



Tortured Whispers

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult, New Adult, Dark

Description: This is a dark taboo love story only for the open minded and brave of heart. If you are squeamish or draw a hard line at strong themes, this book may not be for you, and that's okay.

Brooklyn... Drowning in plain sight while everyone can see you is terrifying. But more than anything it's lonely. And sometimes withstanding the weight of being alone is worse than anything. The only thing that helped me cope was cutting. Sinking a razor into my arm over and over pushed air into my lungs even though it hurt me in the long run. It was the only way I could breathe. Until I found him. He wasn't supposed to ever be mine and my sick mind wasn't supposed to look at him the way I did. Like he hung the moon and the stars. But he made me float And floating felt so much better than drowning. I never wanted to leave his side once I realized he was the reason I could finally breathe again. I knew the world would try to pull us apart. I knew the demons inside of me would try to sabotage our love around every corner... I knew our minds were warped for wanting to be together... We were vile. Immoral. Sin personified. But I was willing to slay every demon and heal every cut if it meant I could be with him.

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Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

TRIGGER WARNING

This book contains self-harm and depression.

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Brooklyn...

The first time I drowned was the scariest time. I'll never forget the suffocating feeling of helplessness. Like my lungs were useless sacks.

It was a normal September day and I was starting ninth grade. I went to my classes as usual and got pulled out during math for speech therapy. I used to need it daily in eighth grade, so I was excited that my dad bumped it down to once a week when I got to high school.

My speech apraxia had gotten much better although I would always talk with what sounded like an accent and some words would never be pronounced properly. I still wanted to keep trying.

I remembered that therapy session being routine. Nothing stood out. I went back to class and looked around for the teacher. I needed to give him my therapy summary. He wasn't in the room though.

Ashley Hartwell, a girl with a short pixie cut and doe eyes, stood to look at me. I remembered her name from roll call in homeroom. I thought she looked nice enough

and when she stood the entire class stopped talking to look at her. I wanted to be her friend. She commanded the room. She was strong and probably popular.

“W-w-where’s M-Mr. Parkew?” I asked her while the class looked on. I hated pronouncing any word that had an R. It automatically turned into a W.

Heat climbed up my neck and I fought to hold her gaze. I hated the sound of my voice and I hated talking in front of people even more but my dad insisted that I step outside of my comfort zone.

Ashley tipped her head back and laughed. It sounded wrong. It seemed to fill up the entire classroom. It was a contagious laugh that jumped from kid to kid until the entire room roared with laughter.

That’s when I felt the water. Normally, the water was only in my head. It made words in my head get jumbled on the way out of my mouth but this time the water was engulfing me. Filling me up from the inside out.

My cheeks warmed and I looked down at my shoes. They were denim ballet flats with a golden bow on top. “Oh my God,” Ashley said in a high-pitched voice. Everything about her said that she should have been nice. She had big innocent-looking eyes and a soft voice. Nothing about her was innocent or friendly though.

“You’re a fucking retard,” she mused.

More water. It sloshed out of my head and into my throat. It ran down my shoulders and arms and wrists and hands and...

“Is that why you got pulled from class? So they could give you meds?”

“She probably needed therapy. Fucking mental case.” Another boy looked at Ashley

and scoffed his words out. He would have been handsome were it not for the ugly words spewing from his face.

“Ew. Just what we need in this class. A crazy retard.” She moved closer to me and I wished the teacher would come back. Couldn’t anyone else see I was drowning? Water was swallowing me up. It was pouring out of me and filling up the classroom while everyone watched.

I was cemented to the floor while Ashley approached with a crooked smile. “Aren’t you going to say anything, retard? Is your stupid tongue tied in a knot? Hmm? God. You can’t even talk. You should kill yourself now. Get it over with.” She shrugged with such ease and walked back to her seat. Everyone laughed, but I drowned.

I drowned in front of the entire class and nobody helped.

I was invisible.

Mr. Parker came back, took my therapy summary, and barely looked twice at me. He dismissed the class and everyone filtered out without helping me. I don’t remember how I moved along from class to class but I remembered feeling weighed down. I remembered feeling like I was walking through water.

At lunch, the water surrounding me muted the clamor of kids talking and laughing. I couldn’t suck in a full breath to save my life. I sat alone near the front by the door hoping to catch a breeze so I could breathe easier. It seemed the loneliness suffocated me just as much as the water did.

“I guess this is where trash goes.” I looked up when I heard Ashley’s voice. It was just in time for her tray full of trash to crash down on my head. Chocolate milk soaked my hair and dribbled down my forehead. I hated my life at that moment. It was a stupid life and the universe would be better off without it.

Teachers and administrators ran her off but she still laughed. The sound pierced the water around me and made it harder for me to breathe.

Nobody could get me to speak after that. The school nurse called my dad to pick me up because I was consciously nonresponsive. I was scared to open my mouth because I'd either get made fun of or I'd sink all the way to the bottom of the water.

I'd gone all day barely able to breathe. I'd gone all day feeling like an invisible anchor sinking to the bottom of the sea. I wanted to snap out of it but...I couldn't. No amount of kind words or pep talks could pull me out of the water.

Every breath was harder to take. I thought I was going to die. I knew I was going to die sitting there on my bed. I was desperate to feel normal. To feel like I could breathe again. To feel...anything.

My dad was talking on the phone right outside of my door. I could hear his deep voice. Normally, it would soothe me but nothing could soothe me right then. I was numb. I'd been underwater for too long.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

I looked at my nightstand searching for something to save my life. If I didn't find something I would be swallowed whole. I could feel the panic setting in. Dread filled my body like immovable boulders.

A glint of light caught my eye. It was the smallest reflection and I'm not entirely sure where it came from but I grabbed it. My precision point tweezers.

My heart thumped slowly even though I was buzzing with anxiety. It had to have been the effects of me drowning. I had to save my life.

With shaky hands, I dragged the tip of the sharp tweezers against my wrist over and over until a trickle of red slid down my skin. A sharp gasp sliced through the quiet four walls of my room. I found myself looking for the culprit but it was me. I gasped.

I could breathe again.

The sting from the cut on my wrist drew my attention away from the feeling of drowning. Now, all I could focus on was the deep, warm burn pushing beneath my skin and into my tendons. I wanted more.

I needed to be able to feel.

I sliced across my wrist again and took another deep, calming breath. The water was gone. It wasn't swallowing me whole anymore.

It didn't matter that the only thing I could feel was pain. I felt something.

Once I could breathe, I dropped the tweezers and watched crimson trickle down into the lines of my palm. Pretty red raindrops racing to my fingertips. I must have cut pretty deep because the pain started to pulse along with my heartbeat.

It was still better than drowning.

“Brooklyn, your uncle is on the ph—” My father’s words were cut short once he saw my bloody wrist. “Oh my god, what have you done? Sweetheart...no.” Tears danced in his dark brown eyes as he sank to the floor beside my bed. I didn’t know how to explain to him that I hadn’t tried to kill myself, though I flirted with the idea. I just needed relief.

The relief that cutting gave me.

The relief that made it easier to drown because at least I could pull myself out of it.

The relief that kept me alive.

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Brooklyn...

Four years later

Walking through the doors of Avery Briggs Alternative High School as a senior was totally different than walking through the doors as a freshman. As a senior, I was ready to get the hell out of there for good. It seemed like I was more aware of each second ticking by but only because I wanted them to tick by faster.

The sooner I left school, the sooner I could take a moment to catch my breath. I could take my college classes online and find a job that required minimal talking and

human interaction. I was already on the hunt for work from home jobs.

I'd taken a few short-lived jobs working in customer service where all I had to do was chat with people and help fix their account problems but the jobs ended when they found out I was only seventeen. Well, I was eighteen now I planned to grab all the jobs I could.

After that awful experience with Ashley Hartwell in ninth grade, my dad decided to move me to an alternative school. He didn't fuck around. I loved that about him but during that time it meant the most. He didn't tell me to toughen up. He didn't excuse it away and tell me that some kids were just mean.

He handled it.

I didn't speak much around people after that though. Even though my speech apraxia wasn't severe, I still tripped over my words and couldn't pronounce things the right way. The anxiety and depression were heavy enough to stop me from talking. It

also meant I didn't make friends but I was okay with that.

Well, I did befriend a boy here and there. Long enough for them to get what they wanted and for me to realize sex wasn't at all what everyone made it out to be. In the end, I still found myself searching for friendship. After a while, I knew it was all a fairytale. Girls like me didn't have friends.

The last time I wanted to be friends with someone, I got humiliated. It was an incident that was four years old but I still replayed the moment where I wanted to be friends with Ashley and kicked myself every time.

Sometimes, I cut my arms while I thought about it. Cutting still helped me breathe through the water in my head. I didn't cut nearly as much as I used to though. I used

to do it seven or more times a day but now I only cut once or twice a day.

I slid my books in my locker and caught a glimpse of one of the many silvery lines peeking from under my long sleeved shirt. I tugged the cotton down over the heel of my hand, popped my thumb through the hole in my sleeve, and slammed the locker closed before heading to homeroom.

If I couldn't find sleeves that came with thumb-holes then I usually cut them into my shirts so I could shield my scars from view. I hated the looks I got from people. Nobody ever said a word but their eyes always said enough.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

Fuck them.

They didn't understand the relief it brought me to cut. Cutting helped me breathe again. Maybe it was wrong but it soothed me the same way a pacifier calmed a baby.

"Miss Powers, good morning," Mr. Fontroy my homeroom teacher smiled at me and I smiled back. "Ah, ah. I'm not letting you walk into this classroom your senior year without speaking."

"Hi, Mr. Fontwoy," I whispered and tucked away wisps of my hair that had fallen from my ponytail. My books slipped from my grasp a little because my palms were slick. I hated speaking and I hated when I mispronounced something so simple.

I could say it in my head a million times.

Mr. Fontroy.

Mr. Fontroy.

Mr. Fontroy.

It sounded fine but the minute I opened my mouth to speak, it was like talking underwater. My lips and tongue betrayed me every damn time.

"Very good, Miss Powers. Take your seat." He gestured to the front of the class but I went straight for the back. Being in the back meant you were less likely to get called on to speak or read out loud.

Once, in tenth grade, my teacher made me read an entire chapter out loud and I stumbled the whole way through. I cut for a week straight after that because each time I replayed the incident my lungs got tight and I felt water swallowing me.

The interaction with Mr. Fontroy wasn't that bad though. I could deal with that. I steadied my breathing and went on about my day.

At lunch, I sat at a table near the back door. I stared down at my phone with the heel of my hand resting on my mouth while I tugged on the fabric of my sleeve with my lips. "Hey, Brooklyn," Pia McClain sat in front of me like she always did. I don't know when she attached herself to my side at lunch but she'd been coming to sit with me for at least two years.

Every day was the same. She said hi and sat down, then she talked to me off and on the entire lunch period about stuff she found on her phone. I spoke very little and she seemed fine with it. Pia was the closest thing to a friend I had.

"Hey, you seen this new challenge? It's called Live Stream the Loser. It's some stupid shit where extremely beautiful and popular people prank losers. God. We're like sitting ducks," she scoffed.

I shook my head and pulled my sleeve from between my lips to glance at her phone. I was glad we were seniors and we'd be graduating soon. Kids were getting stupider by the minute. Everything was a goddamn challenge.

I was born in the wrong era, I swear.

I hated mumble rap, trap music, and shitty pop songs. I lived for the days of Hall and Oates and Phil Collins. I'd choose sitting my room, on the floor with a stack of cassette tapes and a boombox any day over overpriced headphones and Apple Music.

Sure, the quality was amazing but sometimes perfection isn't perfect. The hiss, crack and pop that came from forty-fives and cassette tapes gave me goosebumps. They were raw and flawed.

They were like me.

After school, I went home and pulled out my vintage Sony boombox. I'd found it in a thrift store underneath some toasters and VCR's and only paid six bucks for it. It worked like a charm. I pulled out my tape box and sat cross-legged on the floor, letting my knees fall to the side.

I stared at the box decorated with music notes and vinyl records then pulled the top off. Inside were rows and rows of tapes. I pulled out Big Bam Boom by Hall and Oates. I shut my eyes and put the tape in, letting the familiar clicks ease my anxious mind.

School always made me anxious and jittery once I got home. My head filled with water and in order to stop myself from cutting, I needed to hear music.

Music cut through the water in my head.

It sliced through the liquid.

Cut.

Slice.

Before the first song got started good I was rummaging through my nightstand drawer looking for a razor. I checked between the pages of my blank journal and didn't see it in my usual hiding spot. I moved to the top of my nightstand and tipped my lamp over on its side.

Fuck.

That one was gone too.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

The water was filling up my head quickly.

Think, Brooklyn...

What's making you so anxious? What's really choking you?

The entire day.

Mispronouncing Mr. Fontroy's name.

Being a senior.

Being alive...

My throat grew tight and I tried to let Hall and Oates calm my beating heart but it wasn't working. I didn't realize how worked up I was. I found the bottom of my sleeve with my lips and nibbled on the fabric while I tore my room apart trying to find a razor.

"Hey, Brooklyn." I jerked my eyes up and looked at my father. He stood in my doorway, his gaze scanning the mess on my bed. I'd dumped out all sorts of little boxes and hiding places. Jewelry, paperclips, coins and other knick-knacks littered my comforter.

We stood there staring at each other while an upbeat guitar played in the background over the boombox speakers. "I took them, Brooklyn," he said, letting his head hang. He always looked so defeated. I did that to him. I drained my father. He didn't need

to tell me for me to know it.

I drained everyone that tried to help and he'd tried the longest.

Tears welled in my eyes and burned on their way down my cheeks. Shame was hotter than hell. It was hotter than any volcano eruption. It burned slowly from the inside out and made every skin cell on my body itch.

"I knew you'd be like this today. I couldn't bear to see the blood soaking your sleeves or caking beneath your nails." His voice was quiet and he avoided my eyes. I'd avoid them too if I were him.

I was broken and wicked.

Sure, he told me all the time that I wasn't but I knew better. Only someone broken and wicked would hurt themselves and pray for death instead of the strength to push forward another day.

I sniffled and pushed strands of my black hair back. My ponytail was loose and hair spilled out everywhere. "I love you, Brooklyn. You know that right, sweetie?" Dad took one step into my room. He stood in front of me and I hugged myself, looking down at my bare feet. I hated that he knew how broken I was.

"I know, Dad," I said quietly.

"Come downstairs to the kitchen. Your aunt Erica sent over some banana bread." He smiled at me and the fine lines around his eyes fanned out making his smile look even deeper.

I could still feel the scorch of shame burning me though. "I'll be down in a minute," I whispered, retreating further in my room and sitting on the floor beside my boombox.

Dad nodded and left without a word.

The thought of my aunt's banana bread had my stomach rumbling. I loved to heat it up in the microwave and let it get soft. Aunt Erica always sent over a loaf on my first day of school.

She started after my mother died because it was my mom's favorite thing to bake. It was her way of keeping her sister's memory alive. I usually appreciated it too.

After my first drowning experience freshman year, that banana bread was the only thing I would eat.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

I sat on the floor, breathing in deep breaths. The water in my head muffled the music playing in the background. If I didn't breathe soon I would drown.

My father's footsteps disappeared and I moved into my bathroom. There, I found my precision point tweezers in the medicine cabinet. My fingers buzzed and my stomach tensed when I gripped the cool metal in my hands.

I preferred razor blades to cut with. They were quick and smooth but my tweezers would always be my favorite. I pushed the bathroom door closed with my slender hips and tugged my thumb free from the hole in my sleeve.

The moment I felt relief from the pressure of cutting my wrist I gasped. My head rolled along the bathroom door and a quiet groan escaped me. The red blood that dotted my sleeve made me hot with shame.

Why the fuck do you keep doing this shit, Brooklyn?

I shoved the recurring question from my head and fell into a trance where I dragged the tweezers over an unbroken patch of skin. I didn't even need to see where I was cutting. I could do it by feel.

Once I came out of my fog, I swallowed the thick knot in my throat and washed the tweezers off before putting them back in the medicine cabinet. I blotted the blood on my arm with a baby wipe and pushed my thumb back through the hole in my sleeve.

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“How was your first day?” Dad slid a paper plate over to me with warm banana bread on it. The smell made my stomach roar with want.

“Good,” I nodded.

“What happened that...bothered you?” His eyes probed mine for answers but he refused to come out and ask why I needed to cut so badly. I didn’t say anything. Instead, I filled my mouth with the sweet, soft bread and hummed happily.

My father gave up waiting for an answer and continued talking. “I have some exciting news,” he perked up a bit and smiled at me. He was so handsome.

“What?” I asked, swallowing the last bite of bread. I was definitely getting more. I’d carry the whole loaf to my room if I could.

“Uncle Caesar is coming back to LA. He’s gonna stay with us for a while until his house is ready but, he’s moving back to California for good this time,” he said with pride in his voice.

My tongue was glued to the roof of my mouth. I had no idea what to say. Being around new people made me nervous. It wasn’t that Uncle Caesar was new exactly but I didn’t see him often. Well, I didn’t see him at all actually. We talked on the phone sometimes for birthdays and holidays. Long enough for him to ask me how I was doing and how old I was then he’d always act shocked.

For the most part, all I knew of my uncle was what I heard from my dad. He was a big-time child psychologist in New York and people paid a shit ton of money to hear him speak and buy his books. He was like a god amongst nerds, I guess.

I used to pray for Uncle Caesar to help me like I heard about him helping all those other kids. I wanted him to help me not to drown so much. Not to cut so much. Not to

be so...me.

Dad wasn't having that shit though. He never said anything but I knew I embarrassed him. He had this successful little brother that helped kids all over the country every day. Kids that had real problems and obstacles to overcome. He didn't want to let his brother know that he had one of those kids too. Plus it was against the rules for my uncle to see me as his patient anyway.

I forced a small smile for my father and nodded. "That's good," I said. I brought my sleeve up to my lips and pulled the damp material into my mouth so I could nibble on it.

The thought of having someone new in my home and in my space made my mind go all crazy. It started the vicious cycle that I loathed so much. I couldn't process shit like a normal person. I replayed things over and over. They were scenarios in my mind that I was sure wouldn't actually happen but...what if they did?

Instantly, the water was back. It was inky and suffocating. It dragged me back into a foggy trance where it was hard to breathe and even harder to speak.

"So, what do you think? It'll be an adjustment but I'm sure once he's been here for a little while you'll get used to him." I knew he wanted me to respond, so I nodded. I wonder if I nodded slower when I was underwater. "Brooklyn, you're doing it again. You're getting inside of your damn head and I can't reach you when you're like that." Dad was in front of me, smoothing his big warm hand over my hair and kissing my forehead with an exasperated sigh.

I was draining him again. His eyes were so tired. I wanted to reach out and tell him it was nothing. That I'd get over it. I'd be lying though.

"Talk to me please, sweetheart. Tell me something going on inside of your mind," he

begged.

I had to give him something. My lips parted and I exhaled softly, trying to make the words in my mind come out of my mouth. It wasn't that easy with speech apraxia though. Things got twisted on the way out. Especially when I was nervous.

"I'm new-vous," I whispered, nibbling on my sleeve. My father nodded his head then I saw his gaze fall to the droplets of deep crimson on my sleeve from when I cut in the bathroom. I saw the heartbreak in his eyes and it gutted me. I hated myself.

"It's okay to be nervous, Brooklyn. If you want to stay in your room when he gets here, he'll understand. He's a pretty cool guy." Dad tried to swallow the broken pieces of his heart and ignore my sleeve but he excused himself shortly after I told him how I felt.

I pulled in a shaky breath, trying to fill my lungs then I went to my room and closed the door. I sat on the floor and inched closer to the old boombox hoping Hall and Oates could push away the itch to cut.

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Caesar...

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

Being back in LA meant I got to catch up with old friends and colleagues. It also meant I got to spend valuable time with my big brother, Anthony and his daughter Brooklyn while setting things in motion for my new house to be finished.

Only...I'd been back in LA for four days, staying at Ant's house and I hadn't seen my niece at all. Well, I take that back. I did see a flash of her black hoodie as she hurried out of the door for school one morning.

"Ant, I love being back home but um...mind telling me when I'm going to see my niece? Is she shy?" I chuckled, cracking open two beers. One for him and one for me. My brother's expression turned distant and he stared down the hall toward Brooklyn's room.

"Brooklyn is...different," he began, tipping his head from one side to the other like he was weighing the very essence of his daughter.

"Different how?" I asked, lifting an eyebrow.

"She has anxiety pretty bad. I never told you because I didn't want you shrinking my kid, Cease." He watched my face for a reaction. He still thought I was a hothead like when we were younger. I can't lie and say hearing my niece had bad anxiety didn't fuck with me though.

I sucked in a measured breath and shut my eyes for a moment. One of my biggest pet peeves was watching parents let their kid suffer because they didn't believe in therapy. That was my big brother. When he found out I was majoring in child psychology, he scoffed at me and told me I should be practical like him and take up a

trade.

Anthony was an electrician and he made decent money but I wouldn't trade psychology for the world. It fulfilled me. I got to help kids who couldn't articulate and speak up for themselves. Kids like Brooklyn.

"Ant, it's not about shrinking your kid or what you agree with. Your opinion isn't fact. What is a fact though, is kids do much better in life when they have an objective party to talk to on a regular basis.

I gave you the name of a brilliant psychologist to take Brooklyn to after Andrea died. I'm guessing you never followed through," I said, leaning back in my chair. My head throbbed with frustration.

"I didn't. Brooklyn just needs to learn how to get out of her head, Cease. She's in her head and nobody can reach her. She's a normal girl besides that," he reasoned.

"Who are you trying to convince? Me or yourself, bro?"

"Don't try to get in my mind. Give Brooklyn some time to come out of her shell. I told her she could hide out in her room until she got used to the idea of you being here." I nodded my head at him and then let my thoughts travel to Brooklyn. My chest ached thinking about how long she'd gone without help.

People like Ant who brushed off anxiety irked me. It wasn't a matter of just switching your thoughts. Anxiety was your way of thinking. It was like a second skin. Something you couldn't take off even if you wanted to.

I opened my mouth to say something to my brother but the front door swung open and warm September air rushed in. I stood up and went into the hallway to get another glimpse of the elusive Brooklyn Powers.

She was tall and slender. She looked like a supermodel hiding under a hoodie three sizes too big. Her dark hair was pulled up into a messy ponytail with countless wisps falling around her face, framing her big hazel eyes. Green flecks danced in her hazel pools as she swallowed and took a step to the side.

“Hi, Brooklyn. Long time no see,” I smiled at her, trying to speak as calmly as possible. The poor thing looked like she’d scream if she saw her own shadow. She lifted the heel of her hand to her lips and nibbled on the bottom of her sleeve, her pretty eyes shifting from me to her father.

“Say hi to your uncle, Brooklyn,” Anthony sighed, standing beside me. He was the big brother but I shot over his head. I shot over everyone’s head at six-foot-seven though.

“H-Hi, Uncle Ceas-aw.” Her dark brows furled together like she was kicking herself for pronouncing my name wrong. My chest ached again and I took a small step toward her. She brought her shoulders up around her ears a little like she was trying to protect herself. Her body language spoke volumes.

She didn’t like new people. She thought I was invading her space. “Hey, can I shake your hand?” I asked in a quiet voice. I noticed her voice was quiet and barely above a whisper so I mirrored her.

“N-N-No. I don’t shake hands.” She clutched her book bag and headed toward her room.

“That’s what I’m talking about. See? She gets in her head and shuts down,” Anthony grumbled and went back to the kitchen but I stood planted to my spot, staring as Brooklyn closed her bedroom door.

My bleeding heart was going nuts in my chest. I had to help her. She was family and

there were rules against treating her but I could get her to open up at least. I could be her friend.

“She needs to talk to someone. Does she have friends?” I asked Anthony.

“No. She’s a loner.” I wanted to punch my brother for letting his kid go unchecked for so long.

“Then she’s not expressing herself. Does she have a journal? Anything she does to release? It can be stifling when you feel alone,” I said.

“No,” Ant grunted and stood up. He started slamming things around, getting ready for dinner and I knew I’d touched a nerve. I just didn’t know what it was.

“Ant, what are you thinking about, man? Talk to me.”

“Nothing. I’m making dinner. You wanna analyze that too, Cease?”

“I want to help,” I said, pleading with my words.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

“Please don’t. We’ve been okay on our own all these years. Brooklyn will be fine. I’ll be fine. Enjoy being around your family and don’t turn us into patients, okay?” His voice was gravelly like Dad’s. He was grumpy like him too. I was always the optimistic one like Mom.

“Okay. Sure. I’m still going to get Brook to warm up to me,” I smiled.

“She hates being called Brook. Strike number one,” Anthony chuckled and shook his head. “Hey, how does chicken tenders and mashed potatoes sound for dinner?”

“Sounds a lot like you need to learn how to cook. How have you survived all these years without a woman, Ant? Chicken tenders and mashed potatoes? Seriously?”

“I manage just fine. I’m not dead, am I?” He quipped. I laughed a little and shook my head. Same old stubborn Ant.

“I’m gonna go see if I can coax Brooklyn out of her room,” I announced, feeling pretty confident.

“Yeah, good luck,” my brother snorted and put on a small pot of water to boil for the potatoes. At least they weren’t from a box.

I headed down the hallway to my niece’s room and knocked. There was no answer. I leaned against the doorframe and knocked again. Inside, I could hear her scrambling around. She was hiding something.

When she opened the door and realized it was me, her hazel eyes took on a green

glow. “Hey, kiddo. Can I come in?” Her gaze dropped to her bare feet. I looked at them too. She wiggled her toes then sank them into the carpet. She repeated the motion over and over.

“Can I come in? I’ve been here for four days and I haven’t seen you at all.” She took a step back and gestured inside of her room.

“Sewer,” she said, reluctantly. I knew she meant to say sure but I also knew she struggled with speech apraxia so I didn’t pretend not to know what she meant. I treated her like her speech was normal as anyone else’s.

“It’s good to see you again. I think the last time we saw each other you were four. You wouldn’t talk to me then either,” I frowned.

“I’m quiet,” she told me, sitting on the floor cross-legged.

“I see. Can I sit down here with you?” I asked.

“Sewer,” she nodded. Her shoulders dropped away from her ears a little and it made me smile.

Sitting directly across from her made me realize how much she’d grown up. I should have been there for her. She needed somebody. “Wow, you’re all grown up.”

“Yeah...” She nodded and tucked away a stray lock of hair. Her eyes dropped to the carpet then darted over to the black box a few feet away. She looked everywhere but at me.

“Must be weird having me in your space, huh? I must feel like a stranger. You haven’t seen me in years then I just pop the hell up.” I chuckled and she gave me a half smile. Even that little smile lit her face up. She stole a glance at me then looked

down at the floor again.

“You look diffwent.” The space between her brows creased in frustration.

“I look different? Man, how do you think I feel sitting across from you? It’s like you’re not the same person anymore.”

She stole another glance at me then nibbled on her sleeve. “Dad is happy you’re hew.” She frowned at herself again and my chest squeezed.

“I’m happy I’m here too. Look, I know you have speech apraxia, and it’s okay. You don’t have to get upset because your words aren’t coming out the way you want them to. You don’t even have to call me Uncle Caesar if you don’t want. If R sounds are tough for you then,” I reached out and held her dainty hand in mine. Her skinny fingers were cold to the touch and she was stiff as a board while I tried to connect with her.

“You’ll be Brook and I’ll be Cease. I promise I’ll leave you alone if you call me Cease,” I assured her. Her hazel eyes widened with uncertainty and I could see something happening. The wheels in her head were spinning out of control. It was the same look she had at the front door before she rushed in here to her room and closed the door.

It was the look she got before Anthony said she’d disappeared into her head. I gave her hand a squeeze and she locked eyes with me. Her palm heated a bit in my grasp and I offered her a kind smile. I wanted her to know I was trustworthy.

“Okay, Cease,” she whispered before slipping her hand from mine.

“Perfect, Brook. Will I see you at dinner?” I asked, standing up. “I want all the family time I can get.” Brooklyn gave me a slow nod as her eyes traveled to mine. “Cool,” I

noded then showed myself out and closed her door.

It wasn't a full-blown conversation but it was a start.

**

Brooklyn...

I didn't want him to leave. I just didn't know how to say that. From the moment I came in the house and he walked around the corner to say hi to me, I felt different. I'd been avoiding him for four days but once he stood in front of me, I wondered why.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

His energy was soothing.

It pushed the water away.

Nobody had ever pushed the water out of my head before. I got it to go away with music or cutting but not a person. He was like a savior. I hated that I was so fucking tongue-tied and couldn't express that to him. Not the way I wanted to.

I wanted to tell him that I missed him and I wished he were around more when I was growing up. I wanted to tell him that he'd be good for my father too because as much as he thought I was in my head, he was in his own world too.

My stupid mouth would never allow me to say all that without sounding like a goddamn toddler with an accent though. Anger pumped through my veins making my heart thump wildly. Why was it so hard just to exist?

My bottom lip wobbled, heavy with anxiety and emotion that was too thick to consume and swallow the way I normally did. For once, I wanted to talk to someone. For once I wanted to ask someone to please see me, or hear me, please don't turn away.

Instead, I was lying on my bedroom floor with two ears full of tears while I listened to early eighties music. Sometimes, I had dreams of smashing my head against the wall and pulling out the part of my brain that jumbled the connection between my head and my mouth.

I wanted to burn that part of me. It was stupid and pointless.

“Brooklyn, come eat dinner!” Dad called out. I smelled chicken tenders when I opened my door. I was tired of nuggets and tenders and tater tots but maybe dinner would be different with Uncle Caesar at the table.

Maybe for once, I wouldn’t feel like water was sloshing around in my head threatening to leak out any moment. I scrambled to my feet and rushed to my bathroom to check my face. I wanted to make sure I didn’t look like I’d been crying. I couldn’t handle the concern from my dad.

He always wracked his brain trying to figure out how to get me to open up but I don’t think he understood exactly how broken I was. Shit, even if I could open up I wouldn’t want to. Nobody should see all the tortured thoughts in my mind. All the different ways I hated myself.

I splashed cold water on my face and dried it on a fluffy towel before heading down the hall and to the kitchen. Dad’s brown eyes found mine and he studied me as I sat beside Cease at the table, pulling my arms around myself. I knew he was waiting for me to grab my plate and scurry back to my room like I always did when we had company.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

This company was different though. I didn't feel like I was drowning around him. "Brook, I'm glad you came to eat with us. Now we're spending quality family time together. That's exactly why I moved back out here. I was too far away in New York," Caesar frowned, shaking his head.

My uncle didn't look much like my father at all. Cease was tall. Really fucking tall. I always thought my father was the tallest man I'd ever seen at six-foot-four, but turns out his little brother had him beat. I was tall too but Cease was a tree amongst shrubs.

Dark stubble covered his chiseled jaw and chin and his eyelashes were thick and black framing eyes that were soft brown like cashmere. He had a head full of thick, dark hair that was combed and styled perfectly. Unlike Dad, Cease didn't have a strand of gray on his head. He could have been a hair model for whatever kind of shit guys put in their hair.

Brooklyn, stop staring at your goddamn uncle.

I jerked my eyes away from him and looked down at my plate of food. He stole a glance at me and smiled a little nudging my knee under the table and winking. "Yeah, now you're close and you can annoy me in person," Dad grumbled but there was a smile beneath the rough exterior.

"I'm glad you're hew," I said quietly. I almost thought nobody heard me but Cease gave my knee a quick squeeze under the table that sent my heart into the roof of my mouth. Dad looked at me with pride shining in his eyes.

"Well, if Brooklyn likes you then you get the seal of approval. You're welcome here

anytime, Cease,” Dad chuckled. It was good to see him smile. The entire dinner was good. It was a step in the right direction that I needed.

I got to see what it felt like to breathe normally. To finally walk above water. I actually laughed. I hadn’t laughed in so long I forgot what my laugh even sounded like. It was light and shockingly loud.

When Cease made a joke about how we should take all the instructions and warnings off mundane, everyday things and let natural selection take place, I snorted. I laughed. It made me warm all over. I guess that’s what real happiness felt like and not just the happiness I got from eating Aunt Erica’s banana bread.

“Okay guys, I gotta turn in. I have to be awake at three in the morning for work at four. Lovely life I lead.” Dad pushed away from the table and leaned down to kiss the top of my head. “Good night, sweetheart. You mind helping your uncle with the dishes?”

“No, I don’t mind. I’ll help. Night, Dad.” I stood and hugged him tightly, catching him off guard. I caught myself off guard too. I guess neither of us was used to me being...happy.

“I love you, Brooklyn,” he said.

“I love you too,” I grinned.

“See you tomorrow, Cease.” He headed down the hall to his room and suddenly everything was silent and ten degrees too warm. If I didn’t have to hide my scars all the time, I would have taken off the stupid long sleeve active shirt I had on.

Since I had to wear long sleeves in the summer, I picked the lightweight material gym bunnies used when they wanted to look wintertime cute. I just wanted to hide my

cutting scars.

“Are you comfortable telling me about your speech apraxia, Brook?” Caesar’s voice curled around me and held on tight, yanking me out of the recesses of my murky mind.

“I don’t know...” I shrugged, hugging myself.

“I’ve met loads of kids who have it. From what I can hear, yours is pretty moderate. I won’t push though,” he smiled at me and I wanted to tell him my entire life story. He probably already knew but still...

He was comfortable.

I’d never felt comfortable with anyone. Not even my speech therapist made me as comfortable as standing in the kitchen with my uncle did. I locked on to his brown eyes and tugged on my sleeve with my lips.

“I hate talking. I don’t know when I’ll say a word wight or not.” I fisted my hands at my side and ignored the prickling on the back of my neck. Why was I so fucking incapable of speaking properly?

“You say ninety percent of your words perfectly, Brook. Do you realize that?” He offered me a smile warmer than any day in June.

“Doesn’t feel like that,” I muttered. “I’m a fuck up.” I chewed a vigorously on my sleeve while I stared at my feet. Caesar’s thick, black brows furrowed as he regarded me. He shook his head and pulled my sleeve away from my mouth. I missed the comfort of it.

“You’re no more of a fuck up than the rest of the world. You know what that means,

right?” He asked, holding on to a glimmer of something that made his eyes shine.

“What?” I asked, curiously.

“If everyone is a fuck up, then it means you’re just normal. Don’t be so hard on yourself. You’re perfect, Brook.” He took a step closer to me and brushed the messy hair out of my face.

I’d been called a lot of things but perfect wasn’t one of them.

“No, I’m not,” I said harshly. My own voice sounded foreign to me being so...loud.

“Well, what makes you so un-perfect? Because all I see standing here is a girl that has a lot of thoughts to let out. I don’t see a fuck up. I don’t see someone who has to hide.” He folded his muscular arms over his chest and I noticed how ripped my uncle was. Shit. He must have never skipped the gym.

What if he thought I worked out too because of the shirt I was wearing? Stupid shirt choice, Brooklyn. I only wore it because it had thumb holes and it was long sleeved.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

“I have plenty to hide,” I said, much quieter than the last time I spoke. Caesar didn’t flinch away from me because I was starting to fold in on myself. He didn’t frown at the way I spoke or my funny accent. He stood there, listening for me to speak.

I was used to my dad getting frustrated because I wouldn’t give him the answer he wanted right away and leaving me to my thoughts. Caesar didn’t do that. He waited patiently.

That’s what he was paid to do though, right? He was a psychologist. He got paid to listen to fucked up people like me.

“Like what?” He asked, closing the dishwasher. His long fingers pushed a couple of buttons that made the dishwasher panel light up then he leaned against the counter and eyed me.

He wanted to know what I had to hide.

Every cut scar on the underside of my forearm burned with shame. It was searing and I almost cried out from how uncomfortable it made me. My hand flew up to my mouth and I tugged the dampened bottom of my sleeve in between my lips.

Caesar swatted my hand away with a frustrated frown. “I’m annoying you too. I should probably go to my room,” I choked down the prickly feeling taking over my throat and stepped back. I didn’t know what the feeling was. I couldn’t tell if it was fear or something else.

I did know that I hated the thought of frustrating Caesar. Before he could speak, I

darted out of the kitchen and down the hall to my room. I pushed the door closed and it clicked softly behind me.

Rogue tears, hot and salty, stormed down my cheeks. I just wanted to be normal. My soul ached with the desire to fit in. I know Caesar said everyone was fucked up, not just me but I'd give anything to be fucked up like a normal person.

At least they could speak without sounding ridiculous.

Thinking about how difficult it was for me to have a conversation made my stomach hurt. My head felt fuzzy too. Like...water was trickling back in.

I forgot that being around my uncle made me feel clear-headed. I forgot that quickly. Feeling like a normal person was such a deep craving, that I forgot I didn't have the luxury of feeling normal all the time.

The thought of having a head free of water had my heart racing to go back into the kitchen with Cease. My feet wouldn't move though. Blissful thoughts of standing in the light he radiated made my skin buzz.

