

convincing

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K.S. ADKINS

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# convincing *Bet*

**K.S. Adkins**

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# Bet

***You can make bad choices and find yourself in a downward spiral or you can find something that gets you out of it. ~Ray LaMontagne***

*“Bet,” he says quietly slipping into bed beside me.*

*“Hmm?” I offer absently. Two weeks ago a man came to me shopping a business proposal I could not stop thinking about. He, along with a crew of men were doing something extraordinary, they were recovering missing persons from the Detroit area. To me, the deed was so noble I wanted to support it immediately and fully.*

*“Could you please take five minutes and listen to me?” he asks in a rare form of frustration.*

*“I am,” I defend, never taking my eyes from the screen.*

*“You cannot be considering this,” he argues taking my notes from beside me and reading them.*

*“Alan, these guys are legit---” I start but was cut off.*

*“These guys are trouble, Bet. They are hired thugs for God’s sake. You can’t put your name to this.”*

*Nodding to him and closing my laptop, I lean over and kiss his cheek. “You’re right, Alan,” I whisper hiding my irritation. “I can’t put my name to this.”*

*When he kisses my cheek and falls asleep feeling victorious no doubt, I smile to myself feeling quite victorious as well. He won the battle; I didn’t put my name to it. I started a dummy corporation and put that name to it*

*instead. This way we'd both be getting what we wanted. Alan won the battle but I was going to help these men win the war.*

There's just something about lake air in your face that makes your mistakes a little easier to own up to. Sitting out here in this hard plastic Adirondack chair overlooking Lake Huron, I admit that it's years of mistakes that brought me here. There was a time when my life had been damn near perfect. In the blink of an eye and one drunk driver later, it wasn't so perfect anymore. In fact, life since then has been nothing short of brutal. Nothing made sense to me now, except making money. What else was there to do? Pills helped at first but then when they didn't, I switched to drugs only that didn't work either. I know this because I tried *all* of them. Twice I tried cutting but passed out when I saw my own blood.

Basically, I suck at coping. Every morning I wake up and the world was still turning, laughing and pointing at me, daring me to take it on. For every step forward, I was slapped in the face and reminded that I had no one, nothing substantial and never would. Bad things were still happening to good people and I was still breathing. I've had moments of happiness that were fleeting but it wasn't enough. Closing a deal, a good movie or a fond memory would surface on occasion but, these moments weren't enough to sustain me.

On paper I had it all but everyone knows you shouldn't believe everything you read.

Today I owned so many properties that I had opened my own management company to oversee them. I used the money from that to help business owners get their dreams started and that paid off too. Bottom line, in business no one could touch me. My fleet of cars I never drive would rival any celebrity and yet my social calendar was shit. I didn't have time for friends and in reality, I didn't really care for people much anymore. When it came to relationships I had lost the skills to maintain them and frankly didn't care to. The friends I remember were long before my father struck it big and the second that happened I was thrown into a world of snobs and elitists. When people started associating me with money, life got complicated but back then I always had my family.

Two days ago, I had that moment in my office when I looked around and knew that I had much more than any woman needed. The feeling was so intense it suffocated and shamed me. There wasn't anything that I couldn't buy, yet I felt hollow. That very night, I packed a bag and hauled ass from Detroit to catch the last ferry in St. Ignace to get to Mackinac Island.

My loss wasn't to blame for this meltdown, I was. This breakdown had been coming on for years, I'd just been putting it off by becoming besties with denial. I set myself up for this and I came here to sort it out and put things in order. I'm a business woman and everything I do has a reason behind it, an end goal. Most would say I was a bitch, but an independent female with a shit-ton of money tends to put people off. When a woman appears to have her shit together it makes people jealous. A woman who needs no man to keep her limits the dates she gets called for. Bottom line is, I scare people away and I prefer it that way.

Life was easy up until six years ago and I took that life for granted. Back then I wasn't a bitch and money wasn't my motivator. That life didn't exist for me anymore so I gave it up and played the part of bitch like a seasoned actress. The Bet you see isn't the real me. The Bet curled up watching parents fly kites with their children wishing it were her, *that* was the real me.

That Bet was lonely.

I may have inherited my parents' fortune when they passed but, I'd give it all back to hug them one last time. That money was a blessing and a curse. As it allowed me to venture into business for myself as a small business investor here in Detroit, it couldn't replace what I had lost. No amount of success would.

This weekend was the six-year anniversary of losing my entire family that brought me to an island hours from the dry land I'm used to. Death may be a part of life, but not only did I lose my parents but my husband and daughter too. I lost too much too fast. I was drowning in grief and I knew it. I could take no more. So it was this little island with horse drawn carriages, bicycles and fudge that I'd take that final step to freedom. Fuck the world, the haters and the money.

I wanted the pain to stop long enough to *breathe*.

I wanted more than anything, to be *free*.  
To do that, I needed to *die*.

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The word "Rion" is rendered in a highly stylized, pixelated, and blocky font. Each letter is composed of black and white pixels, giving it a digital or retro aesthetic. The 'R' and 'i' are particularly jagged and irregular in shape.

***Fill what's empty. Empty what's full. Scratch where it itches. ~Alice  
Roosevelt Longworth***

*Listening to her declare her undying love for him tore my God damn heart out. When she asked to see me, I didn't even have the balls to face her. Rion never loved me as more than a friend, a part of her family and her well-being had been my focus for fifteen years. My life revolved around hers. I didn't have the exact date when 'like' turned to 'love' but at some point it had, for me. At least I thought it had and right now I'm not too sure. Facing her now would undo me that much I did know. All these years I had one job, keep her safe and I hadn't even managed that. Fresh from getting stitches she still worries for me despite nearly being beaten to death hours ago. Loyal got his shit together for her and she never gave up on his crazy ass. Jesus, in fifteen years she never gave up on me either. The woman didn't know the meaning of quit. When Rion cares for you, you never have to wonder if she's genuine. You just know. What does that say about a man's character that when he was needed most he was going to leave her hanging for a life of crime? It says he's a piece of shit.*

The drive up took forever. Construction was unbelievable. Christ, it's a two-lane road in the middle of nowhere and I couldn't figure out what the fuck they were fixing. It's not like anyone was actually working, it's just mile after mile of orange cones. There's a reason I haven't been up here in years, the drive is fucking boring. Unless you happen to be getting a blowjob, which for obvious reasons I'm not, it's only the threat of a deer running out in front of me keeping me awake. My bruised ego from losing



the girl that was never mine to a head case of an ex-Marine was fucking with me. On top of it, this damn debt to Adrian hanging over my head, are the only things keeping me from turning around.

Bottom line was, I wasn't real proud about how I left things back home with Rion and I didn't like being stuck with myself alone in this truck either. When a man finds himself taking stock of his life on a two-lane highway where there's more wildlife than traffic, he drives faster. Outside of Rion and now her man Loyal, I had no one. That depressed the hell outta me. I've always considered myself a pretty simple guy. I didn't spend much time with my feelings or any one woman. Never one for permanency, I fucked when I needed to then went about my way. Thing is, that wasn't working for me either. Random women stopped working for me years ago but I kept it up out of habit. Then the one person who depended on me for everything didn't need me anymore and I was lost without her to guide me.

Finally, an hour later when I finally see my exit is minutes away, I exhale hard. I hated the Upper Peninsula and I most especially hate Mackinac Island. No lie, there ain't no cars on this island. There's horseshit everywhere and don't forget the screaming kids that wanted Disneyland and got this instead.

Parking in the ferry lot, I grab my ticket and wait on a bench. Opening up the text Adrian sent, I take the time to look over the info he had on her. Scrolling through it, she sounded like a fucking uppity bitch until I saw her picture. She was a bitch alright, a fucking hot one.

Bitches are my kryptonite. Hot bitches are my Achilles' heel.