I gritted my teeth together and went into the bathroom to start my shower. My showers only lasted ten minutes and I usually had to blast music to get through it. Although I hated being in the water, taking a shower was better than taking a bath. Being in a tub full of water reminded me of drowning and I hated it.

I washed my hair, scrubbed my face and looked down at my arms. Scars littered my olive skin, stretching up to the bend of my arm. I wonder what my uncle would say if he saw them.

I ran my fingers over the newest cuts and my stomach lurched.

Stupid Brooklyn.

So fucking stupid.

I destroyed my arms. They were marked up and ugly. I wanted to stop cutting so I didn't cause any more damage but I couldn't help myself. I went into a trance when I cut and couldn't stop digging into my skin with razors.

Not every cut was deep. Some of them were only scratches that drew blood. I hated them all though.

I rushed through the rest of my shower and hurried out. When I was done, I sat on the bed with my towel tied around my body and tried to stop the water from taking over me. Thoughts of how annoyed Cease was with me wreaked havoc in my mind. He hated me. He thought I was stupid.

I put on a white Back to the Future t-shirt that used to belong to my dad, then I rubbed lavender and honey oil into my skin and rubbed coconut oil on my scars. I stared at the fresh, angry red cuts on my arm. They were jagged and not as clean as the ones I'd made with my razor.

Sometimes, it felt like I couldn't even cut myself the right way. Water rapidly filled my head making my chest constrict. I needed to breathe.

**

Caesar...

Once I heard the shower in Brook's room cut off, I waited a few moments before I knocked on her door. I saw the way she looked before she bolted away from me and out of the kitchen. She was embarrassed and god knows what kind of conclusions

she'd jumped to in her head.

My fist hovered over her bedroom door, prepared to knock but I knew she wouldn't answer. Against my better judgment, I knocked twice then walked in before she could lock me out. Brooklyn needed to open up more but I wasn't trying to shrink her as my brother would say, so I was using tactics that I would never use on one of my patients.

She wasn't one of my patients though.

When I walked in her room, the smell of lavender and honey filled my nose. I took a moment to inhale before my eyes found her. She looked up at me, and tears danced in her beautiful eyes. Worlds of sadness swam inside of her. She looked like she was drowning.

Fuck.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

My heart thumped relentlessly, bleeding empathy for her. It trickled into my chest and destroyed my logic. I reached my hand out to her and she grabbed on. When she did, I pulled her against my body and wrapped my arms around her. A shaky breath came rushing out of her lungs. Cough after cough shook her slender frame.

“Brook, look at me,” I tipped her head back and smoothed her damp hair away from her face. “Are you okay? I want the truth. Don’t give me some bullshit, auto pilot answer. You looked scared to death before I came in here.” I was breaking all sorts of rules. If she were my patient I would never talk to her that way.

“I am,” she said, blinking away tears from impossibly thick lashes.

“You are what?”

“Scawed to death,” she stammered. “Maybe I’m just scawed of death.” Her throat dipped and she clutched me like I was her life preserver, pulling her from the deepest sea.

“What’s trying to kill you?” I asked, my lips brushing the top of her hair. It smelled like fruit. Some kind of berries.

I wished she could see how insanely normal she was. She was a young woman, getting ready for bed with wet hair, a clean face, and the day’s events on her mind. She needed someone to tell her that. She needed a friend to pull her out of the endless sea in her mind.

“Evewything. You hate me. Daddy is fwustwated. So am I,” her words were

shrouded in whispers. I found myself cupping her face and making her look at me, not down at her feet.

“Brooklyn, I don’t hate you. I could never hate you. You’re a part of me. I know I haven’t been around but I’m here now and I’m not going anywhere. I need you to believe me.” My voice was urgent, begging her to not only hear my words but to feel them.

“Y-You don’t hate me?” It sounded as if she couldn’t fathom someone not being annoyed with her or not hating her. What the fuck was going on in that head of hers?

Speech apraxia may have made her words come out imperfectly but her anxiety and depression were worse than the apraxia could ever be. We sat on her bed and it groaned under my weight. “No. I think what you saw on my face when we were in the kitchen was frustration. Not with you but the fact that your father didn’t get you help. I want to help and I think I got pissed that I didn’t have more time with you. More time to help you open up. If I’d been in your life before now, you would have already trusted me, Brook.

Now, I’m like a stranger. That’s why I told you not to call me Uncle Caesar. I know you have trouble with pronouncing your R sounds but I haven’t been much of an uncle to you. I figured maybe I can be the friend you need. Not Uncle Caesar. Not Dr. Powers. Just...Cease.” I bared my soul to her in ways I’d never planned. It was a small sliver but the blatant honesty was so raw it startled me.

Brooklyn looked up at me. Her eyes were more green than hazel at that moment. They looked like orbs of jade with golden specks.

“I’d like that a lot. I don’t have any fwends.” Her brows crashed together and she shook her head.

“It’s okay, Brook. Keep talking. You’ve been through speech therapy. You know that the best way to overcome it is to keep talking. You can only correct it if you hear yourself,” I explained. She gave me an earnest nod like she’d heard all of that shit before but it was still true.

“I want you to be my fwrend.” I heard her trying to pronounce her R sounds and a little bit of pride blossomed inside of me.

“I’d love to be. We have to trust each other though. That’s what friends do. You can’t keep thinking I’m annoyed or that I don’t like you. I have to be able to trust that you won’t push me away without reason. Can we agree on that?” I asked, my voice full to the brim with hope. Brook wasn’t the only person who needed that friendship. Evidently, I needed it to.

“Yes,” she smiled a little and I rubbed the back of her hand with my thumb. Her skin was smooth under my touch.

“Shake on it?” I asked, pulling my hand away. Timidly, she placed her hand in mine, extending her arm. A smile dimpled the corners of her mouth. I smiled when we shook on it then my eyes fell to her arm and my smile disintegrated. Scars littered her skin. Some of the older ones were silvery and the newer ones were bright pink. The newest hadn’t yet turned to scars.

My breathing grew shallow and my heart cracked in my chest. Millions of tiny shards beat in tune with the rush of my blood. She was a cutter.

Brooklyn noticed the moment that it happened and she yanked her hand away, diving beneath the blankets, pulling them up around her shoulders. A sob choked her throat and her entire body shook.

“Hey, it’s okay,” I told her quietly. She wouldn’t move. She wouldn’t turn to look at

me. I felt like I'd slammed against a wall that cut off access to her.

"It's not! I'm broken!" I tried to get her to look at me, I tugged on her shoulder but she wouldn't budge. I tossed the comforter back and squeezed myself into her much-too-short bed.

"Brook, please look at me," I begged. She shook her head vehemently. "I can help you. Just let me in." I pulled her close to me and found her hand with mine, examining her scars. She didn't pull away and that was a good sign.

"You're hurting," I said.

"I'm weak," she gritted out. "Weak and fucking stupid."

"No," a growl rumbled in my chest, making her wince and press her back against my chest. I had to calm down so she'd relax but the entire situation was burning me up inside.

How much shit about Brooklyn had Anthony kept to himself?

"These scars show how strong you are, Brook." I pulled my index and middle fingers down the length of her forearm and shook my head.

It was like reading the most gut-wrenching story on a sheet of braille. Brooklyn let out another sob. It split at the seams with sheer agony and shame. It rolled off of her in thick currents. I would have done anything to absorb it all for her.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

I'd never had such a deep need to protect and help someone before in my life. I knew I would kill anyone that tried to hurt my niece. I would bring so much pain down on them they would crumble. She was precious and she deserved happiness.

I was going to make sure she got it.

"You can't help me. I'm beyond help," she turned over and our eyes locked.

"Nobody is beyond help. I've dedicated my entire life to proving that point. Let me in and I'll help. I'll be there for you the way I should have been all along." Pangs of guilt nipped at my conscious.

"I don't let anyone in, Cease." She said, studying my face then pulling her eyes back to mine. Brooklyn had grown into a beautiful young woman. I blinked a few times and knitted my brows together.

"We're family." My statement hung in the air and I didn't know why. I pushed my fingers through her hair. It had started to dry but it was still damp at her scalp.

A chill raced through my chest and I pushed away the logical, moral part of me shouting inside of my head. I dropped my lips to her forehead and her breath stuttered. Her fists gripped my shirt like she needed me for her next breath.

"Let me in, Brook," I muttered against her forehead. Her bare legs were smooth and warm as they slid against mine.

"Okay," she whispered, tilting her head up. The tip of her button nose brushed against

mine. Something crackled between us. It was tainted and dangerous.

I pulled my hands away from her and swallowed, giving her a nod. “Get some sleep okay? I’ll see you in the morning, kiddo.”

“Cease?” She called out as I forced myself from her bed.

“Yeah, Brook?” I leaned against the doorway, able to think clearly once I was away from the smell of lavender and honey and the feeling of warm, soft legs against mine.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

“When I’m around you, I don’t drown.”

“Drown?” I asked, lifting an eyebrow. “Is that how it feels?”

“Yeah, the apwaxia. It feels like I’m underwater.” It must have been the first time she ever mentioned that to anyone because her cheeks and neck blazed soft red.

“Thank you for trusting me with that feeling,” I said, winking at her. Before I told her goodnight, I could have sworn I saw her face glow an even brighter red.

**

Over the next week, Brook came out of her shell piece by piece. By Friday, she actually came in the house with a smile on her face instead of me having to pull it out of her with a corny joke. Anthony looked like his entire world was brighter when Brook tossed her arm around his shoulders and hugged him. “Hi Daddy,” she grinned. Her teeth were straight and white and her slight overbite made her fucking adorable.

Next, she bounced over to me and wrapped her arms around my neck. “Hi, Cease,” she almost whispered.

“How was your day, Brook?” I asked, fingering her soft ponytail.

“It went by fast. Are we still having family movie night?” Last Friday, I suggested family movie night and at first, Brooklyn wasn’t feeling it but once she saw how happy Ant was she went for it. We ended up having a blast and decided we’d do it for

as long as I was staying with them.

“You get to pick, kiddo,” I smiled warmly at her and her eyes glittered like fireflies.

“Okay,” her voice was warm and she wasn’t whispering like she normally did. When she went to her room, I noticed she didn’t close the door either. Anthony looked at me and smiled, shaking his head.

“You know, Cease, I hate to say it but these past two weeks have been amazing for me to witness. Brooklyn is being...normal. She’s opening up to you and I didn’t think she would open up to anyone ever.”

“Well, I’m sure Brook would have opened up to a qualified psychologist like the one I recommended to you after Andrea...” I was still pissed about that shit and I wasn’t trying to hide it. Anthony grunted and averted his gaze from mine.

“Don’t start that shit.”

“It’s the truth though,” I told him. “She’s starving for love and affection. She wants to be noticed and heard but she’s scared to talk.”

“Well, you’re alright with me as long as you can get her to talk. I’m not admitting that she needed therapy because this isn’t therapy. This is you being her uncle. She needed this, Caesar.”

“I’m being her friend.” I had no idea why my voice was so harsh but I dialed it back and stood to my feet. Anthony’s eyes narrowed in contemplation and he nodded, leaving it alone.

I went to Brook’s room and knocked before sticking my head in. She’d changed out of her hoodie and wore a pink, long-sleeved Henley shirt. It was the first time I’d

seen her wear a color besides black or white. The pink looked good against her olive skin.

“Hey,” she smiled and hugged me, burying her face in my chest. Brook’s hugs made my world spin slower as if the universe wanted me to savor every second.

“What’s up, kiddo?” I sat on the floor with her and sorted through her box of cassette tapes. The girl had eclectic taste. I liked the fact that she had something that made her...her. It was one of the only ways I noticed Brook expressing herself outside of cutting.

“Phil Collins,” I said, handing her a tape. Her teeth found her bottom lip and she chewed nervously before reaching for the boombox. The music calmed her and she leaned against my arm, resting her head on my shoulder.

I noticed her hair was brushed up into a neat bun with not one strand out of place. I tossed a heavy arm around her and she let out a happy sigh. While she stared at the tape spinning in the tape deck, I stared down at her and admired the way she was blossoming.

My finger moved down the back of her neck and over the short swirl of hair there. It was like a single wisp of smoke. “You look pretty today, Brook. I like the pink on you,” I said. She looked up at me and smiled. It was the sweetest smile I’d ever seen.

“Thank you,” she replied quietly. “You look like you just got back from the gym.” I nodded my head at her observation and tried not to look too much like a proud uncle.

She was using her R’s properly. I didn’t want to point it out immediately because I didn’t want her to clam up but I noticed it.

We hung out on the floor talking about whatever she wanted to talk about. I was there

to listen. I was there to make sure Brooklyn was heard.

Every time she pronounced a word with R in it the right way, I noted it in my head. While we sat, I was reminded of our conversation the first night she agreed to let me in. I sat up straight and looked at her.

“Remember when you told me the speech apraxia made you feel like you were underwater?” I asked, running a hand over my chin.

“Yeah,” she nodded in response.

“I never thought that was true,” I said watching her expression. Her features twisted into a web of confusion. She shook her head slightly but not because of the confusion. She shook her head like someone with something in their ear.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

Like someone with water in their ear.

“You’re not speaking right now. You’re not trying to speak. Yet, you feel like you’re drowning, don’t you?” I asked. Brooklyn nodded her head. “Your words might not come out the way you want them to because of the apraxia but the anxiety is what makes you feel like you’re drowning.”

One night when we stayed up well into the morning, talking in the darkness of the living room while she curled up on the couch beside me, she told me that before she felt like she was drowning, she felt the water start in her head. It made things sound fuzzy and she couldn’t focus on anything.

She told me that after a while, the water got into her chest and she couldn’t breathe. Then she felt like she was drowning and would die. She felt like nobody could see her drowning. Nobody cared. It made her want to cry.

“W-What do you mean?” She asked, blinking rapidly.

“I mean that the water in your head sounds a lot like anxiety. The water in your chest making it hard to breathe sounds like a panic attack. The drowning and feeling like you’re dying and nobody can see you sound like depression.” The realization rippled over her and she stared at me with an open mouth. I let her sit quietly as long as she needed to. Brooklyn blinked her eyes, giving a soft shake to her head before wetting her lips with her tongue.

“I-I never thought about being depressed.” Her teeth found her bottom lip and she tugged at a piece of skin there. I swiped my thumb across her lip and she stopped

chewing on it but not before she started mouthing her sleeve.

“There are an insane amount of ways to treat depression if you want to try,” I offered with a mellow shrug. I didn’t want to push her to do anything she was afraid of or would resent later.

“I want to try,” she said forcing her lips to make the R sound. It came out shaky and uncertain but it was perfect.

“Great. I think journaling would be a good start,” I explained, pulling her sleeve away from her mouth. She stared at me for a few beats and her pupils dilated as she took me in. “You don’t have to show anyone. It’ll be your private thoughts.”

“I have a journal but it’s blank.” She scrambled over to her nightstand and pulled out a worn book with a unicorn on the front. I ticked off another mark in my head for times she pronounced the R sound properly.

Nothing would take away the unique accent that she had but I didn’t want it to. It meant that nobody would sound like Brook, ever. She was one of a kind.

“See?” She put it in my hand and I flipped through the blank, lined pages. I noticed specks of dried blood on the pages in the middle and I looked up at Brooklyn. My lips turned down at the corners. “I keep my razors in the middle,” she confided. Her voice was like a feather barely touching my ears.

“This is perfect,” I said swallowing back the thick ache starting to pulse through me. “Use it and turn it into something beautiful...like you,” I touched her cheek and they glowed scarlet.

“You think I’m beautiful? Me?” Her eyes were radiant. She inched closer to me and I held my arm out for her. She seemed most comfortable when she was right beside

me. It made my heart smile when I realized it.

“I do,” I admitted. It was the truth. Not something I said to boost her confidence. Brook was gorgeous. I was honestly shocked a talent scout hadn’t discovered her. She was always barefaced and yet she was striking. Her eyes glittered like the sun bouncing off the ocean. Her hair was thick and hung down past her shoulders in naturally loose waves and curls. It was a mixture of textures that would look messy to anyone else. Her lips were impossibly full and so expressive.

Normally, the eyes told it all but with Brook, her lips were equally expressive. I watched them almost as much as I watched her eyes. Maybe I shouldn’t have...

“Thank you,” she said, snatching me from my inappropriate thoughts.

“You’re welcome, kiddo.” I kissed her temple and stood up.

“You’re leaving?” She asked. Her lips dropped into a frown and my eyes locked onto them.

“Yeah...I’m gonna see what Ant is doing and which movie he’s forcing on us tonight.”

“Okay...” She stood too and curled her pinky around mine. “Ask if we can get pizza, please.” Her full lips curved upward making the apples of her cheeks rise. I wanted to always see that look on her face. Something about that thought made my throat thick. I stepped into the hallway and headed to the living room where I found Ant already browsing Netflix for a movie.

“How’s Brooklyn?” He asked, his eyes fixed on the trailer playing on the TV. I was glad he wasn’t looking at me because while I was the respected Dr. Powers in public, in private, my big brother saw right through me. He could get into my head with just

a look.

I didn't know what he'd find when he looked at me so I didn't want him focused on me. I didn't even know what the fuck was inside of my own head right then. I just knew it was wrong.

"She's fine. She wants pizza," I told him, sitting on the couch.

"She can have whatever she wants. I'm just glad I get to have my little girl back. She's herself. The Brooklyn I remember before..." He glanced at me and cleared his throat then flipped to another channel.

"It's okay to talk about Andrea," I told him. I was glad to switch the subject to something else. Anything else besides Brook. Something about her got under my skin in a way that wouldn't let up.

"I don't like to. Brings up tough emotions and I'm done dealing with emotions," Anthony grumbled. He crammed his thumb against the remote over and over until he stopped on another movie worthy of his consideration.

"Talking about Andrea might help Brook too," I mentioned, crossing my legs at the ankle. My main focus was the TV screen but I didn't miss my brother's quick glance at me.

Brook was his soft spot. He may not have understood the inner workings of her complex brain but he loved his daughter with everything he had. I respected that. He was doing the best he could by her.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

“Yeah? How so?” He asked, turning his full attention to me.

“She’ll feel like she can express herself too. If you don’t, then she won’t. You set the stage, Ant.” I’d been noticing that Anthony was closed off emotionally and the only time he showed any feelings at all was when he wanted to get Brook to open up to him. Other than that, he was a closed book. He certainly didn’t give off the vibe that he was an open-minded parent. He never talked about his late wife, Andrea.

“You can’t keep her mother’s memory locked away in a box,” I told him. I clenched my fist and tapped my toe on the floor in perfect time with the ticking clock on the wall.

“If I start talking about Andrea, I’ll think about her. If I think about her, I’ll think about how much I miss her, Cease.” His Adam’s apple wobbled in his throat and he studied the backs of his hands like there would be a pop quiz.

“And that’s okay. You miss your wife. That’s normal. I’m sure Brook misses her mom. You two can bond over the grief. It’s a powerful thing. Grief brings people together in the strangest ways but it’s usually an unbreakable bond once it’s formed.” I was prepared for a fight with him. He hated when I analyzed him.

“I know you’re waiting for me to fight back but I can’t. The way you’ve gotten my kid to talk and smile is something I’ve never seen before. I figure you must know what you’re talking about.

Your patients must be paying you for your smarts because they’re damn sure not paying you for your good looks. We all know I’m the good-looking brother.” A smile

tugged on the corner of his lips and I laughed out loud.

“Fuck you, Ant. Even if you did get the looks, I got the height and we all know that trumps everything.” I soaked in the feeling of hearing Ant laugh. It was something he needed to do more often.

“I gotta take a piss, I’ll be right back,” Anthony sighed, standing to his feet. I sat flipping through Netflix movies and settled on an action flick for my choice. I wanted to get a jump on the pizza so I went to ask Brook what she wanted on hers.

When I walked into her room, she was standing at the foot of the bed in just her bra and panties, watching something on her phone. I should have spoken up. I should have knocked or walked away but I didn’t.

My chest tightened and my mouth turned to cotton. Something about Brook broke my logic. I should have been around her more as a child. I should have watched her grow up. Maybe I wouldn’t be watching her from the doorway.

Shame weighed my neck down until my head hung. Logic began to seep back in and I knocked on her door with my eyes focused on the carpet. “Let’s order pizza, Brook.” I couldn’t believe that for a fucking second I thought it was okay to stand there and stare at her like that.

It was morally corrupt.

It was wicked.

It was fucked up.

“Oh, shit.” I listened from the hall as she scrambled around to put on clothes. She brushed past me wearing a pair of jeans and a long sleeved shirt with thumb holes

she'd cut into the bottom of the sleeve.

My heart thumped when I saw that smile of hers. I wanted to help her. I was displacing my feelings. That's it. I had to get a hold of that shit.

The thickness in my throat gave way to normalcy and I pushed out a breath. There was nothing morally corrupt or wicked. I just had displaced feelings for a hauntingly beautiful, sad girl.

My brain needed more time to get to know Brook. I forced myself to flip a switch that shut off the budding, twisted part of my brain. Flipping that switch allowed me to finally sit with my family like a family member and enjoy pizza and movies.

It allowed me to look at Brook like any other uncle would.

**

Brooklyn...

Friday movie nights were my favorite. We'd done five in a row already and this Friday made the sixth. I had my reasons for counting. Cease was only staying with Dad and me for eight weeks.

Every time I thought about him leaving, my head started to fill with water. It was anxiety. I had anxiety and I was depressed. It wasn't like I didn't know that already but it felt different hearing someone else point it out. I wasn't depressed whenever Cease was around though. He kept the water away.

He was my knight in shining armor and the thought of him leaving our house made the water fill my lungs like never before. It filled them so quickly that they burned trying to expand and I gasped trying to suck in air.

Breathe Brooklyn.

I had to coach myself through the simple fucking act of breathing every time I thought about Cease moving into his new house. It was pathetic.

I was pathetic.

The hatred I had for myself still stung. It would always sting. The only relief I felt was when Cease sat beside me on my bedroom floor listening to me talk.

I would always steal my hand away in his. My shoulders were tight each time he gave my hand a squeeze. He thawed all the icy parts of me. Being around him was like warming my hands over a fire on the harshest January night.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

“Hey, Kiddo Ant is still at work and I have to go finish signing the closing papers on my house. You wanna go with me?” Cease stood at my bedroom door and I let my eyes travel shamelessly up his tall, muscular body.

Today he was dressed like he was going to the office. He wore gray slacks that hugged him flawlessly and a crisp white shirt. My breath clogged my throat on the way out when my stare lingered on the patch of skin exposed by the three open buttons at his throat.

Did he have to smell so warm and rich? It made my heart thump far too fast. Sometimes when I was tucked beneath his arm on the couch, his scent made me dizzy. Not in a bad way though.

“Yeah. I’ll go. Do we get to see the house?” I didn’t have time to put my hair in a ponytail because Cease was looking at his watch and I felt the need to hurry.

“I’ll take you to see it,” he promised. He looked at my hair and said, “Leave it down. I like it.” His eyes narrowed a bit with a smile that never quite met his lips. Heat rushed through my core making my belly clench. I placed my hand there subconsciously.

“Thanks,” I tried not to smile too hard but the urge vibrated through me, pushing my cheeks up and curving my lips. “Um, your keys are in Daddy’s woom. He moved your car out of the dwiveway.” I moved past Cease and headed down the hall to Dad’s room.

Even though I was pronouncing words with R’s in them better, it still made my palms

tingle when I said things wrong in front of Cease. He would never judge me but I judged myself and I was harsh.

“Thanks, Brook,” he said warmly. As I moved past, we locked pinkies then he gave my hand a squeeze.

When I walked into my father’s room I tucked my hair behind my ear and brought the heel of my hand to my lips. I sucked on my sleeve as I moved things around on Dad’s dresser looking for Cease’s keys. I knocked over a few medicine bottles and frowned, picking one up. I curled my fingers around the brown bottle and read the name of the medicine.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

Nitroglycerin?

I picked up another bottle and eyed it. Aspirin. Another bottle was for something I couldn't pronounce. When the fuck did my dad start taking all those medicines?

He was always fine. He never told me anything about doctor appointments or pills. My ribs turned to bands of cement. They refused to let my lungs fill with air.

The water was back. I choked back a whimper and hurried to set the bottles up the way they were before. I was there to find Cease's keys, not snoop. I picked up a medium-sized wooden box to look behind it and the top slid off.

My chest tightened when I saw what was inside. Razors. I picked them up and cradled them in my palm. Dad stashed my razors in a box on his dresser. I thought he threw them away.

Maybe he didn't get a chance. I wet my lips with my tongue and tried to steady the erratic knock of my heart. My fingers shook as I inched my sleeve back. Water swallowed me. I could have called out for Cease. He would have come running. He would have pushed the water away.

Instead, I pushed the sharp tip of the razor into my flesh and watched blood bead at the puncture.

Fuck.

It felt so good.

I sighed softly and deepened the cut. My breathing came out in ragged puffs that made my shoulders tremble. My stomach quivered with the threat of being caught and the back of my neck prickled with nerves.

I watched the blood roll down my wrist and collect in all the creases before I snapped my eyes shut. Smooth bliss fell over me. The moment was sweet like butterscotch.

For a moment I was free. I wasn't drowning.

"Brook, you okay?" Cease's deep voice was a siren signaling a flood of shame. With my ears on fire and my breathing labored, I stumbled into my dad's bathroom.

"Um, Y-Yeah. I'm okay!" I shouted over the rushing water. I stared at the way my blood diluted then ran quickly down the drain before I pressed a paper towel to the cut to stop the blood flow. I tore another paper towel from the roll and wrapped the razors inside before shoving them in my pocket.

On the way out of my dad's bedroom, I found Caesar's keys on the nightstand and grabbed them. "Found them," I said. I had to force a smile when I wanted to do the opposite. I wanted to crawl under a rock and die.

I hadn't cut since Cease started staying with us. I didn't have to when he was around. I was weak staring at my razors though.

Weak and stupid.

The throb in my arm sank down to the bone. Each pulse was a reminder of my stupidity.

Bile crept up the back of my throat threatening to exit my mouth. My fake smile was the only thing keeping me from falling to scraps. Caesar's eyes pinned me to my spot.

It was like he was looking right through to my truth and I hated it. How could one look from him paint me with regret? I should have never cut.

It felt good though. It was such a relief. I tapped my lips with curled knuckles then pulled my sleeve between my lips. “What’s the matter?” Cease asked, his brows lowered on his forehead.

“Nothing. Just ready to go.” I could taste the subtle metallic blooms from my cut when I nibbled on my sleeve and sick me liked it. I was so fucking weird.

“Okay...let’s go beautiful,” Cease smiled at me even though I could tell he didn’t believe shit I said. I was too fucking strange for him to call me beautiful but dammit if it didn’t warm me to my toes.

Sitting beside Caesar in his car made me giddy. For a while, it kept the shame and guilt of cutting at bay. I loved being around him. His presence meant the world to me.

He obliged me and put on Hall and Oates while we drove and he even sang along with a couple songs. I used the opportunity to steal glances at him. His profile was so handsome.

I wanted to reach out and touch the chocolate stubble scattered on his jaw. The urge was strong as fuck. I fisted my hands and rubbed my knuckles on my jeans turning my gaze away from him.

So fucking sick, Brooklyn. He’s your uncle and you’re crushing on him hard as shit.

There was nothing wrong with a crush though. I didn’t have to act on it. It could stay in my head like a secret.

When we pulled up to the realtor’s office, Caesar helped me out of the car and put his

huge hand on the small of my back as we walked. I felt it through my shirt and my hoodie. My skin blazed like fucking lava when he touched me there.

“Dr. Powers, so nice to see you again.” When I saw the realtor with her shiny black heels and perfect clothes, I hated that I chose to wear a hoodie and jeans. I hated that my hair looked wild and not sleek like hers. I hated that she could wear short sleeves and show off her unscarred arms.

I forced my stare to the floor and looked at my Converse as we walked along. Why did Cease always call me beautiful? Why? I caught a glimpse of my too skinny, too tall self as we walked past a window and I wanted to shrink and vanish.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

I wanted to be shiny and pretty like the realtor that Caesar smiled at.

She flipped her long blonde hair over her shoulder before leaning over way too far to hand him a folder of papers. Her boobs were huge. I'm sure that's what she was trying so desperately to get my uncle to notice. How could he not notice them? They were practically spilling out of her shirt.

My heart sped up a bit and my palms felt damp.

I wanted to run and hide somewhere.

"Brook, you okay?" He asked, leaning over and speaking close to my ear.

"Uh huh," I nodded quickly and drummed my nails on the tabletop.

"Aww, who's this? You're way too young to have a kid this age so she must be your niece, huh?" She beamed with a cheesy grin and looked at me.

"Wow, yeah...how'd you guess?" Caesar chuckled.

"I'm pretty good at figuring people out." She let her eyes linger on him and I felt jealousy heat my entire face. The heat crept down to my neck and I turned my head so nobody could see me turning beet red.

They held small talk for a while and the longer it went on, the more I fidgeted in my seat. I could feel the dull ache from my newest cut, and suddenly I remembered the razors in my pocket. I tugged on Cease's hand and he stopped talking to lean over to

me.

“Bathroom,” I whispered.

“Okay, I’ll ask.” He rubbed the back of my hand and asked the pretty realtor where the bathroom was. I hated leaving him alone with her but it wasn’t like he had the same fucked up thoughts I did anyway.

I was his niece.

He called me beautiful because that’s what uncles did. I’d know that if I ever really had one. I’d know that if I wasn’t so fucking stupid.

Ugh.

I pulled the folded paper towel out of my pocket once I locked the bathroom door behind myself. The razors called out to me like a promise of peace. I needed that promise right then because I was starting to sink under the water.

I sat on the edge of the sink and pulled in a deep breath that trembled on the way back out. I found a smooth patch of skin and quickly opened up a shallow cut. The pain bit at my sadness and pulled my focus away from drowning.

Good pain...

I didn’t have time for anything serious while my uncle was only feet away. My thighs clenched thinking about him.

Uncle, Brooklyn. He’s your fucking uncle. Don’t be twisted.

He was so beautiful though.

Something pulsed deep inside of me and it was delicious but it was covered in sin. I blinked rapidly and rushed to clean up so I could get back to Cease. Even being in his space made me feel better.

“Hey, Kiddo. Let’s go. You wanted to see the house, right?” He winked at me and I felt like I would actually combust. His eyes were perfection. I wanted to stop staring but I couldn’t. There was no way.

“Yeah,” I squeaked. I looked around for Ms. Pretty Realtor but she was nowhere to be found. Can’t say I was complaining.

“Why don’t we grab something to eat then head over to the house? I’m starving,” he groaned.

“Me too,” I replied, still stealing glances at him.

Once we were in the car, I pressed my nails into the heels of my hands until my skin throbbed. I wanted to touch Cease so fucking bad it was eating me alive.

“What happened to the realtor?” I asked, my throat dry and my words creaky.

“Oh...she uh...she was a little too friendly. I had to tell her in a polite way that I wasn’t interested.” He shook his head at the memory and pulled away from the office. Meanwhile, irrational anger stormed around in my head like a tribe of giants making my temples ache.

“Oh...” I muttered, sucking on my bottom lip

Page 19

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

“Never throw yourself at a man, Brook. You’re too fucking beautiful for that shit. Always make them come to you,” he told me.

“What if I just want a kiss though?” I asked, my knees knocking from nerves. Did I seriously just ask him about kissing a guy? The only guy I wanted to kiss was sitting right beside me.

God, what was wrong with me?

Why was I like this?

“Kiss?” Cease said the word like it was his first time hearing it. “Who do you want to kiss, Brook?” His voice grew deeper but instead of scaring me it forced my thighs to press against each other.

“Nobody,” I lied. Cease cleared his throat and gripped the steering wheel tighter in his fist, making the cords in his forearms flex. Why did he have his sleeves rolled up like that? Was it normal for that to drive someone crazy?

It was driving me in-fucking-sane.

I squirmed a bit in my seat and stared at the soft dark hair on his arm, scattering down his wrist and just barely over his hand. Was there anything not wildly gorgeous about him?

“Wanting to kiss a guy isn’t the same as throwing yourself at him. Making the first move isn’t the same thing. That’s taking charge.”

“Oh,” I nodded, taking in his answer. I forced my eyes to stare out of the window at the passing trees and buildings so that I wouldn’t keep staring at my uncle like a twisted freak.

When he pulled into a hole in the wall burger joint, my stomach rumbled. He let me order whatever I wanted once we were inside. I got a juicy burger with everything on it. Maybe chewing would help me not look at his lips when he spoke. Maybe if I focused on eating I wouldn’t melt when he smiled.

We spent more than an hour sitting in a little booth with red vinyl seats and metal napkin dispensers talking about any and everything. I almost forgot we were supposed to be seeing his house. “Promise you’ll bring me back here,” I demanded with a smile on my lips.

“Whenever you want, Brook.” His arm was heavy around my shoulders but it was my center of gravity right then. It was the only thing pulling me down to Earth because whenever I was around Caesar, I floated.

“So, are you ready to see Casa de Powers?”

“I’m pretty sure that’s where I live now,” I joked.

“Well...this is Casa de Powers 2.0,” he laughed, opening the door to his home. It was huge. Twice the size of my house. The foyer boasted gorgeous marble flooring and a golden and glass chandelier that gave off warm light as the sun set outside.

“Wow,” I muttered, tilting my head back to look at it.

“You haven’t even seen the place and you’re already wowing?” Cease tickled my side and a laugh popped out of my mouth. We walked into the kitchen and I slipped my hand in his. It was always so smooth and warm.

“This is beautiful,” I whispered. Huge windows created a wall of glass behind the sink and gave an amazing view of his backyard. A thicket of trees created a dense line giving him privacy on all sides. I wanted to go outside and bury my toes in the blades of grass.

“Do you have air yet? It’s so humid in here.” I heard my voice and smiled at the way my words came out without being jumbled. The progress made me dizzy with happiness. Cease caught on to it too and wrapped me in a hug.

His strong arms around my slender frame felt good. They felt so good. How could something so pure and good make my body roar with desire?

“I am so proud of how well you’re speaking lately, Brook. I try not to call attention to it but it’s fucking amazing,” he beamed

“It’s because of you,” I told him, pressing the tip of my pointer finger against his hard chest.

“Me? You had it in you all along. You just needed me to watch you blossom.” He smiled down at me while I was still safe in his arms. “Oh, and to answer your question, I haven’t had the heat and air turned on yet.” When he let me go, I pulled my black hoodie off and laid it on the counter.

Something flashed in Caesar’s eyes when he looked at me. I didn’t know what it was but it made my nerve endings stand at attention like a wave a static shock washed over me.

“You don’t have to hide behind hoodies and long sleeves around me. I like you the way you are. Scars and all.” He reached out and took my hand in his then he pulled my thumb out of its hole and rolled my sleeve back. I snatched my arm away but it was too late.

He saw my fresh cut marks.

There was no mistaking the look in his eyes.

He was pissed.

“Brook, why have you been cutting again?” He growled. Anger poured off him. His spine was straight like a ruler and his shoulders were stiff and unmoving. I shrank back, snatching my hoodie from the counter and holding it over my arms.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

Moments ago his touch melted me and now he looked like he hated me.

I couldn't handle Caesar hating me.

It would surely kill me.

"I-I was scawed. I don't know. I'm sowwy, please don't hate me, Cease," I begged. Terrified tears dripped from my lashes.

"Hate you?" His voice was a deep rumble. It sent chills across my shoulders that settled in, making me heavy. His long legs ate up the space between us as he approached me. His lips were pressed into a firm line. "I could never hate you, Brook. If anything I love you too fucking much." His fingers yanked on my wrist until I was middle to middle with him.

Feathers fluttered in my stomach and my temperature skyrocketed. Logic crumbled to dust when I was that close to him. "I hate seeing you so scared and sad," he said, brushing hair behind my shoulder. His eyes studied mine and confusion crept in making the space between his brows crease and his stare narrow.

Being so close to him made me irrational. My shaky breath matched my fingers. I slid them around the back of his neck and stood on my tip toes. In a burst of urgency and need, I pressed my lips to his. His long fingers slid through my hair and I moaned. It was a sound so soft it would have been missed if it weren't dead quiet.

Caesar's hand turned to a fist in my hair and I felt pressure mounting between my thighs. He yanked back until our kiss was broken and looked at me with fire crackling

in his eyes. The fire soon faded and he let his hand fall to his side.

My stomach sank watching his mouth turn down in a grimace.

Oh, god Brooklyn what the fuck did you do?

Why?

Why?

Why?

**

Caesar...

Brook's shoes squeaked as she bolted out of the front doors. I stood in the kitchen of my new home silent except for the fierce knocking of my heart against my chest. When she kissed me my cock ached and the depraved animal inside of me reared its head.

Fuck.

I liked the kiss.

It was the sweetest thing. A whisper of needy desire that melted against my lips. The things I wanted to do to her on that counter were fucked up. Even standing there thinking about it made my erection painful.

I let out a growl and made a fist, slamming it against the granite countertop before a strained breath escaped me. My head was pounding as I took one step after the other

toward the foyer. I focused on my car in the driveway while I locked the doors behind me without glancing once.

Brook was sitting in the passenger seat with her knees pulled up to her chin, bawling. My chest was tight watching her in so much anguish. She was confused but she wasn't there alone.

I got in the car and started the engine, yanking on the seatbelt to click it into place. "Please don't tell Daddy," she begged barely above a whisper.

"I'm not telling him," I grunted, throwing the car in drive. My arms ached from being so tense.

"I'm sowwy," she cried. A hiccup slipped out before she went into another fit of tears. I knew for a fact that this episode would send her into a cutting frenzy. I couldn't keep driving in silence.

What was I supposed to say?

Should I tell her that I wanted the kiss as much as she did? Should I tell her that I saw the jealousy painting her aura in the realtor's office but the only girl pretty enough to hold my attention was her?

Fuck no.

I couldn't say that to her. Neither of us should have been feeling that way. It was wrong.

I pulled over to a parking lot and stopped. I stared out of the window and scrubbed my forehead with the heel of my hand. "Brooklyn, you know I love you, right?" I asked, my voice ragged.

“Not anymore,” she scoffed.

“Still. Always. No matter what,” I snapped. “Why did you do that?” I begged her to tell me so that I could ease the confusion in my head. It was tearing me up inside, making me feel like lead.

“I um...I don’t know. I’m fucking warped. My mind is sick, Cease,” she sniffled. I found the strength to look at her and my heart twisted.

“You’re displacing your feelings, Brook. You feel happy for the first time in a long time and-and you’re attaching those feelings to me. I’m your uncle though,” I said more so for me than her.

“I know,” she said sharply. “It won’t fucking happen again. It was stupid. I’m stupid. So...fucking stupid.” Her voice was thick with emotion that broke and gave way to tears.

Anger filled me up from the inside, crowding my normal train of thought. I wanted to throw a punch at something to let the frustration out.

“You’re not stupid. Stop saying that shit. There’s nothing wrong with you, Brooklyn. You’re perfect. You’re perfect even with the scars and anxiety. You’re perfect with your insecurities and quirks. You don’t see it but they make you so goddamn stunning it’s breathtaking.” I let out a pained laugh and drummed my restless fingers against the steering wheel.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

I made Brooklyn feel safe. I knew that. I couldn't let her navigate dangerous and uncharted waters on her own. I had to throw her a life preserver.

"I'm warped too, Brook. It's not just you," I confessed in a hushed tone. She stopped sniffing and looked at me with emotion filling her wide hazel pools.

"Y-You..." she stammered without saying much else. I already knew what her question was though.

"Yes. I think you're beautiful in a way I shouldn't. It's fucked up. We can't kiss anymore. We can't...do anything. Okay?" I lifted my eyebrows and begged her with my stare.

"Okay," she said earnestly. The tears were gone at least. I couldn't take her crying anymore. It was fucking destroying me. I would have given anything to kiss those tears away. Instead, I tucked away those kinds of thoughts because I knew better.

We both knew better and we would act like it from now on.

**

Before I got out of the car to go into the house and try not to reek of guilt when I looked at my big brother, Brook stopped me. "I found medicine in his woom. That's why I cut myself. I felt the water. I was scared."

My ears heated at her words.

“Medicine? In Anthony’s room? “I quizzed.

“Yes,” she scanned my face and held my hands in hers. I hated how the warmth coursing from her to me made me feel so alive.

“What kind of medicine? He hasn’t said anything about needing treatment for anything.”

“Nitwoglycewin.”

My blood ran cold and I shook my head. I wanted to shake the words out. “Are you sure, Brook?”

“Yes. I know what I saw,” she said, placing her hands on her slender hips.

“Did you see anything else? Aspirin?” Brooklyn nodded emphatically. “Fuck!” I roared.

“Cease, what’s wong?” She tugged on my wrists.

“I need to talk to him,” I stormed into the house and told Brooklyn to go to her room. She went, reluctantly and I headed straight for my brother.

I found him in the kitchen, popping popcorn for movie night. Rage exploded from me without warning the moment I opened my mouth. “You’re on heart meds and you didn’t fucking tell me, Ant?”

He stopped what he was doing and looked at me, his mouth hanging open. “Cease...were you going through my shit?”

“Yes, I was. I was in your room looking for my car keys and I found the fucking

medicine. Were you going to tell me? Tell Brook? Hmm?" I stepped toward him and his shoulders squared.

"I'm. Fine. Don't worry." He was on the brink of losing it but I'd already lost it.

"You're not fucking fine and you know it! You're having heart problems like Dad did and you're hiding it like him too. I'm so goddamn tired of you hiding things from me. First, you didn't tell me about Brook and her cutting and anxiety now you're not telling me what the fuck is going on with you either. You don't talk about any goddamn thing!"

"What happened to Dad isn't going to happen to me, Caesar," he tried to assure me.

"So you mean to tell me that you have a crystal fucking ball and you can see into the future? Tell me again...how do you prevent heart attacks from happening?" My breathing was noisy as I stared him down, glaring.

"I take my medicine. I'm fine. Stop worrying and don't go through my shit anymore, Caesar. You wanted your keys all you had to do was fucking ask. Send me a text."

"It's not normal to keep things from the people closest to you," I shouted.

"You're not close to me, are you? You've been in New York for how long without a single fucking visit? Then you want to complain that I don't tell you shit while you're off being a goddamn hot shot shrink. Don't come in here acting like you care."

"I do care!" I roared. "Fine, don't tell me anything. You could have at least told your daughter. She's scared shitless. She started cutting again."

The anger faded from his eyes and was replaced with sadness. "What? How did she find out? You told her?"

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

Shit.

I couldn't let Ant know that Brook was the one who found his medicine. I'd do anything to protect her from getting yelled at. Ant wasn't harsh by any means but she was fragile.

"Yes. Of course. We talk and I wanted to know if she knew how long you'd been taking the heart medicine," I said, swallowing the jagged fragments of the lie I told.

"Fuck you, Cease. You crossed the line. You shouldn't have told Brooklyn and now she's cutting her fucking arms up again all because you couldn't keep your mouth shut!" The vein in his forehead pulsed and I could feel the one in my neck throbbing.

"Don't you see that's the problem? You don't tell her enough. You don't let her in enough and she feels alone. Floating in the water. Talk to your kid." My voice softened but my anger didn't. I realized Brook could hear every single word of what was going on. She was in her room, not some soundproof fortress.

She already had enough on her mental plate. Hearing her father and me shout it out in the kitchen wasn't helping. Ant's mood died down some, his shoulders relaxed and his head hung a bit. "I'll talk to her," he promised. "I'm still pissed at you for poking your fucking nose where it doesn't belong." He stalked past me, clipping my shoulder on the way to Brook's room and I went into the living room.

**

Family movie night happened only because Brook requested it. She sat snuggled next

to me like she usually did. I wanted to move to a recliner instead of indulging in behavior that contradicted what I said to her earlier in the day. The truth was...I couldn't.

After fighting with Anthony, beside Brook was where I wanted to be. While he dozed, the TV watched me. My fingers twirled lazily in Brook's soft black hair.

I was singlehandedly obliterating every word I told her about not doing anything. Tangled in that sticky moment, I realized I needed her too. Knowing she was safe and calm put me at peace.

I made a mental note in my mind to set clear boundaries with Brook once I was out of the house. Maybe my head would clear and my heart would forget the way she made me feel once I moved out. Maybe.

Brook's hazel eyes were fixed on the TV while my fingers inched her sleeve up revealing one skinny scar after another. With each inch I moved up, I waited for her to flinch away. To brush my hand off of her. She never did.

She let my touch skim her olive skin. Over each mark on her once smooth arm. I looked at every scar as a tortured cry that nobody heard. Well, I was listening loud and clear and Brooklyn would never go unheard again.

"Should we wake him?" Brook asked once the movie went off. I opened my mouth to speak but nothing came out. My eyes traced the fullness of her lips and the way the green flecks in her eyes seemed to glow with the light of the TV behind her.

I blinked rapidly, trying to find my words but it was hard. She rendered me totally speechless. She wasn't even doing anything but I got so caught up in her beauty that I didn't know what to say.

“Um, yeah. I guess. You can handle that. I’m going to hit the shower.” I was still pissed with my brother but I knew by morning, I’d make an effort to come around and work things out. Right then I needed time and space. I’m sure he needed the same things.

Once I was in the hot shower, the water rushed over me and I prayed it took the thoughts I was having with it when it swirled down the drain. I couldn’t stop replaying the way Brooklyn kissed me. Her lips were so soft and timid. She tasted so sweet. But not the kind of sweet that would make you think of candy.

She was the kind of sweet that made you think of burying your nose in between flower petals. I imagined how sweet she must have been all over and my dick stood at attention.

Shit.

No matter what else I thought about, I kept coming back to Brook’s kiss. The thought of pinning her to the bed while I kissed and sucked on her full lips, had me thrusting into my soapy fist. My eyes fell shut and I imagined sliding in and out of Brook’s tight pussy.

Two minutes later, pressure built deep inside of me and everything from my fingertips to my toes tingled. I came so hard my knees buckled and I braced myself, pressing my forearm against the slick shower wall. I watched my seed disappear down the drain and cursed under my breath.

What the fuck was wrong with me?

I shut the shower off then got out, wrapping a plush towel around my waist. I needed sleep. Bad. Not because I was tired but because I needed a break from my brain.

I was relieved to see that Ant was gone from the couch. I laid out my blankets and pillows before crashing down to what had become my bed over the past four weeks.

**

The alarm yanked sleep away from me, sending memories of jerking my dick to Brooklyn, crashing down on my head. I was tired. That's what it had to have been. I was so fucking tired and I wasn't thinking straight.

I sat up and looked at my phone to check my appointments for the day. I had a meeting with an old colleague and one of my best friends from New York, Ronnie Hollows. He had a practice in LA, and if he would have me, I'd gladly be a psychologist on his team.

It was so quiet in the house that I could hear the rustle of the leaves outside when the wind blew. On the way to the bathroom, I walked past Brooke's room and noticed she'd already left for school. I must have been tired because I didn't even hear her leave.

I got dressed and tried to ignore the colossal feeling starting to crush me. It loomed over my head no matter how upbeat I was about meeting with my old friend. This wasn't anxiety or nerves. This was something else.

I had to make up with my brother. I realized that I couldn't go talk about a job knowing he was at home being pissed at me.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

When I walked into his room after a few knocks, my entire world tilted on its axis. Anthony was face down on the floor. His body was cold and stiff.

The dense feeling of doom was no longer over top of me, it was me. It sank into my blood and pumped through my veins.

I dropped to my knees, my hands trembling like a leaf in the height of a storm. “Ant! Anthony, please get up, man. Please...” My voice cracked, giving way to tears. His body was heavy and stiff as I flipped him over on his back. “Anthony, no...no...no.” My words felt too tiny. They didn’t feel real. My big brother couldn’t be there on the floor dead.

He absolutely couldn’t.

I wanted to wake up from the nightmare playing in my head.

It had to be a dream, right?

I rested his head in my lap with my spine bowed and my head hanging until my forehead brushed his. His skin was like cold leather. My big brother was just a body.

My shoulders quaked as sobs took over me along with the realization that in an instant, I was alone in the world. Our parents died when I was still a kid. All I had was Anthony.

Now, I had no one.

I shouldn't have fought with him. I got him riled up and didn't come back to apologize. Agonizing tears dripped onto Ant's shirt as I cried over him, my fists in balls begging the very air around me to let this be a bad dream.

Twenty minutes of broken cries later, I fumbled to call an ambulance. They took him to the hospital and I waited hours for them to tell me he had a heart attack probably hours before he was discovered. They asked if I wanted to notify anyone from their phone and suddenly the feeling of doom was heavy on me again.

I had to tell Brooklyn her father was dead.

She was in school without a care. My throat turned scratchy as I rose from the chair I'd been planted in. I knew there were people talking to me but I couldn't respond. My body was cement as I walked through the doors. All I had to do was put one foot in front of the other.

Left, right.

Left, right.

I checked out while my muscles kicked in and drove me to Avery Briggs Alternative High School. I told the main office I needed to take my niece home. My body was void of emotion and my voice was a flat surface that held nothing. Not a single inflection.

She was happy to see me until she settled beside me in the car and realized something wasn't right. "Cease, what's wong?" Her soft voice and adorable inflections shattered me. I turned into a tsunami of sorrow, my tall frame curved over the steering wheel. "Cease, what's wong! What happened?" Her hands trembled as she touched my back. "Please talk to me," she begged.

“I’m sorry, Brook,” I rasped. I had to pull myself together. She couldn’t see me break down. I wiped the tears from my hot face and prepared to tell her the hardest thing I’ve ever had to tell anyone.

**

Brooklyn...

Everything on me shook...my lips, my chin, my hands and shoulders. I didn’t know what was coming next from Cease but watching him crumble right before me was haunting. He composed himself after a moment then looked at me.

“Your father is...dead. He’s gone, Brook,” he sniffled.

My lips moved but nothing came out.

Water, water, water.

“No...no, Cease. Don’t say that,” I begged. My chest felt empty like my heart would never beat again.

“I found him this morning on the floor in his room. He had a heart attack,” he explained, trying to remain calm. Sweat beads made of ice covered my forehead. I sucked in one last urgent breath before the water swallowed my head.

A howl clawed at my constricted throat until I had no choice but to let it out. Water shredded my lungs to useless scraps of tissue. I was sinking like a rock.

“Nooo!” I don’t even know when I started to cry. I don’t know when I started to shake or clutch my shoulders and rock back and forth.

“I’m so sorry, Brook,” Caesar said again. His voice was too far away. He sounded like he was a football field away instead of right beside me, holding my hands.

“I-I-I can’t breathe,” I gasped, scratching at my throat with my nails. I didn’t care if I drew blood. I wanted to. I wanted to feel physical pain and not the godforsaken pain that echoed in my heart.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

“Calm down, Brook. You have to breathe, baby.”

“I can’t!” I shrieked in a panic. My wet eyes scanned for something in Cease’s car. Anything to cut with.

“You’re going to have to calm down.” He rolled the windows down and I felt air rushing over my skin. The water was still swallowing me rapidly. It felt as if I was inside an aquarium banging on the thick glass, begging for Caesar to get me out.

He pulled off and more air slid across my skin but my lungs were still useless. It wasn’t until Cease took me home and held me in his arms that I started to breathe. Deep, chest-vibrating coughs shook my body.

Finally, my voice squeaked out tiny and afraid, “Why?”

“I don’t know, Brook,” he sighed, brushing the hair from my forehead. Each thump of my stupid heart made me feel like my ribs would shatter.

The walls of my own house felt foreign and unwelcoming. I hated being home. I didn’t want to look at that house again. Memories suddenly became my lifeline and the only thing that would play before my eyes.

How?

How could my father be gone?

How could I miss him so sorely already?

A part of me was gone and there was only a gaping hole.

**

I woke up in my bed. Darkness surrounded me and I felt cold. Cold and so fucking empty. Once reality came surging back in all bitter and jagged, I rushed to my bathroom and locked the door.

My faithful precision point tweezers stared back at me from the medicine cabinet like an old friend. I yanked them down and shoved my sleeve up hastily. My lips parted and I sucked in breath after breath, thirsty for air. The water was coming faster and faster.

A satisfied moan escaped me as I shut my eyes and sat on the edge of the tub. Warm blood slid down to my hand. The deep thrum pulsed down to my tendons and it stung so bad but still so good.

Shame and grief danced in my chest before taking over my body. I hated myself, so I cut again and again and again until...

Knock, knock, knock...

"Brook, you awake?" Caesar's voice was hazy at best. "Brooklyn, open this door," he growled. The bathroom door trembled beneath his fist.

My hands slipped trying to open the door. They were coated in thick crimson. It smeared all over everything. It dripped onto the floor. It soaked my sleeves.

There was so much blood.

"I can't...I can't open the door," I laughed. I sounded distant.

“Brooklyn!” Cease shouted. His voice was broken apart.

In the next moment, or maybe it was two or three moments, Caesar dragged me out of the bathroom and my vision grew fuzzy.

**

I woke up in the hospital. Pain burned my forearms when I tried to push to a sitting position. I looked down to see stark white bandages up to my elbows on both arms. A thick knot lodged itself in my throat.

I was in awe.

I was happy and pissed off at the same time. Having bandages on meant I wouldn’t cut but the exact same realization made me smolder with anger. I needed to cut but I knew better.

My head hurt with the contradiction.

“There she is,” I jerked my gaze to the corner of the room and saw Caesar’s long frame swallowing two chairs he’d turned into a makeshift bed. His eyes were bloodshot red and his normally perfect hair was disheveled.

He strolled over to my bed and pushed his fingers through my hair. Everything came into focus. I pushed out a soft sigh and nuzzled against his touch.

“Can you tell me it was all a bad dream?” I sniffed. Cease shook his head, sadness washed over his handsome features. He sat beside me and pulled my body against him. His smell was more comforting than anything in the world.

“I’m sorry, baby. It’s not a bad dream. When you’re ready to talk, I’m here. Let me

know. I'm not leaving your side." I looked down at my bandaged arms then at Cease.

"I went too far. How much blood did I lose?"

"A lot. Scared the fuck out of me. I can't lose you, Brook." He kissed the top of my head and my heart thumped.

"I'm sowwy. My head is fucked up. This hurts so bad."

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

“I know,” he muttered. Then we sat there in silence.

**

We moved in silence like that for days. We spoke when necessary but we were too shell-shocked for anything else. I knew closure would come after the funeral but I wasn't looking forward to it.

The days that led up to saying that final goodbye shifted into a mind-numbing blur that I'd never be able to fully recall. I didn't know what I ate, how I got dressed or what I wore. I couldn't recall getting makeup work from school or if I'd spoken on the phone to anyone.

The only things that remained ever-present were the water and the sinking feeling.

Once the day of my father's funeral finally arrived and I wore my solemn black dress and dropped a single rose into his casket, I thought I would feel better. I thought maybe I'd get some kind of reprieve from the constant drowning sensation once he'd been lowered into the ground but I didn't. I wanted Cease to work his magic and pull me out of it but it seemed like he was drowning too.

After the funeral was done and the last extended family member was gone, I put the casseroles in the fridge at Cease's new house. He stood in the kitchen staring at me once I finally stopped moving. I didn't see him because I was busy nibbling on my sleeve and looking down at my phone, but I felt him.

Whenever he looked at me, my skin got hot. Not hot like being outside in July but hot

from the inside out. Hot like having a fever. Only the cure for this fever was more sickness.

“Aside from the obvious, how are you feeling, Brook?” I didn’t speak. I only shrugged my shoulders in response. I didn’t know how to speak to him anymore.

Someone that once saved me from myself, needed saving. He was sad and he was withdrawn. I was back to feeling alone and I didn’t know how to tell him that without crying. I was so tired of crying.

“I know I haven’t been a good source of strength for you lately,” he confessed with a grimace. I glanced at him and listened for him to go on. “I want to fix that. Tell me how, Brook.” His sincerity gripped me somewhere deep that I thought would be permanently dead after they closed my father’s casket.

I looked at Cease and pulled in a long breath. I said the only words that were true no matter what, “I can’t breathe without you” I tapped my chest and tears filled my eyes making everything blurry.

In the next blink, Caesar’s hands were on my hips. He pulled me against him in a hug that I needed so, so much. “I’m not going anywhere, Brook. I know I’ve been in my own head this past week but I’m not going to leave you out here alone. You’ll stay with me until you graduate then we’ll discuss what you want to do after that.” His fingers drew invisible loops on my lower back and it made the space around me squeeze in tighter.

Goddammit.

I still wanted him so bad I could taste it on every taste bud.

“I want to stay here. I mean...until I can get a job and...” My words were disjointed

but Caesar understood. He always understood.

“Brooklyn, you can stay here as long as you want. I’ll have you moved in by the end of the week.” His lips pressed against my forehead and my lungs felt free and clear for the first moment in days.

**

Guilt trickled down into my belly as I laughed and ate dinner with Caesar that night. I shouldn’t have felt happy in any respect. I buried my father hours ago when the sun was high in the sky. Now was not the time to laugh and eat like life was okay.

It wasn’t.

“Worry about the dishes in the morning. We need rest. You want the guest room tonight or...you wanna sleep with me?” His words came out sheepish but they set me on fire.

“You,” I said instantly. I hated sleeping alone. I needed Caesar’s closeness. I needed him.

The silence that filled the room while we slid into bed after taking showers and brushing out teeth was different than the silence we’d endured all week. This silence was thick with something else. Something weighing down the spaces between the lines.

Still, I laid in bed with Caesar, telling myself nothing was wrong. I was his niece and I needed him. I needed his comfort and love.

That was it.

I soaked in the feeling of his cool sheets against my warm skin and tried not to look at his sculpted pecs and defined biceps in the tank top he wore. “Come here,” he demanded in a low voice.

It wasn’t a harsh command but it was rough and it held more than an uncle calling his niece over for a hug. I slid close and his strong arm snaked around me, nearly sucking the breath from my chest.

“I want you to make me a promise, Brook,” he tipped my chin up so that we locked gazes. I would have promised him anything in the world right then.

“Okay, what is it?” I asked.

“Promise me you won’t cut. I’ll sleep beside you and give you whatever you need. Just stop.”

Page 26

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

“I want to stop,” I told him. My words got stuck in my head and I couldn’t express myself the way I wanted.

So fucking stupid, Brooklyn.

“I know it’s not black and white but I want that to be the main goal,” His touch was feather soft as he stroked my hair. I slid my legs over his letting the prickly sensation tickle my calves.

“I’m going to twy,” I told him.

“Thank you. I worry about you so much and I want better for you. Maybe it’s selfish but...Brook, I can’t think about anything happening to you. What if you cut too deep or one too many times?” I could feel his heart thumping through his chest and I wanted to listen to that sound on repeat until I fell asleep.

I hated how sad he sounded.

He cared about me.

Me.

Stupid, fucked in the head Brooklyn. Someone actually cared about me.

“I won’t leave you either, Cease,” I whispered. He squeezed me and buried his nose in my hair, taking a slow, deep breath that left goosebumps along my shoulders.

“Thank you,” he said touching my cheek. I struggled against my own desire, pressing my thighs together, praying he couldn’t tell how wet my panties were. I wanted to steal that moment and keep it for myself. I wanted to sneak away in the shower and rub my pussy while I thought about Caesar.

He stroked my hair over and over until a rogue moan floated into the air from my mouth. Cease slid thumb along my bottom lip then replaced his thumb with his tongue. Heat spilled into my belly and stretched up to my chest then my throat, making my neck flush.

I met his kiss with my lips and slipped my tongue into his mouth. He tasted it like it was a piece of candy. He was so strong but his kiss was so gentle. For the first time, I felt like I was floating instead of drowning.

I pushed my fingers through his dark hair and gripped it tight at the back of his head. He pulled away putting centimeters between our shaky breaths. He rubbed his nose against mine before he dropped kisses to my neck that made me squirm. The pressure building between my thighs was so intense I could have blacked out right there in his bed.

His lips stopped moving right at my throat. He stayed there unmoving, pushing out heavy puffs of air. He was barely contained and I was mist. I was vapor. I’d come undone after the first kiss and I didn’t want to pull myself together.

Caesar cleared his throat and moved away but not too far. “We should um...we should get some rest,” he told me.

“W-What?” I stammered.

“Brook, let’s go to sleep. We can’t...we can’t go beyond that. Fuck, even that was too much.”

“But it was perfect,” I reasoned.

“It was...so much more,” he shook his head and fell against his pillow. “We can’t though. We shouldn’t. Let’s get some rest.” His words were disjointed but my mind was too fuzzy to protest.

Maybe sleep was better than trying to untangle everything that happened between us. That’s what I was going to tell myself anyway. So I faded into sleep.

But...

I couldn’t stay asleep. That kiss still burned and tingled on my lips. I still felt his breath on me even though he was sleeping. I turned over in bed to look at him. His full lips begged for a kiss but I stayed put just staring at him like a creep.

His facial hair was thicker since he hadn’t shaved. I liked it. I ran the pads of my fingers over the prickly hair. My clit throbbed thinking about how his stubble would tickle between my legs.

My teeth found my bottom lip and my hand found its way to my wet panties. Fuck, they were soaked. My eyes were drawn to something in the dark. It took me a moment to realize the bulge I was looking at was Caesar’s erection.

Holy shit.

Don’t touch it, Brooklyn.

Don’t touch it, Brooklyn.

Don’t fucking touch it.

I reached out and slid my hand along his hard-as-steel cock then choked back a groan. I slipped my hand inside of my panties and rubbed my needy clit in circles. I was panting so rapidly that my lips turned dry.

Page 27

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

I dared another touch and that time my moan was out loud. I was so slick. So slippery. I'd never felt like that before. I rubbed my arousal between my fingers then fingered my aching clit while imagining Cease thrusting inside of me.

An orgasm crashed into me like a tidal wave. My body jolted then gave way to shivers that wouldn't stop if my life depended on it. I bit down on my lips to stop the nasty noises from escaping.

Once my heart rate returned to normal, I finally fell asleep and stayed asleep.

**

Caesar...

I didn't think it would be tough for me to go to Brook's school but it was harder than I imagined. I should have known it would be a bitch going back to that damn school when Brooklyn decided to stay home instead of tagging along.

I had to make her promise not to cut. I also hid all the knives and tweezers and anything else sharp I could think of. She was still in the early stages of trying to kick a habit, so her mind would immediately revert the moment I was away from her.

I wanted her to be successful with trying to abstain from cutting so as much as I wanted her by my side all the time, it would only work if she learned to be alone with her own mind.

Besides, I couldn't pretend that I didn't need to put space between us. The way I

kissed her a couple of days ago was too intense. I lost a piece of myself. I hadn't mentioned it since. I knew it was fucked up but I was too scared to revisit my feelings. They were far too hungry to entertain.

I was waiting for the guilt to kick in.

Wanting Brooklyn the way I did was immoral. The way she made my dick so hard was sinful. I had to redirect my thoughts away from Brooklyn because even sitting in the principal's office, my cock was thickening rapidly.

"Dr. Powers, I'm so sorry for you and Brooklyn's loss. The Avery Briggs family is here for you in this difficult time." I listened to Principal Whitman's canned sympathy and gave him the smile he was looking for.

Thank you, sir. I came here to talk about getting Brooklyn's missed work and getting her back in classes."

"Yes, of course. What address will she be staying at?" His fingers were poised over the keyboard, ready to type. I rattled off the address to my new home and watched the principal's face fall into a frown.

"I'm sorry, Dr. Powers. That address is outside of our zone. Brooklyn won't be able to attend Avery Briggs unless she lives within the designated zone. Since we're an alternative school, our zone is tiny. You'll have to find an alternative school within your area. I will personally make sure that Brooklyn's records get transferred over smoothly."

My nostrils flared a bit as I gave Principal Whitman a tight smile. "I'm sure we can work something out, sir. She's a senior. Most schools would let her finish out the year," I reasoned.

“We need donations for our technology department. We’re trying to expand our computer lab. If you’d be willing to make a sizable show of support we’d be most appreciative,” he flashed a grin and I fought the urge to roll my eyes.

I pulled out my wallet and slid him my card. “I’m willing to make a donation granted Brooklyn gets to finish out her senior year here where she’s comfortable.”

“Sir, Avery Briggs will miss Brooklyn but I can’t overlook the zoning laws.”

“But it’s cool to take the donation?” I laughed and smoothed a hand over my face. “Fuck you,” I said, locking eyes with him. Once I stood and rolled my shoulders, Whitman rearranged the knickknacks on his desk and cleared his throat.

“Well, I um. I apologize I wish I could be of more help.” His shaky fingers tugged at his cheap tie and he refused to look me in the eyes.

I must have looked like a madman. It was such a simple request. He could have used Brooklyn’s old address. He could have done a lot but instead, he held his hand out while looking the other way.

Dick hole.

I didn’t say another word to him. I left and drove back home to Brook. When I found her, she was on the floor of my room listening to Phil Collins. Her black cassette tape box was open and tapes surrounded her in a semi-circle.

She was so fucking cute when she was in her element. She dragged her hazel gaze up to my face and smiled, hopping to her feet. I opened my arms, ready for the crash.

It was the first time we’d been away from each other since Ant died. I realized once she was in my arms that it was hard for me to be away from her too.

Lavender and honey clung to her skin and I was helpless against it. It was harmless at first, brushing my lips against her warm neck. Then I turned ravenous and tasted her honey-dusted skin with my tongue.

Her moan was so soft and light. She gripped my shirt in her fists begging me to hold her closer. I granted her wish by locking my arm around her slender waist, crushing her against me.

“I missed you.” Her breath trembled when she spoke. I couldn’t tell if it was from the kiss or being close to me after me being gone. Either way, it spoke volumes and made me want to taste her even deeper.

“I missed you too, Brook.” I pulled back to stare at her. Her eyes darted all over my face, making me stir somewhere deep and dark. I saw the kiss coming before she leaned in. I could have avoided it. I knew the truth of why I didn’t though.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

Instead, I melted into the moment letting her sweet mouth explore mine before backing her against the wall and dominating the kiss, tugging on her bottom lip with my teeth and slipping my tongue into her warm mouth. I swallowed the soft moan that came from between her parted lips. It was almost as sweet as kissing her.

My dick ached, pressing against the fly of my slacks. I couldn't delve that deep into my warped mind. I couldn't fuck Brooklyn like I wanted to. I would only indulge in the kisses.

We both would.

I would draw the line at fucking her though.

Even though right then, there was no denying how stiff my cock was. "We can't fuck, Brook. We can't," I explained to her in a raspy voice.

"Okay," she pouted then rolled her hips, grinding against my erection. My dick jerked in response to her warm body and dangerous movements.

"Brook, you gotta stop doing that," I begged, my voice full of confusion. How the hell did she even know how to move like that?

"Can I...kiss you again?" She asked, pushing her fingers through my hair. I didn't answer her with a yes or a nod. I answered her with another kiss. Her dainty hand traveled up my chest then down to the rigid bulge in my slacks.

I gripped her wrist and pinned it above her head.

“What did I say?” I asked, pressing my forehead against hers. I moved away from her before I broke my own rule and she whimpered. Her full lips were still glistening from our kiss. They were bright pink and so fucking sexy. Her hazel eyes were wild with desire and her pulse jumped rapidly beneath her smooth skin.

I watched her neck like a starving hawk.

“You went up to the school?” She asked, clearing her throat and averting her eyes from my face. She was trying to shift the mood and I needed to do the same, so I followed her lead.

“Yeah, I have some bad news, Brook.” I sat on a stool at the island and thanked God that my dick was softening.

“Bad news?” Her face crumpled into a cute as fuck frown and I pushed out a breath. I really had to stop paying attention to how gorgeous she was.

“You can’t go back to Avery Briggs. My address isn’t in their zone. I have to find a new school for you to go to for the remainder of your senior year.” I watched her withdraw after that.

Her hazel eyes turned distant and she started nibbling on her sleeve. She didn’t have to say a word. I knew the water was sloshing in her head, filling her mind up. I headed to my room without a word to her and found the black box decorated with music notes and vinyl records. I pulled out a Hall and Oates tape then took Brook’s retro boombox into the kitchen, set it on the island and played it for her. Sara Smile was the first song that played and it couldn’t have been more appropriate.

I’d do anything to see Brook smile right then.

I pulled her down to the floor with me and held her in my arms. “Talk to me, Brook,”

I whispered into her hair. A gasp escaped her and she gripped my shirt in her fists.

“I don’t want to go to another school. I’ll get bullied,” she sniffled. “All I want are friends, Cease.” My heart twisted deep in my chest.

“I know. Maybe this school won’t be bad. It’s only until you graduate.”

“Daddy would tell me to step out of my comfort zone,” she said, wiping her tears with the back of her hand.

“That’s exactly what he’d say,” I mused. It was a bittersweet feeling. The emptiness of not having my big brother echoed all around me. “I need you to be strong for me, Brook. I know you’re scared. I can’t be there to protect you even though I want to. Now is when you have to be fierce like a lion.” I tugged on her soft black hair until her eyes met mine.

“You too,” she said quietly. “You need to be strong too. I know you miss him.” Her words brushed away the thin veil of normalcy I’d been trying to construct. I inhaled slow and shut my eyes.

“I do. He was all I had, Brook.”

She turned to face me, kneeling up and holding my face in her hands. Lavender and honey closed me up in a hug. “You have me too, Cease. I love you.”

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

“I love you too, Kiddo.” I stroked her hair and touched her chin.

We ate dinner together that evening and I got to experience Brook’s cooking skills. She made us barbeque chicken, wild rice, and broccoli. I smiled as she hummed along to She’s Gone and moved around the kitchen like she owned it.

I devoured her food in ten minutes flat and I watched her blush from across the table at me. I cleared the table and Brook filled the sink with hot soapy water to wash the dishes in since the dishwasher hadn’t been completely hooked up yet. I stood back, observing her slender frame only covered by a Back to the Future shirt. Her long legs were bare and I could tell that she wasn’t wearing a bra under her nightshirt. She hummed and swayed a bit while her dark hair swished across her back and her olive skin glowed under the lights.

My feet carried me to her. I stood behind her and she bumped into me when she went to put the tea bags in the trash. I held on to her waist and dipped my head down to breathe in her delicate scent.

She froze when she felt my dick stabbing into her from behind. My desire for her was spinning wildly out of control. “Cease, I thought you said we wouldn’t,” she whispered.

“I’m not fucking you, Brook. I just needed to touch you. I needed to smell you and hold you,” I confessed.

“What if I want you to...” She swallowed and turned to look at me. I shook my head before nipping at her full lips. She slid back, sitting on the countertop. When her long

legs wrapped around me I suppressed a groan deep in my throat.

The heat between her thighs drowned my train of thought. All I could feel and smell was her. She was so wet.

She was sinfully wet.

I shut my eyes and ghosted my lips along her pronounced collarbones. They were the roadmaps to the quickening pulse beating beneath her silky skin. I slid my tongue along her throat and she whined, grinding her hips against me.

“Please, Cease,” she begged. My dick throbbed and I rubbed it through my cotton pajama pants.

“We can’t, Kiddo. I shouldn’t be doing this.” My voice was pained as I rubbed my nose against hers. If I opened my eyes and looked at her, reality would suffocate me and I wanted to stay in the world where I was wrapped up in a woman I couldn’t live without. Not my niece.

“Please. I need this,” Brook pled. Her nails scraped my scalp as she pushed them through my hair over and over. I growled and pulled her against me, my dick stabbing her hot pussy. “I can give you a hand job,” she offered.

My eyes popped open and I pierced her with my intense stare. She bit her bottom lip like she was turned on instead of scared. It only made me want her more.

“Brook,” I warned with my tone. Before I could fully object, she plunged her smooth, warm hand below my elastic waistband and gripped my hot dick. A hiss escaped me and I tipped my head backward.

“Kiss me, Cease. Please?” She asked so sweetly. I reached over and slammed my

hand down on the light switch, sinking us into the darkness. Under the shroud of blackness, I wasn't so morally corrupt.

Brook's hand slid up and down my shaft like she was committing every vein to memory. It made me fucking dizzy with the need to shoot cum all over her pretty hand. "Like this?" She asked, her voice quiet and sweet.

With a growl, I pinned her with my lips, sucking on her tongue and probing her with mine. "Just. Like. That."

"You're so fucking big," she muttered. Her unique accent was too much right then. I nibbled on her neck and pressed my thumb against her wet little panties. I knew for a fact that if I put my finger on her slippery skin, I would lose it and fuck her.

"Oh my god!" She yelped as I rolled my thumb over her plump clit. Her hips went wild with motion as she got herself off on my touch, the same way I did with her.

I bucked in her grasp.

In and out.

In and out.

I rubbed her clit in lazy circles while I sucked on her perfect pouty lips until it felt like we were spinning round and round.

"Cease!" She moaned, stiffening beneath me. I opened my eyes to watch her shadowy silhouette as she came all over her panties and my hand. Seeing her overcome with desire made me lose it. I shot thick ropes of cum all over her hand and thighs.

It was pure sin looking at my cum splashed on Brooklyn's flawless olive skin. "Fuck," I groaned thrusting a few more times in her hand. Everything tingled. Everything buzzed.

"I don't think I ever came that hawd..." She wet her dry lips with her tongue and I tucked my dick away in my pants before I did something even more stupid than what I'd already done.

"Me either, Brook," I admitted with a huff. "Let's not make a habit of that shit."

"But it felt so good," she reasoned.

"It did. It felt fucking fantastic, Kiddo." I ran water in the sink and splashed some on my face.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

“We have to behave though,” she said like she hated the thought.

“We do,” I agreed. She stared at the way my seed decorated her.

“I made you...cum that hawd?”

Fucking Christ, did she have to sound like that? She hated it but it did things to my mind. It did things to my heart.

“Yes,” I held my head down. If I looked at her...if I looked into those eyes, I would lose whatever sanity I was holding on to. “You do all kinds of shit to me, Brook.”

“You do stuff to me too, Cease.” I stole a glance at her and she put her hand between her thighs then held it out so I could see her glistening arousal, slick and wet all over her fingers.