Memorizing the info and saving her photo, I board hoping I can get back off this fucking floating nightmare within twenty-four hours. She may be hot but let's face it, to be on Adrian's list, she's probably not very bright. I'll meet her, charm her, maybe fuck her too because it's a gift I have, get whatever it is he sent me here for and jump back on the ferry. The only thing about this job that I didn't like was that he refused to tell me the details until I got here. I don't care for the uncertainty, but I owed him a favor so it didn't really matter what it was, I had to do it or get dead for refusing. Twenty-five minutes later, I'm back on dry land and walking the mile (on foot no less) to Mission Point Resort. Checking in, I walk uphill another five minutes and manage to find my lodge in the dark. Fighting

with the door and surveying my room, I decided for four bills a night it was a fucking rip off. This shit hole didn't even have central air. Looking out on the deck and spying a hot tub, I undress, take the lid off and climb in. Fuck, my feet hurt from all this walking shit and I'll be God damned if I rent a bicycle like the rest of these idiots. A man had to have his limits.

Sinking down into the water, I close my eyes but my Zen gets interrupted when I hear a woman's voice bitching someone out on the deck connected to mine. We're separated by a privacy fence but I can hear her fine. She sounds like a pain in the ass like most women are, right up until I heard his name. Slowly moving to the side closest to the fence to eavesdrop better, I'm half in half out of the tub when I hear it.

"You need a financial planner, Adrian," she laughs, "Not even your best threat and biggest thug could get me to agree to that." Straining further she continues, "You can't win this but if it makes your dick feel bigger, I invite you to try." When a laugh escaped me and she heard it, she lowers her voice. "I'm warning you, you do this I *will* crush you. I will always crush you, that's how this works." Then I hear the patio door open and close, I sink back into the water with a smile on my face. Okay, so she's feisty too, she gets points for that. But clearly she ain't too bright like I thought. Adrian ain't a guy you want to cross. Here I figured, I'd have to find her and track her and the bitch is my neighbor. Smiling again at my stroke of luck, I sink back down to enjoy my soak but still can't find my Zen.

"Listening to another person's conversation is considered rude in some situations." She says from the other side of the fence. Her voice is velvet but stern like she's big into orders and people taking them.

"Is this one of them situations?" I ask her splashing in the tub for effect.

"No," she laughs, "It isn't. Good night, neighbor."

Why I did it, I'll never know but I did. "What's this Adrian want from you?" I ask her casually.

"He wants something that doesn't belong to him." she says pulling a chair out to sit.

"Ah, this guy also has a small dick?" I blurt.

Laughing she takes a moment before answering. “His small dick is probably one of his better qualities because it’s one he can’t help.”

“Ouch.”

“If a woman tells you size doesn’t matter,” she whispers, “She’s lying to get closer to your wallet.”

Before I can toss my wallet over or offer my dick as a measuring stick, I hear her patio door open and close. Drying off and dreading going back into that hot ass room, I take a cold shower and pass out with a smile on my face. This trip to Hell Island was starting to look up.

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# Bet

Waking to sunlight blinding me would normally make me crabby. For no other reason than I don't sleep as much as I'd like to and I hate the interruption in the rare event that it happens. But this morning was different; there were no meetings or conference calls. No assistant guiding me through my day, it was simply a day off.

What a concept.

I was such a workaholic that three hours after giving birth, I had my assistant bedside merging deals while I was breastfeeding my daughter. Running my hands over my not so flat stomach, it felt like a life time ago. My body has changed some, I'm curvier now, fuller and some days I'm okay with it. Lucky for me, today was one of those days.

After making a pot of coffee, I grab the pamphlets I scored from the front desk. Spreading them out, my choices were horseback riding, a haunted tour, dinner with the chef, or a buggy ride. Okay so it wasn't exactly Disneyland or Vegas but all of it sounded fun. I decided to skip the chef and add a picnic to it and figured this would end up being an easy day to soak it all in.

Calling the stable, I arrange for a twelve o'clock ride which gave me time to grab a real coffee and stock up on food for my picnic. Rummaging through my back pack, I laughed when I realized I didn't pack a thing that was horseback riding appropriate then said fuck it and decided I'd wing it.

The cool thing about this place is the main hall has a cute café that has a huge selection of fresh food and a killer booze selection. Food and booze, what else did a girl need? Two sacks later, one filled with food the other

with my drink, I make it back to my room to refrigerate it before taking a carriage to the stable.

Walking over to the main office, I'm greeted by a man in 'old school' attire which is totally little house on the prairie adorable. Part of me wondered if they got a bonus for wearing the outfit but the other part figured they didn't care because they worked on this beautiful island and probably said the hell with the outfit.

Out in the lot, I'm guided over to an open area where the horses were grazing. The man asked me which horse I wanted and I pointed and said "That one."

"Have you ever ridden before?" he asks me with a chuckle.

"No, sir," I reply. "But I'm a quick learner."

"That one there is Strawberry, he's a charmer but he's a big boy and can be stubborn. You sure you want him to be your first ride?"

Smiling up at him I nod, "Yes, sir," I tell him proudly, "I want to ride Strawberry."

"Let's get you geared up then."

Fifteen minutes and six tries later, I had to be hoisted up into the saddle because I lacked the strength to do it myself. Then I'm added to the group, given basic riding instructions, and before you know it I'm heading up to the woods to begin my ride.

Strawberry was everything he said he would be. Super charming, enormously powerful and extremely stubborn. Certainly hungry too because he stopped about every ten yards to eat something he found delicious. Our leader announced we would trot uphill and Strawberry, like a typical male decided to show off. The first thing I noticed was trotting *hurt*. The second thing was I should have paid better attention to the instructor because every step felt like I was being kicked between the legs.

Pushing the discomfort aside considering I seemed to be the only one having it, I listened to the birds, the huffing Strawberry did to remind me he was the boss and took in the view from up top.

My God, the view was breathtaking and certainly not what I'm used to. I was used to concrete, blaring horns and traffic. This though, this had to

be what heaven looked like. The sky went on forever, the water was endless and the trees swayed softly around me. At this elevation even the air smelled heavenly, pure and I wanted more. Living in the city was a loud life compared to this. Days were spent always looking over your shoulder, keeping your doors locked and rarely seeing a tree. Up here, where no one could touch me felt like freedom, a taste of peace. It overwhelmed me, humbled me, and confused me.

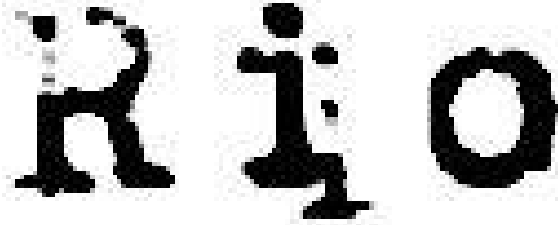
I had so many feelings about it that I didn't know which one to focus on. Finding myself bombarded I struggle to hold it in but somehow manage it. At any given time I was ready to cry, sulk or scream. Take your pick but not today I swore, not right now.

I was saved from an emotional breakdown on Strawberry's back when we turned to head downhill. My horse wasn't messing around on the ride back either and any potential tears of sadness were replaced by tears of pain. Strawberry was a male to be taken very seriously and I learned my lesson the hard way.

Thirty minutes later, we're back at the stable, I'm helped from Strawberry's back and landed ungracefully on rubber legs. For some strange reason I was reluctant to leave his side. He was big and gentle, he made me feel safe so I stepped even closer putting me directly under his chin. Scratching him softly, I think he noticed my inner turmoil because during his scratch he huffed and bumped me with his nose, I hoped telling me I'd be okay. That bump gave me the strength to walk away because the other alternative was climbing back on. This afternoon was fun, I didn't expect to love it and I actually smiled wide at what I'd accomplished.

I rode a horse today. I rode a fucking horse! By myself!

Yes!



I'll be the first to admit she was fucking adorable trying to climb on that horse. Granted, she chose the biggest fucking horse they had, a guy had to admire her determination. Once she was up, the smile never left her face. Making sure I brought up the rear so she couldn't see me, I watched as she tried keeping her horse in line. Twenty minutes in, she just went with it because that horse had its own agenda and she didn't seem to mind at all.

Trotting uphill fucking sucked by the way.

My balls felt like they were being beaten with aluminum ball bats. No one else seemed to have a problem except me and her either. From back here it looked like she was being electrocuted she was so stiff. Bottom line, we had no fucking clue what we were doing and if the woman wasn't so comical to watch, I'd be pissed for the sac beating I was getting.