“Goddammit, this is wrong,” I growled. “We need to go to sleep before I do something I can’t take back.” My tongue wanted to lick every trace of her sweet pussy off those wet fingers but I couldn’t get the taste of her in my mouth. I’d be hungry for her forever if I did.

Anger and frustration swelled inside of me until, in a burst of energy, I slammed my fist against the wall leaving a dent in the drywall.

Brook’s eyes flashed hurt before she hopped off the counter and quietly moved into the bedroom. When I heard the shower start, I walked into the bedroom too. I pushed out a breath and fell over on the bed.

I prayed I didn't hurt her feelings. I hoped I wasn't too harsh. I needed to get away from her though. She was pulling me into something so dark I knew I'd never be able to return from it.

Though, to be perfectly honest, I couldn't say that it was all her doing.

I wanted her too.

I wanted everything about her. Even the parts she deemed too ugly for societal consumption made my mouth water with the need to devour her.

I wanted to protect her and keep her close to me. I wanted to tell her how beautiful she was—show her how beautiful she was. I wanted to teach her things nobody else could. Things about herself and life. I wanted to teach her how to be happy.

**

Brooklyn...

In one moment I went from feeling euphorically happy to feeling tortured and confused. It wasn't like I didn't know that stroking Cease's dick was wrong but in the moment it felt so right. It felt like everything we both needed, and the relief I felt when I came from his hand was unbelievable.

It felt like I was flying.

I hated the way he ended things though. He seemed so angry and regret tainted his tone. I did what I do best...retreat.

I snuck a razor into the shower with me and stood, staring at it in between my fingers. I stared so long I started to shake. I told Caesar I wouldn't cut. I promised.

I felt like shit though. I was standing in the shower feeling like I would slip off the edge and into the ocean at any moment. Thick, dark clouds pushed me closer like a raging thunderstorm egging me on.

I needed to cut.

Caesar would be mad at me but he was already upset at what we did. I saw his pained face in my head and tears blurred my vision. I pushed my soaked hair away from my forehead and wiped my eyes. I couldn't tell my tears from the shower water anymore.

My skin hummed with anxiety. It was thick and coating every part of me no matter how hot the shower water was. No matter how much I tried to convince myself that cutting was bad.

Caesar didn't feel the same way about me as I did about him. He regretted what happened between us and why wouldn't he? Why would he want someone with thoughts as sick and tortured as mine? I was vile and he needed someone who wasn't me.

I winced as the tip of the razor drew blood from high on my forearm. I pressed deeper and a shaky breath flew from my mouth. Relief. Pain. Throbbing fucking pain. Dense ribbons of blood streamed down my arm coating the old scars, breathing life into them.

Shut your eyes, Brooklyn.

Don't watch the blood run.

I had to though. I had to be present for every moment of pain because it forced me to focus on something other than the cavernous hollow where my heart used to beat.

Hot water splashed my newest cut and it stung. I didn't hate the way it made me feel though. It was such a strange mixture of emotions that surged through me. More proof that I was fucked in the head.

Page 31

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

How could I war with myself over cutting yet need it so badly to breathe?

I gritted my teeth so hard my gums pulsed then I shoved my arm into the hot spray of water to wash my cut. I stifled the howl begging to erupt from me. The pain was hot and it sank so far down into my bones.

Finally, the bleeding slowed and I turned the water off so I could get out. I wrapped one towel around my body and a washcloth around my arm where I'd cut. The razor was clutched close to my heart as I held my hand over the knot in my towel.

When I stepped into the bedroom, Caesar sat on the bed, his shoulders pulled low and his gaze fixed on the carpet. It made my core thrum when I looked at him but my heart felt heavy and twisted in my chest.

"I'm sleeping in the other woom tonight," I told him as I headed out of the door. His thick brows gathered in and he scrubbed his jaw with his large hand.

"Brook, what we did..."

"I don't want to talk about it," I snapped, cutting him off. The sting from rejection was far worse than any cut I could have ever dealt myself. Still, being in Caesar's space kept the water at bay.

The moment I went into a room and was alone with myself and my thoughts, the water swallowed me. It took me like a dark thief and I went willingly because I knew I could pull myself out with my razor.

I crumpled onto the bed and let my arm hang off the edge, lifeless. Cease thought he took all the razors and tweezers and even kitchen knives but I always kept one. It was shameful and wrong but I needed it.

Being alone inside of my head was scary. My mind was wrought with contradictions and self-loathing. It was littered with whispers of suicide and pain.

Tears rolled down the sides of my face and collected in my ears. Even though I toyed with the idea of giving myself a permanent way out of life, I never cut to kill myself. Cutting horizontally was for harming but cutting vertically was for death.

Each scar pressed into my flesh by sharp pain was only horizontal.

I sniffled and sat up, my heart pounding. My eyes fell to the angry red cut on my arm. I liked how soothed I felt when I sliced myself.

I fumbled with my razor for a few beats before opening another cut on my other arm. That one was shorter and much more precise. I found myself wishing it would bleed more.

Sick me liked watching the blood drip and run out of my body. I liked how perfectly red it was because even if I was too broken to be perfect at least something inside of me was. I had perfect red blood that rolled over and coated the pain.

I flexed my fingers, pumping blood into my veins but still, no blood rolled. I only managed to get a smear of crimson at the cut. In the shower, the blood rolled so beautifully thick and fast that it tinted the water at the bottom of the tub. Now, nothing.

I let out a frustrated growl and cut my arm in a different spot, that time I pressed harder. "Fuck," I cursed at the deep pain burning through my arm. It bled that time

though.

It was perfectly red.

Once the cut was made, my heart started to beat again. It thumped at double the speed to make up for lost time, it seemed. I pushed and pulled air from my lungs so fast it all seemed like one breath. Sweat rolled down my neck as I watched the blood soak into my towel.

The pain was weird though. It was different and it made my fingertips tingle. Not with pain but with numbness. It felt like my hand had fallen asleep.

I wet my lips with my tongue and hopped off the bed, looking for something to stop the bleeding. The tingling continued in my fingers and I when I tried to ball up my fist, it wouldn't work. My hand wouldn't move.

What the fuck?

I tried dozens of times to make a fist and the most I was able to do was curl my fingers in slow motion. My pulse raced and warm scarlet trickled a little faster with each thump as I grabbed a cotton bandana from a nearby duffle bag with Cease's things inside.

I tried not to collapse on the floor as I moved back to the bed on wobbling legs. Blood droplets scattered on the floor and on my thighs as I fumbled to tie the bandana against my fresh cut.

A dull thrum knocked through my chest as I watched to see if the blood would stop rolling. After ten minutes, it slowed to nothing even after I removed the bandana. I blinked over and over, my lashes moving like butterfly wings.

What had I done to myself?

Stupid.

So fucking stupid, Brooklyn.

An involuntary cry left my throat and I muffled the sound with my hand. I would have to put a bandage on that cut. It was deep. Too deep. I fucked up something important in my arm because I still couldn't make a fist.

I went to sleep terrified of what I'd done to myself but not terrified enough to let Cease know.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

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Even after days had passed, I still found it tough to naturally move my fingers. I really had to force them to work or else they wouldn't. My thumb was back to normal but my other fingers felt useless.

I was still terrified to speak to Caesar about it because he'd take me to the doctor or the hospital and then everyone would see that I was a cutter. Everyone would get the same look of pity and disgust. They would judge me. Every time I thought about it, my heart pounded and sweat slicked my forehead.

I just stayed out of his way and every time he tried to talk to me, I avoided him by rushing into the room I'd made my own. He knocked but I wouldn't answer.

I guess Caesar got tired of that shit because when he came home after day three of me avoiding him, he cornered me in the kitchen. I pretended to be startled but I wasn't. Nothing about Cease scared me. If anything, I felt comfort the moment I felt his warmth.

I looked up into his soft brown eyes and felt every drop of water in my head evaporate. Why did I have to feel so whole in front of him? "You can't avoid me forever, Brook. It's Sunday and we need to talk." His eyes were sporting deep circles and his hair was messy like it normally is when he sleeps like shit.

What made him toss and turn all night?

"About what? How stupid I am? How fwustwated I make you?"

“No!” He roared and I flinched a bit at the intensity of his voice. “You’re not stupid and even though you frustrate me I don’t want to ever be away from you.” His eyes softened with sadness and it gripped my stomach like an iron fist.

I reached out a timid hand and touched his cheek. I couldn’t help myself. I knew it was wrong and I shouldn’t have touched him at all but I couldn’t resist the pull he had on me. It was magnetic, and just like magnets, I couldn’t help who I was attracted to.

I couldn’t help who I loved.

Love...

“Can we please talk, Brooklyn?” Caesar asked, his head hung low like the weight of the world was on his neck.

My mind ping-ponged between answering him and trying to feel out the realization that I loved him. I was stuck staring at him as a result. Once again, I looked stupid.

Cease gripped my hand in his and electricity tingled through my fingers. We sat on the couch in the living room and I looked at him, still stunned that I loved him. Of course my first experience with love would have to be sorely unrequited.

The thought of it made my gaze fall to the floor. I stared at my bare toes and wiggled them on the plush carpet. Cease tipped my chin up and made me look at him.

“I don’t hate you. You know that right? I love you so much, Brook.”

“No, you don’t. Not like I love you,” I told him, my voice a whisper.

“Brook, I can’t love you the way I want to and trust me, I want to. It hurts in the

deepest parts of me that I can't," he confessed.

"Why can't you?" I asked, my words trembling as much as my bottom lip.

"Because it's dangerous," he told me. "It's like tempting a lion. Once I get you...that's it. You belong to me. I don't share and I don't hide. I can't love you like that without serious consequences. I'm not willing to let anyone take you away from me. If I can't have you the way I want to...at least we can still be Brook and Cease, right?" He asked.

The raw emotion in his voice shattered me in a million tiny pieces. He wanted to love me the same way I loved him. Maybe he was telling the truth. Maybe he was just as warped and fucked in the head as me.

"Listen, I didn't want to talk about that. Not right now," he said with a heavy sigh. My head was already reeling from everything so switching subjects sounded perfect. I needed quiet time to digest the new feelings coursing through me. "I found a school for you to go to," Cease said hesitantly. "It's not an alternative school, it's a public school but they have an alternative program. They keep the students on their own hallway." My mind switched from love to school and I felt a headache moving into my brain and spreading down through my spine.

"All the other students will fuck with me," I muttered.

"You can request to eat lunch in your class with your classmates. It's fine. It'll be fine, Brook." I wanted to believe him because he was my life preserver. He was the one who pulled me out of the water in my head and breathed life into me but I hated the idea of going to a regular public school. Kids were assholes. Ninth grade taught me that more than anything else did.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

“I landed a job at a family therapy practice but one of my stipulations was office hours. I made them around your school day. I’ll make sure I’m here to see you off and here when you get home.” Caesar’s voice cut through the fog in my brain. He found a job. That was great.

I couldn’t resist smiling when he smiled. “Thank you for doing that,” I said, holding his hands in mine. The fact that he would create an entire work schedule around my day made me feel warm inside.

I tried my best to give Caesar a squeeze but my hand wouldn’t grip his all the way. Suddenly, the burning feeling of shame and regret torched me. I put my hands in my lap and bounced my knee.

“Can we please try to keep the lines of communication open between us, Brook? I know things get hazy so I’m going to try my best to keep a clear line drawn even though I don’t want to. I know it’s what’s best.”

“I don’t like what’s best, Cease. I like being able to kiss you. I know we can’t do anything else but feeling your lips on mine and your hands in my hair and on my waist...” I shut my eyes, reliving the strong sensations Caesar gave me whenever we touched.

“You don’t think I love that too? I do. You taste so sweet.” When I opened my eyes, he was so close to my face. Close to my lips. I could smell the cinnamon from the candy or gum he had in his mouth. It warmed my tongue and I wanted a taste for myself.

While I slid my hands through his thick hair, he pulled me closer to him until I was in his lap. I'd felt his dick in my hands before so I knew how big it was but that wasn't shit compared to being on top of it while it struggled against his pants and pressed against my pussy.

"Brook, if I keep kissing you like this something is going to happen and..."

"You're going to fuck me," I said in a throaty voice that shocked both me and Cease. I was tired of the back and forth between us though. I knew it would be fucked up from the world's perspective. I knew it was forbidden and even illegal in the state of California, but I didn't give a fuck.

I'd drop off the grid to be with him.

Realizing I loved him meant I'd do anything to have him. The thought startled me. I wasn't used to having anything worth fighting for or protecting.

"Yes. I am. And once I do that..." He shook his head as if it spelled out doom for us and everything we knew.

"Nobody has to know," I whispered against his lips. I cried out when his fingertips dug into my hips. His erection stabbed into me and I wished we didn't have the barrier of our stupid clothes.

His hands slid under my shirt gliding over my bare skin right up to my bra. He paused and pushed out a long breath. "I know you don't want to..." I swallowed the thick knot in my throat and locked my hazel eyes to his brown ones. "But can I..."

"You can do whatever you want, Brook. I don't know what the fuck is happening to my sanity but sometimes I think if I don't touch you or feel you touching me...I'll lose my fucking mind." His eyes were wild and when I lowered to the floor between

his long legs, he groaned.

I'd given head and hand jobs before, I'd even had sex once or twice but I'd never handled anyone with a dick as big as Caesar's. When I unzipped his pants, it popped out and bobbed up and down to the pulse of his heartbeat and my mouth fucking watered.

His curious eyes watched me between his legs so I had to do something. He was so rigid and I knew it would feel so good to finally wrap my mouth around him. I erased the distance between my lips and his dick and took him in my mouth.

The way he groaned when my tongue slid across the head of his dick made wetness pool in my panties. I loosened my jaws and inched down on his thick shaft. He was so warm, so smooth. I wanted to suck his cock forever.

"Fuck, Brook..." he hissed, gripping my hair and fucking my throat. I gagged a little and pulled back. My breath quickened when I saw how his dick glistened under the lights.

I wondered how he'd look coated in wetness from my pussy.

The thought had me easing Caesar back into my mouth until my saliva dripped down his impressive length and onto his balls. I craved him. I craved his flavor on my tongue. I wanted to know how his cum tasted.

I worked his dick faster between my lips, letting my tongue swirl around his head, pulling deep groans from him. His thigh muscles were tight with the need to release and his cock swelled even more in my mouth.

"Shit, Brooklyn..." His dick jerked once then my mouth filled with his seed. I swallowed every drop like I was dying of thirst. Finally, his muscles relaxed and his

breathing returned to normal, so did mine. I licked the last splash of him from my lips and looked at him.

God, I thought I would burn beneath his gaze. My arms and legs felt bound and my feet made of lead. I expected for him to rush away like he did before but instead he spoke. "See, this is why it's so dangerous for us to dance on the line, Brooklyn. Do you know how bad I want to press your body to the floor while I kiss every inch of you and dig my dick deep between your walls? I want to hear you moan my name because as much as you hate it, your voice is like water. It's like rain and I've been going through a fucking drought these past three days without hearing it.

It's killing me to keep my composure." I watched the cords in his neck flex and found the bottom of my sleeve with my teeth. I was going to have an orgasm right there in front of him if he kept looking at me that way and talking like that.

"I can sleep in my room again," I whispered.

"I want you beside me. I feel better knowing I can hold you and keep you safe."

"From what?" I asked, tilting my head to the side.

"From yourself." His answer struck me hard in the chest, rendering me silent. Suddenly I was self-conscious of the cuts on my arm like Caesar could see them through my sleeves. I nibbled and sucked on my sleeve faster.

"I'll come in if I feel...the water," I swallowed and looked away from him not wanting to divulge how often I'd drowned in the past three days. Cease nodded and I sat beside him on the couch while we talked about my first day of school.

Page 34

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

I just knew falling asleep beside him later that night would result in more forbidden touching and teasing. I knew we'd slip further into the realm of taboo but he held me instead and as much as I burned to do more, the moment couldn't have been more perfect.

**

San Marino High School was noisy. All the voices rushed together to form one long chorus of chaos. My head was pounding by the time I moved past the main office.

I pulled out the map of the school I'd printed out and glanced at it. I wanted to get to the alternative wing quickly so my nerves could settle down. I could already feel the water starting to slosh around in my head.

Walk past the main office and turn right, then another right. I could do that. Easy.

I rounded my shoulders as I moved past body after body. I hated the close proximity of everyone. Did they all have to be directly beside me? In front of me? Behind me?

I wanted to vanish. I wanted to run away. If my father were still alive, I wouldn't have to deal with any of this shit.

Realizing I couldn't go home to my dad after a long day of school hurt. I wanted to cry. My cheeks were hot and my throat was tight.

No, Brooklyn. Don't cry. Not here. Not now.

I hated how fucking weak I was.

With my head down and the map tucked between my fingers, I steered myself down the hall nearest to the main office then I ran right into the back of someone. My head jerked up and I opened my mouth to apologize before the water made it impossible.

My face and neck heated as I blinked rapidly making the person's face come into focus. "Holy shit, you go here now?" A smile curved her full lips as she looked at me with her arms folded.

Ashley Hartwell.

She'd gotten a little taller since ninth grade and her pixie cut was shoulder length now but everything else was the same. Her doe eyes and soft voice sent me off a steep cliff and headfirst into murky waters.

"I-I-I'm sowwy," I whispered. My belly roiled and I raced down the hall, gripping the strap of my book bag. Once I made it to my new class, I fell into a chair and balled my shaky fingers into fists. Well, my right hand still didn't want to work all the way but it was as close to a fist as I could make it.

Why did I cut myself that deeply?

Why did I cut at all?

Why didn't I bring a razor to school?

I needed to cut. I needed to feel the relief. I wanted the drowning to stop.

I rubbed my chest praying for the ability to massage oxygen into my lungs. Nothing happened though.

If I could just slip away to the bathroom and cut myself this would all be over. I wanted to give my new school a chance but I couldn't. What was the point of my father moving me to Avery Briggs only to have it yanked away from me in senior year? It clearly didn't matter what strides I made toward overcoming speech apraxia or trying to tackle anxiety and depression. I would always end up full circle and in the same place looking at the same faces.

"You must be Mrs. Powers, correct?" The teacher seemed nice enough. I nodded and handed her my packet of papers. I didn't know what the fuck they were and I didn't care.

I was drowning and the only thing I cared about was going home to find relief. I already knew nobody could see me drowning but it didn't mean it wasn't happening. My teacher kept speaking to me but I couldn't hear much. The water garbled everything.

I sucked in small sips of air all day. Just enough to keep me from going completely under. It felt like I was breathing through a straw though.

At lunch, I sat near the open door, praying for a breeze to fill my lungs and inflate me like a sail. I sucked on my sleeve while my eyes darted around the crowded cafeteria. I was looking for Ashley.

I didn't know what I would do if I actually saw her though. Would I punch her in the face for what happened in ninth grade? Would I curse her out and tell her to stay away from me the rest of the year?

No.

I wouldn't even be able to get my mouth to open let alone get my brain and tongue to be on the same goddamn page. The back of my neck prickled with embarrassment. I

was such a failure at every fucking thing.

Suddenly, my appetite was gone. I wasn't really eating anyway, just picking at my food and trying to breathe. I stood to toss the leftovers and that's when I saw her.

She was sitting near the back of the cafeteria surrounded by other kids who were all laughing and talking and eating. Nothing was wrong with their brains. Their words came out fine every time.

Page 35

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

A boulder sank into the pit of my stomach and my knees turned to jelly. I just wanted friends. I wanted to be normal and sit in the back of the cafeteria laughing and talking without wondering when I'd fuck up an R word or trying desperately to find any word in my vocabulary that didn't have an R.

I didn't want to think about how worthless I was or how nobody cared about me. Well, nobody but Cease. He cared. He cared a hell of a lot and I cared about him too. I missed him.

"Move the fuck out of the way." A guy walked past me and clipped my shoulder. Pain radiated down my arm as I clutched my bicep. A small cry escaped my mouth and I rushed out of the cafeteria.

I headed back to my classroom and sat down, still rubbing my chest and praying for air. Only one other kid was in class eating lunch and it made me wonder if I was that much of a social fuck up that I couldn't even sit through the entire lunch period in the cafeteria like a normal person.

I wasn't normal though.

Nothing about me was normal.

Once the last bell of the day sounded, I bolted to the parking lot desperate to get away from the thousands of people roaming San Marino High. Suddenly the inside of my car felt like a quiet sanctuary. My skull throbbed from the headache closing in making my scalp feel much too tight.

I threw my car in drive and sped out of the student parking lot like a crazy woman. I needed air. I needed to breathe.

The closer I got to Caesar's house, the easier it became to breathe. When I stepped inside and his scent greeted me, I felt my lungs inflate. I was so grateful that the house smelled like him.

He wasn't home yet but he sent me a text saying he was ten minutes away. That meant I had time to cut. The realization had me rushing to my bedroom and digging out my hidden razor.

I'd tucked it between the box spring and the bed frame in the tiniest of slivers. Once I got it out, I fell to the bed and rocked back and forth, anxious to feel the familiar pain and see the blood.

I yanked my sleeve up baring old and new cuts on my arm. I went to work quickly, digging the sharp razor into my arm to erase today's events. I wanted to erase the memory of loud chaos, the memory of seeing Ashley Hartwell, and I wanted to erase the memory of the guy bumping me at lunch.

When blood rolled, I breathed. I breathed away the feeling of hopelessness and invisibility. I breathed away the fear and pain. I sniffled watching the pretty red slip and drip. I tilted my hand this way and that watching the show.

No tears fell from my eyes but I cried with the life force raining from my arm. It was the loudest cry I could conjure.

I opened another cut then another and they all cried simultaneously. When I heard Cease's keys in the door, my heart smashed into the roof of my mouth. I scrambled into the bathroom and ran water to wash my bloody arm. The rush of water stung my skin and I winced, biting my bottom lip.

Once my arm was dry, I pulled my sleeve down and looked at myself in the mirror. “Brook, you in here?” I heard Caesar’s voice and noticed my eyes were brighter. More green than they’d been before. They were...pretty.

Caesar made me feel pretty. The realization made my mouth dry. A small smile danced on my lips as I yanked the hair tie from my messy ponytail.

My hair fell down wild and untamed. I raked my fingers through it even though my right hand was stiff and partially numb. Cease liked my hair down and I loved the look in his eyes when he thought I looked nice.

“I’m in here,” I called out. I rushed into the bedroom and gathered the razor I used to cut. I stashed it in its hiding place and flopped down on the bed.

“Hey, there she is,” he smiled. It was such a deep and satisfied smile that it made me wonder if he really did see beauty when he looked at me.

I leaped into his strong arms and they constricted around me like bands of metal. I needed his security right then. My eyes fell shut and I buried my nose in his shirt. His scent was intoxicating.

“Hi,” I sighed.

“Let’s hear it, Brook. How was your day?” Chills spread out over my arms when I felt him playing in my hair. He sat on the bed and I sat on his lap.

“It was bad. I hated every second. I’m probably making it out to be worse than it really was but...” my voice trailed off and I shrugged my shoulders.

“Don’t downplay your feelings, Brook. If you felt like it was awful then acknowledge that.”

“Okay...it was stressful,” I nodded.

“What was the most stressful part?” His strong fingertips slid up and down my spine offering more comfort.

“I saw Ashley Hartwell,” I told him. I brought my sleeve toward my mouth and sucked on it. Pangs of metallic blood melted on my tongue and sick me rejoiced.

“Wow...did she see you?” He asked, his brows furling together.

“I bumped right into her.” My lips dropped into a frown and the space between my brows creased. “I felt so stupid. My words came out wrong when I tried to apologize.” I chewed on my sleeve as my mind replayed the short interaction over and over. I was a prisoner in my own mind. “God, why the hell can’t I stop thinking about it? I feel insane sometimes,” I growled.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

“Brook, breathe. You have to realize the interaction you had today was normal. You were in a school full of other students. You probably weren’t the only one to bump into someone.”

“Why did I have to bump into her though? Out of all the people in school.” My shoulders were stiff and so was my spine. It made me feel taller than I actually was.

“It was a random incident. Don’t give it any more fuel than necessary,” he replied, massaging the knots of tension from my shoulders and neck. “I have an idea and I want you to be open to it, okay?” Cease looked at me and I fell into his brown pools.

“Okay,” I agreed.

“I want you to start talking to a therapist. Dr. Hollows owns the new practice I work at. He’s an amazing doctor and he’s worked with teens who suffer from anxiety and depression. He’s also worked with people who self-harm.

I know you’re going to want to shoot me down at first but you have a lot on your plate. Your father passed, you’re living in a new home, and finishing your senior year in a new school. It would be helpful to sort through all those things with someone who can help you.” His finger slid down the bridge of my nose as he looked at me.

“You’re helping me.” My voice raised a few octaves as my heart sped up.

“I know but it helps even more if you have more than one person on your side, Brook. I’m talking to someone too. I have a session set up for tomorrow before work. There’s nothing wrong with it.” Cease placed a firm hand on my shaking leg to slow

my bouncing knee.

I didn't want to talk to a therapist but I knew Caesar had my best interest at heart. "I know you're nervous but this guy is a good friend. I hand-picked him. I haven't told him anything about you yet and I won't until you agree to see him."

"Will you be mad if I don't?" I asked, my voice soft.

"No, not mad. If I'm being honest I'll be frustrated though."

I nodded, appreciative of his honesty. "I don't think I'm worth helping, Cease. He won't understand what I'm saying. He'll think I'm stupid or annoying." I shook my head trying to clear it of the nagging torment raging inside.

"No, he won't and you're not beyond help. You're worth helping. You deserve help," he smiled and his eyes crinkled a bit at the corners. Sincerity poured off him.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

“You’re the only one who thinks I’m worth it. You’re the only one who cares. The only one who thinks I’m...pwetty.” My voice cracked on the last word and I kicked myself for letting it come out wrong. It took so much concentration to say things right.

“Brook, you’re beautiful,” he said, stroking the side of my face.

“I’m a cutter. I’m sick. I like watching the blood. I can’t talk wight. My thoughts are jumbled and...I’m in love with my uncle.” My heart thumped against my ribs, begging to break free so that Cease could catch it as it leaped from my body. Then he could hold the most intimate part of me. Maybe the only part that was pure.

“Brooklyn...I love you too.” Our foreheads pressed together and my eyes closed slowly. “I wish you could see how perfect you are. How beautiful you are.”

“People like me aren’t beautiful Caesaw. People like me bleed instead of crying,” I said through gritted teeth.

“There’s beauty in the bleeders too, Brook. The only reason I’m asking you to get help is because I know you need it. I need it too. Things are dark in my mind after losing Ant.

I’m kicking myself every fucking second. I’m at war in my own head and the guilt is heavy.” His words were choked and I felt his pain vibrate through me. It struck my chest and made my breath hitch.

Caesar was broken too.

He was like me.

“W-Why are you kicking yourself?” I stammered, stifling tears.

“Because his death feels like my fucking fault.” His words were forced out through clenched teeth and a stiff jaw. “I finally came home to be closer to you and him then I blow up and yell at him because of all the shit he kept from me. I argued with him, Brooklyn.

I argued after I knew he had a heart condition that was serious enough to need medication for. I did that. I was selfish as fuck and now my...my big brother is gone.” His brown eyes filled with sadness and he looked at the floor to avoid my gaze.

My hands trembled as I knelt before him, lifting his head up so I could see him. “It’s not your fault, Cease,” I told him quietly.

“My heart doesn’t know that. That’s why I’m pushing you to get help. If I can help you maybe I wouldn’t feel like such a fuck up. The only thing that keeps the guilt and self-loathing at bay is your voice and your smile.

How goddamn sick does that make me? I’m falling for you so hard I can’t tell up from down.” He let out a short, dry laugh and stared at the ceiling.

He was falling for me?

Someone like Caesar was capable of loving someone like me? My cheeks prickled with...something. I couldn’t put my finger on it.

Desire.

Love.

Guilt?

I slid my arms around his neck and we hugged for what felt like forever. I didn't mind though especially once I knew I held his jagged, broken pieces together the same way he held mine together.

"I'll go talk to the therapist," I told him barely above a whisper.

"Thank you, Brook," he sighed letting his shoulders slump a bit.

The mood lightened between us for the rest of the evening and I didn't feel the need to cut at all. Not even a tingle of an urge. Instead, I ate dinner with Cease, did my homework, and got ready to watch TV with him until we were both dozing off.

Being snuggled against him for so long made me yearn for more. I was going to go in for a kiss when I noticed his eyes were shut and his breathing was rhythmic. He was fast asleep.

Stop pushing your luck with him, Brooklyn.

I stood up and got in the shower instead. I examined my newest bunch of cut marks and cursed myself for being so damn stupid and impulsive. I tried to make a fist with my right hand and while my fingers curled in a bit more, it was still like moving my hand underwater.

I slammed the heel of my hand against the shower knob and shut the water off. I didn't want to look at my cuts anymore or think about how dumb I was to keep harming myself when I knew it wasn't good. I wrapped a towel around myself and went into Cease's room to put on my nightclothes.

“Can you do me a favor?” He was already seated on the bed and his brown eyes were glued to me once I walked out of the steamy bathroom. My skin tingled while he let his stare roam.

“Sewer,” I nodded. Cease smiled at the way I fucked up the word sure but I cringed.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

“Can you sleep in here with me tonight?”

“Of course,” I squeaked. The thought of him needing my body to occupy his space made me dizzy. I went to my room, changed into a long sleeve black shirt that didn’t even cover my ass, and a pair of pink panties. Once I slid my thumbs through the holes in my sleeves, I padded back toward Cease’s room.

He’d slid down in bed and was dozing off again. I snuggled my body right against him, pressing my back to his chest. Feeling his muscles on my back made me bite my bottom lip.

I pulled my sleeve between my lips and began nibbling. “Stop. Don’t be so nervous,” Cease said, he moved my arm and swept his lips across my ear.

“Sometimes, being around you makes me nervous.” I turned to face him and he smiled a little in the darkness. “I can’t believe you like my stupid voice.” I rolled my eyes and he chuckled in response.

“I do. I love your voice, Brooklyn.” He pushed loose strands of hair away from my face and kissed my forehead. “I love the way you love 80’s music. I love the way you get nervous and chew on your sleeve.” His Adam’s apple wobbled in his throat and he brought my hand up to his lips to kiss my palm. “I love your scars...” He pulled my thumb from my sleeve and rolled the material back. My stomach quivered not from his proximity but from what he’d find.

I squeezed my eyes shut when his grip tightened against me. “Brooklyn,” he growled. “You promised...” He was hurt. I hurt him with my lies.

“I’m sowwy. I was scared,” I sniffled, pulling my arm back. “I get weak when I’m scared, Cease.” Tears danced in my eyes, making his face a blur. He took my hand back in his and pushed out a breath.

“Please don’t keep shit from me. Even if you’re weak...I’ll be there with you.” He dropped achingly gentle kisses to my fresh cuts and I let out a broken sob. My body shook from the kindness of it all.

I was stunned that he could still care. I lied to him. I broke my promise and he still loved me.

Soon, there were no more sobs because Caesar’s mouth was on mine melting my cries away and replacing them with air. I could breathe with him. His dense body hovered over mine and he settled between my legs making me ache.

“I love you, Brooklyn,” he whispered before brushing his lips against mine.

“I love you too,” I uttered between breaths.

I moaned at his teeth and tongue on my neck. I knew pain could give relief but I never knew it could feel so good. So warm and full.

My thighs closed around his middle and I could feel his toned muscles flex against my skin. The feeling was so rich and thick I wanted to drown in it. For the first time in my life, I wanted to drown.

“I don’t know what the fuck you’re doing to me, Brook. I want it though. I want you.” He pushed my shirt up, exposing my breasts. His hungry eyes feasted on the sight of them before his mouth latched on. It was so warm and wet.

I moaned and snapped my eyes shut while he licked and nibbled on my stiff nipples.

“Can I taste you?” His voice was buried in rock and gravel. It was so rough and deep that it made my pussy throb.

“P-Please,” I squeaked. I needed to feel his mouth on me before I died. I heard the sound of thread popping and fabric tearing right before he yanked my panties off. I never thought anyone actually ripped panties off but he showed me that it was real and possible and so fucking sexy.

My breathing turned into anxious panting when he spread me open. Nobody had ever been that intimate with me before. The first time I had sex it was quick and rushed. The second time I wasn’t completely sure I even wanted it.

This time...I wanted every fucking second. I needed it to survive.

His lips connected with my most sensitive bundle of nerves and a howl of unharnessed pleasure ripped the quiet air around us. My spine arched and my fists snatched the sheet from its corners.

Fists...

I made fists with both hands.

Maybe I hadn’t fucked myself up too bad.

Cease dragged his thick tongue along the surface of me while I moaned and called his name over and over. A ball of pressure swelled in my core threatening to explode. I needed it to explode. I bucked my hips against his mouth and he dug his fingertips into my ass pulling me against his face harder until I shattered. I turned into particles flickering in the darkness.

Every limb trembled uncontrollably.

When he came up from between my legs, we shared a kiss. I sucked on his tongue stealing my flavor from him. “Are you a virgin?” He asked. I felt his thick cock pressing against my tightness and I swallowed the knot lodged in my throat.

“N-N-No,” I stammered. His nostrils flared and his cashmere brown eyes narrowed.

“Brook, once I’m inside of you, you’re mine. Understand? Nobody else has access to your body.” My pulse beat in the roof of my mouth. It beat in my throat and down to my toes. I wanted nothing more than to belong to him.

“Yours,” I nodded with wide eyes. “I’m yours, Cease.”

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

He rocked against my hole and let out curse words that gave me goosebumps. I was so wet that the longer he pushed, the more receptive my body became until he sank deep into me. For a moment I wondered if he'd split me in half. In the next moment, I didn't care.

My walls contracted and a jolt of pleasure shot through me like a bullet then it smoothed out into lazy waves that radiated all over. "Did you cum, beautiful? Did you cum on my cock?" Cease asked, staring into my eyes. I nodded timidly and watched a wolfish grin take over his handsome face.

He bucked into me and I moaned. "Such an eager girl. Eager and sweet." He crashed against my mouth and stroked my pussy until tears fell from my eyes.

"Oh god, Cease!" I squeaked, digging my nails into his broad back.

"Cum again for me, Brook. You feel so fucking good. So slippery for me."

"All for you," I cried out as another wave of shivers took over me.

"Fuck!" He roared, tensing and gritting his teeth. His dick twitched inside of me and I felt heat flood my core. It was the most satisfying feeling I ever remembered in my entire life.

I wanted to live in that feeling. I wanted to bottle it and let it sustain me forever. It was pure bliss. Caesar was pure fucking bliss.

**

Caesar...

Brook was wrapped around me in the middle of the night and goddammit if my dick wasn't rock hard and begging for her. Time stood still while I made love to her and I wanted to press pause again. She was knocked out though.

I waited and waited for the flood of regret to flush through my veins but it never did. I felt pangs of guilt for what we'd done but the strongest and most resounding feeling was relief. I needed her.

She helped to heal the broken pieces that shattered when I found Ant lying on the floor alone. He died alone and after we argued. No matter how much the logical side of me said it wasn't my fault and I couldn't have known what would happen, the emotional side of me felt like shit. I had to work through my own issues but having Brook by my side helped tons.

While she snuggled closer to me, I breathed in her signature honey and lavender smell. With her arm draped loosely around me, I was able to make out the loud, red cut marks on her skin. Seeing that shit made my chest tight. I'd never seen such beautiful sorrow before. I was happy that I pulled her out of the water in her head but I wanted her to learn how to pull herself out.

She was just as strong and fierce as anyone else. I only wished I knew how to help her see that. I picked up her hand and kissed her wrists over and over, hoping somehow to pour love into her veins.

Why didn't Ant tell me how troubled she was?

Thinking about Anthony brought me to the stark realization that he would have my fucking head if he knew what was happening right now between Brooklyn and me. He would never understand. I wasn't sure if I understood. All I knew was that she

lived inside each beat of my heart and without her, nothing moved.

**

The morning brought a clear head and a sleepy Brooklyn sitting in the kitchen, trying to get herself together. I smiled when I walked past her. “There she is,” I smiled, kissing the top of her head. “You okay, Kiddo?”

“Cease, you can stop calling me Kiddo now,” she laughed. “Your dick was inside of me last night.” Her voice turned sultry and my cock throbbed like it could hear her words.

“It was pretty fucking deep inside of you,” I growled close to her ear. I watched goosebumps blanket her beautiful olive skin in response. She blushed and tipped her head back to kiss me.

“So no more Kiddo,” she demanded.

“No more Kiddo...unless I’m trying to piss you off.” I pressed a kiss to her soft lips then slid my hands up her sides. Her skin was silky and flawless. “I want this off,” I told her while I held her plump bottom lip prisoner between my teeth. I tugged on her shirt and she giggled while she pulled it over her head.

Perky tits with hard caramel nipples stared back at me. I wet my lips with my tongue and sat Brook on the counter before devouring her amazing breasts. The way she slid her fingers through my hair drove me wild. I pressed my teeth down on her nipples and she whined hooking her long legs around me.