Her horse seemed to like having her on his back (lucky prick) and when she took the reins guiding him away from the group to look over the island he went with no fuss. The looks that crossed her face left my chest feeling tight. Jesus, she looked innocent and tragic. For just a few minutes it looked like she was reevaluating her life and realized she didn't have it figured out. Then like a switch, she sat up straighter and looked untouchable again.

That thought brought me right back to Adrian. The fuck could he want with a beauty like her anyway? She wasn't a low-life or a whore and the two of them knowing each other made no sense. Before I could make any more assumptions, we were told to head back downhill to finish the tour. Thank fuck.

Leading my horse out of her line of sight, I watch her scratch her beast like it was the most precious thing on the planet, like it was her lifeline. The

damn thing was loving it and actually nudged her like he got her pain. Slowly she walked away but looked back at the horse who was watching her as well. Giving him a final wave she grabbed the first buggy out and went back to her room. Before I could take a piss and ice my balls, she had a basket full of food and was gingerly waddling down the hill toward the huge patch of grass that faced the lake.

Spreading out a big pink blanket, she takes her time setting up her lunch. When that was done, she reached in and produced a bottle of white wine and started drinking from the top, foregoing the glass. Ah, a woman I could admire.

Kids ran around her like they were drawn to her. Parents tried engaging her but she wasn't about them, she was about the little ones and it was extremely sad to watch. She played catch, chase, shared her feast and looked fucking miserable doing all of it. My own stomach yelled at me reminding me to grab some grub. Heading to the main hall, I make sure to find a window seat so I could watch her.

For another hour she just sat there totally still.

It's like she tuned the world out. Head cocked to the side, she stared out over the water. Finally, the spell had broken and she packed up but didn't head back to the room. Following her lead but staying out of sight, I watch as she takes the furthest chair, sets the basket down next to it, wraps herself in that pink blanket and just cries.

I know the sound of sorrow, now. I'll never forget it either. Almost like pieces of her soul were being stolen and it was slowly killing her. Even hidden in the bushes, I watched it all wishing I could make it better for her.

When she made her way back to the room you could see the pain from the ride finally set in. Drinking the wine probably helped some but not enough. The woman was bowlegged right now and fuck knows I was hurting too. The problem was we were both tore up from riding horses when I'd prefer we were tore up because we fucked ourselves that way.

Now that we're back in our rooms, I sit outside hoping she'll come out here and talk to me. Lucky for me I didn't have to wait long. My neighbor, I had hoped, was thinking about me too.



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# Bet

Labor hurt less than what I had going on between my thighs right now. I couldn't sit or walk without waddling and my ass muscles were screaming at me. With less than half a bottle of wine left, I made my way to the deck debating between crawling into that hot tub or, ungracefully flopping into the chair.

The hot tub won.

Stripping down, I could barely make it up the three steps before sliding in to the blessed heat. I knew I was riding Strawberry wrong and the proof was paralyzed in the water. Reaching for the wine again, I decided to chug it so it would work faster. Normally wine wasn't meant to be medicinal but this was an emergency.

How I was going to make it to that haunted tour was beyond me, but I'd rent a wheelchair if I had to. Being sore and properly buzzed wasn't stopping me. When a burp escapes, I wasn't even lady-like enough to cover my mouth. I was too sore and too tired. Besides, who was going to hear me?

"Excuse you." Says the deep voice beyond the fence. Shit, busted.

"Can I help you?"

"Yeah," he says "You can share whatever it is making you burp like a drunken sailor."

Giggling at his attempt to start a conversation, I try to sit up a little straighter. My neighbor's voice was a balm to my ragged soul. "It's the wine," I tell him. "I grabbed a bottle of Prosecco and it's carbonated. Truly, I can't help it."

“Mind sharing?”

“Not at all,” I say using both hands to anchor my body as I climb out. “Give me a sec, I’ll hand it to you around the fence.”

“I got time,” he says and I can tell he’s smiling at me.

Slowly, I test the condition of my legs. When the soreness grabs me I let out an ‘ooph’ with that first step and limp toward the corner. “Here you go,” I say reaching my arm around the back. His warm fingers brush mine while he tries to find a spot to grab. Securing the bottle I let go and was about to step back when his hand comes back to my side of the fence.

“Don’t leave me hanging,” he says moving it up and down.

“Sorry,” I mumble reaching forward to take it. With a firm grip he shakes my hand and just like that my hand is toasty warm. “It’s nice to meet you, neighbor.”

“You too,” he says releasing me slowly. “Mind if I finish it?”

“Not at all,” I say climbing back into the tub. “I’ve had enough for two people.”

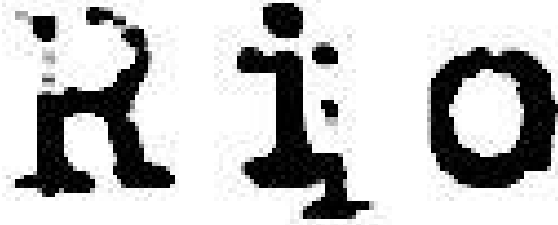
“No more than ten minutes in that tub, neighbor, especially if you’ve been gulping the bubbly. Don’t want you to get dizzy.”

“Thanks,” I say smiling. “I’m just finishing up here; I’ve got a haunted tour to get to at eight.”

“Then you best get out now,” he says laughing, “It’s seven forty five.”

“Shit!” I squeal in a panic. I had a thing about being late, as in I never was.

Scrambling to get back out I was impressed with my ability to move that fast, you know until my face met the wood deck reaching for my towel. Then I proved that not only did I burp like a sailor, I swore like one too.



Soft tiny hands.

The softest I ever touched. Her grip though, didn't match the size, that's for sure. My dick wanted to know what the grip could do to get it off but, I wanted to know how those fingers would feel in my hair, down my chest and then resting in my palm. While my dick wanted all things sexual, the man wanted all things emotional. I wanted to know what made her cry, why she was here alone and what her clothes smelled like.

Throwing back the wine, I let out my own burp because damn, this was carbonated.

Advising her to be careful with how long she soaks, she gives her thanks and tells me she's finishing up for the haunted tour. She's an open book, this is good. While she gets ready, I'll be sure to grab myself a spot at the last minute.

Sharing the time with her, she panics in the cutest way. Suddenly there is splashing and then the loudest thwap! Running to the corner of the fence I can't crane my body to see if she's okay.

"Ow." She says in a quiet voice.

"Neighbor? You need some help?"

"I'm okay," she moans, "I'll get up... as soon as my legs start listening to me."

"What's wrong with your legs? Are you hurt? Bleeding? Talk to me."

"I met a male named Strawberry," she mumbles, "He taught me a thing or two. I'm not hurt or bleeding, just slightly drunk and embarrassed."

"You still going to that tour?"

“Hell yes I am,” she says. “I’ve had worse than this, trust me.”

“Be careful, neighbor,” I tell her.

“Careful’s my middle name,” she says. “Actually, it’s not, but you know what I mean.”

“You believe in ghosts?” I ask her.

“I don’t believe in much of anything,” she says standing up by the sounds of it, “Especially ghosts.”

“You good to walk?”

“Pssh,” she says making noise, “Maybe in a few. Right now I seem to have crawling down. You have to do one before you can do the other. Night, neighbor.”

“Yeah,” I mumble while wearing a smirk on my face. “Night.”

It took her several minutes but she finally did it. Once she was inside she wasted no time knocking shit over before getting dressed and waddling her cute ass down to that tour.

Let it be said, a drunk bowlegged female screaming her head off is not something you want to miss.

# Bet

Do not go to the haunted tour.

That's my advice, take it or leave it.

In this world a lot of shit happens at night. Good, bad and horrendous.

Tonight was horrendous.

Everything was fine at first. My buzz calmed down enough that I could think straight, my limbs were sore but flexible and this tour was filled with families. Our guide was a college student and his major had to be theatre. He was very into it, super over the top and quite believable. To the children, at least.

Doing as we were told, we follow him (in the dark) holding glow sticks. He spun a vivid tale of creepiness and humor. Getting lost in his enthusiasm wasn't difficult. At one point he was discussing a particular tree that played a part in World War II and I moved aside so the little guy behind me could see.