“Bite me harder,” she begged, gripping my hair in her fist. I realized I could show her the beautiful side of pain. The side that didn’t harm but helped. I bit her nipple again and she moaned that time. I could feel heat pouring from her sweet cunt and I wanted

to be covered in it.

“Bend over. Now,” I told her, snatching her hair in my hand. I loved how soft it was and the way it felt between my fingers.

She slid off the counter and bent over giving me a perfect view of her ass and a glimpse of her glistening pussy. God, she was soaked. I knelt behind her and slid my tongue along her slit while she gasped.

“Cease,” she whimpered.

I snaked my tongue deep into her pussy and coated my face in her wetness. Once I was satisfied, I stood up and eased into her tight pussy inch by inch so I didn’t hurt her. When she pushed her ass back on me, I took it as a signal to go deeper so I did.

“Yes! Oh my god!” She squeaked. Her knuckles were white from gripping the counter’s edge. I had to pause before I came deep inside of her. Her moans were like drugs in my veins.

Page 40

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

“Do you trust me, Brook?” I asked, slowing my pace.

“Always,” she answered immediately.

“Good girl.” I slapped her ass then slid my hand up to her throat and squeezed. When she yelped with surprise, I hooked a finger in her mouth and she sucked on it like it was my dick.

“You know I’d never hurt you,” I said, fucking her harder while my grip on her throat tightened.

“I want you to,” she whispered.

“You want me to what?”

“Hurt me...” I shut my eyes against her words and I choked her harder while I hammered into her. The slippery noises coming from where our bodies connected was so addictive.

She was everything. She was too much and yet I couldn’t get enough. I wanted to consume her sweetness whole. Not just the pretty parts. Not petal by petal but from the root up.

Maybe I was a monster. I wasn’t sure. I was sure of one thing though: Brooklyn tamed me. She tamed my grief and my uncertainty. She tamed my heartache and made everything feel like it was okay.

“I’m going to cum, Cease.” Those words were music to my ears. My body thrummed with a steady buzz of electricity when her pussy clamped down around my girth. I slammed into her from behind and she screamed. It dripped with pleasure the same way my cock was dripping with Brooklyn.

That high-pitched, needy squeak unraveled me. I shot into her hard and fast. I slowed to a stop, letting my cock pulse between her walls while she finished milking me dry.

My skin wouldn’t stop buzzing even though I’d pulled out. I was in awe watching my seed dribble back out of her. She was mine now. I was in too deep to give a fuck about society anymore.

Brooklyn and I would have to hide from prying eyes for a while but the moment I could run away with her, I would. Somewhere where nobody knew us.

It was risky but I had to have her. I’d never known feelings to run as deep and strong as the ones I had for Brook. I was helpless against the love I had for her. If it made me sick then I never wanted the cure.

I only wanted to die a happy man.

We indulged in a quick shower together but I had to go for a therapy session before work and she had to go to school. She spent five extra minutes kissing me and I spent ten extra minutes talking my cock down.

**

When I walked into Ronnie Hollow’s office, I knew it would be a casual session. He and I were best friends from our days at NYU together. He got his doctorate before I did but only by a year. I was grateful that he offered me a position as a child therapist within his practice.

I wouldn't trust anyone else with my issues and I wouldn't have asked Brook to trust anyone else either. There was a slight conflict of interest with us being friends but it was something we both chose to turn a blind eye to. Ronnie knew how to keep a neutral head and I knew how to be a patient and not a psychologist.

"Cease, come on in," Ronnie smiled at me and gestured to the black sofa against the window in his office. I took a seat and pushed out a breath.

"Thanks for doing this, Ronnie. I don't really trust anyone else. Also, since there's an ethical boundary line we're crossing here...I don't have to pay for the session, right?" I cracked a smile and Ronnie shook his head at me.

"No, that's not what it means. It means I'm charging you double for stressing me out as a therapist and a friend," he laughed.

"Well, you let me know how that shit goes. I just closed on a house and I'm living with an eighteen-year-old. Money is not my friend." I watched Ronnie's brows gather and he grabbed his pen and pad to write notes.

Page 41

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

Fuck.

I caught the slip up immediately.

“Your brother had a daughter, right?” Ronnie quizzed.

“Yeah, Brooklyn,” I answered.

“Is that the eighteen-year-old you’re living with?”

“Yeah. I didn’t realize the session started already.” I cleared my throat and shifted in my seat.

“Easy, Cease. You know I’m here to help,” he reminded me.

“I know, I know.” I calmed down a bit and exhaled to settle my frayed nerves.

“You already know what I’m going to ask you, so let’s hear the answer.” Ronnie laced his fingers together and looked at me.

“You want to know why I didn’t refer to Brook as my niece especially during a time of grieving.” I shut my eyes and tried to force images of Brook’s naked body writhing and moaning beneath me, from my mind.

“Exactly, so...why didn’t you? Was it a simple slip up? Do you resent having her in your home?”

“No, not at all. Quite the opposite. I love having her there.” My heart knocked faster and harder in my chest.

“Okay then...maybe it was a slip-up. Now, tell me how you’ve been feeling since Anthony’s death,” he said.

“Guilty...empty,” I shrugged and looked at the floor.

“Where’s the guilt coming from?” Ronnie asked, scribbling down more things on his pad of paper.

“The night before Ant died, we got into an argument. I never got to apologize. I never got to make it right.” Regret colored my tone. I rubbed my forehead with the heel of my hand and sighed. “To have someone I loved so much jerked away from me in the middle of a frivolous argument...It fucking hurts. It’s the most bitter pain I’ve ever experienced. I didn’t even get to say goodbye.” Pain struck my chest. I hated everything about the way Ant died.

“Why don’t you tell me what the argument was about?” Ronnie said in a hushed tone.

“It was about him keeping things from me and his daughter. He’d been taking heart medication for...I don’t know how long. He kept it from me. He kept it from Brook. He knew I’d worry but that’s not enough reason to keep something so huge given how our father died.” Heat rushed the back of my neck and I rubbed it, willing the heat away.

“How did your father die?” Ronnie’s fingers moved nimbly across the pad of paper as he took notes. I forced my stare away from his words and focused on my hands. I hated reliving how my father died.

“He had a heart attack,” I began slowly. “I-I found him in his room, in bed.” I didn’t

want to go too deep into the memory. It hurt too much. It hurt twice as much after Ant died.

“So your father and brother both died in similar ways?”

“Yeah,” I nodded.

“How old were you and Anthony when your father died?” Ronnie probed.

“I was sixteen and Ant was twenty-one,” I answered.

“How old were you when your mother died?”

“I was eleven and Ant was sixteen.” I pushed images of my parents out of my head because if I conjured them up then I’d conjure the pain that came with their absences.

“So, Anthony became kind of like your father after you two lost your dad. I assume you stayed with him, correct?” He quizzed.

“Yeah, I did. He was like my second father. I should have never picked that fight with him,” I said.

“Cease, your argument with Anthony was a trauma response to you finding out he was keeping his heart condition a secret. You felt betrayed, right?”

“Yeah, exactly. Still, I knew he had a heart condition and I fought with him. It was stupid,” I frowned.

Page 42

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

“It wasn’t based on logical thoughts. It was a direct response to past trauma.” I let his words sink in then I replayed them. He was right.

I lashed out like an angry teenager when I found out Ant was sick. I could have been more compassionate but I wasn’t reacting like a rational adult. I looked at my watch and stood to my feet. It was time for me to get to work.

“Ronnie, thanks, man. I can’t believe I overlooked the fact that I was responding to past trauma,” I sighed.

“When things are right on top of us, we don’t see them. That’s what a neutral party is for.” We slapped hands and I told him I’d stop by again once my day was done. I wanted to brief him on Brook before she had her first session.

**

The end of my day came up quicker than I’d anticipated. My time got eaten up with new patients and the endless mountains of paperwork I had to review and fill out. I was so anxious to get home to Brook that I nearly forgot I was supposed to stop by and talk to Ronnie bout her.

I found my way to his office and knocked before walking in. He was done with patients for the day as well. He offered me a seat and said, “Okay, Cease, tell me about your niece.”

I sat on the couch and checked my watch. I had about twenty minutes to get home before I could see Brook. I hoped her second day was better than her first. I wanted to

see her smile.

“Brooklyn...” I fought the smile trying to find its way to my face. “She’s a beautiful girl. She’s eclectic and funny. She’s also brilliant. She’s troubled though. She has anxiety and depression.”

“How bad are we talking?” Ronnie frowned.

“Moderate to severe with self-harm and possible suicidal tendencies. She needs patience, Ronnie. She needs to be heard.” Even though I was nervous letting anyone else talk to Brook, she needed it. She needed it more than I needed to protect her.

He nodded in response and wrote down some notes. “I’ll see her tomorrow. She’s in good hands, Cease. I believed him. Ronnie was an amazing psychologist and he bucked the norms of our field. If anyone would know how to handle Brook in a gentle manner, it would be him.

Before I went home, I decided to pick up something for Brook in case she had a shitty day at school. I wanted to get her something that would let her know she was beautiful no matter what her brain told her to think. I knew she was fighting some serious demons and I wanted to help.

I was determined to help.

**

Brooklyn...

The end of the school day crept up slower than a goddamn sloth. I wanted out of San Marino High School. I wanted to get away from the scratchy way everyone’s presence made me feel. I wanted to cover my ears and shut out the constant drum of

noise created by useless conversations.

I wanted to be back at home with Cease.

He was my safe haven.

He was my protector.

He was like a lion and loving him was just as dangerous.

I moved through the hallway toward the main doors when I heard someone shouting. “Hey! Wait up!” I slowed my pace and glanced over my shoulder. Surely nobody could be calling out to me. I was invisible. A nobody amongst somebodies. I didn’t even fit in enough to stand out. I just disappeared.

I froze when I saw Ashley jogging toward me. I paused in the middle of a rush of students making their way out of the school and I got knocked around.

“Move! Stop being so fucking retarded!” A deep voice grunted at me and I cringed. I hated that word. Fucking loathed it. My skin crawled whenever it was hurled at me. I shrank my shoulders in and tucked my chin.

“Fuck you, asshole!” Ashley shouted at the guy then she flipped him off and put her hand on my shoulder, moving me off to the side. “Sorry about that. Sometimes these motherfuckers are rude.” She adjusted her bright pink book bag on her shoulders and smiled at me.

Why wasn’t I pretty like her?

“So, um...Brooklyn, right?” She asked.

“Yeah,” I whispered. My eyes darted around then landed on the shiny tiled floor beneath my feet.

“Listen, I wanted to apologize for what happened in ninth grade. I was being such a bitch. We graduate this year so I wanna make it up to you. Friends?” She held out her hand and I studied the smooth skin on her forearm and wrist. Not one cut. Not one tortured whisper leaving a scar on her pale skin.

My throat constricted and my cheeks flushed with heat. I was such a fuck up. Why did I scar up my arms? They used to look normal Ashley’s once upon a time.

Page 43

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

“Hey, Brookie. Friends? Let me get your number so I can text you. We can hang out.” She grinned at me and held out her hand again. I looked at it still mesmerized.

Did she say she wanted to be friends?

All I ever fucking wanted were friends. I nodded my head and shook her hand. I was immediately self-conscious of my long sleeves and thumb holes. What if she felt that the bottom of my sleeve was damp? She’d think I was gross. I should have given her my other hand.

So fucking stupid, Brooklyn.

I reached in my pocket and grabbed my phone. It nearly slipped between my fingers because my hands were slick with worry. With shaky fingers, I put Ashley’s number in my phone.

Hers was only the fourth phone number in my contacts. I put my phone to sleep quickly and shoved it back in my pocket, avoiding Ashley’s gaze. “Cool, I’ll text you later, okay?” She smiled again and it was so bright and cheery.

“O-Okay,” I stammered. “Bye.” My feet steered me toward my car and once I was inside, I let out a rush of air. The silence all around me started to push the water into my head and down my throat.

I sputtered with a cough and gripped the steering wheel for something tangible to hold on to. If I were holding on to something, I wouldn’t drown or float away.

Why couldn't I breathe?

I'd wanted friends ever since I could remember and being Ashley's friend was the ultimate. Yet I still felt plagued. My shoulders slumped with invisible weight and my neck ached, making it difficult to turn my head.

I drove home with the windows down even though a storm was rolling in and rain started to fall from the dense clouds. I needed the air. I needed the air to force itself into my lungs because they were filling up with water instead.

A cry of relief wobbled from my tight throat when I pulled up at home and saw Caesar's car in the driveway and lights on in the house.

He was home.

He would save me.

I stumbled up to the house and tried to unlock the door but my keys clattered to the front porch. My breathing was so shallow I was starting to work up a sweat trying to inhale. I was practically kneeling on the porch.

When the front doors swung open, I scrambled up Caesar's long legs and fused myself with him in a tight hug. "Hey, what's wrong, Brook?" His strong arms held me tight, just like I needed. They forced the water out of my lungs. When he guided me inside the house, my knees loosened far too much to hold my weight and I crumpled against him.

"Brook, talk to me. Are you drowning?" He knew. He fucking knew. My heart thumped to life.

"Yes," I cried. Cease took me into the bedroom and we sat on the floor. His hands

were smooth and cool against my cheeks as he cupped them. His lips were gentle and feathery on my hot forehead.

I missed him when he moved across the room, but when I saw him pull out the boombox and tapes, a pained laugh fell from my lips. I loved that man more than words would ever be able to express. He played Hall and Oates and sat on the floor, holding me, kissing my temple and drawing invisible hearts on my scarred arms.

“I love you,” I whispered.

“I love you too. You ready to talk about it?” He met my lips with his and I slid my tongue into his mouth, hungry for the sensation he injected into my bloodstream. I was clearheaded, the water was gone and pleasure started to creep in on me.

It curled around me like dense cords, coiling and tightening until I was wrapped completely in its grasp. My body tingled as I climbed on top of him. I wanted him inside of me immediately.

He wanted it too.

His dick stiffened beneath me and I turned ravenous. I pulled my shirt off and Cease unsnapped my bra tossing it to the side. His tongue and teeth found my nipples and drew moans from the pit of me. I loved when he bit me.

I loved every flash of pain...every jolt that pushed through my body. The pain Caesar gave me didn't burn like my cuts. It burned deeper. It sank into my marrow and smoldered.

When I felt his dick slide between my pussy lips, I shuddered against him. I'd never been on top before but nerves didn't rule me for once. For once, I was pushed by the desperate need to connect to him.

“I can be on top, Brook,” he said.

“No, I want to ride you,” I said, panting through dry lips that were parched from my rapid breathing. Cease’s slick hands slid over my skin and I tipped my head back as he pushed against me again.

I lifted up and eased him inside of me with a slow groan. Once he was deep inside, fire rained down around us. I had no fucking idea what I was doing. It felt so good though. I rocked my hips until the need to go faster took over making me bounce on top of him.

“Like that?” I asked, looking down at his beautiful eyes.

Page 44

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

“Just like that, Brook. Fuck.” His strong fingertips dug into my hips, then my ass as he held on for dear life. I wanted the pressure from his grip to bruise me. I didn’t give a fuck.

I rode Caesar like I’d been doing it my entire life. Like I was made for him. Sweat rolled down my spine, it dotted his brow, and it covered us as the heat passed back and forth. I leaned down to kiss him so I could slow down.

“You feel so fucking good riding my dick, Brook,” he muttered against my mouth.

“Do I?” I asked, needing to hear how I made him feel.

“Yes, baby. You’re perfect.” He took my arm in his hand and kissed my scars. I trembled from the sentiment. The way he loved me was unmatched. He accepted every fucked up part of me and turned it into something beautiful.

Cease dragged his tongue along my collarbones then up to my neck while he clutched my body close to him. His manly scent filled my nostrils and I moaned from the smell of him and the way his mouth felt on my hot skin.

“Dammit, Brook. I’m about to cum. I can’t keep coming inside of you.” Our foreheads pressed together and I stared into his eyes, begging for him to empty into me. I loved the way it felt. So warm and full. So complete.

“Please, Cease. I love when you cum inside of me.” Even saying those words had me buzzing with the need to climax. I slid my cunt up and down his shaft and he groaned. It mixed with my eager moans to create an erotic symphony.

“Fuck, don’t say shit like that,” he pled with me. His dick jerked between my tight walls and I whimpered, moving my ass faster. “I gotta pull out,” he told me. I lifted up so he could slide out. His seed splashed across my flat stomach immediately. I watched his load slip down my skin with my bottom lip tucked between my teeth.

The sight was so amazingly sexy.

Caesar’s thick cock was still stiff and pulsing. The last bead of cum sat right on the tip of his dick. So I cleaned it for him. I slid my slippery pussy back down on his throbbing erection and he let out a barrage of colorful curse words. His hands turned to fists while I rode him painfully slow.

My core ached and squeezed while we both moaned with immeasurable pleasure. Fuck. I never knew sex could feel so good.

I wasn’t sure what happened but in the next second, Cease had my hair in his brutal grip as he pinned me to the floor. He was a madman. A wicked thrill sliced through my middle when I felt him penetrate me from behind.

He fucked me so good. So deep. Every bone in my body sang with pleasure. His dick owned me from the inside out. Every thrust told me who I belonged to.

My orgasm was quiet that time. It rolled over me like slow waves at the shore. My body tensed while I moaned Cease’s name against the carpet. He couldn’t escape coming inside of me that time and I’d be lying if I said a smirk didn’t dimple the corners of my mouth when I felt it.

“You did that on purpose,” he grunted.

“Did what?” I sat up, batting my lashes at him.

“You knew riding my dick after I came was going to drive me insane.”

“I didn’t know that but I’m glad it did,” I laughed then headed to the bathroom to start the shower.

I giggled when I felt his hands on my waist and his lips on my neck. I fucking giggled. Only happy people did shit like that. The thought tingled down to the soles of my feet.

I was happy.

**

“I got you something,” Cease said. I couldn’t pry my eyes off his sculpted chest or the way remnants of shower water trickled down his abs. I didn’t even realize how hard I was biting my lip until I felt the sting. I blinked a few times and focused on the bag he was holding in front of my face.

“What’s this?” I asked, scrambling toward it like a little kid at Christmas. I plucked it from his hand and dug in. I pulled out tank top after tank top. They were so pretty and soft. All different colors and patterns. I couldn’t stop running my hands over the fabric.

“I got you some tank tops. I know it seems stupid but I wanted you to start feeling comfortable enough with yourself to wear them around the house at least. I want to see your arms. I want you to see your arms,” he said, pinning me with his gaze.

“My arms are howwible,” I frowned, looking down at my marred skin.

“They’re a part of your struggle. A struggle that has helped to create you.”

“Yeah, maybe if I was over it but I’m not, Cease. I’m still a cutter.” I ran my fingers over the scars and tears welled in my eyes.

“So what? You’re trying.” He touched my hand, then my scars. They twinged beneath his fingers.

“I cut so bad the other night that I think I fucked something up in my arm, Cease. The night we first made love. I could barely make a fist. I was so scared.” My voice was a whisper. I avoided Caesar’s eyes because I knew what I would see.

Pain.

“What? Why didn’t you tell me? We can go to the doctor and get you checked out, Brooklyn,” he frowned.

“Why? So they can see that I’m a cutter and give me pills to make me happy?”

“No! So they can check your arm for nerve damage.” He forced my face to his and kissed away each sob that wracked me. “Baby, you have to come to me when you’re drowning. Don’t drown alone. Ever.”

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

“It’s what I’m used to,” I whispered

“Not anymore, Brook. Do you love me?” His words shook and his eyes looked wet.

“Yes, of course, Cease. I love you so fucking much.” I pressed my lips to his and he nodded.

“Then don’t hurt yourself anymore. Not like that. Because when you do...it tears me up inside. Don’t do it anymore because if you stop to think, it tears you up inside too. Now, it’s not only tearing you up emotionally but it’s tearing you up physically.”

Oh god, he was right. His words rang as clear and true as any bell and they echoed just as much. Even though cutting made me feel better when I was drowning...the relief was only temporary. It was like dying a little bit with each cut but having to be brought back to life...back to pain all over again.

I had to stop.

“You’re right,” I whispered, my gaze focused on nothing in particular. I wet my dry lips and fingered the tank tops lying in my lap. “I have to stop.”

“You do. It’s a process but I’m here. You’ll meet with Dr. Hollows tomorrow and we’ll help you through, I swear. You have to trust me though, Brook.”

“I twust you. I do. I can breathe around you.” The more I relaxed, the more I noticed the connection between my mouth and brain strengthen. “I trust you,” I said still with an accent but it came out right.

I held up a yellow tank top and stood to pull it over my head. I held out my arms and spun around for Caesar and he gave me thumbs up. “Yellow is amazing on your skin,” He walked me to the mirror with his arms around my waist while he held me from behind.

“When you’re clean from cutting for one year, you should get a tattoo.” My ears warmed at his suggestion.

“I’ve wanted one ever since I started cutting,” I confessed.

“Then we’ll make that shit happen. I want to see you get something badass.” His lips placed kisses along the curve of my neck making me feel warm and loved.

“Okay,” I beamed. The light in my eyes was back. It was jade and it was beautiful.

“See that spark? That’s what I love so much about you, Brooklyn. Everything contained in that spark is what’s fighting to get out and live above water. You have to be strong and brave though. It won’t be an easy fight.

You’re my girl. I know you can do it...right?” When we locked eyes, I felt like I could do anything. So I nodded. I wanted to be sure of myself for once in my fucking life. I wanted to do something right or at least something positive.

“Yes,” I said with a set stare. “I can’t erase the old scars but...I can stop myself from making new ones.” Clad in only a yellow tank top and a pair of panties, I took Cease by the hand and we went to the spare room I hid out in when we weren’t speaking.

I dropped to my knees and slid my fingers between the box spring and bed frame until I hit against the razor I had hidden there. I plucked it from its narrow confines and held it up for him to see. It was such an ugly fucking thing. It was an ugly moment. Both moment and razor were smeared with old blood and bad memories that

made me feel like I was sinking.

Caesar's Adam's apple bobbed in his throat and I saw the hurt in his eyes. I hated that look. I hated hurting him. I hated hurting me.

There had to be a better way to cope. There had to be.

With emotions in my eyes ready to fall any second, we marched into the small ensuite bathroom and I dropped the blade in the toilet. Old blood became new again and tinted the water pink.

I locked pinkies with Caesar then reached out and flushed the toilet. The sound of the water pushing the razor out of sight made my stomach flutter.

"Was that the last one?" Cease asked, kissing the top of my head.

"Yup. Last one," I admitted. My lips parted enough to let out a shaky laugh. I flushed my last fucking razor. I did it. On purpose.

"Okay. You got this, Brook. Even when you feel like you don't. I'm always here. If you're at school, I'm a phone call away. I'll drop everything for you."

"I know you will, Cease." I laid against his chest trying to grasp the new feeling flowing through me. It was refreshing. It made me feel light like I was free.

I wondered briefly if that's what peace was...feeling free.

If so, I could get used to being at peace. It was even better than being happy.

**

“I think I made a friend,” I told Cease as I looked at my phone after dinner. Ashley actually sent me a text asking if we could hang out after school.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

“That’s amazing, Brook. Is it someone in one of your classes?” he asked, closing his laptop.

“Not exactly. You remember Ashley Hartwell?”

“The girl from ninth grade?” He asked, his face morphed into a concerned frown. I wanted the smile back.

“Yeah, her. She apologized for everything before we left school. She wants to hang out tomorrow. I’m nervous though.” I lifted the heel of my hand to my lips but there was no sleeve to suck on so I nibbled my nails instead. Cease caught the nibbling and eyed me.

“Brook, be careful okay? Having friends is fine but make sure they’re genuine.”

“All I’ve ever wanted was a friend. Before everything went to shit the first day of ninth grade...I wanted to be her friend,” I scrunched my brows together and focused hard to pronounce at least one word right.

“I understand,” he sighed and rubbed the back of my hand. “Please be careful.” I knew Cease thought Ashley was up to no good and I did too at first but I had to stop and think about it. She pulled me to the side when nobody else was around. She wasn’t trying to embarrass me and she stuck up for me with that asshole bumped me on the way out.

She didn’t have to do that. She probably wasn’t perfect but I didn’t get the vibe that she was out to get me. Only time would tell but I had a good feeling.

“She’s okay. Not pefect but okay. I’ll try out the whole friend thing. If I feel like it’s going south, I’ll ghost her.” More of my words came out right and I smiled inwardly.

“Okay, Kiddo,” Cease smirked at me and I slapped him with my pillow.

That cute little pillow fight of ours turned into me on my back while Caesar dug his thick cock into me.

“Cum all over my dick, Brook,” he demanded in a gruff voice that turned my insides to mush. My body liked Cease. No...it loved him. It reacted in ways I didn’t know were possible.

When he said cum...I came.

Hard.

“Open those beautiful eyes. I love watching you cum.” He pushed my legs back until my toes kissed the headboard then he sank deep. So fucking deep. His weight on top of me made me feel like I was rooted to the earth.

My legs shook without permission and moans exited my body left and right. High-pitched and throaty. Slow and hungry. They were all swirled into one cry as I melted all over Caesar’s dick.

“Fuuuck,” Cease groaned as he emptied his heavy balls. His heat poured into me. I thought I was done with my orgasm until he took it upon himself to roll lazy circles around my sensitive clit with his talented fingers. The three orgasms that followed were sharp and quick and...holy fucking shit they made me lose sense of my senses.

I think I blacked out.

Well, not completely but I saw black encroaching on my vision. When he moved his fingers away, my vision came flooding back in like sensory overload. I whimpered and snapped my eyes shut, rolling onto my side.

“Payback for what you did earlier,” Cease laughed, rubbing my back.

“Asshole,” I muttered.

“You liked it though. Tell me I’m lying.”

He knew I couldn’t. I liked everything he did. It was all magical.

**

While I was in school the next day, I counted down the seconds until I could see Cease again. My brain refused to concentrate on anything other than how good it felt being with him. How free and clear my thoughts were. It was weird not having water in my head all the time.

Ever since I realized I was madly in love with Cease, the water hadn’t been a problem. I was relieved. Even one day without being underwater was amazing. It was like getting a pair of glasses for the first time and realizing how fuzzy everything was before.

When the last bell of the day rang, I rushed to my locker and gathered my things. When I stood up, I let out a yelp and put my hand over my thumping heart. “Hey Brookie, wanna go to my house?” Ashley scared the shit out of me, but she was serious about wanting to hang out. My nerves jittered but I tried my hardest to keep them calm. If I let them go wild then the water would suck me in.

“Yeah,” I nodded. “I can’t stay long though because I have an appointment.” I was a

bundle of nerves waiting to run rampant as I tried to pick words that didn't have R sounds in them. When I navigated my sentence pretty well, I pushed out a sigh of relief.

“Cool. Follow me. I'm parked in the student lot.” We walked out together and my stomach buzzed with weird energy. I listened to Ashley ramble on and about nothing but it was better than listening to the shit that went on inside of my head.

I had a friend.

Page 47

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

A smile slowly stole space on my face as we got to her car. “Where are you parked?” She asked, her eyes scanning the lot.

“The black Toyota,” I told her pointing.

“Oh, I see it. Cool.” She flashed a smile and I watched her get into her car before I hurried to mine. Once I was behind the wheel, I let out a small squeal. It was a pure burst of excitement that I couldn’t control.

I drove behind Ashley to her house and gave myself a pep talk the entire time.

You can do this Brooklyn.

You’ll actually have a friend if you don’t fuck it up.

It’ll be your first real friend since elementary school.

When we pulled into the driveway I shut my eyes for a second and tried to calm my nerves. I could feel the water edging in on me though.

Fuck.

I slid my thumb from my sleeve and pulled back the material so I could see my scars. They were potent reminders of why I couldn’t let the water back into my head. I had to think about Cease. I had to remember how it felt to be at peace. To be happy.

Ashley knocked on my window and I jumped. “Come on,” she smiled.

“One sec,” I replied, hastily pulling my sleeve down. I forced myself to swallow the knot in my throat as I got out and followed Ashley to her house. I had to push through this. Normal girls did this shit all the time like it was nothing.

The inside of her house smelled like vanilla candles. I tried to focus on the sweet scent and not the growing nerves scattering inside of my brain. “So, this is my house,” she shrugged. We headed to the kitchen where she offered me a soda. I obliged just to have something to do with myself. Otherwise, I’d wonder if I was doing everything right.

Was I sitting right? Smiling at the right time? Nodding when I was supposed to?

“I notice you always wear hoodies and long sleeves even when it’s hot. You’re not gonna like shoot up the school or anything are you?” Ashley laughed, tipping her can of Coke upward.

“Oh...no. School shootews awen’t usually females anyway.”

Stupid Brooklyn.

So fucking stupid.

Did you hear yourself mispronounce those R’s? You turned them into fucking W’s again.

Ashley laughed a little and put her hand on top of mine. “The way you talk is so fucking cute. Stop being so self-conscious.”

“It’s awful. I sound stupid,” I muttered, pressing my chin to my chest. Wisps of hair fell into my face, escaping my messy ponytail.

“Girl, stop it. You’re fine. It is what it is.” She studied my face and I saw a flicker of something in her brown eyes. I couldn’t tell what it was. “Is that why you’re always wearing those hoodies and long sleeves? You feel like you have to hide?”

“I don’t know. I...like them. They feel comfo...they feel good.”

“Comfortable?” Ashley smirked. I felt my face heat to one thousand degrees. I hated it. She wasn’t making fun of me but I still felt something. I couldn’t tell if it was nerves or what.

It was probably nerves.

She just wanted to be my friend and I wanted a friend so badly.

“Yeah,” I shrugged.

“Hey, Brookie...are you um...a cutter?” Sirens blared to life in my head. Red, angry, and loud.

“What? No,” I shook my head and stood up, ready to leave.

“Hey, no judgment here. I told you I wanted to be friends. Friends know everything about each other. We’ve technically known each other since ninth grade so, no reason to hide.”

Page 48

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

“We weren’t friends though,” I frowned.

Cease told me to be brave like a lion. He was like a lion. I had to channel some of his bravery so I didn’t bolt out the front door.

“True. I want to change that though. Can I at least have a chance to prove I’m not still the same bitch from ninth grade?” She poked out her bottom lip and I fidgeted in my seat. I brought my sleeve to my lips and squeezed my brows together.

“I don’t know...” I muttered against my sleeve.

“Am I judging you? No. I don’t care about your speech impediment or if you’re a cutter. By the way, I was only asking because I saw you looking at your scars when you were sitting in your car,” she said.

“Yes. I cut.” Bile burned the back of my throat but I forced it down. Why was this so hard? The girl was begging to be my friend. All I had to do was relax.

“Shit. That’s deep, Brookie. You don’t have to do that shit. It’s stupid. Plus, life is too good to try to kill yourself.”

“I don’t try to kill myself,” I said sternly.

“Oh...I’m sorry. I don’t know how that stuff works.”

“I’m not suicidal.” At least not anymore.

“Can I see your scars?” She asked. Her eyes widened with curiosity and she leaned forward. I folded my arms tight across my chest and shook my head.

“No. I don’t show them to anyone.” I looked at my phone and stood up. “I gotta go, Ashley. Thanks for letting me hang out with you.” I headed to the front door and wrapped my fingers around the knob. It was cool to the touch and I welcomed it against my slick palm.

“Brooklyn, I’m sorry. I’m just curious. That’s all. I wasn’t trying to make you uncomfortable. Can we hang out again tomorrow? Maybe when you don’t have an appointment?” She pled.

“I don’t know. I’ll think about it,” I shrugged, opening the door. I needed air. My hands were starting to tremble. I’d been fighting off the water for too long and I was tired.

“I’m sorry I made you feel uncomfortable,” she apologized again. A tug in my stomach told me to believe her. It was just hard to trust anyone. It was hard to have a friend. The only person I let inside was Cease.

“It’s okay,” I told her, moving my feet to the porch.

“I’ll text you.” Ashley waved as I hurried to my car and got inside. My breathing turned shallow the second my hand wrapped around the steering wheel.

I was still fighting off the pull toward the roaring water. It would have been so easy to fall in headfirst and let it swallow me. It would have been easy to drive to the store and get a pack of razors, stash them in my car and open up my arms over and over until blood soaked my hands and turned sticky between my fingers.

But why?

Because someone wanted to be my friend?

Because she was a little insensitive and curious about personal things? I had to learn to deal with things like that. Things worse than that.

I clenched my teeth together and let out a frustrated growl. I couldn't cut. I promised Caesar. I promised myself. I wanted to follow through this time.

Tears leaked from my eyes. They were involuntary and I hated them. They were weak.

I took turn after turn and drove where my GPS told me to until I reached Cease's office building. I parked right beside his car. Just seeing it made my chest relax. I sniffled back more rebellious tears and headed inside.

I stopped in the bathroom on the first floor and looked in the mirror. I missed the girl with the jade glow in her eyes. She was pretty. This girl in the mirror had wide eyes and trembling lips pressed into a hard line. Her nostrils were flared and her hair was a mess.

That wasn't who I was before I left the house this morning. This morning, I was tangled in the sheets with Cease between my legs, drinking from me like I was the only oasis in a desert. I forced my eyes shut and tried to relive that moment. It was only seven hours ago.

I could feel Caesar's facial hair tickling my inner thighs. I could hear my laughter turn to moans as he put his mouth on me. I was free in those moments.

When I opened my eyes again, I could see the glow in my irises coming back. I realized I would see Cease in a few minutes. I couldn't let him see me like that. I looked panicked.

I splashed water on my face then rooted around in my hoodie pockets to find chapstick. I never wore gloss but suddenly I wanted to. I wanted wow Cease.

I stared at my messy ponytail and frowned. I tugged the hair tie from my hair and finger combed it a little. Cease loved my hair down. I liked it too the more I saw myself that way. I wasn't perfect but at least I looked better than I did coming in the door. Plus, I still had twenty minutes before my appointment with Dr. Hollows.

I found Cease's office with no problem. His door was open so I stood back and watched him for a few moments. He was so handsome. No...handsome was too buttoned up for Dr. Caesar Powers. I let my fingers slide over the golden nameplate on the door and smiled. Dr. Caesar Powers was fine as hell.

When I knocked, his head jerked up and we locked eyes. The air around me grew balmy and I wanted out of the hoodie I was wearing. Cease's cashmere brown eyes swept the area outside of his office when he poked his head out of door. The lone desk out there was empty so he tugged me inside and closed the door.

I couldn't wait to close the gap of space between us. It was too much.

In the next second my hands were in his hair and his lips were on mine. "Cease, I missed you," I breathed. I really breathed too. I took one of the deep breaths I could only take around Caesar. I drew in his perfect, clean scent and it made me feel grounded.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

“I missed you too, Brook. Why didn’t you text me when you got out of school?” He pulled my hoodie off then tugged on my hair until I whimpered.

Yes.

I needed more of that pain.

“I went to Ashley’s,” I told him.

“You didn’t tell me you were going to her house.” His brows furrowed as he regarded me. His eyes were everywhere on me but I didn’t feel self-conscious. I felt sexy. I felt beautiful.

“I’m sowwy,” I whined as his grip tightened. I wanted more. I thought about saying something smart-mouthed to see if he’d pull harder.

“I worry about you, Brook,” he grumbled.

“I know. It was a quick visit though.” My fingers opened button after button on Cease’s shirt. I couldn’t keep my hands off of him. I’d heard him claim me as his over and over but I wondered if he knew that meant he was mine too.

All. Fucking. Mine.

I kissed his neck and bit a trail up to his ear. He made the sexiest sound in response to me. My pussy clenched then flooded my panties. I had on white ones today. They’d be transparent by the time he got between my thighs.

When I felt his strong fingers unbuttoning my jeans, my hips rocked with anticipation. I had to do something with my hands while he pushed my pants down my long legs, so I unbuckled his belt.

We couldn't get each other undressed quick enough. For once, I regretted wearing so many stupid fucking layers. My chattering mind was silenced once Caesar's heavy cock sprang out of his slacks.

My mouth watered and I locked my arms around his neck. We shared a torrid kiss that blasted fire through to my core. He lifted me against the door like I weighed nothing. I was worried it would turn to flames the way we were going at it.

We became a mess of teeth on flesh and nails scraping skin while he penetrated me. I was steadily unraveling while Cease deepened his powerful strokes. My thighs were jelly wrapped around his solid frame.

I wanted him deeper still. Even though it felt like I would pop any second with how full he made me. He stretched me like my pussy was custom fit for him. It didn't matter because I didn't want anyone else.

I'd never survive with anyone else. I'd never flourish with anyone else. I was a part of him and he was a part of me. "Cease," I breathed. I didn't know if I was coming or going but my lord, I never wanted it to stop.

My head rolled along the door while he thrust harder and faster. He was drenched in me and slid in and out so easily. My pussy welcomed him. If my body was a temple then by all things holy, Caesar Powers was the most devout parishioner.

"Cum for me, Brook," he grunted. He was close too. I knew it. I could tell now.

His cock swelled and the veins all pulsed at once with the need to explode inside of

me. Sick me wanted to get pregnant and have his baby. Sick me wanted a life with him far away from judging eyes and whispering mouths.