Backing away, I was still buzzed when I stepped on someone's foot. Quick to offer an apology, I spin around which causes me to lose my balance again and I stumble face first into the largest spider web man or beast has ever seen.

Swiping at my face blindly, I let out the most impressive scream these lungs could manage and then I did what any reasonable woman would do.

I ran for my fucking life.

Up hills, down hills.

At one point I even ran in a circle but that didn't help either. I was so terrified that I took the steps back to my room two at a time although I don't know how I did it. My brain was on auto pilot, my fight or flight responses in full force. Not caring if I woke every person in the building, I screamed when I ran down the hallway and continued screaming in the living room while ripping the clothes off my body before flying head first into the hot tub.

Scrubbing and screaming at the horror of it all, I was afraid to put my hands in my hair. I have thick hair. Any creature would love to find a home in there and that's when the heebie-jeebies hit me.

"That was quick. How was the tour?" he asks from beyond the fence.

Taking a deep breath, I sink under the water letting the chemicals kill any living fucking thing in my hair before responding. Coming up for air I answer casually, "It was great, I learned a lot actually. How about you? How has your night been?"

"Better than yours by the sounds of it."

"You heard me screaming, huh?"

"Honey, General Custer heard you screaming."

"Well, I don't like spiders."

"Can't blame you there," he says laughing, "What's spiders got to do with a haunted tour?"

"Can we change the subject, please?"

"Nope," he says laughing, "Spill it."

"I sort of walked---okay stumbled into a web. With my face."

"Check your hair," he advises me, "Those bastards are water resistant."

"They are?" I gasp. "Fuck!" Holding my breath I dunk myself again and one more time just to be safe.

"Got you a little something," he says "Crawl outta there and come grab it."

Padding out, I waddle over to the back side of the fence and take the bottle of wine he offers.

"It's half empty," I say laughing.

“I was thirsty.”

When a big smile hit my face, I knew it was time to go. I didn't come here to make friends and I certainly didn't want to be attracted to a stranger with nice hands and a sarcastic personality to rival my own. “Thanks, neighbor,” I say backing away, “Night.”

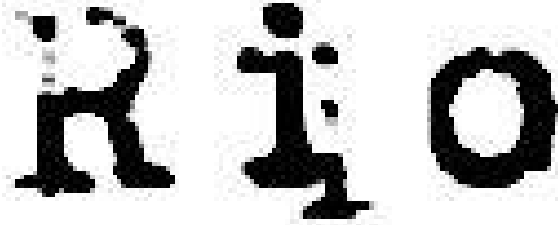
“Leaving me already?”

“I've had a long day,” I say standing near the door, “I have to be up early.”

“Drink that first,” he advises me, “That way if anything survived you really won't give a shit.”

Before I scream at him for the reminder, he laughs then walks through his own door closing it behind him. “Smart ass.” I mumble taking a huge swig from the bottle. You know, just in case.





My neighbor gave me all the material I needed to jerk myself off and into a sound sleep. She was beautiful, hilarious, humble *and* hiding something.

She was mysterious.

My dick liked mystery.

Normally I'd like a little mystery too but I had a job to do. Only I didn't know what that job was yet. I didn't know this woman but what I did know I enjoyed the hell out of. She's not here for work or to do anything shady. I've been around shady people all my life and she ain't in that league. Actually, I can't figure out what league she's in because I know shit about her. I don't have a name or a connection, just a photo and even that didn't do her justice. Bottom line was, this woman is a walking talking contradiction. One minute she looked in awe, the next she had tears running down her face. When she cried she didn't wipe the tears away, she just let them run down her face like she was too grieved to care.

I swear she cried so fast and hard she didn't even know that she's doing it. Like a switch, it just happens and hell if I can figure out what causes it. When she ain't crying though, she carries herself as a woman who knows her shit. Not like she's better than you, just confident and really fucking lonely.

Even though I'm here on a job for Adrian, I didn't give him much thought because last night may have been the most fun I'd had in years.

Fuck yes, I laughed at her expense.

After stepping on my foot, I tried steadying her but she spun out of my arms and head first into a giant spider web. A giant *fake* spider web. One of

those cotton things they use to decorate for Halloween. But she was still buzzed and then too disoriented to figure it out. Then she pulled some shit from Ferris Bueller when Ed Rooney broke into his house and scared his sister Jeanie who took off like a shot with her arms flailing, screaming like she was on fire.

She did Jennifer Grey better than Jennifer Grey. Not once did she stop screaming either. Not when she marathoned it up the hill, not when she soared up them steps and not even in her own room. In fact, she didn't stop until she nearly drowned herself in that hot tub. Pretty sure those maneuvers loosened them legs of hers up a bit too. So I couldn't help myself from keeping her riled up a while longer, I enjoyed the hell out of it mostly because she was a good sport.

This morning I had no idea what she had planned so I woke up early prepared to meet her in person. A chance meeting at Starbucks? Maybe a well-executed bump in the shoulder or, a close call with a horse where I can play hero? I'm sick of watching her from a distance, talking through a damn fence. I want to be face-to-face and I hoped that we could spend some real time together. Our time here was limited and I wanted to know her better before I stole from her. I wanted to see how she handled an orgasm while she sat on my face. For now I was ignoring Adrian's calls, he could wait. Still smiling over last night, I decided to take advantage of my good fortune and I didn't feel guilty about that at all. The sun was out and there was someone I needed to get acquainted with first.

If all went well, I'd be between her sore legs by dinner.

# Bet

Waking up early, I kept my promise to myself and left my phone in my room while I went for coffee. My phone was a life line for business only even though no one I cared about used it, it was a habit. A habit I came here to break. Especially, trying to beat level 152 on Candy Crush. So far I've been doing pretty good with it, I've stayed too buzzed and busy to worry about checking it. I couldn't forget why I was here, though. Yes, I was having some fun but something had to give. My life was work and work was my life. I'm young but I feel so aged that I struggle to enjoy the little things like pedicures and sleeping in.

No matter which direction I turn, there was always a document to sign, a business that needed backing and a line around the block of people wanting money. When Adrian decided to up the stakes and play dirty I said screw it. It was time to take a vacation and reassess my situation.

My first vacation, alone.

I did it, I was here and I was proud of myself for making it happen.

I was so caught up in my own triumph, even if no one knew it was happening, that I barely dodged a huge pile of horse shit trying to cross the street. Tap dancing around it, I shake my arms trying to rid myself of the fact that I *almost* wore it. Had I actually done it, I probably would have passed out from hysteria. Looking around quickly, no one was laughing or pointing so I kept going until I came upon a stone bench in front of the marina. Taking a seat, I look over Lake Huron again wondering if I should buy a boat. A boat would be fun. Then I realized I'd have no one to boat *with* and got depressed all over again.

Shaking it off, I make it to Starbucks and almost cry it smells so good inside. Standing in line, I'm not even bothered when I'm bumped from behind. At home it happened a dozen times a day. Turning slowly to peek over my shoulder, a large man mutters, "Sorry" before looking at the food in the case. Checking him out on the sly, I feel my stomach flutter. Oh hell no, I didn't come here to hook up, and besides, this place caters to families and he probably came here to get his wife a coffee after fucking the hell out of her. Lucky wife, I grumble because he favors Ricky Martin in skin color and the way he stands. The man was very tall, had a five o'clock shadow, thick jet black hair with streaks of grey that made my nipples hard. He also had a face to masturbate to and I stored the image away for later. If he could sing too I'd orgasm all over the condiments. Christ, now I'm jonesing for another woman's husband.

Rock meet bottom.

Grabbing my cup and bolting, I spend hours going from shop to shop. No one wanted a thing from me, I was simply a tourist and blended in like everyone else. Briefly I wondered what my midnight neighbor with a deep voice was doing right now but shut that down too. I came here to find some peace and make a decision, nothing more. Now that I made it down one row of shops and was half way through with the other, my feet were screaming at me. Having no choice but to do as the natives did, I rented myself a bicycle.

Best and worst idea ever.

First, I haven't been on a bike since fifth grade. Second, there was a revolt happening between my legs that made staying straight nearly impossible. Every time I peddled my bike threatened to tip over and I was doing all of this sober.

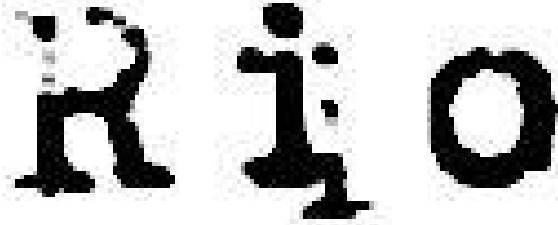
Between almost maiming dozens of people, knocking over a garbage can and not being able to make it up the hill back to my room, I ungraciously fell off my bike onto the grass and laughed my ass off. I was likely the wealthiest woman on this island; I negotiated millions upon millions of dollars daily and yet, I couldn't manage a bicycle.

The reality check couldn't have come at a better time. It felt amazing to laugh even if it was at my own expense. The days of taking myself too seriously ended now, right here in the damp grass with my thighs cramping.

How long I laid there, I didn't know but finally I stood up, dusted myself off and limped my bike the rest of the way. Parking it with the others, I slowly head to my room to relax before taking myself to dinner in the main hall. Once in the room, I didn't even bother curling up on the furniture. Instead, I sat out on the deck and let the sun bake me while I read my very first romance novel.

I needed this too.

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Christ almighty, the woman was a train wreck. Okay, a hot train wreck but still. It's like she had to do everything at once. Following her while she shopped was about as exciting as having your tires rotated when you had to piss but I will admit, seeing her excitement over it threw me off. She was way too excited about the shit here considering each place was the same as the last. I decided that she must not get out much, if at all. Then she did the unthinkable, she rented a God damn bike. I had seconds to make a decision, try and keep up with her by running and potentially blowing out a knee or... rent a fucking two-wheel death trap.

If I was bad on a bike, she was worse. She missed killing at least eighteen people and every time they screamed at her she'd yell "my bad" then giggle. Just as she started to get the hang of it, she turned to make the hill back to her room. Even I was smart enough to jump off to walk it up, but not miss fast and furious. She was able to peddle a few times then she started to wobble and my breath caught.

Shit. She was going down.

Then she flopped off the bike, did a tuck and roll into the grass and laid there laughing. Yeah, I may have cracked a grin too but it's because this chick is off her rocker not because it was cute. Walking past her with my bike she was so in the moment she didn't notice me, as usual. I wasn't used to women not noticing me and my ego didn't like it. Parking it and heading up to my room to shower, when I come out I can hear her reading on her deck. I shouldn't have listened. But it seemed weird to me to hear anyone read out loud. Especially the shit she was reading. The woman was reading porn.

She was into it and no lie, my dick was loving all of it. Then once the chapter ends, she starts laughing. Talking to herself she says things like “that’s not possible,” or “who writes this shit,” and the line that had me rubbing myself in broad daylight, “Hell, I could do that with one arm tied behind my back. Oh wait, I have!”

Just like that I wanted *both* arms tied behind her back, with her body arching while she begged me to fuck her. Muttering a curse, I’m about to walk back in when her voice stops me. “If you come over to borrow some rope, I’m afraid we can’t be friends. Because if you did, we’d be *best* friends.”

My eyes go round but I got not a thing to say. “Here,” she says tossing the book over, “Maybe you can finish yourself off, but I’m warning you most of us did that shit in tenth grade.”

“What?”

“You heard me, neighbor,” she whispers close to the fence, “You’re hard and needing to get off, I know what sexual frustration sounds like. The book isn’t terrible, just skip to the middle and get creative.”

“I’m not jerking off!” I growl through my side of the fence.

“No? Oh then it must have been someone else moaning. My bad.”

“I wasn’t--”

“Whatever,” she says opening her door, “Just toss it back over when you’re done. ‘kay?” then she slams the door. Now I’m standing there with a stiff dick and a romance novel. I couldn’t believe she heard me, I couldn’t believe she had the balls to call me out on it. Most of all, I couldn’t believe I was about to jack off with a paperback and didn’t feel bad about it in the slightest.

# Bet

Day drinking always seems wise at the time. There's nothing like having a cold glass of wine to soothe you. The first one is so good, you order another. You get caught up in the beauty around you, wishing you belonged, that it would notice you too. When it doesn't, you order a third glass to dull the sting of being invisible.

Having no appetite because your heart hurts, you order a fourth, when you really start to feel it working. Then because you're a genius, you cash out, grab your bike only to walk it to the highest point on the island.

Then you do some stupid shit, like fly downhill on two wheels, completely tanked with a smile on your face.

The adrenaline rush felt so amazing, I did it again. I haven't felt a rush like this in well... ever, now that I think about it.

Full of wine and ambition, I wheeze as I climb that bitch again because the way down was worth the asthma attack. I did this because I wanted a memory that was my own for a change. Climbing on, I didn't even have to push to get going. The hill was so steep I was probably going twenty miles per hour before the half-way mark. Jamming the brakes to avoid a carriage, I see my turn and work on slowing down.

Laughing, screaming and some other shit too, I get to the bottom and look back up to where I'd been. Wow, I really came a long way. Yes, I could take that and apply it to a lot of things in my life but I didn't want to. For now, I wanted to enjoy this feeling while it lasted. That hill was my ticket to freedom or a bloody death. Both options I was okay with.

“Are you crazy?”



Turning to the voice and seeing a state trooper scowling, I can't stop the giggle that escapes me. I mean, he's a state trooper on a bike with knee pads and a riding helmet. That and I'm far drunker now than when I started and this reaction couldn't be helped.

"No," I say attempting to turn around and push it back uphill. "I'm bike riding."

"I'm going to need your driver's license."

"Yeah about that?" I say patting my nonexistent pockets. "Didn't bring it."

"Where do you think you're going?"

"Back up that hill," I say pointing over my shoulder with my thumb, "Why, is that against the law?"

"No," he says, "It's not. But drinking and riding a bike recklessly is."

"You're shitting me."

"Ma'am, you've got a crowd watching you so, no, I'm not shitting you. Do you see all those kids? The last thing I need, the last thing anyone needs is to see you eat pavement. How much have you had to drink?"

"Swear to God you give me a breathalyzer, I'm going to pee my pants. Wait, is it in your pouch? Can your bike hold two people? Do you carry a gun? How come you have a horn and I don't?"

"What's your name?"

"Bet," I say sticking my hand out, "What's yours?"

"Neil."

"Nice to meet you, Neil," I tell him shaking it vigorously, "Any chance you want to race?"

"No. But I am going to ask you to join me for dinner later tonight. Then after you say yes, I'm going to escort you back to your room."

That's when I lost my buzz, my humor and my interest in tackling the hill again. "I'm going to have to pass on dinner, Neil. As much as I appreciate the offer, I can't."

"Married?"

“Widowed.”

“I’m sorry,” he says with sincerity, “Please, go park your bike and sleep it off. I don’t want to ticket you.”

“Actually, could you ticket me just so I can say I did something wild for once?”

“You’re serious?”

“I’m always serious, Neil, but I’m working on it.”

“I’ll make you a deal,” he says reaching for his pad, “We exchange numbers and I’ll ticket you.”

Smiling, I put my hand out for his phone and put my number in it and then he does the same with mine. When that’s done he makes quick work of writing my ticket and hands it to me.

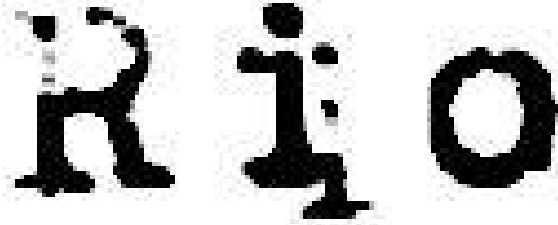
“Thanks for not throwing me in the clink, officer.”

“Coffee,” he says, “I’ll be at Starbuck’s at eight tomorrow morning. Have coffee with me, Bet. If you enjoy my company we can work up to dinner.”

“I’ll think about it,” I say turning my bike around, “One more?”

“No,” he says laughing. Then pointing to my cottage he orders me, “Sleep it off.”