I was never well though.

I'd always been sick.

Maybe sick me was real me.

Maybe I needed to stop brushing her off and embrace her. At least she was free and at peace.

I came hard on Case's command. The delicious jolt surged through me forcing my spine to curve forward. My orgasms were so forceful when Cease demanded I give them up. They were like tyrants ordering my body to succumb to the most sinful pleasure.

...and I did.

Caesar shot his load inside of me, slippery and hot while I moaned from the sensation. My heart rate was through the roof. I was sure anyone around could hear the way it banged against my chest.

"Shit," he cursed, sliding out of me. I pulled up my panties in a rush and inched my jeans up over my bare legs.

A knock on the closed office door glued me to my spot. "Hey, Cease, did your niece come for her session?" I heard an unfamiliar voice on the other side of the door and froze.

"Yeah, Ronnie, she's in here. Give me a second..." We both scrambled around trying

to be quiet as mice while we got dressed. I tied my black hoodie around my waist and tried not to look like I was still floating high on an orgasm.

Once Cease was dressed and buttoned up, he opened the door. A tall, slender man stood at the once empty desk just outside Cease's office. He was talking to a woman with dark hair and plum colored lips. She was pretty. I had to fight off the urge to compare myself to her.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

Once she saw the door open, her eyes darted over to Cease and she smiled seductively. It turned me into a crazy person. I'd never experienced anything like it. My muscles seemed to strain against my skin as I locked onto this woman's gaze. She was staring at Cease but I was staring at her.

"Hi, Dr. Powers," she purred her words out like she was a fucking sex kitten and I wanted to rip her throat out.

"Hey, Denise. Back from your break, I see. I want you to meet Brooklyn." He smiled at me like I was his everything and it made the pounding in my ears subside a little.

"Brooklyn, nice to meet you," Denise smiled, offering her hand. I refused to shake it. I hated shaking hands anyway because I was always afraid someone would see my scars by accident but right then, I hated Denise. That was reason enough not to shake her hand.

Cease noticed my refusal and chuckled a bit, pulling me close to his side.

"Yes, Denise, this is Dr. Powers' niece. She's gonna be my patient and she's lucky because we all know I'm the best doctor in here," Dr. Hollows interjected playfully.

"Yeah, okay. Keep telling yourself that," Cease laughed. He was so sexy when he laughed. He was sexy when he did anything really.

"Niece? Okay. I got scared for a second. I thought you had a girlfriend. I was thinking I didn't even have a chance to get my hooks in you first." Denise was back to eye fucking Caesar and my heart rate climbed quickly.

“He does,” I blurted. I had to concentrate really hard on saying my R sounds. “He does have a girlfriend.” My voice shook a bit but I’d be damned if I was going to let some woman sit in my face and hit on Cease after the way he fucked me in his office.

“Mmm, all the fine ones always do,” Denise grunted and went back to her computer. Dr. Hollows looked at Cease and made a noise.

“You never mentioned your girlfriend, Dr. Powers. Congratulations,” he smiled. He was a handsome man with smooth brown skin and deep brown eyes. He only looked to be slightly older than Cease.

“Yeah, it’s still new but...it’s serious,” he swallowed and put his hands in his pockets.

“Uh oh, we talking marriage?” Hollows asked.

“Eventually. I just need to get settled,” he said. My emotions swung wildly in the opposite direction of rage and headed toward downright giddy.

Marriage?

Could I be Cease’s wife?

I rocked back and forth on my heels and suppressed the smile trying to emerge. I didn’t know how it would ever work though. We’d have to move far away from LA and New York. We’d have to be somewhere where nobody knew Dr. Caesar Powers or had his books.

“Brooklyn, are ready to be seen?” Dr. Hollows broke apart my thoughts of an exit strategy where I actually got to be happy with Cease forever. I smiled timidly and nodded, following behind him.

“I’ll see you in a bit, Brook,” Cease assured me. I nodded in response then entered Dr. Hollow’s spacious office. Inside smelled like books and leather. It was unexpectedly soothing.

I sat on the couch and looked around a little at the plaques and degrees hanging on the walls. I tried not to let my nerves go wild because if I did they would drag me toward the water like wicked, insolent children. They were such fucking pests.

Dr. Hollows spent a half hour listening to me talk about myself and who I was. I didn’t think it would take that long. I had no defining qualities. I still spoke though.

It was when he asked me why I was in his office that I clammed up. I pressed my knees together and nibbled on the edge of my sleeve. I really missed the thick sleeves on my hoodie but my shirt sleeves would do.

I wanted to tell him I was in there because I needed my head cracked open and examined. I needed to take out all the ugly parts and make them pretty but maybe that wasn’t the best way to start. Instead, I looked at him and shrugged my shoulders.

“You don’t know?” He quizzed, knitting his brows together. “Why did you agree to see me when your uncle suggested it?” Hearing Cease referred to as my uncle, stung. I averted my eyes and sucked on my sleeve harder.

“Cease wants me to talk about some stuff. Get some things out of my head and say them to someone who can help,” I told him.

“Cease?” Hollows noted. “You don’t call him Uncle Caesar?” He gave a small smile but I still wasn’t totally comfortable. A part of me was always on edge no matter who I talked to.

“No. He’s not like an uncle. He’s like a friend. A best friend,” I said firmly. My jaw

was set and my eyes locked on to Dr. Hollows.

“I understand,” he nodded. His voice was still smooth and non-judgmental. Why the hell was I so on edge? It wasn’t like he was peering into my darkest secret. He was trying to help me with my cutting. He was there to help me get through my anxiety and depression. He didn’t know Caesar and I were in love.

“Cease wasn’t there for me when I was growing up. He wasn’t around. Now that he is...” I gave another timid shrug of my dainty shoulders and hugged myself.

“Now that he is, it doesn’t seem very much like he’s your uncle, does it?” His eyes crinkled at the corners and something inside of them reminded me of my father. My heart twisted.

Page 51

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

“No, he’s not like my uncle at all. Not like I would assume an uncle would be. That’s why I can connect to him so easily. I’m not close to anyone but him.”

“I see. He’s like your rock then?” Hollows asked, jotting notes down.

“He is my rock. I wouldn’t be sitting in your office without him pushing me. I need help, Dr. Hollows.” My voice cracked with the admission and I darted my gaze to the ceiling before tears fell.

“And that, my dear Brooklyn is why you’re here. Tell me what you think you need the most help with.” His voice was so strong and full of conviction. Like he lived for the moment his patients admitted they needed help.

Well, I was at that point and I was ready to turn shit around.

I slid my thumbs from their protective holes and pulled my sleeves back to my elbows. I felt beyond exposed. Like I was naked on the surface of the sun. I’d never done anything like that before but if I wanted results...if I wanted to change into someone I’d never been before, I had to do things I’d never done before.

“I cut myself,” I said. The room was void of air as Hollows examined my arms with his eyes. He never left his chair but you couldn’t convince me that he wasn’t touching my arms and taking in all the damage I’d done.

“Before I say anything else, I want to thank you for taking such a brave and courageous leap like that. It couldn’t have been easy to show such an intimate part of your life.” I actually felt pride and sincerity emanating from him.

“You’re welcome,” I nodded, pulling my sleeves back down.

“How long have you been cutting?”

“For about four years I guess. I started in ninth grade.”

“That’s a long-term commitment. Why are you ready to stop?” He asked.

“I don’t want to hurt myself or the people I love anymore.” I beat myself up for mispronouncing my words but I pushed through anyway.

“That’s a really good reason to stop. When you cut...how do you feel before and how do you feel afterward?” He wrote down notes at a furious pace as I began to talk.

“I feel like I’m drowning. Like I’m underwater and cutting myself is the only way I can breathe again. It gives me gills.” My lips trembled involuntarily as I picked with a hangnail on my thumb.

“How long does the feeling of being able to breathe last after you’ve cut?”

“Not long,” I admitted. “Something always stresses me out again. Nothing helps me permanently. Nothing except being around Cease.” Saying his name was like a granted wish that pushed more air into my chest.

“Your uncle is what I like to call your bright spot. Sometimes, when we feel like we’re in the dark all the time, that bright spot leads us to the light. It shows us there’s a way out.” His eyes were so kind. I was starting to feel comfortable around him.

“Can you not call him my uncle? Please?” I asked, swallowing. Hollows smiled a little, then nodded before he wrote something down. “He’s definitely my bright spot.”

“That’s great. Hold on to that, Brooklyn. Sometimes bright spots save our lives.” He sighed then leaned back in his chair, letting the room fall silent again. “I’m going to leave you with a piece of information that I think you’re mature enough and strong enough to hold on to. Is that okay?” He quizzed.

“Yeah,” I nodded my head.

“There was this story on the news a couple years ago about a kid probably a little younger than you, Caleb Baxter. He self-harmed too. He got caught up in some silly internet challenge and ended up taking his own life. His parents were prominent people in the community so they were shocked when they found out. They thought their son was...normal for lack of better words. They were wrought with regret that they didn’t see the signs.

Now, they weren’t bad parents but they didn’t know what was going on with their son. It was like he was trapped in darkness. The same way you feel trapped underwater. Sometimes having a bright spot can also help to shine a light on your symptoms and triggers.

Don’t ever feel ashamed for your bright spot no matter who or what it is. Embrace it. Even if it never makes sense to anyone else. Okay?”

He stood up and so did I. Something about his words erased all the apprehension I had about him at first. Caesar was right. He was an amazing therapist. Instead of leaving his office feeling judged and angry, I felt lighter and contemplative.

I felt like I could finally take control of my life.

With a little help of course.

**

Caesar...

Brook's sessions with Ronnie were going so well. I looked forward to seeing her smiling face every day when she came to my office after school. Well, after school and after she stopped past Ashley's house.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

Ronnie told me in our sessions that he understood my concerns about Ashley but Brook needed to do normal things. She needed to have friends and branch out. She even needed to make bad decisions on her own. It was all a part of helping her find herself and have confidence. I agreed with him. I didn't like it, but I agreed.

I noticed my sessions with Ronnie turned more and more into sessions where we spoke about Brooklyn and less about how I navigated the world without my brother. Ronnie pointed it out during one of our meetings before Brook got there. "How's your grief over Anthony been lately? Have you noticed that he's been on your mind or has he faded into the background more? There's no right or wrong answer," he assured me.

"I guess he's faded more into the background," I said.

"That's a good thing. I know it can feel like we're betraying our loved one's memory but that's not it. Sometimes they have to go into the background so that you can heal. It means you're..."

"Compartmentalizing Ant's memory," I said, finishing his observation.

"Exactly. As you know, it's a sign of progress, Cease. You should be happy. Your mind is adjusting even though I know you still miss him. I honestly don't think you need any more sessions to work through your grief." Things fell silent as Ronnie scribbled on his pad then he lifted his eyes to me. "I do think we may need some sessions about Brooklyn though." He watched me, gauging my reaction but I didn't know how to react. Had I been that see-through? I tried not to balk at hearing him refer to Brook as my niece. I tried to keep the conversation casual when she was

brought up.

Maybe I wasn't as careful as I thought. Ronnie's raised eyebrows and patient expression told me he was waiting for me to speak.

"Why do we need sessions about Brook? Is she okay?" I played dumb and Ronnie saw through that shit too.

"She's fine. She's great. I think that can be attributed to you. You make her happy. She makes you happy. Am I correct in this assumption?" I saw his pen moving slowly that time while he wrote. He was analyzing me and I was trying to map out where his thought process was headed.

"Of course," I chuckled, folding my hands together in my lap.

"Good, good," he nodded.

"So, you wanna tell me why you're analyzing my relationship with Brook? Be up front, Ronnie." I narrowed my eyes and rested my elbows on my knees. I needed to hear every word that came from his mouth.

"Cease, I'm noticing unusual behavior between you two for an uncle and niece. Now you know my office is a no judgment zone and I still uphold confidentiality even though we're friends."

"What are you getting at, Ronnie?" I asked, my brows crashing together and my nostrils flaring. I wanted him to spit it out. I refused to initiate such an intimate conversation.

"I'm not the bad guy here. I'm not trying to hurt. I'm not trying to expose anything. I'm trying to understand. I'm trying to help." I stood to my feet and headed to the

door. My back was tense and my spine was stiff.

“Are we done here?” I huffed. “You’re not being direct and I sense apprehension so I see no further need for us to continue if the session isn’t benefitting me any longer.”

“You’re right. I’m being passive. Forgive me, Cease but this is a sensitive topic.” He swallowed what I assumed was a knot of reluctance before he spoke again. “Are you and Brooklyn...involved romantically?” He finally asked.

“I’m not dignifying that question with an answer. I’m protecting her.” My jaw flexed furiously.

“You’re in love with her,” Ronnie countered. My heart knocked against my chest like a fist. I had been too transparent. This shit was going to tear apart the safe haven Brook and I built around each other.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

“Caesar, do you remember what my dissertation was about?” He asked before I opened the door and stalked out of his office. I paused to bring the memory to the forefront of my mind. When I remembered his dissertation, my hand fell from the knob and I sat back down.

He wasn't out to hurt or expose us like he said.

“Yeah, I remember,” I muttered.

“I know you don't feel comfortable talking to me about it right now but give it some thought. I only want to help you two navigate this.” I was grateful that Ronnie didn't try to hold me in his office and continue talking because I needed time to think.

I didn't want anyone, no matter who it was, to peer into my relationship with Brook. It was sacred. It wasn't meant to be understood by anyone outside of us.

I didn't care about how much Ronnie wanted to help. Some things were absolutely private. I wasn't upset with him though. I kicked myself for letting my feelings for Brook be exposed in that manner.

I was ripped from my thoughts when I heard a soft knock on the door. I looked up to see Brook. She looked fucking amazing. I stood with a dry mouth and wide eyes.

Her hair had been straightened and she had the prettiest pouty, glossy lips I'd ever fucking laid eyes on. I don't know what the hell her and Ashley were over there

doing but I'd never seen Brook look so stunning.

"Hi," she said in a small voice.

"Damn, Brook..." I slid my tongue along my teeth and took long strides toward her. Her hazel eyes were hypnotizing, especially with smooth black strokes outlining them. She was a goddess standing before me. "You look amazing," I finally said, pulling her against me with my hand on the small of her back.

"Ashley gave me a makeover," she giggled.

"Well, you look...wow..." I shook my head and tipped her head to the side. I wanted to be careful not to mess up her pretty lip gloss. I couldn't promise I wouldn't bruise her dainty neck though.

I clicked the lock while I crushed Brook beneath my weight against the door. "You should have never come here looking like that, Kiddo."

"Why?" She breathed, hungry for every kiss and bite I decorated her neck with.

"Because bad things happen to pretty girls like you when they walk into a lion's den."

"Oh?" She quizzed, intrigued. Her slender fingers moved to unbutton my shirt. My pulse quickened and my cock ached. Every word from her pouty mouth made me want to fuck her senseless.

I sank my teeth into her warm skin and she gasped, calling my name while her nails pierced my shoulders. A beautiful red mark materialized on her neck. I needed to see more of them. I needed her to know and feel who she belonged to.

Deep down I knew I was proving to her that I was the only one for her. That what we

had couldn't be replicated. I wanted her to know with each kiss, lick, and bite that I would protect what we had.

I hated that she wore jeans every day. I wanted access to that perfect pussy all the fucking time. I forced the stiff denim down her long legs and she kicked them off her feet.

Her cute pink panties were saturated with slippery arousal. I slid my fingers against the transparent scrap of cotton, creating friction against her plump clit. "I want them off and in my fucking hand, Brook." My breathing was ragged. The scent of her in the air turned me into an animal.

The way she trembled while she pulled off her wet panties made me stroke my dick through my pants. The instant she placed them in my palm, I shoved them in her mouth.

"Bite down on that," I instructed. I hoisted her up against the door and placed her thighs on my shoulders. I was where I wanted to be. Face to face with Brook's slick cunt. The way it glistened called out to me but I took my time.

I teased her clit with the tip of my nose before placing painfully slow kisses along her puffy lips. She let out muffled cries with her panties clenched between her teeth. I continued tasting her, making her squirm and buck against my mouth. Each time she did it, she slid her bundle of nerves along the tip of my nose and shuddered.

I sucked and slurped and tongue fucked countless climaxes from her body.

When I felt her dripping from my chin to my chest I lowered her to her feet and led her to my desk where I bent her over. I needed inside of her immediately. She said something with the panties between her teeth but I couldn't understand her.

“Fuck me, Cease,” she panted when I removed them. I growled and shoved them back in her mouth right before I thrust inside of her. We had to be as quiet as possible and it was stupid to fuck her in my office but neither one of us could handle the tension.

I let her newly straightened tresses slip through my fingers before I pulled hard and fucked the shit out of her. I gave her the deepest strokes, feeding her every inch of my cock. She was so goddamn wet I wouldn't be able to hold on without filling her with cum.

The thought of her sitting on Ronnie's couch with her pussy still full of me, had me sending thick ropes of cum deep inside of Brook's pulsing cunt. Her body jerked with an orgasm and squeezed my girth over and over. It was the sweetest, most unrelenting torture I'd ever endured. I wanted more of it though. I wanted it all the fucking time.

“Oh my god,” Brook pushed the panties out of the mouth and on top of my desk. “That was fucking amazing.” She stood upright and looked around for her jeans. I handed them to her and walked into my bathroom. As much as I wanted to keep her sweetness on my face, I knew I couldn't. We weren't at home and I'd already been too reckless. We had to wash up.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:11 am

“Can I have more of that when we get home?” Brook asked from behind me. She gave me a squeeze around the middle and I rubbed her hands.

“All. Fucking. Night.” I turned around and we shared a slow burning kiss that made Brook’s entire body quiver. I loved pushing her body to its limits. I loved watching the effect I had on her. It was beautiful.

A knock sounded on my office door before I heard it swing open. Brook froze to her spot, her hazel pools full of fear. I kissed her forehead and tucked a lock of hair behind her ear.

“Cease, you in here?” Hollows’ voice called from my office.

“One second, Ronnie,” I answered. When Brook slid her pinkie around mine and tugged, I tugged back. “It’s okay,” I assured her.

I walked out to greet Ronnie while Brook hung back. “Is Brooklyn here?” He asked, looking around me.

“Yeah, she’s in the bathroom.” A small swarm of nerves took over me remembering that he knew about us. More than likely, he knew we’d been in my office fucking too. The scent of both of us had to still be in the air. There was no mistaking it.

“Cease, remember what I said to you during our session,” he said quietly.

“Ronnie, I don’t want to talk about it. I don’t feel comfortable talking about it.”

“But there is something to talk about?” He regarded me with his hands in his pockets and a quizzical expression painted across his features.

“No, Ronnie. There isn’t,” I lied.

By then, Brook was walking out of the bathroom. I forced my eyes away from her face but it was really all I wanted to look at. I did catch a glimpse of my teeth marks on her olive skin.

I was so goddamn stupid for marking her up like that right before she had a session with Ronnie. Brook turned me into a crazy man though. I wanted her more than I wanted my next breath sometimes. It was staggering.

“Ah, Brooklyn, how are you?” Ronnie shook her hand and she smiled.

“I’m fine.”

“You ready for our session? We’re making so much progress.” They headed out of the door and I watched Brook smiling and laughing while her dark hair flowed behind her.

The moment the door closed, I fell into my chair and sighed. What the fuck was I doing? I lost my brother and lost my goddamn mind.

Everyone in the world would look at us like we were pariahs if we decided to have a life together. If I was being honest though, that’s all I could think about lately. Every night I held Brooklyn in my arms, I thought about having her in my arms forever.

I thought about waking up to her in the kitchen making breakfast and playing loud eighties music. I thought about fucking her every night until we fell asleep from exhaustion.

I thought about it all.

Lately, seeing her round and full with my baby was at the forefront of things. As insane as it was, it brought me immeasurable peace. Was my mind that fucking warped or was I simply in love?

I pushed the nagging thoughts to the back of my head and answered some emails while Brook had her session with Ronnie. When she was done, I took her to grab dinner outside of town.

“If we’re going out to dinner, can you do me a favor?” Brook looked at me with excited eyes.

“What is it?” I’d do anything for her. She had me wrapped around her little finger.

“Can you buy me a dress? I want to look pwetty.” When she batted her long lashes, I was helpless. My chest squeezed and I took the next exit to the mall.

I sat waiting for her to try on several dresses until she found the right one. When Brook was done, she came out of the store wearing a pink dress that skimmed her toned thighs. She wasn’t quite comfortable enough to bare her arms so she wore a jean jacket over the dress but it was so Brooklyn. It fit her perfectly in every way.

I couldn’t wait to take her out away from prying eyes. I mainly wanted to look at her pretty face blush from across the table.

Little did I know, she was going to sit right beside me instead. Her pinky found mine and I brought her hand to my lips to kiss it. “Nobody here knows us,” I whispered in her ear.

“I know. I like it like that. Nobody from school or that knows you from your job. It’s

amazing. We're like...a couple." So much love shone in her eyes that I nearly got lost in it all.

"We are," I said with all the certainty in the world. I leaned over and kissed her cheek, then swept her hair away from her neck. Lavender and honey pulled me in hard and fast. The light scent had my cock thickening instantly.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:12 am

I brushed my lips against Brook's ear and said, "You don't have on any panties, do you, Kiddo?" Beneath the table, my hand started its slow journey up her inner thigh.

Brook shook her head at my question. Her teeth found her bottom lip as she squirmed in her seat. I liked making her squirm. I also liked making her cum without sticking my dick in her. It was incredibly sexy to witness.

"Is your pussy wet right now?" I quizzed, my voice low and rumbling through my chest. I watched the hollow space between Brook's collarbones dip when she sucked in a breath and my cock twitched.

Goddammit.

I couldn't control myself around her. There were people all around us and I was sporting a full, thick erection while the tips of my eager fingers slid back and forth against Brook's cunt. She shuddered violently and I did nothing to hide my arrogant smirk.

She was mine and her body knew it too. It obeyed without words. Orgasms by telepathy.

I'd never had that type of connection with anyone before.

"Cease," she stammered, gripping my forearm. Her knuckles were blanched.

"What is it, Brook?" I asked, nuzzling my lips against her neck.

“I’m going to cum,” she warned me slamming her knees together.

“Open. Now.” I growled, biting her earlobe.

“Fuck...” she dragged out the word on an infinite loop.

“Shh, the waiter is coming over. Can you order food with my thumb rolling over your clit, Brook?” She shook her head, soft black hair swishing back and forth. Excitement rushed through my body when the waiter approached. Brook was soaking wet and my dick was at full attention.

Above that table, we looked normal though. We didn’t look like two people coated in sin and diving head first into the deepest, darkest waters. “Hey, guys, ready to order?”

“Yes, we are. Brook, you wanna go first?” I glanced at her pretty face and her cheeks were rosy, her skin was dewy, and her breathing was rapid. She was so fucking close.

“Um...yeah,” she squeaked. “Tacos? Chicken tacos.” She looked at the waiter and forced a smile.

“Okay cool, and you, sir?” I pushed my gaze to the menu and worked Brook’s clit faster beneath the table.

“I think I’ll go with tamales.” I closed the menu with my free hand and gave it to the young man. “Can we get some iced teas, please?”

“Yeah. Coming right up.” He nodded at us then walked off. I turned my focus to Brook who’s breathing was coming faster and faster.

“Give in, Brook. Flood my fucking hand with your slippery pussy.” I didn’t move faster. I moved slower. Making loops around her clit with my thumb. I avoided direct

stimulation just to drive her insane.

She dug her nails into my arm while her back went stiff. She was so goddamn sexy right then. Her full, parted lips were flushed and pink, her skin looked satiny under the ambient lighting and her fucking nipples were so hard. They pressed against the pink fabric of her pretty little dress like they were beckoning to me. They wanted me to free them.

“Oh, my god,” Brook breathed. I felt warm, slippery honey coating my fingers. I wanted to be inside of her so bad it was painful. I shifted my position, moving so that my hard dick wasn’t pressing right against my fly.

I was dangerously close to shooting my load in my pants. I wanted to save every drop for Brook though. “Such a good girl. Fuck, your pussy is so wet. I can’t wait until we get home so I can rip that dress off and fuck you until you cry.”

“Cease,” she whimpered while she continued to cum against my hand. After she was done riding out the waves of her sexy-as-fuck orgasm, I moved my hand and looked at the way my fingers glistened. “You got my hand all messy, Kiddo.”

“Stop calling me Kiddo,” she grumbled.

“Why? I like watching you get all pissed off,” I smirked. One by one I cleaned each finger, tasting her sweet flavor on my tongue. She sat staring with wide, curious eyes. “Your messes taste fucking delicious. I want you to make a mess all over my face when we get home. Then make one all over my cock,” I said so that only she could hear.

“As long as it lasts all night,” she quipped. Her neck turned a beautiful pale red and I was dying to mark her up more.

I had to control myself though. Ronnie's words played in my head over and over. He knew. He knew I was with Brooklyn. If he could tell who else could tell? I had to slow down.

I was so busy thinking with my emotions that I wasn't leaving any room for logic. All I could see was my love for Brook and how much she drove me crazy. She was still in high school and I was a prominent child psychologist of all goddamn things.

I knew I wanted to be with her forever but I had to actually plan to make that happen. We couldn't ride off into the sunset without consequences.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:12 am

The waiter brought our food out and I stared at my tamales trying to think of an exit strategy. One where I got to keep Brook but I could also find a way to take care of us. It was enough to make my head hurt.

“What’s wrong?” She’d polished off three tacos and was laying her head on my shoulder. Being able to smell her lavender and honey with each inhale was enough to keep me calm. “You went all quiet on me, Cease.”

“We should probably talk when we get home,” I told her. She slid her slender fingers between mine on top of the table and I looked at the contrast. My sturdy long fingers against her dainty ones. I guess Ashley had also painted Brook’s nails because they were pink. They looked nice.

“Is evewything okay?” I noticed as long as Brook was happy and relaxed, she could pronounce R’s just fine. The minute she tensed up, they all became W’s. “Everything is fine. Stop worrying.” I kissed the top of her head and she sighed, her shoulders relaxing against me.

“Aww, look at this...” I looked up to see Denise, the office secretary, standing at our table. Just as quickly as Brook’s shoulders relaxed, they turned to stone when she saw Denise. I missed the smooth warmth from her hand when she moved and hid it under the table.

“Hey, Denise. What are you doing all the way out here in San Bernadino?” I asked, folding my arms across my chest. I could tell she was checking me out and I didn’t care but I knew Brooklyn did.

“I came to check on my parents. I’m never usually out this far but it’s Friday so, why not? This is cute. A little uncle-niece hang out time, huh? You probably want a boyfriend just like your Uncle Caesar don’t you?” I cringed inside and stole a glance at Brook. She looked livid. Instead of flying off the handle, she excused herself and went to the bathroom, leaving me alone with Denise.

“Did I say something?” She asked with a chuckle. “Maybe she can tell I have a little crush on you and wants you all to herself. I don’t blame her.” Her hungry eyes roamed all over my chest but the only thing I could focus on was Brooklyn. I didn’t want her to let the water back in. “She probably has a little harmless crush on you. Might want to nip that in the bud now. Kids like her can get clingy.”

“There’s nothing to nip in the bud, Denise and you need to watch your mouth.”

“Caesar, I’m sorry if...”

“Dr. Powers,” I snapped, standing up.

“Right...Dr. Powers, I’m sorry if...” I held my hand up signaling her to shut the fuck up and she got the point immediately. I dropped more than enough money on the table to cover our meal and tip then I went to the bathroom and stood by the door.

Luckily, Denise didn’t follow. I wasn’t going to be responsible for what came out of my mouth if she tried to explain herself any damn more.

After standing there for ten minutes, Brooklyn emerged with wet eyes. Seemingly nothing else was out of place. Her energy was off-kilter though. I knew my girl and she wasn’t right.

“You ready to go?” I asked her, holding out my hand. She nodded but didn’t grab on. Instead, she walked right past me and headed out of the doors. I caught up to her in

the parking lot then finally slowed my stride.

“You should be with someone like her, Cease. Not me. I’m a fuck up.” Brook got in the car, clicked her seatbelt on and brought the heel of her hand up to her mouth so she could suck on her sleeve.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:12 am

I didn't get upset until I saw angry red scratch marks peeking from beneath her jacket sleeve. "What the fuck did you do, Brooklyn?" My voice swallowed the space around us as I put the car in drive. I had to do something to stop myself from yelling.

She wouldn't answer me but I saw her lips trembling and I heard her sniffles. I prayed that she hadn't done something stupid like cut herself again. "Did you cut?" I asked, nearly breaking the steering wheel.

"No," she whispered. The free fall regression was heartbreaking. I sped home while beside me, Brook shrank more and more. She slipped deeper inside of her head and all I could hear were Ant's words telling me that she would be fine if she could just get out of her head.

I whipped the car into the driveway and Brook stormed out, unlocking the doors and slamming them behind herself. I wanted to scream. She was upset and she was shutting down.

"Brooklyn," I called out when I walked into the foyer. I found her in our room, peeling her denim jacket off and tossing it to the floor. She thrust her forearms in my face and with her teeth bared she let out the most painful growl of frustration. Deep red scratch marks marred her arms. She was a road map of anguish.

"I didn't have anything to cut with so you know I did, Caesar? I dug my fucking fingernails in and scratched. I tried to draw blood. I wanted the pain. I needed it. Because I realized I'm not normal. You need someone normal. I'm fucking your head up too."

The quick thump of my pulse made me hyper-aware of how tense I was and how any little thing would cause me to snap and explode. “Brooklyn, you’re not fucking my head up.”

“Yes, I am!” Her voice came out a powerful shout. A cry for me to hear her. So I listened.

“Why do you think that? Haven’t I shown you from the beginning that it’s not just you?” I took a step toward her and she took one back. “I love you the same way you love me. It’s not right and people will think it’s fucked up but the entire world is fucked up and we’re not going to be the ones to throw it off its axis. Not by loving each other,” I told her.

“You need someone normal,” she said again. “I’m not. I’m fucked in the head. I’m tortured. I’m filled up, bursting at the seams with fucking sorrow cutting helps it bleed out.

You. You helped it vanish but I can’t have you. I don’t know why I thought I could.” Before I could speak, her phone chimed and she grabbed it, reading the text.

“Brook, please listen to me,” I begged, reaching for her hand. She snatched it away and picked the jean jacket up from the floor. “Where the hell are you going?”

“To a party. It’s Ashley’s birthday.” She narrowed her hazel eyes at me because she already knew we were about to bump heads.

“No. Fuck no. You’re not going to a party in this fucking condition,” I boomed.

“Why not? You think I’m going to cut?”

“Yes! Of course I think you’re going to cut. You’re upset and we need to talk. You

can't run away from that."

"Dr. Hollows says I need to have normal experiences. I need to make friends and she's my only goddamn friend."

"I'm your friend Brooklyn. She doesn't even fucking know you!"

"So what! Are you going to tell me I can't go? Hmm? Uncle Caesar?" Her words sliced through me unexpectedly as she pushed past.

"I'm asking you not to go. I'm not asking as your uncle, Brook. I'm asking as..."

"As what?" She asked, her lips pressed into a trembling line. I didn't know what to say. Words escaped me. "Exactly. You know we can't really be together either. We need to accept it, right?"

"No! That's not what I'm saying. I just want to talk." My voice softened as I tried to get her to calm down and have an actual discussion about our future. She didn't want to hear it though.

"I'm going to Ashley's. I'll be back," she said before slamming the door. The house was empty without her. I fisted my hands and stalked into the living room, crashing to the couch.

Maybe she was right.

Maybe we shouldn't be together.

It was selfish to love her the way I did. It was selfish for my heart to bleed for her and want to keep her protected and close to me. It was selfish for me to think she was far too beautiful and too perfect for anyone else.

She completed me. We fit together but if we were ever going to be safe and normal we couldn't be together. Safe and normal didn't mean fucking your niece or falling insanely in love with her and everything about her.

I was sitting at home on a Friday night staring at a movie that I didn't really want to watch because it made me feel closer to Brooklyn. It made me feel closer to Ant. Nostalgia washed over me and I played back the last memories I had of my big brother.

Family movie nights.

He'd murder me if he knew I was in love with his daughter. I had no doubts in my mind about it. He was gone though and the grief we experienced stitched Brook and me together in ways we would have never imagined.

Page 58

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:12 am

My mind went to war with opposing thoughts until my chest started to ache. My focus shifted to Brooklyn as it always did. I wanted to talk to her. I wanted to explain to her that we needed to make some serious decisions and that meant evaluating our feelings.

I knew it would make her uncomfortable but nothing worth having ever lived inside of a comfort zone. Like she could hear me thinking about her, she sent me a text.

Brook: I hate arguing with you.

I stared at it, almost unable to believe my eyes. As pissed as she was when she stormed out, I didn't think I would hear from her. Especially not while she was at the party. I wondered if she was okay. Was she hiding somewhere feeling uncomfortable or trapped?

Me: Yeah, it's no walk in the park for me either, Kiddo.

Brook: Stop. I hate when you call me Kiddo.

Me: I know. But it makes you smile.

Brook: We can't do this, Cease. Me and you. We can't be a thing...

Me: We need to talk. Can I call you?

Brook: Sure. It's a little loud though.

I tapped her name in my phone and pressed it to my ear. My heart sped up thinking about hearing her voice. “Hey, Cease...”

“What’s up, Brook? Can you come home so we can sit down face to face and talk about things?” I asked rubbing the back of my neck.

“I’m kinda busy...I’ll leave latew.” Her words slurred together and it sent up dozens of red flags.

“Brooklyn, have you been drinking?” I asked in a low growl and through clenched teeth. I heard her push out an annoyed breath on the other end.

“This is why I sent you a text, Cease. I don’t wanna be policed. I can dwink if I want to.” She slurred harder and my fucking blood boiled. She was somewhere with people I didn’t know...with people she didn’t even fucking know, and she was drunk.

“Hey, sexy. Come sit your pretty ass on my lap,” a deep voice chuckled on the other end.

“No thanks. I’m twying to talk on the phone,” Brook slurred.

“You’re twying? Oh shit. I bet that cute little lisp would sound amazing while I fucked you. Even better, I could shut you up with my cock.”

Veins bulged, pressing against my skin as I stood to my feet. “Brook, where the fuck is Ashley’s house?” I barked. She wouldn’t answer me because she was too busy fussing with the motherfucker talking to her like he didn’t value his front teeth. I’d gladly knock them out for him.

“Brooklyn!” I thundered, grabbing my keys. “Give me the address now.”

“I’m fine’ He’s just being...” Her phone ended the call.

Fuck that shit.

I wasn’t waiting for her to give me the address. I’d look up her location on the tracking app we both had on our phones. She could see me wherever I was and I could see her. Looked like she was in a neighborhood not too far from where we lived.

Finding Ashley’s house wasn’t hard. The cars lining the street and the drunken teenagers hanging out on the lawn were dead giveaways. My eyes honed in on Brook’s car like a goddamn magnifying glass.

A boy only a hair taller than her, in dark jeans and a white t-shirt, had her pinned against her car. He was smiling down at her while she was clearly pushing against his chest. There were a dozen other kids out there and nobody stepped in to tell that asshole to back the fuck up.

Well, he had a rude motherfucking awakening coming.

**

Brooklyn...

When I saw a massive six foot seven frame prowling toward my car from the side, I knew immediately. My mind knew, my body knew, my heart knew. They all sang together at once.

Caesar.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:12 am

I tried my best to get the fuck away from the guy stalking me around Ashley's party but he wasn't taking no for an answer. He followed me around the house three times then out to my car. He kept insisting that my lisp needed his dick then it would be all cured.

Fuckboy.

I literally could not have rolled my eyes harder.

Cease stood right beside me, eclipsing the glow of the streetlight and forcing the fuckboy to look upward. His stupid legs stumbled backward and he looked like he would piss himself when he saw the fury on Caesar's face.

"H-Hey, I-I'm sorry," he stammered.

"Did you hurt her?" Cease asked taking one long stride forward. Fuckboy shook his head repeatedly, holding up his hands.

"N-N-No, I didn't hurt her. I just thought she was cute." I swore Cease's stare would make the fuckboy combust and I was halfway looking forward to the spectacle.

I locked my arm with Caesar's and tugged him toward my car. "I'm fine," I said quietly.

"I don't want to fight. I'm sorry," Fuckboy sniffled. The second Cease turned toward me, Fuckboy darted toward Ashley's house and out of sight.

“Brooklyn, let’s go. We’ll come back for your car in the morning.” He snagged my bicep in his steel grip and pulled me toward his car like I was a doll. I folded my arms once I was strapped into the passenger’s seat.

“You don’t need to have a fucking attitude. Who the hell was that guy?” He asked as we pulled off.

“I don’t know. Some guy fwom school.”

“He could have hurt you, Brook! Then I would have had to kill him.”

“Defending your niece. That’s honowable,” she scoffed.

“No. Not fucking defending my niece. Defending the woman I love. The woman I want to spend the rest of my life with.”