“Yes sir, officer,” I say then salute him which seemed like a great idea at the time. Then I slowly walked my bike back to the rack, parked it and decided I needed more wine before dinner.



The woman was going to give me a heart attack.

When she left the patio of the restaurant she was clearly tanked. Thinking she was taking the bike and going to crash back in her room was tolerable. Watching her sneak up the hill like the rest of us couldn't see her had me white knuckling my belt buckle. If I was worried about her making the climb it was nothing compared to watching her fly down that hill at warp speed. The only reason I didn't announce myself was because she had this look about her. The one that said, fuck it, I'm about to do something fucking stupid so sit back and watch.

Like once wasn't enough?

She no sooner stopped and caught her breath that she was eye balling that fucking hill again. The second time down she almost side swiped a God damn buggy and she wasn't steady on that fucking bike neither. She looked like a drunk on a bike, period. Slamming on the brakes, I'm surprised the bitches didn't blow with the beating she was putting on them. Not like she rented a mountain bike that was made for extreme shit. No, she rented a cruiser with a pink basket.

A cop on a bike (which is hilarious for about ten different reasons) approaches her. He'd been eyeing her for the last twenty minutes just like me and about fifty other people were. You see a woman squealing with her legs sticking out from each side of her bike, you wait to see what happens. Finally deciding to intervene, he starts talking and pointing and she does the same.

Getting closer but making sure I wasn't seen, I listen as he asks her out and for many reasons it made me extremely angry. Mainly because this fucker could get in my way, not because I was jealous. Thank Christ she

turned him down but he wasn't giving up. When she asks for the ticket he cons her to get her number which I couldn't believe she actually gave. Now I see him smiling and flirting and she looks bored. He asks for coffee she agrees to consider it.

Right then and there I knew I needed to step up my game.

Making sure she was good, I stay a safe distance away and watch as she fumbles with parking the bike then stumbles up the steps to the cottage. Waiting in the hall, I wait for her to get in before I head to my own room. Once I'm in the hot box, I sit there wondering how in the hell I'm supposed to get this woman to trust me enough for me to betray her. Especially, when I didn't know what I was betraying her *for*.

More than that though, I was wondering how in the hell I was going to get her to want me as badly as I wanted her.

Make no mistake, I wanted her.

Didn't matter if this was a job, the woman got under my skin in a bad way. An hour later, I couldn't detect any movement and took the opportunity to close my own eyes. If she woke up, I'd know it and I'd follow.

Until then, I needed to rest because this woman was exhausting to keep up with and yeah, I liked that about her too.

# Bet

Dinner was lonely.

Even though I turned Neil down, I was still glad I came out despite the loneliness. I wasn't ready to do the 'get to know you' shit with someone I wasn't paying for their time. I wasn't ready to do it for real and that was seriously depressing because odds are I never would be. Looking on the positive side, I will admit watching men and women interact was beautiful and I missed it terribly. Listening to children beg for bed was beautiful too. I missed it all, even the tiring parts. The arguments over nothing, the teething baby, the morning sex, the laughter and having a partner that loved me at my worst. Watching life move on right in front me, I wanted to be angry. I wanted to scream that it wasn't fair but most of all, I just wanted the pain to fade enough that I could feel something more than *grief*.

In truth, I didn't expect to find true love. A companion would be nice though and at one time I had given it serious thought. Drowning in misery those early years were rough and I wasn't proud of my behavior. At a loss on how to start over, I did all sorts of things my family would have disowned me for. For six months I would go to work blazed out on coke, or even better, I'd do a line or two and leave the residue on my desk as a reminder to get more later. I had three dealers on speed dial and knew them on a first name basis. Hell, one year I even spent Christmas with one named Dibz out of boredom. Turns out Dibz was a family man and even he felt sorry for me. That was a holiday I'll never forget. Then I would hire escorts to take me out and pretend they gave a fuck. If they proved exceptionally good at pretending, I'd let them stay over and have them again in the morning with the promise of a big tip. Until one morning, I caught one of them trying to steal the custom Shinola watch I was given from my husband

for our first anniversary. Because of that, I broke his nose and never called the service again.

Between the drugs and random sexual encounters, I decided to clean my act up and give back as much as I could instead. Work would be my drug. Work would replace fucking strangers. Work would replace the emptiness inside of me too, only it did none of those things.

Having money and being generous meant people wanted to *see* you. They want to attach your name to their cause. At first, I was everywhere then it quickly became stale. So when I turned over a new leaf and was extended an invitation to a charity event, I sent money instead. Like anyone cared right? It was about the check I wrote, not which dress I wore. Even the flu didn't stop me from working because without work, I just had *me* and that wasn't enough. Bottom line, I pretty much sucked. Slamming back another glass of white wine, not even the whitefish spread was able to take my head to a better place. Tomorrow was the anniversary I dreaded. The day following, would have been my daughter's eighth birthday. Asking for a large glass to go, I pay my tab and walk downstairs to the café to purchase two more bottles, content to drink alone in my room.

Walking out, I look over at the water and the chairs with no one in them and make my way down. Sipping my wine, I watch families ride bikes, lovers kiss and the moon brighten it all for me to remind me what I'll never have again. A startling reminder of what I squandered the first time it was given to me. Throwing that glass back, I throw the empty cup and not caring if anyone saw me, heard me or that I littered. At that moment I didn't want to be me. I didn't like me now, I didn't even know who I was. "I want it back! I want it all back!" I scream at the water. I wanted the routine back, the expectation back, the arguments and the comfort. Clenching my fists I scream it again and again.

When nothing happened, I cursed myself for doing something so stupid in public. Showing my emotions is not the norm for me anymore. Besides, no one was listening to me anyway. Again, I was swiftly reminded that I was invisible. Hanging my head, I walk back to my room with purpose. Quite often I tell myself that I needed to be grateful that I even had them for a time. But I'm not grateful, not even close. I was stolen from, robbed, jipped, bamboozled and I wanted revenge. But revenge on who? For what? As the past six years proved the only one I was hurting was

myself. Throwing my door open and falling into the chair on my patio, I drank wine straight from the bottle laughing out loud at the truth as I knew it. I was the richest homeless girl in Detroit.

“You okay over there, neighbor?” he asks from his side of the fence. I wanted to ignore him, I did but, I was just so God damn lonely that I couldn’t. Plus that voice. Fuck, that voice was beautiful. “Not really, neighbor,” I mutter, “Not really.”

“Anything I can do to help?”

“Talk to me?”

“’Bout what?”

“Did you read the book?” I ask taking another chug.

“Yeah,” he mumbles, “I read some of it.”

“Was I right?”

“About which part?”

“I don’t know?” I laugh, “All of it?”

I’m startled when the book crashes at my feet. Picking it up, I set it on the table next to me. “So what did you think?”

“I wiped the evidence off the pages,” he says, “What does that tell you?”

“That you amuse easily?”

“You drunk?”

“Working on it,” I tell him chugging again.

“You wanna talk about it?”

“Not really,” I confess but then change my mind like all women do. “Hey neighbor, have you ever lost the one thing you valued most?”

He was quiet a minute before he answers, “Ain’t got nothing left to lose these days.”

“Oh,” I say clumsily standing up and leaning against the fence. For some odd reason, I put my hand against the wood wanting to be close to this complete stranger. For some reason, I felt like he understood my misery. “Well, I lost four things I valued most and I can never have it back.”

When he stays quiet, I close my eyes and feel the wine kick my pathetic ass. “Night, neighbor,” I throw out before entering my suite and screaming myself to sleep.

Like every night since I lost it all, I prayed I wouldn’t wake up. But like all things in life, you seldom get what you want.

Life wouldn’t release me and I hated that I wasn’t strong enough to do it myself.

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R i o

I hustled to make it back to my room first. Sitting outside pretending I'd been there for hours, I hear her knocking shit over to find her place on the deck. As I sweat to death, It didn't go unnoticed that her room had air conditioning yet she didn't turn it on. Preferring to roast like the rest of us I guess which, I thought was supremely stupid. I only know this, because when she was taking a shower this morning I hopped the fence and snuck into her room to look around. Fuck if I knew what I was looking for, I expected something to stand out though. It's not like I was sent here to just watch her, I was here for a reason. The woman brought one bag, just one. Whatever Adrian wanted recovered had to be small like jewelry or a flash drive.