I sat quietly while he drove, fighting off tears. I didn’t want a promise dangled in front of me that I knew couldn’t happen. I’d been researching incest laws in the state of California and the outlook wasn’t good. It was illegal no matter how you presented it. No matter if it was consensual or if everyone was of legal age.

It was fucking illegal.

I couldn’t be with Cease. Not if I wanted him to lead a normal life. Not if I wanted to keep him out of jail. I loved him too much to be so selfish and reckless.

“Can we go inside now?” He asked once we were parked in the driveway. When the movement of the car stopped, the stars in the night sky seemed to spin wildly out of control.

I had too much to drink. My stomach bubbled and I felt every ounce of liquor trying

to exit my body. It was like every organ inside of me was rejecting all the red solo cups of alcohol I'd forced upon them. I opened the car door and everything came spewing out.

"Holy shit, Brook," Cease ran to my side and helped me out of the car.

"I'm gonna be sick again," I said before dry heaving on the porch.

"Okay, give me a second," he fumbled with the keys and once the doors opened, I bolted to the nearest bathroom and crashed to the floor in front of the toilet.

"See, you shouldn't have been drinking," he fussed as he held my hair back. "You need some ginger ale and crackers. I'll get you some." Even though I hated him fussing at me, I had to admit that him being there for me was nice. Him coming to my rescue like that was even better.

If I hadn't been drunk, I would have been extremely turned on. He went full alpha and didn't even have to say more than a fucking sentence. The fact that he was a chiseled skyscraper was enough.

Mine.

He was my chiseled skyscraper.

I couldn't have him though. The thought made tears burn my eyes once I was done throwing up. I sat on the bathroom floor and wished for a razor to appear out of thin air. I wanted to feel physical pain and not the horrible emotions that wreaked havoc on my heart.

"Here, take small sips," Cease said, handing me a ginger ale. The cold can felt so good against my hot hands. Instead of drinking it right away I just held it against my

forehead.

“Wanna tell me what made you get drunk around a bunch of assholes that you don’t even know?” Cease asked, sitting on the edge of the bathtub. I let my eyes travel lazily up his long legs before shrugging my shoulders and taking a sip of soda.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:12 am

“I was sad. I needed to wash the sadness away without drowning. They were passing around liquor in cups and I took one then another and another until everything was fuzzy.”

“Brook, you can’t replace one vice with another. That’s not how healing works. That’s exactly why I didn’t want you running out of here like you did. When you’re upset you need to talk. Especially right now. You’re in a vulnerable place,” he fussed.

“No shit, Cease,” I scoffed. I pushed damp strands of hair away from my face and looked at him. My heart ached at how fine he was. How defined the angles of his face were. How dark the hair on his face was turning. I liked the fact that he was letting his beard grow in. He looked distinguished.

“You know, I did research on incest laws in California. There’s no scenario where we can be together and be free,” I told him.

“There are ways around everything, baby. Let’s get through your graduation first. Let me save money. Let’s make a plan,” he begged.

“I want to believe we can make a plan and make it happen but...how? How can I have you and not ruin your life in the process?” My heart was starting to thud faster and faster. Thinking about fucking up everything Caesar worked for was making me dizzy with shame and guilt. Everything but regret.

I could never regret a love like the one I had with him.

“I need you to trust me. I’ve been thinking about this for a few days and I’m playing

around with some ideas. I do know that we have to be careful. Ronnie suspects we're together." The revelation sounded like bombs falling from his lips. My eyes flitted over his face and I felt the need to vomit all over again.

I slammed the can of soda down on the edge of the sink and let all the contents of my stomach go into the toilet. Cease was at my side in an instant, holding my hair and rubbing my back in slow circles. As usual, he was there for me without me having to say a word.

"He...knows?" My voice wobbled.

"Yes. He knows but I refused to confirm. He's not out to get us. His dissertation was written on GSA," he said like I should know what he was talking about.

"What the hell is that?" I asked, sniffing.

"Genetic Sexual Attraction. It's a syndrome. It exists outside of your run of the mill incest. It's a special circumstance where relatives have been apart for an extended amount of time or when they've had no knowledge of each other, meet as adults or teenagers for the first time and have an attraction to each other.

Ronnie argued that the syndrome occurs because, when looking for a mate, our brains are hardwired to seek out faces that look similar to our own to denote trustworthiness."

My ears burned at his words and I sat up a little straighter.

"So, like...we're attracted to each other because we didn't see each other while I was growing up?"

"Essentially. I saw you once when you were four." He stared at the floor and pushed

out a shaky breath. “He’s not a bad guy but still. I don’t want anyone meddling in what we have. It’s our refuge. I know Ronnie would try to help us understand our feelings but I’m not ready to share the feelings that I have for you yet. I don’t want them to be picked apart.” He brushed his knuckles against my cheek and I nuzzled against his touch immediately.

“I’d shout how much I love you from the fucking mountain tops but for once, I don’t want something so sacred analyzed down to the bones. I want to love you and that’s it.”

When he stopped talking, my bottom lip began to tremble. He loved me so much that it radiated off him. I never wanted to leave his side but I was terrified of anyone finding out. They would take him from me.

They would take us away from each other and it was clear that he needed me as much as I needed him. “I want us to lay low when we’re in public. No more fucking you the second you walk into my office. No more going out together for a while. Here at home, everything is fair game.”

“Y-You really want to try and work this out, Cease? What about getting arrested?” I quizzed. My stomach was churning and I prayed I didn’t throw up again. How the hell much liquor did I have left to get out anyway? It felt like my body was rejecting everything I’d eaten for the past eighteen years.

“Yes, I do. We’ll have to jump through some hoops but at this point, I can’t see living life without you.” He stood to his feet and held out his hand for me to grab on to. The walls seemed to buckle when I stood up. I needed to lie down.

Cease ran a warm shower for me and washed me from head to toe. When I got out, he handed me Tylenol then tossed one of the tank tops he bought at my head. I laughed a little before pulling it on.

I stared at my scars, shame churning deep and hot in my belly. “Stop it,” Cease warned.

“I hate them. I hate my scars.” I dropped my hands to my side and climbed in bed beside Caesar. He spooned with me, warming my cool skin with his muscular arms.

“They’re a part of you now, Brook. You can’t wish them away because then you’d be wishing yourself away. They’re not perfect. They show the undisputed fact that you’re not perfect. That you’ve been through some shit with yourself. You’re going to come out on top though. Also, you don’t have any vertical scars and that is something to be proud of.” I watched his thumb skate over my scarred skin and nodded. He was right. I didn’t harm to kill I just harmed to...breathe.

Page 61

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:12 am

“So, you wanna figure out how we can be together in the face of society and say fuck all the rules?” Caesar asked, squeezing me.

“Yeah, of course. I’m scared though.” My throat grew tight thinking about anyone trying to tear Caesar and me apart.

“It’s okay. We’ll be smart. We’ll keep everything between these four walls. When it’s time to make moves, we will.” I nodded at him then tried not to mention the other thing that had been on my mind constantly. I tried to lie in his arms and drift off to sleep but thoughts have a way of digging their hooks in and not letting go.

“What’s wrong, Brook?” He asked, pushing out a heavy sigh.

“Nothing,” I whispered.

“You’re lying,” he whispered back. My skin sang when his fingers slid along my sides. I let my eyes flutter shut while I absorbed the tingling.

“I’m thinking about something,” I admitted.

“What is it?”

I cleared my throat trying to make the thick knot inside budge but it wouldn’t. My thoughts demanded to be heard. “What if we decide to have a baby, Cease? What if it’s not okay?”

He sighed softly and slid his huge hands down to my stomach. Just one of his hands

covered my midsection it seemed. “When we’re ready for babies, they’ll be fine. Okay? Don’t worry about that shit. The chances of our kid having any issues are the same as any other couple,” he assured me.

“But...I thought...” I stammered while he kissed my temple.

“Stop worrying, Brook.” He placed his lips on my neck and a sense of calm washed over me. He was magic for my jittery soul.

**

When Monday rolled around, I felt like having a tantrum. I legit wanted to kick my feet and whine and pout. I’d spent all weekend being lazy with Cease. We watched movies and ate everything in the house we could get our hands on. Oh, and the sex...oh my god.

I had more orgasms than hairs on my head. Caesar made sure any uncertainty I had was gone. I just wished it could continue forever. It gave me a taste of what it would be like to be with him all the time.

I knew I’d have to talk to Ashley when I got to school and honestly I wasn’t looking forward to it. Once I was sober, I realized that she was nowhere to be found when that asshole at the party was harassing me. She was nowhere to be found when I was getting drunk when I shouldn’t have been.

“Hey, I’ll see you this evening, okay? You don’t have your session with Ronnie, so if you want to hang out with Ashley...I guess you can. Not too long though,” Cease said with a point of his long finger.

“So parental,” I laughed.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m looking out for you and you know it. She makes me uneasy.”

“I know, Cease. She was a shitty friend at the pawty on Fwiday. I’m gonna talk to her today at school.”

“You nervous?” he frowned.

“Yeah, how’d you know?” I quizzed.

“Your R’s started to slip.”

I frowned when he pointed it out, but it was true and I heard it. I’d been doing so much better with my speech apraxia but I still slipped when I was emotional. Sometimes my brain was firing faster than my mouth wanted to work.

“I heard it,” I nodded.

“You gonna be okay today, Brook?”

“Yes, Caesar. See? I’m fine.” I flashed him a smile and grabbed my book bag.

“I love you,” he said before I hit the door.

“I love you too,” I told him, scrunching up my nose. I leaned in for a kiss and he pressed the softest one to my lips. I could go to school a happy girl after that. I was happy a lot more often than I’d ever been in the past.

Well, shit in the past, I wasn’t happy at all. Now, I was able to laugh more and look at myself in the mirror without cringing.

Page 62

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:12 am

I had a lot of sad moments, mainly when I was thinking about my father but none of them brought on the water. I was thankful. I never thought I'd be grateful for being sad. I'd be grateful for anything if it meant I wouldn't have to deal with the drowning.

**

When I got to school, I saw Ashley at her locker and I was pretty sure she tried to call out to me but I was too nervous to stop and talk. I'd never had a friend before, so having to confront a friend about something they did that I didn't like was well outside of my comfort zone.

I had to remember what my father said though. I had to step outside of my comfort zone if I wanted to get anything done. I made a mental note to talk to her after school. That way I'd have the entire day to work myself up to it.

I should have gotten it out of the way early in the morning though. Thinking about it during all of my classes made me sick with worry. When lunchtime came, I hid away in the corner near the front of the cafeteria hoping Ashley didn't see me and try to come over. I didn't even eat anything. I couldn't tell if it was remnants from being drunk Friday night, or nerves but my stomach was immensely queasy.

My throat seemed to get tighter and my mouth drier with each passing class until the bell rang for the end of the day. I pushed out a deep breath and shut my eyes for a moment while I stood at my locker.

You can do this, Brooklyn.

You're brave like a lion and Dad would be so fucking proud.

"Brookie, can we talk?" Ashley's voice came from behind my locker. I closed the door and smiled at her.

"Yeah, we really need to," I sighed. Looking into her doe eyes made me nauseous but I steadied myself. We moved into the parking lot and slowed at my car. "Ashley, Fwiday at your pawty there was this annoying fuckboy that wouldn't leave me alone. I looked around but you weren't there. I was getting shitfaced around people I didn't know and anything could have happened. It would have been nice if you at least checked on me."

Ashley's brows furrowed and I saw a flash of something in her eyes. In the next moment, I was concentrating on trying not to throw up all over the parking lot. My stomach was doing backflips though.

I couldn't hear anything Ashley was saying because my spine involuntarily curled forward and I let everything go all over the asphalt. "Oh my god, Brookie," Ashley jumped back and slapped her hand over her mouth.

Once I stood upright, I clutched my stomach and leaned against the car. I hated the taste in my mouth. I fished around in my book bag for a bottle of water. It tasted like heaven.

"Let me come to your house so I can fix you toast and play in your hair to make it up to you. I'm sorry I was a shitty friend." She held my shaky hand in hers and pled to me with her eyes. "Come on, Brookie. I'm teaching you how to have a friend. Friends let friends apologize for doing fucked up shit."

I sniffled and tucked wispy hairs behind my ear. I gave Ashley a nod. I watched the smile spread across her face and a glint flash in her eyes. "This will be fun," she said.

“I’ve never been to your house before. You always come hang out at mine. I’m excited.” She squealed a little bit and clapped her hands.

We got in our separate cars and I drove ahead so she could follow me. I couldn’t shake the nausea the entire time I drove. I wanted to get home as soon as humanly possible.

When I pulled into the driveway a sigh escaped me. Before I went into the house, I sent Cease a text.

Me: Feeling shitty again today. Ashley is gonna come over and sit with me for a while.

Cease: Is it your stomach again?

Me: Yeah. Kinda threw up at school in the parking lot. So sexy, I know.

Cease: I’ll be home early with tea and crackers. Don’t let her stay long.

Me: Okay. Love you.

Cease: Love you too, Kiddo.

Me:

Cease:

I got out and sucked in a quick breath to steady my nerves and my stomach. I led Ashley inside and showed her where the kitchen was. “I’m gonna change clothes and lie down,” I told her while she puttered around in the kitchen.

“Okay, Brookie. I’ll bring you some toast,” she chirped.

I went into the bedroom and changed out of my school clothes into a long-sleeved shirt and a pair of denim shorts. Before I could clean off the bed and move my unicorn journal, another wave of nausea hit and I dashed into the bathroom.

I hovered over the toilet and let everything come flying out again. My head pounded relentlessly and I let out a soft moan as I sat on the cool floor. “Brookie, you in here?” Ashley called from outside the bathroom door.

“Just a minute,” I replied, holding my stomach. Ashley let out a giggle and it sent me hurtling back to ninth grade. It was wrong. Just like it was back then.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:12 am

“Okay guys, I’m finally fucking live. Let’s do this. I told all my followers that in a couple months I would have a super lit Live Stream the Loser challenge and look where I’m at...” Ashley let out an excited squeal and I felt my lungs constrict. Something was wrong.

Why was she in the bedroom saying stuff like that? I stood up and tried to quell the wobbling of my legs. My knees were useless though. “I’m at loser headquarters and I think I stumbled upon the fucking mother load. Look at this pathetic ass journal.” My ears rang when I heard her mention my journal.

I’d been writing in it ever since Cease suggested I do it to help my anxiety. It was filled with my emotions for him and how deeply I was in love with him. It detailed the first time we had sex too. It was a chronicle of our entire relationship.

When I opened the bathroom door and peered into the bedroom, Ashley was holding her phone, live streaming the pages of my journal to everyone. If I hadn’t thrown up everything in my stomach already, I would have been sick.

“Oh, guys, look who it is. The loser herself, retarded fucking Brookie. Aww, look at her. She’s so damn clueless. And to think, I had to pretend to be this bitch’s friend for so long. I could feel my brain turning retarded every time I had to talk to her.”

Tears blurred my vision and I tried to blink them away but they kept coming. “Look at this sick shit in her journal. Oh. My. God. Brookie are you screwing your hot uncle? Eww. You’re going to reproduce and have little retard babies,” she laughed maniacally with her head tipped back.

Flames of shame licked at my face. I tried to grab the journal from her evil hands but she dodged me and continued reading the pages out loud. One after the other. My private thoughts were ripped to shreds. Exposed.

“Oh, and guess the fuck what? Brookie here is a cutter. She’s the ultimate loser.” Ashley reached in her pocket and pulled out something small in a rectangular box. I couldn’t make it out because my tears were constant.

“P-Please, Ashley. We’re supposed to be fwiends,” I begged in a soft whisper. My stomach was in a million knots and it felt like I was slipping down into the water faster than ever.

“Fwiends? We were supposed to be fweinds, Brookie?” She mocked me with loud laughter before turning the phone around so she could record me. “Say hi to the loser.” I caught a glimpse of her screen and saw the number of live viewers climbing into the eight hundreds.

Water filled my lungs and my mouth popped open. I gasped but more water rushed in. “Here, Brookie. I got you a present since I know you like to cut.” She pried my hand open while I stood paralyzed by fear and anxiety and placed the small box in my palm.

My chest squeezed and it felt like my heart was beating in my ears. “Ashley, don’t do this,” I felt my lips moving and I knew what I was trying to say but I didn’t know if it came out right.

“Holy fuck you’re such a sick bitch, Brookie. Are you guys reading this journal? Take screenshots. This shit is fucking gold.” She turned to me and grinned. “Open your gift, retard. It’s a pwesent,” she mocked me with a sharp laugh.

I looked down at my palm and began opening the plain white box. “N-N-No...” I

stammered staring down at the shiny new razors in my hand.

“Y-Y-Yes. I knew after this you’d want to kill yourself. So, go ahead. This’ll be the biggest Live Stream the Loser challenge ever. I’m going viral with this shit.” She blew a kiss to the phone then turned her stare to me. “Kill yourself. I mean, get it out of the way now. You’re fucking your uncle and isn’t he a doctor? Oh, sweetie. His life is ruined. So is yours.

He’s gonna go to jail for a long time for fucking you. He’ll have his license to practice pulled and everyone will know how disgusting you both are. You? You’re going to jail too.

So, make the world a better place and slit those ugly little wrists of yours. Now.” Her words hit me like daggers with poisoned tips. She was live and everyone could see my journal. Everyone knew my deepest secret.

I’d somehow managed to ruin Caesar’s entire fucking life without even doing anything. I was that much of a failure. There was no way he would still love me after this. Even if he did, they would snatch us away from each other.

How was I supposed to survive jail?

How was I supposed to survive life if I didn’t have Caesar?

“Oh shit, look guys...” Ashley turned the phone around and pointed at me with laughter bouncing off the walls. I looked down to see urine racing down my thighs. The number of live viewers had jumped to the thousand mark.

I couldn’t breathe.

The water was too much.

I was drowning.

“Kill your fucking self, Brooklyn. You’re trash and people like you don’t deserve to live. I’m sure that’s what killed your father, isn’t it? He found out you were banging his brother and it made him have a fucking heart attack. Because being dead is better than having a disgusting retard for a kid.” Ashley reared her head back and blew a mouthful of spit that landed on my cheek.

With hands nearly too shaky to perform, I dumped the box of razors out and fumbled around for one. I needed to breathe. I had to cut.

I know I promised Cease but...everything was too much. Besides, he’d hate me once I cut again. He’d hate me once he found out I was stupid enough to let Ashley into our house and expose our love.

He’d hate me.

He’d get ripped away from me and I’d never be happy again. I’d never have peace again.

All I wanted was a friend and I was too stupid to even have that. The promise of relief that the razor brought was so welcoming. Razors had been my only friends anyway.

Page 64

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:12 am

The ache in my chest spread to my shoulders and my spine. Suddenly the weight of the world was too heavy and gravity pulled me to the floor. Everything was spinning. Nothing stood still.

My own heart was spinning and beating wildly out of tune, making it impossible to breathe.

Cut, Brooklyn.

“Kill yourself, loser,” Ashley chanted. Her voice sounded so far away. I’d slipped into the water. I’d slipped into a trance.

I yanked my sleeves back and stared at all the scars littering my arms. “Yes! She’s gonna do it, guys. Look!”

All the scars. So ugly and fucking stupid. Just like me.

I pierced my skin and moaned from the pain. I was tired of being a fuck up. I couldn’t live knowing I ruined Caesar after everything he’d done for me. He deserved better than me. I was just a fuck up anyway.

With a steel grip on the razor, I let out a choked and garbled sound as I dragged the blade straight down, going deeper than I’d ever gone before.

Vertically.

Bright red surged out and I stared at it for a moment before moving to the other arm. I

needed to make sure there was no coming back. Fuck ups didn't deserve second chances.

So I sliced straight down my other arm too. I slid down on the floor while blood pumped with each beat of my sluggish heart. I could breathe again but I didn't want to. Not anymore.

I couldn't tell which was warmer, my tears or my blood.

"Fuck...oh my god. She did it. She really did it. There's way too much blood. I gotta get the fuck out of here." I heard the thumping of footsteps running away then nothing.

My hands were slick and sticky and crimson dropped from my fingertips. It wouldn't be long before I finally let the water win the war. It could have me. I was done fighting.

A sob choked my throat as I lie bleeding out. Not for myself though. I thought of Cease. He would find me.

My arms were like cement as I reached up to my hair. I could barely move but I made sure I pulled out my hair tie before blackness stole me away.

Caesar liked my hair down.

**

Caesar...

A car that I'm guessing was Ashley's ripped past me as I pulled into the driveway. Alarms sounded in my head once I saw the front door wide open and didn't see

Brooklyn standing there waiting for me.

She always waited for me.

I barely remember throwing the car in park before I was scrambling toward the house. My chest was weighed down with a heavy, unrelenting sense of dread. Nothing about the air in the house seemed okay.

“Brook!” I shouted. “Brooklyn!” I ran straight into our room and my world shattered into a million pieces. A sour taste invaded my mouth as I dropped to my knees.

My sweet girl.

She was covered in blood. Her wrists were shredded...vertically. She cut to kill.

But why?

I cradled her body in my arms and called 911 before I let the first sound out of my mouth. She was still warm. I felt the slow thump of a pulse. I didn't have time to waste.

Once I knew an ambulance was on the way, dizziness swarmed me and hot tears bit my eyes. “Brooklyn, don't leave me. Please,” I begged. My voice was thick with regret that I wasn't there for her when she needed me most. “Brook! Please! Don't you fucking die!” I pressed her frail body against mine as if I could gift her my heart so she could live instead of me.

My entire body felt too heavy to breathe or move or speak.

I willed time to speed up while I held her.

I looked around in sheer panic, trying to find something to apply pressure to her wrists with. Her lips were turning blue and warmth was leaving her rapidly. My teeth chattered as I reached over my head onto the bed and grabbed for something. Anyfuckingthing.

Page 65

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:12 am

I pulled down the tank top she'd slept in and let a roar, thick with anguish, leave my mouth. I ripped the thin fabric in half and wrapped Brook's bloody wrists in the shreds. My eyes were too blurred with tears to notice if the bleeding stopped.

I snapped my eyes shut and rocked back and forth over her, praying that God spared her. I knew that loving her the way I did was selfish but she didn't deserve this shit. Not my Brook.

"Please, Brook...I don't know what I'd do without you," my voice was a hoarse whisper as I buried my nose in her hair. Lavender and honey broke me down into dust.

"Sir, we need to get to her," an unfamiliar voice made my eyes open. I moved out of the way and let the EMT's get to Brook. They moved in a flurry to bandage her wrists once they found a pulse.

"I'm riding in the ambulance," I told them. "I'm her uncle." They nodded and directed me out of the house behind the stretcher she was lying on.

The ride to the hospital was a blur. Signing papers that allowed her to have two blood transfusions, one after the other, was a fucking blur. Sitting in the family waiting area while hearing nothing for hours was a blur.

My thoughts were underwater.

For the first time, I was the one drowning. I felt the anguish and terror that ripped through Brooklyn at every second when she was in the water. I felt every lash of

torment and it was horrific.

I wanted out of my own head.

All I could do was imagine living without her and it was too staggering to envision. Life without Brook's light was darkness. It was the blackest pit of loneliness and I never wanted to experience something like that.

I received call after call from Ronnie but I sent them all to voicemail and after a while, I put my phone on airplane mode. I was in no mood to talk or explain.

"Family for Brooklyn Powers?" A nurse scanned the waiting area with a clipboard in hand. I sprang to my feet with a burst of energy that came from nowhere. My chest tightened with each step I took.

What if there was bad news?

I would crumble in front of everyone.

"Your niece is in critical condition and we'll be monitoring her through the night but she's stable as of now." A doctor told me once I was sitting inside a quiet office. It was too quiet. Nothing was right. Even though they told me she was stable, I still felt something rock solid and heavy as a boulder in the pit of my stomach.

"And what else?" I asked, knowing the other shoe hadn't dropped yet.

"Dr. Powers," he sighed, pushing glasses on top of his head. "Your niece lost a significant amount of blood. Since she was only six weeks pregnant, we couldn't save the baby. I'm so sorry. I didn't know if I should tell you the news or tell her when she woke up but..." His words were gibberish after I heard him mention a baby.

She was pregnant?

Brook was pregnant with my baby.

“I need a moment, please,” I said quietly into my balled up fist.

“Absolutely, sir. He rested a heavy hand on my shoulder and said, “I want you to know that if you hadn’t tied off the blood flow and gotten her in here when you did, she would not be alive. I know the loss of her baby is tragic but you singlehandedly saved her life. Let that give you comfort during this difficult time.” When he left, I disintegrated into nothing. I lost my kid.

All I’d been able to think about for weeks was seeing Brook pregnant with my baby and before I knew it was a reality it vanished. How was I going to break that news to her? She would spiral.

Nurses let me into her hospital room and I crumpled on her bed, bowing my body over hers. I grabbed her cool hand in mine and brought it to my lips. I kissed her hand, careful not to disturb the IV feeding into her vein.

“Please pull through. I need you. I need you so much, Brook.” I smoothed the hair from her face and kissed her forehead.

Time ticked on as I sat at her bedside holding her hand. Nurses came and went. They took her vitals and noted her improvement. They moved her to stable condition and into a different room. I still sat at her bedside, pressing kisses to her forehead.

Six hours had passed before her beautiful hazel eyes fluttered open. “There she is, hey Kiddo,” I smiled, tears clinging to the rims of my eyes.

“Don’t call me that, asshole,” She croaked out. A smirk lifted the corner of her lips.

Seeing that smile made my heart soar into the roof of my mouth.

I curled my fingers around the back of her neck and crushed her lips with mine. I didn't give a fuck who walked in. I'd never been more grateful for anything in my life.

"I should be dead," Brook said as a tear leaked from her eye. "I can't even die wight."

"Brook, why the fuck did you try to kill yourself? Do you know what that did to me when I came in and saw you lying there with...with blood everywhere? I thought you were dead. Fuck, Brooklyn. I thought you were..." My words dissolved into helpless tears. I'd never felt so broken. "Losing you means losing me."

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:12 am

“Cease, I messed up. Everyone knows about us. Your life would be better without me.” She shook her head and stared at the ceiling while my mind went wild trying to put together the pieces.

“What do you mean everyone knows about us? What happened, Brook? Tell me everything.” I gave her hand a squeeze and she gave me one back.

“I’m so stupid. I wanted a friend so bad that I let Ashley in. She came to our house and she live streamed my entire journal. She gave me razors. She told me you’d lose your license. You’d go to jail.” Her lips trembled and she grabbed my hand. “I know you can live without me but I can’t live without you. I’d rather die.”

I slid my hand out of Brook’s grasp so I could curl my fingers into a fist. That must have been why Ronnie was calling. If he knew then the live stream went viral.

My head pounded and my mind raced, fracturing into a million different splinters. I didn’t want things to happen like this. I had a plan in my head and I wanted to execute it. Now, everything was blown up and I didn’t know what the fuck would happen or how it would play out.

“Brook, I need Ashley’s whole name. I need her address and all of her social media links,” I said, standing to my feet. I wanted to nail that fucking bitch to the wall. I was usually diplomatic and understanding but Ashley nearly killed Brooklyn and she did kill my child. I had no sympathy or remorse.

She was barely human in my eyes.

“Okay but...she was live when she did that. It’s out there,” Brook told me.

“It doesn’t matter. Your journal is not admissible in a court of law. Even if I’m investigated, what you wrote could be nothing more than elaborate fantasy brought on by grief. Ashley, on the other hand, will go the fuck to jail.

She will get the life and I don’t care what I have to do to see that she gets life. She will die in prison.” Vivid, gory images of seeing Brook lying on the floor bleeding to death assaulted my mind making my heart squeeze so tight I had to take a seat.

“Life?” Brooke tried to push into a sitting position but let out a howl from the pain in her arms. She fell backward and a nurse rushed in to check on her.

“Miss Powers, are you okay? Why didn’t you let me know she was awake?” The nurse glared at me and I apologized profusely. I was so happy to see her eyes and hear her voice that it slipped my mind to have the nurse come in and check on her.

“Her arms hurt, can she have something for the pain?” I asked, my brows knitting together.

“Of course. I’ll be right back to take your vitals too. Until then, sweetie, use the buttons on your remote to lift you and lay you down.” She smiled sweetly at Brook then eyed me harshly before leaving the room. Clearly, I wasn’t her most favorite person.

Once the nurse gave Brooklyn the okay, she left us alone and I closed the door to her room for privacy. Brook pushed the up button on her bedside remote and sat up to look at me.

“Why were you mentioning the life in prison, Cease? I’m alive. Ashley didn’t touch me. I did it. I cut my own wrists.” She sounded so remorseful. The fact that she

regretted it once she was clearheaded gave me so much hope.

“It doesn’t matter. In the state of California, it’s a felony to encourage someone to commit suicide.” My jaw flexed rapidly as I imagined the day Ashley got sentenced for the heinous shit she did.

“It is?” Brook sounded more alert.

“Yes. It is.” A soft knock on the door disrupted my words for a moment. I stood, straightening my spine and making my shoulders square as I walked over to the door. I was in full-blown protective mode.

I paused briefly when I saw Ronnie standing there. “What are you doing here?” I asked. I wasn’t upset but I didn’t even know how he knew where to find us.

“Hello, Dr. Powers...” He glanced over his shoulder and into the hallway as if to get me to play along. “Since I’m Brooklyn’s psychologist, I’ve been notified that she’s been hospitalized due to attempted suicide.”

“Of course, Dr. Hollows, come right in.” I stepped aside and let Ronnie in. I’d nearly forgotten that he was officially her doctor. He had every right to know she was in the hospital.

“Jesus, Cease. How are you guys?” He patted me on the back and then went over to Brook with sad eyes. “Sweetheart,” he said softly, holding her hand. His simple words made Brooklyn break down into a puddle of tears. Her sobs were horrible to listen to. I felt helpless.

“I-I’m sowwy,” she stuttered, looking up at the ceiling. I wiped her eyes once I realized her arms must have hurt too much to do it herself. “You just...weminded me of my dad.” She cried a little harder and it felt like I’d been punched in the stomach.

“I’m sorry, Brooklyn. I didn’t mean to...” Ronnie apologized.

“It’s not your fault, you didn’t know. I’m glad you’re here Dr. Hollows,” Brook told him.

“I’m glad I’m here too, Brooklyn. You did some pretty serious damage and I’m um...I’m sorry about...” I gripped his shoulder tight and he looked up at me, confused.

“She doesn’t know yet,” I whispered.

“What? What’s wong, Cease?” She asked, her wide hazel eyes were pools of vulnerability. They crushed me beneath their gorgeous gaze. How could I tell her she lost our child?

“Shit. Cease you should have told her the second she came to.” Ronnie gawked at me in shock.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:12 am

“I know, okay,” I growled. I hated having to break such terrible news to the love of my life. I wanted to see her eyes shine once more before I had to plunge the knife into her heart. She would break down and it would take everything to pull her out of it.

I couldn’t send her into the water deliberately.

Maybe I was a fucking coward or maybe I was being selfish again. All I knew was that Brook was my heart and if she broke and shattered then...I did too.

“What’s wong?” Brook’s voice was stronger that time but it shook violently like she knew. Ronnie glanced at me and pushed out a breath.

“I’ll give you two a few moments and I’ll come back after I’ve done my rounds for the night.” Ronnie’s smile was warm and polite as he left but god did the weight of the world fall once he was gone.

I sat on the side of Brook’s bed and held her hand, stroking it repeatedly with my thumb. She had every right to know. So why the hell was it so hard to make my mouth move? My tongue was swollen and glued to the roof of my mouth. I couldn’t begin to figure out what to say to soften the blow.

“You’re scawing me, Cease.” Her feet moved back and forth rapidly under the blanket. “I can still walk, right? I’m moving my feet.”

“Yes, you can still walk, Brook,” I sighed.

“Then tell me what’s going on,” she demanded.

“You lost a lot of blood,” I began quietly. “You needed two transfusions. When they told me about it, they uh...they said that you’d been six weeks pregnant but they couldn’t save the baby. Too much blood was lost too quickly.”

Shimmering tears flooded her eyes as she removed her hand from mine. She couldn’t move her arms too much so she let the tears stream rivers of sorrow down her cheeks without wiping them. Without stopping them.

My stomach flopped saying the words out loud. It made things so much more real. It hit home so much harder. Gingerly, Brook cradled her flat stomach.

“I killed our baby, Cease,” she whispered.

“No, you didn’t know, Brook.”

“I should have known! I kept throwing up even after the party and everything made me nauseous. How did I not see that? I’m an awful person.”

“You’re not an awful person. Ashley preyed on you like a goddamn vulture. She pushed you and pushed you until you snapped. You were vulnerable, Brooklyn.” I wiped her eyes but she turned away from me.

The small action hit my chest hard, making it tough to breathe. “I want to be alone,” she whispered.

“Brooklyn...”

“Alone, Cease.”

I nodded and left the room, trying to hold it all together. I wanted to talk to her though. Talking was how I worked out my problems. I wanted to listen to her talk but

she shut me out.

My heart was empty as I stood in the hallway, braced against the wall. I wanted to be in there offering comfort, holding her hand, rubbing her shoulders, telling her it would be okay. I wanted to do something.

“Cease, what are you doing out here?” Ronnie came out of a room nearby and closed the door behind himself.

“She put me out. She wanted time alone.”

“That’s normal. You know that. Don’t hold it against her,” he said.

“I know, Ronnie. And you know things are a lot harder when they hit home. I can deal with patients all day long but Brook isn’t a patient. She’s...everything.”

“The mother of what would have been your child.” His brown eyes studied mine and I finally broke down with a nod.

“It hurts so fucking bad, Ronnie. I know we can try again. I know that but finding out this way? It’s torture.” I fought back the emotions trying to slide down my cheeks. I couldn’t help wondering why though. Why the fuck would someone want to hurt a girl like Brooklyn? She was quiet and never hurt or bothered anyone. Her only mistake was wanting a friend so badly that she didn’t think things through.

“I know. Come with me. We’ll go talk in an office. I have to tell you some things.” I nodded and followed him.

“What’s going on?” I asked after he shut the door and sat down.

“I need you to be one hundred percent honest with me, Cease. I need to hear it from

your mouth before I can offer any modicum of help. Are you and Brooklyn romantically involved?" There was no more hiding it from him. I doubted there was anymore hiding it from the entire fucking world.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:12 am

“Yes. That would have been my child. I love her though, Ronnie it’s not something salacious. It’s just a fucked up situation. I’m sure the board will have my goddamn throat for this though.” I pushed an unsteady hand through my hair and rested my elbows on the edge of the desk.

“I know. That’s exactly why I wanted to hear you admit it. I can help you with the board, Cease. Now, the incest laws in California still remain unchanged but nobody is bringing criminal charges against you last I checked.

Brooklyn’s journal won’t hold up in court but the board is a different story. They’ll want to investigate.”

“For unethical behavior, I know,” I muttered.

“You can still keep your license, Cease.” I wasn’t so sure about that though. I shook my head and rested my mouth against my knuckles.

“I’d have to go to the board first and head them off. That means I’d have to openly admit to being romantically involved with Brooklyn and I don’t see that ending well for my license. If they find me guilty of unethical behavior then the next step is prosecution because incest is a fucking felony. I can’t lose Brook and she can’t lose me.”

“Let me help. I’m in the forefront of research involving GSA and I really think you and Brooklyn present a perfect case of the syndrome occurring outside of adoption. I’ve always argued that this doesn’t only present itself in cases of adoption but any close living quarters.

When you told me that Anthony was like your second father, it immediately made me realize that you had more of a sibling bond with Brooklyn than anything else. You hadn't seen her more than once during eighteen years..."

"But I knew she was my niece, Ronnie," I argued. "I knew of her existence and I knew who she was. I just hadn't physically seen her. I talked to her on some birthdays and everything." I was convinced that I was warped but I also didn't give a fuck. Warped or not, Brook was the one for me and that was that.

I'd do whatever I had to just to keep the love we had.

"This is what I'm saying though. You disassociated Brooklyn with being your niece after you saw her in person. In GSA we see a mental disconnect even after the person knows full well of the biological relationship. You show clear signs of disassociation and so does Brooklyn.

Somewhere in your brains, a link was missed. It's not wrong or right it's just the brain misfiring the same way at the same time with two people that society deems incompatible. The fact that it happened to both of you simultaneously is phenomenal," his eyes burned with excitement. He really felt like he could make his argument work.

"So in essence," I laughed, rubbing a hand over my tired face. "We're like a one in a million mishap?"

"It will be looked at that way at first but it'll open up the door for people to understand why rare cases like this happen and how broad the spectrum for GSA is. You're definitely right about needing to go to the board first and with legal representation, Caesar. But I think if you build a case siting GSA, with me defending on Brooklyn's behalf...you could keep your license to practice in California." His smile was confident and proud.

After all, Ronnie dedicated his entire career to researching this topic. If anyone was an expert and should be speaking on me and Brook's behalf, it would be him. I had no time to be self-righteous. I had to save my relationship and I had to save my license.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:12 am

“They’ll ask me to end the relationship though. If I don’t, they’ll have to bring charges.” I chewed on the inside of my cheek while I thought. “I have an idea though. I can’t change my name because my degrees are awarded to me but if I weren’t seen dating or even marrying Brooklyn Powers, nobody would bat an eye.” My pulse quickened mentioning my simple plan to someone outside of my head.

Ronnie’s brows lifted high on his forehead as he regarded me. “A name change? She would need to get it outside of the state,” he said.

“She’d need to get a new social security number and it would help if she became a resident of another state, then moved back to California and became a new resident with her new name and social. It could work though. It would work even better if I moved out of LA.” I looked at Ronnie and he nodded solemnly with his understanding.

“I’d miss you at work, man but...I may have something else that would help depending on where you move. I want to see to it that you and Brooklyn are happy together. I know what the rest of the world sees and thinks but I see love and I see two people that need each other.”

He had no idea how his words touched me, or maybe he did. They were exactly what I needed to hear. They gave me a renewed sense of strength.

Like I’d said all along, Brook and I would have to jump through hoops but I would have the happy life we wanted and the life we deserved. We’d been through enough grief and sorrow.

**

Brooklyn...

I was numb after Caesar told me I lost a baby that I didn't even know I had growing inside of me. I wanted to be mad at something or someone and I was finally tired of beating myself up. The alternative wasn't better though because it meant I beat up Cease.

It meant I pushed him away and shut him out for the three days I was in the hospital. It meant he sat in silence day after day at my bedside, holding my hand while I slept and making sure the nurses did what they were supposed to do for me. I watched the man I love do everything he could for me and I couldn't crack my mouth open to say a single word to him.

I didn't know what to say.

It was my fault our baby was gone. A baby with Caesar was all I ever wanted. Because I let the water win, I lost something so precious. I was determined never to let the water win again.

That was the only good part that came of my attempted suicide. It was my rock bottom. It was the darkest place I'd ever been in and I never wanted to go back.

Yes, the Live Stream the Loser challenge Ashley recorded went viral being shared over two million times. Yes, I had to see myself for a week straight on the news over and over again moments before I sliced my wrists open. Yes, online I had to actually witness myself slashing my arms until I was soaking in my own blood. The sharing was so bad that the government stepped in and removed the video from Facebook, Instagram, and all the other platforms. It still lived on though. Nothing ever dies on the internet.

Except for me.

Over and over.

Even with all the drama and heartache, I didn't want to cut.

I hated the way my arms looked more than ever after the gruesome cuts I dealt were sewn back up. It would be months before my hands were back to normal...or as normal as they would ever be.

I'd never be a painter or surgeon and I'd never be a famous pianist for sure but I'd still be able to write and cook. I still didn't want to cut.

There's something life-changing about seeing yourself die and knowing you killed something innocent in the process of selfishness. Nothing would ever make me cut again.

**

Walking into the house after almost dying was a sobering experience. My stomach knotted when I went into the bedroom and saw where the blood had been scrubbed. Faint red spots marked the brown carpet.

That's where I hit rock bottom. That's where I lost my baby. That's where I lost a part of myself. I shut my eyes and sat on the bed, willing the tears not to fall.

It didn't matter how many times I passed that spot, I remembered the hopeless feeling of sinking. I remembered feeling like nothing mattered and that I was alone in the world. My mind spun wildly out of control. It warped into something unrecognizable.

The shame that invaded my thoughts was sharp and wicked. I wanted to speak to

Cease as the days started to pass but I still couldn't find my words. I couldn't talk to him and I could tell he was dying inside without me. He tossed and turned night after night. He was always so far away and I wondered what he was thinking but I didn't know how to ask.

A part of me was afraid to hear him say that he was upset with me. He told me it wasn't my fault but how could it not be? My hands made the cuts. My mind produced the thoughts. I wanted to die.

Thursday night, when I couldn't sleep for the fourth night in a row, I sat up and stared at Caesar. He was tossing and turning...again. He was so restless without me.

A wave of emotion knocked against my fractured heart and my lips trembled. I reached a shaky hand out to touch his shoulder and he became still immediately. Even in his sleep, he needed me. I slid closer to him, closing the gap of space between us and letting my legs slide between his.

A rumble started in his chest and his muscular arm locked around my waist. I was his even during his slumber. I slid my palm along his jaw and sucked in a breath. I loved him more than anything in the world. I loved him more than I loved life evidently.

My heart thumped in my throat. Caesar was the most beautiful human being. He was my human being. Why did anything else matter? I was his and he was mine.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:12 am

I leaned in and breathed his air. I breathed his scent, fresh like laundry, soap, and deodorant. I brushed my lips along his, suddenly desperate for his touch and kiss. His hold on me tightened and I felt my stomach flutter to life. Heat rippled through me and I pressed my body against his even harder. I needed his proximity.

I needed to feel him pumping through my veins.

“Cease,” his name came out as a quivering breath but it made his eyes pop open like all he dreamt about was me.

“Brook, are you okay?” He asked, groggy.

“I’m sowwy,” I choked out through tears.

“Baby...” he sighed, pulling me in tighter and burying his nose in my hair. The sobs that came from my mouth rocked my body. My shoulders shook and my wrists screamed in pain when I fisted Caesar’s shirt.

“It’s okay, Brooklyn. It’s okay.”

“I killed our baby,” I cried.

“You didn’t know,” he said, kissing me over and over.

“It’s still my fault. You can’t be that forgiving. You can’t. Why don’t you ever hate me! I did awful things and you still...” I couldn’t even finish my sentence. I felt ruined. I felt broken to the bone...no, deeper. I felt broken down to my cells and

atoms.

“I still love you and I always will. I’ve had my moments to be angry with you and to grieve and I’ll have more in the future but...I forgive you, Brooklyn Powers.” I don’t know what I expected from him but forgiveness wasn’t it. I wasn’t prepared for the relief and peace that flooded my brain and body.

“I forgive you,” he said again, pulling me in tighter and closer until I thought I would meld with him and we’d turn into one.

“Thank you,” I whispered against his shoulder.

“I need for you to forgive yourself and know that it wasn’t your fault.” He pulled back and curled his fingers under my chin. My skin heated beneath his touch.

“I-I wanted to die.”

“Did you know you were pregnant?” He asked me, his cashmere brown eyes flitting over my features.

“No, of course not.”

“Then I need to hear you say you forgive yourself too. Start the healing, Brook. We both need it. We’ve got a long road ahead of us.” Caesar stroked my face and hair and I let my eyes fall shut.

“I forgive myself,” I said as quiet as the darkness around us. He nodded and kissed my forehead then each of my eyelids. They were such sweet and tender kisses that I gasped. Maybe I did deserve a love like Caesar. I’d been through the darkest moments and he was still there. He never ran or shied away. He never shoved me away from him. He only pulled me in closer. I had no idea what I did to deserve a

man like him but the rocky road we just crossed over was a clear sign that we belonged together.

I would fight anyone to keep him.

He was mine.

I already died for him. Now, I was ready to live for him.

Our lips collided in a slow kiss that set fire to my insides. How long had it been since he touched me this way? Oh god, it ached so vibrantly. It ached all over in the most delicious ways.

“Caesar, make love to me,” I begged in staggered moans.

“Are you sure, Brook?” He hovered over me and peered down. His eyes danced with love and relief.

“Please, Cease. I need this. We need this connection.” I didn’t have to say another word. his lips dominated me in the best way possible. With every kiss, he coated my bruised heart with salve. Between my thighs throbbed with need each time he dropped a kiss to my neck. His teeth and lips nipped at my shoulders and throat while I bucked against him.

His cock was so stiff that I couldn’t help grinding against it. I rolled my hips over and over creating invisible infinity loops. “Fuck, I missed you so much, Brook.” Cease’s voice was a deep, pained groan.

I slid his boxer briefs down and gasped when his thick warm dick slapped against my pussy. I’d never been so wet. It had been too long and I needed him. He was my oxygen.

“Show me, Cease. Show me how much you missed me,” I said, sandwiching his face between my palms. While he kissed me, his erection cushioned against my wetness, threatening to push in forcefully. He took his time though.

I was even tighter than I remembered in the past, so he rocked against me until I stretched for him. Blood hummed in my veins once he was deep inside. I arched my back to better accept him and he hit a spot inside I didn’t even know I had.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:12 am

I moaned so loud, the air vibrated with sound. “Shit, Brooklyn.” He lost himself inside of me and I accepted every brutal thrust. I needed it. I’d forgotten how amazing his pain made me feel.

“I’m not gonna last long, baby,” he told me. I didn’t care because I felt my body trembling with the need to release. In the next moment, I convulsed with a soul-rocking climax that stole the breath right from my lungs. Cease thrust into me a few more times before his heat surged into me, filling me up.

“Fuck,” he cursed letting his cock pulse between my walls. He stayed there until his dick softened and even then, I didn’t want him to leave.

We needed every second of that. My muscles were so smooth and nimble afterward and he went to sleep without moving once during the night.

**

“Wait, she’s actually getting arwested?” I asked, looking with wide eyes from Cease to Detective Buckman. He’d been handling my case like a pro and helping me navigate the shit storm in the media.

After the live stream exploded all over, the police went looking for Ashley but her family hid her and claimed she ran away. “Yeah, they found her at a birthday party for her little cousin. She posted pictures on Instagram. I guess Miss Hartwell can’t stay the hell off social media. She’s being brought in right now. Her parents are calling for her bail amount but she doesn’t get bail. She’s officially a flight risk. She’s in there until her trial.” Buckman winked at me. My mouth hung open. I was in total

shock but Cease laughed at it.

“You hear that, Brook?” He patted my shoulder as I blinked repeatedly. In public, he was still my uncle and we were going with the defense that my journal was one huge lie and twisted fantasy even though it was inadmissible in court.

“I can’t believe it,” I said.

“Well, believe it. Attempted murder plus involuntary manslaughter is a serious offense,” Buckman said. I knew Ashley was getting charged with attempted murder but this was the first I was hearing about the involuntary manslaughter. My head spun and I tried to understand it all.

My lawyer, Sandy Stein was always running late but dammit if she wasn’t amazing. She came in setting down her briefcase and pushing hair out of her face.

“W-What was the involuntary manslaughter?” I asked her when she was settled. “I didn’t know anything about murder, Sandy.”

“Well, dear,” she said in a nasal Boston accent. “Not only did Miss Hartwell attempt to murder you through suicidal encouragement, but she inadvertently murdered an innocent bystander. Your unborn child. The state is prosecuting. It’s news as of her arrest. God, the look on her face was amazing.

News crews were crawling all over the place. I can show you if you wanna see but if you don’t, I understand.” Sandy had her phone tucked in her hand, ready to go. I wondered if I was a vindictive person because I wanted nothing more than to see Ashley’s face crumble when she was read her charges.

I gave a slight nod and Sandy propped up her phone in the middle of the table we were all sitting at so everyone could see. Cops swarmed the house Ashley was hiding

out at. The door seemed to burst into a million pieces when the cops kicked it in. I watched them drag her out and for the first time, she didn't look innocent to me. Her doe eyes didn't make me think of someone friendly.

I knew how fucking evil she was and that's all I could see. I could only see hatred and ugliness. I could only see someone that didn't care if I lived or died.

Her head was hung low so that her hair hid most of her face. I wanted to rip her fucking hair from her head. When it came to Ashley Hartwell, I wasn't kind and forgiving. I wanted justice and I wanted her to suffer.

"Ashley Hartwell, you are under arrest for the attempted murder of Brooklyn Powers and the involuntary manslaughter of her unborn child." The cop on the video tossed Ashley against the car and held her hands behind her back while he cuffed her and read her Miranda rights.

"What? Manslaughter? I didn't...I didn't know! I didn't even touch her!" She shrieked wildly while thrashing against the metal cuffs. Seeing her anguish felt good. I didn't know who said you couldn't revel in the pain of others but I was reveling like shit.

Sandy stopped the video and Buckman shook his head. "They are going to nail her and I'm going to make sure of it. She's being denied bail and she'll sit in jail until trial," she explained again.

"How long until her trial? I asked, looking from Buckman to Sandy.

"Thirty days. I have a feeling they'll try her sooner. This case is all anyone is talking about. Look, go home, get some rest and stay away from the windows and stay off social media. It's scary," Sandy warned. "We'll go to trial soon and then we'll get justice for you and your baby, Brooklyn."

“We’ll bury that bitch,” I said loud and fucking clear. Sandy gave me a high five and Buckman and Cease laughed.

**

“You know what I noticed?” Caesar asked as we drove away from the police station.

“What?” I stared down at my arms and sighed as I tried to make a tight fist with my hands.

“You said every R perfectly back there. I’m really proud of you, Kiddo.”

“Stop it,” I whined.

“What? You know I’m gonna fuck with you, Brook,” he flashed a heart-stopping smile.

“I know. I really wouldn’t want it any other way.” I hooked my pinky around his and gave it a squeeze as best I could. Cease, of course, squeezed back.

**

Over the next few weeks, I started to regain more use of my fingers and hands with the help of physical therapy. I started going back to school too even though the principal offered me the learn-at-home option. Cease and Dr. Hollows told me it would be perfectly fine to take it but I wanted to prove to myself that I could be brave and face school again. I had to.

It wasn't that bad going back either. The noise and the kids rubbed me the wrong way, but I was okay. Knowing I'd see Caesar at the end of the day was enough for me to keep pushing.

"Sandy sent me an email letting me know what time we should be at the courthouse for the trial in the morning. How are you feeling?" Cease asked me. I grabbed a yellow bowl from the cabinet and dumped fresh popcorn inside. We were having movie night and I picked the snack.

"Pumped," I smiled and stood on my tiptoes to kiss his lips.

"Are you going to be okay sitting in the courtroom?" He quizzed.

"Yes, Cease. I'm going to be okay. It's not going to be easy but it'll be okay. I think she'll get convicted."

"I think so too." He took the bowl from my hands and we moved into our room where he put on Netflix. I snuggled up beside him and laid my head on his chest.

I needed one more moment of calm before I walked into the drama tomorrow. I knew there would be cameras everywhere. Everyone would try to get a statement and all eyes would be on me.

My anxiety was through the roof but I still had no desire to cut. I did briefly wonder if I'd have the desire when I laid eyes on Ashley but fuck that. I couldn't let her control one more aspect of my life.

I let the feeling of Cease playing in my hair soothe me until my breathing returned to normal and I focused on the movie. There would be enough time for nerves in the morning.

**

Sandy picked out a blue and white dress for me to wear on the first day of Ashley's trial. She told me that blue was a trustworthy color and she wanted people to look at me and see a victim whose word could be trusted. I wore it because I trusted Sandy. She hadn't steered me wrong yet.

I slid my arms through the white cardigan I picked out to wear over top of it and looked at myself in the mirror. Cease was in the kitchen with Dr. Hollows and I wanted to ask him how I looked but I changed my mind. I stared at myself with unblinking eyes.

My posture was straight and I had that glow in my eyes that I loved to see so much. A light feeling settled in my chest. I was getting ready to make a major decision.

I shrugged out of the cardigan and tossed it on the bed. My scars were on full display in the short-sleeved dress and I couldn't lie and say I didn't have a care in the world. Going without the cardigan was fucking terrifying but I realized with all the shit that I'd been through...being scared didn't stop the world from spinning.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:12 am

I couldn't shove my head in the sand because I was terrified. I had to do things precisely in that moment of fear. It meant I was truly brave like a lion. It meant I was fucking fierce.

Cease and Dr. Hollows stopped talking when I walked around the corner. I know what they saw. They saw dozens of silvery horizontal scars on my arms that were split in half by the bright pink vertical scars I now sported.

I hated every scar but they were mine. I didn't have to love them to be at peace with them. I only had to acknowledge that they were there and they weren't going anywhere. The world would either accept them or not. Neither choice was my problem anymore.

"There she is," Cease said, holding his arm out for me. "You look absolutely beautiful, Brook." His lips found my temple and I shut my eyes absorbing his strength.

"You do look beautiful, Brooklyn," Hollows smiled warmly.

"You can call me Brook, Dr. Hollows. I think after school and after this trial, I'm going to be done with Brooklyn Powers." Caesar locked pinkies with me and I leaned over to kiss his cheek.

We arrived at the courthouse and thank god we were escorted through a side entrance to avoid most of the press. I still dealt with cameras flashing and reporters shouting at me but it was nowhere near the frenzy that was on the front steps.

Caesar and I sat side by side, holding hands while they brought Ashley in. She wore light blue cotton pants and a matching shirt that read: LA COUNTY JAIL on the back in bold black letters. She looked thin and broken.

Good.

I caught Cease looking at me from the corner of my eye. He leaned over and whispered in my ear. “You okay?”

“I’m fine,” I said, my chin pointed forward. He rubbed my knee and focused his attention on Ashley. There was a soft murmur in the room until the judge walked out.

“Judge Caleb Baxter Sr. presiding.” The bailiff stepped to the side and I eyed the judge, trying to figure out why he sounded so familiar. I’d either heard of him before or seen him somewhere.

But where?

I listened to the lawyers and watched the live stream video over and over. I listened to testimonies about how much blood I’d lost and how I would have surely died if Cease hadn’t acted so quickly. I saw blood tests that confirmed my pregnancy then I saw blood tests that confirmed the loss of my pregnancy.

Each thing presented as evidence was a blow to my soul. There were times when I didn’t think the tears would ever stop flowing. Times where Caesar had to wrap his arms around me and hold me together because the broken pieces would crumble to the floor if he didn’t. It was too much.

The days seemed too long.

I thought the trial would never end and at times I asked myself why the fuck I was

torturing myself. Every day I walked into court baring my arms and refusing to hide. It pulled and tugged at me until I was nearly transparent from being stretched so thin.

The jurors even shed tears when screenshots of me cutting my wrists were displayed. I'd seen enough of it though. I'd lived through that so many times that it didn't phase me. Not the blood or the look on my face. The toughest part was hearing about me being six weeks pregnant.

The words sounded foreign to me. Like my skin was far too small and tight to cloak me. I wanted to run and hide from the words being tossed around like nothing. Words like fetus, pregnancy, and abort.

My knee jumped up and down until it was time to read the verdict of the jury. A short, stout man stood and held a piece of paper in his hand. "We, the jury find the defendant, Ashley Hartwell guilty of the charge of attempted murder. We the jury find the defendant, Ashley Hartwell, guilty of the charge of involuntary manslaughter. We the jury find the defendant Ashley Hartwell guilty of the charge of recording without consent."

Hearing Ashley break down in inconsolable sobs helped to ease the pain of everything I sat through for nearly a week while going through that trial. Her family had the nerve to cry along with her like she deserved pity and compassion. They were just as bad as her.

"Order in the court!" Judge Baxter banged the gavel over and over until silence fell like a hush over the courtroom. Caesar gave my hand a squeeze as we listened. "Miss Hartwell, you have been proven to be a despicable human being as per these testimonies and the video that I have seen with my own eyes. You nearly caused Miss Powers to lose her life because of an internet challenge. You were especially cruel taking advantage of someone who had severe emotional damage.

There is a special place in hell for people like you who disregard human life. For people that push others to kill themselves and think it's a joke. Something like that is not a joke!"

Was I mistaken or did I see tears in the judge's eyes? His gaze was fiery on Ashley and she cowered beneath it. "I am the wreckage left behind after a suicide is successful, Miss Hartwell. I lost my son to the Livestream the Loser challenge. I have seen heartless people like you in my courtroom before and age and prior record don't mean a hill of beans to me.

I will punish you to the fullest extent of the law. You see, you're dangerous and I have a sworn duty to protect the citizens of California, therefore, I will move to sentence immediately." A buzz broke out in the courtroom and camera flashes clicked softly in the background.

My fingertips hummed listening to the judge.

He seemed familiar for a reason.

I wasn't losing my mind.

During my first session with Dr. Hollows, he told me the story about having a bright spot and he told me about a kid younger than me that didn't have a bright spot and how he killed himself. The kid's name was Caleb Baxter.

The judge for my case was his father, Caleb Baxter Sr.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:12 am

I pushed all the air from my lungs and dug my nails into Cease's leg. Judge Baxter had been there before. He saw what happened when someone killed themselves. I could tell by the look in his eyes he wasn't going to take it easy on Ashley and she didn't deserve for him to.

"Order!" Judge Baxter sounded his gavel then bored into Ashley with a stare so cold it sent a chill through the courtroom. "Miss Hartwell the crimes you committed were atrocious and heinous. They were heavily premeditated and torturous in nature. You had no mercy while you repeatedly urged the victim to kill herself. You orchestrated an elaborate plan to watch Miss Powers suffer so you could broadcast it to the world.

Because of you, this egregious act has been seen millions of times. Miss Powers may never have a normal public life after this is over with. Given all of the information I've reviewed on your behalf, I sentence you to life in prison with no chance for parole."

A shaky, emotional cry ripped from my throat after the sentence was read. Not one person was quiet in that courtroom. Caesar held me because if he didn't, I would have surely fallen to pieces. I would have burst into a million pieces of confetti.

"It's okay, Brook," he whispered into my hair. "You got justice. Our baby got justice." His words were so hushed that only I could hear them. They were only meant for me anyway though.

The roar of the world could be heard in that courthouse. The only ones who opposed the ruling were members of Ashley's family. Not one decent human being would ever think she deserved anything less than what she got.

I hoped she lived to a ripe old age.

**

Caesar...

I decided to wait until after the trial was done to go to the board with concerns of an inappropriate relationship with Brooklyn. I foolishly hoped that they watched the trial with the rest of the world and deemed the journal inadmissible and nothing to investigate.

That wasn't the case.

I sat in a conference room with Ronnie and a handful of board members while they reviewed papers in front of them. "Dr. Powers, we'd like to keep this as low key and out of the public eye as possible. There has been enough surrounding your family this past month. We also would like to not call much attention to Dr. Hollow's practice as it's a staple in the community."

"Right, of course," I nodded at Dr. Owens who was the mouthpiece for the board.

"Now, what do you have to say for yourself? The allegations are pretty steep and definitely immoral." Owens' back stiffened as she looked at me.

"Dr. Owens, I admit to having an inappropriate relationship with my niece in the past," I said. She leaned over to whisper to her colleagues and Ronnie leaned over to whisper to me.

"You're doing fine. You had to get the truth out of the way," he told me. I wanted to believe that but Dr. Owens and the other members of the licensing board didn't look pleased.

“So, are you admitting to the things written in your niece’s journal? There are accounts of sexual intercourse, Powers.” Owens sounded like she was reciting a chant that would conjure a demon and she didn’t have the heart to finish.

“I know,” I nodded.

“You expect us to let you continue practicing? You work with children. Who’s to say you won’t abuse one of them?”

My jaw flexed in response to her line of questioning. I would never hurt a child. I would die first. Ronnie sensed my irritation and moved to settle the energy in the room. It was charged for sure.

“Dr. Owens, I’d like to speak on behalf of Dr. Powers as well as his niece Brooklyn Powers since I am both his boss and her psychologist.” Ronnie got the nod to speak and he approached the topic with eloquence. “I’m not worried about Powers abusing children any time soon. I’m not worried about it at all. The brief relationship he had with Brooklyn is a direct result of GSA. You’ll all note that I am the pioneer of recent research done on this unique syndrome.

He’s had a long string of perfectly normal relationships with women. He is not a sexual deviant or anything of the such. You’d have to look at all the research I’ve done over the past decade and see how seamlessly this situation fits in with non-adoption related GSA.”

Ronnie laid out fact after fact for the board and they took it all in. I waited patiently while they spoke amongst themselves. On the outside, it may have looked like I was fine but on the inside, I was a ball of nerves.

What the hell was taking so long for them to reach a decision? That couldn’t have been good. Maybe they didn’t give a fuck about Ronnie’s research or findings.

Maybe they wanted to nail me to the wall.

“Powers, Hollows.” Dr. Owen called out. We all took our seats across from each other standoff style. “The board opts to notify you one week from now of our joint decision. So far we’re split. In order to keep things fair, you will be temporarily suspended from practice until further notice.”

I swallowed trying to loosen the tightness in my throat but I still gave a smile and a nod. This was a part of what it would take to keep Brook in my life then I’d go through it. I’d jump through all the hoops in the circus for her.

**

When I got home, Brooklyn was in our room. She leaped off the bed when I walked in and it melted away the stress of the day instantly. “Cease, guess what?” She bounced from foot to foot excitedly.

“What?” I sat on the bed and it protested under my bulk.

“My cap and gown came! It’s almost time,” she did a little shimmy and I couldn’t help but laugh. Her hair was getting longer and beginning to stretch down her back. I couldn’t keep my hands out of it.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:12 am

That moment was no different. The second she sat in my lap, I threaded it through my fingers. “Are you going to model it for me?” I quizzed.

“Of course,” she purred. She went to slip on the white graduation gown but I shook my head. After the day I had, I needed a release and that meant I wanted Brook in as little clothing as possible.

“Caesaw,” she gasped. The way she said my name when she was nervous made my dick so painfully hard. I slid my gaze over the blush on the apples of her cheeks and down to the flush on her neck.

She was perfect and I wanted to devour her.

I freed my cock while she stripped out of her clothes and I stroked it watching the rest of the show. She wiggled her cute little ass for me and I growled, hungry to feel her slippery heat. When she slid the silky white gown over her naked body, I stared at her perfect tits and the way her nipples peeked through the unzipped portion.

I motioned for her to put on the hat and then come over to me. I needed to suck and bite on those hard nipples. The moment my mouth touched her, she moaned and heat flooded her cunt.

I cupped her hot pussy in my hand and moved my hungry mouth up to her neck while she squirmed in my firm grasp. “I want you to put that sexy pussy on my cock and ride me until I cum, okay?” I slapped her ass and she yelped. It was cute as fuck and it made me anticipate the noises she would make once I was inside of her.

“Okay, Cease,” she breathed. I held my dick steady for her and she eased down on top of me, whining with every inch that disappeared between her walls. She slid up and down so slowly at first that I knew I’d shoot deep inside of her.

Remembering how tense I was sitting across from board members earlier in the day had me hammering into Brook from below while she cried out, her slender body jolting from pleasure. Her hips had a mind of their own and I could only hold on for the ride while I watched her sexy tits bouncing and jiggling in my face.

“Ride that dick, Brook.” It was heaven being buried deep inside of her. I slid my hand between us and massaged her clit, making her body go rigid with an overload to her senses.

I snatched her hair in my fist and she whimpered. “Keep riding, Kiddo.” Anger flashed in her hazel eyes and she fucked me like a madwoman while I teased her stiff clit.

Holy shit, when Brooklyn came, she drenched my cock down to my balls. There was no hope for me holding out after that shit. I’d never felt her cum so hard before. I shot my seed deep, deep inside of her.

“Caesaw!” She screamed, her nails digging into my shoulders. I thought I would cum again just from the way she shouted my name. It drove me crazy. It showed me that I short-circuited her for the briefest of moments and I loved it.

Heat danced between us while we sat stuck. My tongue drew lazy circles on her pert tits while she caught her breath. “If we’re going to hell for fucking then I think I’m okay with that. I can’t give up dick like this.” She pressed her damp forehead to mine and we shared a slow kiss.

“I’m with you on that one, Brook. I could never give you up,” I chuckled.

“You must have had a shitty day. How was the hearing?” she asked, sliding off of me. I soaked in her long lean lines and tight curves as she walked to the bathroom, naked.

“They’re making me wait a week before they come to a final decision.” Brook poked her head around the corner and frowned at me.

“A whole week? They let Ronnie talk, wight?” She was getting nervous and her R’s were slipping.

“Yeah, he did an excellent job. I still have to wait though.”

“That’s not fair,” she frowned.

“It takes time to make a decision on something complex like this,” I explained.

“You told them we weren’t together anymore...wight?” She knew the entire story we were feeding to the board with only half-truths exposed.

“Yes. Don’t panic. Don’t worry. Everything will be fine,” I sighed.

Brook came back with a warm washcloth and wiped my soft cock down sending sparks up and down my shaft as she stroked it. I pulled her down on top of me and slid my fingers through her damp hair. “We’re so close to having everything we want, Brook. We’ve been through too much for this to go wrong. Just hold tight. The week will be gone before you know it.” She slid on to the bed and nodded, but she still looked like her mind was working over time.

With a sigh, I got up and grabbed her boombox. I popped in a Hall and Oates cassette and pressed play while she laid against my chest. The music calmed her energy down immediately as usual and I sang to her even though she hated when I did that.

**

Just like I told her, the week flew by. She had to get ready for graduation and didn't look up again until Monday of the next week. Of course, it helped that I fucked her until she came multiple times every day before school and every night before bed.

“You find out what their decision is today...wight?” Brook asked, nibbling on her bottom lip. She was all ready for her last day of school and I wanted her to be happy and relaxed, not worried about me. There was no dictating Brook's worrying though. She was going to worry about whatever she wanted to and there was no stopping it.

I was grateful that she seemed to have no desire to cut. She told me that losing our baby was her turning point. Even though she didn't know she was pregnant at the time, the fact that she had a hand in it happening at all bothered her down to her bones.

I tugged her bottom lip free from her teeth and replaced them with my teeth before kissing her. Her whimper made me animalistic but I had to control myself. I had to leave soon.

Page 76

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:12 am

“Yes, I find out their decision today. Please don’t sit at school worrying about me. It’s your last fucking day. Don’t stress,” I told her. She nodded but I knew she’d be in school stressing anyway.

“I’d be a lot more relaxed if you fucked me on the counter.” She slid her hands up and down my chest, making my dick semi-erect.

“You know I love filling that pretty pussy up with my dick but I have to be on time for this.”

Brook pouted but I knew she understood. We kissed goodbye and went our separate ways for the day.

**

When I got to work, Ronnie was waiting for me outside the conference room. I wasn’t expecting to have them come to me. I didn’t know if that was a good thing or a bad thing. “Have you heard anything?” I asked him, straightening my tie.

“Nope, but they’re all in there waiting,” he said, glancing at the door. My mouth went dry.

“Already? I’m on time, right?” I double-checked my watch just to make sure.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:12 am

“Yeah, they’re early,” Ronnie said, opening the door. All eyes turned to us once we walked in. I held my head high and spoke to everyone around the table. I refused to show nerves.

When I sat down, I clasped my hands together and sat there, waiting. “We’re a little early, Dr. Powers. We wanted this to be fairly quick since we don’t have much to say.”

That shit was never good so I braced myself for the worse. “Well, thank you for taking the time to see me face to face. I really appreciate it.” I nodded at them and Dr. Owens smiled in return.

“We’ve reviewed Dr. Hollow’s research and deem your case to be within the spectrum. Ethically and legally, however, we must insist that you stop any inappropriate relationship with Brooklyn Powers. If you don’t, we’ll have to involve the authorities, Caesar.” Owens’ eyes softened when she regarded me and I appreciated the small show of compassion.

“As far as your license goes, you can still practice at your discretion. This matter is settled and as far as I’m concerned, you’re free to go on about the rest of your day.” She reached out and shook my hand then Ronnie’s.

An involuntary smile stretched my face the moment the board members left. Ronnie and I slapped hands and he shook his head in disbelief. “We did it,” he said.

“We did. I wouldn’t have been able to do shit without your expertise though. Thank you, man.” I meant that from the bottom of my heart too. Ronnie was an amazing

friend.

“No problem. I told you from the beginning that I wasn’t out to hurt or expose. Only help. Now, I know damn well you don’t have any patients to see today because you were suspended so that means, you’re itching to get out of here and go see Brook. Go tell her the good news.” He knew me well. I didn’t want to waste time.

We were so close to everything we wanted that I could fucking taste it.

**

I knew Brook was still in class when I got done with hearing the board’s decision but it was her last day and I needed to see her. I went straight from my job to San Marino High School and pulled her out of class.

I stood in the main office waiting for her nervously like I didn’t have great news to share with her. My muscles tensed when I saw her walk around the corner, scanning for me. When she finally saw me, her hazel eyes jumped to life. It was a struggle for us not to collide in a hug and tangle together in a kiss.

“Hey, Uncle Cease,” she nodded nonchalantly before strolling out of the school’s doors.

“Hey, Kiddo.” I winked at her. The moment we were in the parking lot she pelted me with punches. I laughed and grabbed her in my arms before backing her against the car.

It was reckless but I needed to kiss her. My lips found hers and her hands slid through my hair. “I get to keep my license,” I spoke against her mouth and watched her eyes get big.

“Are you serious, Caesar?!”

“Yup,” I nodded. “Now all you have to do is graduate.”

“Oh my god. We’re so close,” she said breaking into a smile. “Let’s go home and celebrate.” She followed me home in her car and we barely hit the door before we were stripping each other out of our clothes.

We landed on the floor of our room in a circle of cassette tapes and 80’s pop music. We were surrounded by happiness for once. After all the bullshit that went wrong, we finally had a string of things that went right.

**

Brooklyn...

One year later

I paced the floor of the tattoo shop over and over, wringing my hands trying to figure out how to tell Cease when he got there that we couldn’t keep our appointment. I looked down at my forearms and my stomach lurched. I wanted to cover those scars so badly and we’d finally found a place willing to do an amazing tattoo for me. Cease even said he’d get tattoos matching mine. Bonus points for it being in the Bay area where we’d moved at the beginning of the year.

Now here I was bitching out. I would have stopped him before he got here to tell him we’d have to call it off but he was already on his way to the shop when his phone died. I couldn’t text or call to tell him to go back home.

When I saw his car pull up I thought I would throw up right on the shiny floor.

You better fucking not, Brooke.

“Hey, baby. You okay? You’re not punking out on me, are you, Brooke?” I looked into his cashmere brown eyes and melted a little like I always did.

“Well, not exactly but...we can’t get them done wight now.” I forced a smile but he frowned at me.

“You’re nervous. Why?” He asked, lifting a thick brow. “See, I told you I should have gone first. You wanted to be so bold though,” he teased.

“Brooke Anthony?” The tatted guy behind the counter called my name and I failed to turn around. Getting used to everyone calling me Brooke instead of only Cease would take lots of getting used to.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:12 am

I loved my new name though. I just had to turn the hell around when people actually used it. I'd become Brooke Andrea Anthony right after I graduated. I had a new social security number and thanks to some connections Cease had at vital records...a new birth certificate too. I was a whole new woman.

"Um hi, is thewe a late cancellation fee?" I asked quietly. I pulled in a deep breath and tried to overlook the way I messed up on my R. The guy behind the counter didn't seem to care so neither did I.

Cease gripped my bicep. "Can you give us a moment?" He asked the tatted guy before pulling me off to the side. "Brooke, are you really canceling? You've been cut free for one year. Not only that but this is the one year anniversary of when you...Of when I..."

"I know, Cease," I said, frowning. I tried to kill myself one year ago to the day and I was flaking on my celebratory tattoos.

"What the hell could be more important than that? You've faced so much yet a tattoo is freaking you out?"

Frustrated, I balled my fists up tight at my side. "It's not that I'm scared of getting a tattoo," I said through clenched teeth.

"Then what is it?" Cease asked, waiting for my answer.

"I can't get one while I'm pregnant. I found out this afternoon while you were at work." I sniffled and looked up at him with tears in my eyes.

“Pregnant? Brooke, are you serious?” He bent his tall frame down and placed a palm on my belly.

“Yeah...the test said six to eight weeks,” I laughed through the happy tears. Caesar swept me off my feet and pressed his lips against mine in a kiss that made me feel like I was floating.

“Holy shit. You’re having my baby?” I nodded and he hugged me all over again. “Yeah, we’re gonna have to reschedule that tattoo in about nine months. I’m gonna be a dad,” Cease told the man behind the counter before carrying me out of there.

“So, I’m calling Ronnie and telling him I won’t be in tomorrow. We need to celebrate all fucking day.” He said kissing me much slower. That time, it made me smolder down to my toes.

“He’s going to curse you out,” I smirked. Ronnie opened up another practice in San Francisco and asked Caesar to run it for him. They’d prepared for months to get it going and it happened to be their opening week.

“You think so?” Cease laughed.

“Um yeah. I do...”

“Eh, he’ll be okay,” he shrugged happily. I loved that peaceful happy look on him. It was my favorite.

“I can’t believe you were so mad over me canceling a tattoo,” I mused as we walked to our cars hand in hand. Cease looked over at me and sighed.

“It was going to be a special tattoo, Brooke.”

“I know. It can wait though,” I reasoned.

“That’s true,” he said rubbing my stomach. “I think I was more upset because after we were all tatted up, I was going to do this...” He lowered to one knee in the middle of a full parking lot complete with onlookers and pulled out a black box. My heart thundered to life at the sight of an engagement ring nestled safely inside.

“Brooke, we’ve been through hell and back and now it looks a lot like we’ve finally reached heaven. I want it to be like this forever. Will you marry me?” He asked, his voice full of emotion.

Knots.

Dozens of thick knots occupied my stomach.

I don’t remember actually saying yes. I kind of cried and babbled like an idiot but Caesar got the message. He always did.

No matter what I was trying to say, Caesar understood. No matter where I was on earth or in my head, he made me feel like I was safe and at home. I’d never have to worry about drowning again. He was my oxygen and with him, I’d be able to breathe easy forever.

The end.