On top of that mess, I'm pathetic that I felt the need to know she was okay. As a rule, I don't do needy chicks. But this one was dealing with some shit, I could feel it. When she leaned against the wood privacy fence separating us, I could feel her trying to stay strong but failing. Call me crazy, but I had a feeling she had to be strong most days and today wasn't one of them. Putting my hand up to the fence, I just wanted to be close to her even if she didn't know it. Maybe offer her some of the strength I wasn't using. That moment she went from buzzed to shit faced was quick and just like that she stumbled her way back in while I stood there wishing I'd had more time with her. The female was quick-witted and I liked that. She wasn't shy either and I liked that most of all. Seeing her in person was a shock to my dick and my dick wanted her. What's fucked up is the man wanted her too. Man and dick have never been on the same page before. My dick was a fuck stick, pure and simple. The man has only ever wanted one woman and while the man thought that woman had issues, she doesn't hold a candle to the shit show passed out in the room next to mine.

Fuck if I could sleep now either. Listening to her scream at the water was rough; watching her force herself back to her room was rough. Hearing her say she's lost four things she's valued most was rough, but hearing her scream herself to sleep was the worst. Replaying all that shit in my head over and over made sleep fucking impossible.

I may follow her during the day but it's the last two nights I look forward to most. Her voice, her laugh and her fucking humor. I'm telling you, she doesn't even try to be funny but she's so sarcastic she might be the funniest chick I've ever met. Even if I'd never had a picture to go by, I'd tell you she was gorgeous by voice alone. That voice has kept me in a state of perma-stiff for two God damn days.

Mostly I wanted to let her know I was her neighbor but I didn't because I still didn't know *why* I was here. Sending Adrian a text, I tell him I need to know what I'm recovering for him and that I needed it now.

*Her.*

That was all he had to say. I recover items, not people and this was not welcome news. Now, Adrian and I go way back and not in a good way. We used to get into a lot of shit and where I was good at taking things like documents, cars and jewelry, he excelled at some dark underground shit. Why the fuck would the woman in the room next to me have to do with any of that? I debated telling him no, but knew he'd send someone else instead. Ain't never had to secure a person and I had no idea how I'd go about doing that either. Fact was, I owed Adrian big and if he wanted the emotional train wreck next door, he would have her. Even if I didn't like it, money and freedom meant more than my erection.

In my world, fifty grand goes a long way and it squared my debt with that asshole for good.

Besides, if he had his eye on her, there *was* a reason. The last thing I needed was to *know* the reason. So this morning when I woke up after sleeping like shit, I head out to the deck to sip coffee hoping to catch her but hours pass and she never comes out. Sitting in my room, I wonder if she slipped out early. The island ain't a big place but it is big enough that I could have a hell of a time trying to find her and that meant spending more time here. Throwing my jeans on, I hop the low side of my fence then hop

hers onto her deck. Peeking in the sliding door, I don't see her in the living room. The lights are off, no television for white noise, just silence.

Taking it a step further, knowing I could get arrested for breaking and entering, I round the corner to look into her room. Closing my eyes, I mutter a silent *fuck* to myself when I see her. She's curled up in the center of her bed with two empty bottles and picture frames all around her. I can't see who they're of, but whoever it is she misses. There's a quilt with girly shit she's wrapped up in and I started to worry when I realized how hot it was in here. Yet, here she was curled up like she was freezing cold.

Stepping back out and hopping both fences again, I sit on the couch in my own room wondering what the fuck to do now. Grabbing lunch to go, I come back and she's still in her room. I spent the rest of the afternoon alternating between sitting on the deck, pacing and wanting to break back in.

At eight pm sharp, I heard her door open and her foot steps on the wood. Sitting up in my chair, I move it closer to our shared side of the fence to see if I can get her to talk to me.

Until now, I hadn't realized how much I needed to hear her voice.

# Bet

Sitting outside I wondered if I'd ever be warm again. No matter what I did, I was always so fucking cold. No, I'm not anemic; what I am is, lost and alone. My family had kept me safe and warm. Without them, I've been eternally frozen. When I opened my eyes and realized I'd lived another day, the disappointment was crushing. Why can't I just be with them? I served no purpose here, I was in the process of giving my money away so what use was I? How much money did I even need? Even if I lit it all on fire, I make enough on my investments to live comfortably for three lifetimes. Only, I didn't even want to exist in this one.

Why couldn't I catch a break? I needed to sleep through today because I knew tomorrow was going to wreck me, only I was wide awake. Why her birthday hurt worse than the fact she was dead, I'll never know why, but it does. It was these quiet moments with nothing to distract me that were the worst. Normally, I work late then get stupid drunk to forget. This time, I needed to get away and try to deal only I found I couldn't. Sitting here staring at trees with a vicious hangover and no sense of self, I admitted that I never would.

"Where you been?" he asks knocking on the fence to get my attention. Not bothering to answer, I curl myself tighter inside of her blanket hoping to disappear. "Talk to me," he urges, "You hungry?"

"No," I whisper, "Thanks."

"Wanna grab a drink?" he offers, "My treat."

"Pass," I whisper.

"You hurting, neighbor?"

“Yes,” I admit, “Deeply.”

“Bout them four things you valued most?”

Covering my mouth to stop the wail from escaping, I run to my room slamming the patio door behind me. Punching, kicking, throwing the lamps, shattering the glasses and finally running to the bathroom to vomit, I collapse on the floor in a useless heap. Fuck, I can't do this anymore.

Resting my head on the bowl, I stare at my vomit without thought. It was all wine anyway so who cared, I could always get more. So many ways to die, why I couldn't I find the right way to end this? Because I was pathetic, that's why and even death laughed at me. This wasn't the first time I looked into paying someone to kill me. On my way here I actually called in a favor to a hit man offering him a fortune to do the job. Who knew hit men worked on referrals?

Fuck, I can afford to die that's for sure.

“You ain't getting your deposit back,” he says from outside the door. Oddly enough, I don't even care that he's in my room. Knowing my mental state I probably left the front door open intentionally, hoping a murderer was on the island. The odds were slim, but I was open to it.

“You gonna stare at your puke all night?” he asks persisting. Looking up, I see he's the man from Starbucks, the one who looks like Ricky Martin and was there getting his wife coffee. So no wife then, fucking awesome turn of events. “Up you go,” he says gently lifting me and I don't fight him, I can't. He sets me on the edge of the bed, grabs a wash cloth and sets about wiping my face and mouth. I felt like a child and didn't have the energy to scream at him to leave. The chill from the cloth alone has me looking for her blanket to comfort me. “You sick?”

“No,” I whisper, “Do yourself a favor and leave the way you came, please.” Staring at the wall, I can't look at him. I don't want to see how beautiful he is, knowing he has life to look forward to but I don't.

“Ain't leaving you like this. So you got two choices, have dinner with me at the bar or have dinner with me on the deck.”

“I'm not hungry!” I scream at him while clutching that damn wash cloth. “Get the fuck out!”

“Can’t,” he shrugs casually dismissing me, “You got me worried now, so what’s it gonna be, neighbor?”

He wasn’t going to leave, I could feel it. Didn’t I want him to leave? I just didn’t know. Part of me needed space the other part needed human contact, his contact. “Still waiting. In case you’re wondering, no is the wrong answer.”

Sitting there in utter defeat, I said fuck it. If he wants to surround himself in misery who was I to say no? “The deck would be nice,” I tell him quietly, “Thank you.”

“Get cleaned up, I’ll be back in a few.”

Nodding at him, I wait until he leaves to flush the toilet and take a shower. A half hour later when he returned, my stomach started growling and I realized I hadn’t eaten in over twenty four hours. Watching him set the table, I pull up a chair offering to help but he orders me to shut up and eat.

So I do.

Twenty minutes later with a full belly and a fresh glass of wine, I can’t help but admire his beauty now that I have a face to go with the voice. Was he sent to save me, fuck me or just be another lesson to learn from? Christ knows, I’ve had enough lessons. My life clock was ticking and I knew I was beyond saving but if he wanted to fuck... who was I to say no?

# Rion

She ate like a lady. Napkin in her lap, plastic silverware arranged properly and no elbows on the table. I, on the other hand, ate like I always did, with purpose. She watches me, I watch her and we don't talk. Dinner may have been my idea but I was thinking it wasn't a good one. The fuck do I have to say to this chick? Find her, bring her back and hand her over that's it, that's my job. Thing was, I thought I had problems right? Loving Rion knowing she didn't love me back, but I still got her in my life if I can man up and handle it. There's a darkness about her that rivals my own. Thing is, I work at hiding mine while she flaunts hers. She's sick with something but I ain't got no name for it yet.

Wanting to challenge her darkness made me a bastard, I knew this and I had no problem with it.

Thinking back on her curled up on that bed got me starting the conversation. I didn't know the specifics, but whatever her damage was it's contaminating her and I found that I didn't like it. "Guessing those things you valued ain't things, am I right?"

"No," she says sipping her wine, "They aren't things, they are, or rather, they *were* my family."

"Ah," I say reaching for more chicken even though I'm full. I just need the distraction because I'm not sure I even want to know more but I started this game. "Mom or Dad?"

She closes her eyes and when she opens them and locks on me, I freeze. For just a moment her mask slipped, her walls were down and I saw her for who and what she really was. "Look," I mumble. "You don't have to---"

“Mom, Dad, Alan and Indie.” She says taking another sip. “Alan was my husband, Indie our two year old daughter. I lost them all six years ago today, tomorrow is Indie’s birthday. She would have been eight years old.”

“Fuck,” I whisper feeling like shit for doing this to her, “I’m sorry---”

“What’s your name?” she asks tilting her head to the side to rest it on her hand. She let me off the hook so I didn’t hesitate in giving it to her. “Rio,” I offer, “What’s yours?”

“Bet,” she says quietly, “Bet Lennox.”

Lennox, fuck! In some way she was related to fucking Adrian, had to be. This was not good at all. The irony was not lost on me that my best friend and the only woman I thought I’ve ever loved was a bookie. Not only did she live and breathe betting, for fifteen years I did too. Now, in the middle of an island I’m sitting across from a stunner whose name is Bet of all fucking things and I’m seriously taking a gamble even talking to her. This new information was not welcome and I didn’t know what the fuck to do with it. If I thought running would help I’d have Usain Bolted it outta there but I dug my grave this deep, might as well jump in now.

“What do you do for a living?” she asks, making the effort to get to know me.

“I’m in between right now,” I offer, “But I used to be in collections. What about you?”

“I exist,” she says pushing away from the table to stand up.

“You leaving me, Bet?”

“Can I pay you for dinner, Rio?” she asks.

“No,” I growl, “You can pay me by sitting down and talking to me.”

“I’m not good company,” she says reluctantly taking her seat again, “Surely you have other options.”

“Nope,” I say pouring her more wine, “Dinner with a depressed female is all I got going on.”

“Will you get drunk with me tonight?” she asks, “I mean like stupid drunk?”

“What else is there other than stupid drunk?”



“Exactly,” she smiles at me. Christ, is she something. Not just beautiful but broken and accepting of it. As we drink in silence, we watch each other again but on my end it’s because she’s quite possibly the most haunted woman I’ve ever seen and the attraction is undeniable. Then the guilt kicks in because I’m here to betray her. Making light jokes and small talk, I can see when her buzz kicks in and she starts to settle. I could also see the desire she had for me and no doubt it mirrored my own. You can fake a lot of shit but lust isn’t one of them. We both have danced around it, trying the get to know you bullshit, but it was there, brewing. But it all came crashing down with one question.

“What’s got you thinking so hard?” I ask her when I could take it no more. She’s been staring at me like she’s weighing in on my character and it’s freaking me the fuck out. “You have a dark past and possible future, I can feel it,” she says casually. “I find myself wondering how dark.”

“Dark enough,” I growl at her. I don’t like that she sees it, I also don’t like her boldness about it either. This chick is bold about everything like nothing scares her. In return, it scares the hell out of me.

“Hmm,” she says swallowing the rest of her glass. “Since you’re in between jobs, I have a proposition for you.”

“I ain’t gonna like this,” I argue standing up to leave. “I think I’m gonna call it a night, you probably should too.”

Grabbing my wrist with surprising strength, she stands pulling me toward her and kisses me hard on the mouth. When her tongue works mine, I groan pulling her even closer. She wraps her arms around my neck and seduces my mouth with her own. Pushing her up against the privacy fence, she reaches down and palms my dick and I bite her lip in return. I’ve been with a lot of women, and ain’t one of them ever made me feel like this with just a kiss.

“Now do you want to hear what I have to say?”

“I’m listening,” I tell her while squeezing her ass. Crawling her way up my body, she meets me face to face. Bet is a small woman but her strength is impressive. Without even blinking she speaks loud and clear. “First, I want you to fuck me,” she says biting my lip hard and licking away the sting. “Then I’ll give you five hundred grand to kill me.”

“Are you fucking crazy!” I roar, pinning her arms above her head.

“No,” she whispers looking me in the eyes. “I’m not crazy; I’m just not strong enough to kill myself. It’s not as easy as you think.”

“You are one fucked up bitch, you know that?”

“Is that a no?”

“That’s a fuck no!”

Releasing her arms, she rubs her wrists but stays quiet for a moment. Then whispering, “It was worth a shot.” she walks around me in favor of her bedroom and closes the door behind her. As for me, I sat on her deck for hours at a total loss. Then, when my eyes got heavy, I slept on her couch after cleaning up the mess she made earlier. The bitch wasn’t killing herself on my watch.

Ah Christ, who am I kidding? She wasn’t a bitch and she didn’t want to be alone any more than I did. I just needed to be where she was because her sorrow was a God damn magnet for me. Turns out it was a good thing too, because morning came and it wasn’t a good one but, I refused to let it stay a bad one.

# Bel

Reliving that night is a horror that *never* leaves me. Some nights my dreams begin with a fond memory but they always end the same way. With me sitting at my desk, wrapping up paperwork and telling Alan I'd meet them at Maccabee's because I had to work. We were to have dinner at seven to celebrate my parents' anniversary. Alan worked a half day and picked Indie up from daycare to dress and feed her prior to. He did this often because I had a tendency to get too involved in my work, which always ran us late. I was so focused on my deal that I had lost track of time, again. When my phone rang, absently I answered it knowing I was going to get teased for losing hours like always. Except, that didn't happen this time.

What happened was a trooper told me that I needed to get to Henry Ford hospital, that there had been an accident. He provided no further details, except that time was of the essence. Deal forgotten; I drove with purpose to the hospital, not understanding the magnitude of the situation. Entering through emergency, I gave my name and was immediately escorted back by two nurses, one police officer and a counselor. Of course, I didn't know she was a counselor at the time but it didn't take long to figure out why she was there. Literally being escorted from room to room the staff didn't know where to take me first. My mind was so far gone, where they went I followed. At 8:04 pm my mother was pronounced dead. At 8:19 my father, at 8:42 my husband and at 8:59 my daughter.

Indie my little fighter held on the longest, like she'd been waiting for me to get there. When she was born she was placed in my arms and she died that way too, with me holding her. There was something poetic about that but for the life of me I just didn't know what that was. All I knew was that in one hour, I lost it all to a teenage drunk driver.

Death itself is hard enough. Remembering how a loved one looked when they died was even harder because that's how you remember them. My parents' bodies were ravaged, being in the front seats. Alan suffered a severe head injury when his head went through the window; but my daughter... Indie didn't have a scratch on her, she simply looked asleep. The three of them 'looked' like they were in an accident, she did not. For hours I held her waiting for her to wake up.

She didn't wake up.

The counselor literally had to pry her out of my arms. To her credit, she tried reasoning with me but I refused to listen. I needed her to shut up so Indie could rest. My daughter had so much life in her she didn't sleep as much as she should. She needed to sleep.

The second the woman touched me I lost it. Taking Indie with me, I kicked the shit out of her until two men managed to restrain me. Then the room flooded with staff and in that moment I would have killed them all had I known how. There was one doctor she was young like me. She called them off, told them to give me time and stayed with me. She said we were safe with her, and we were. But those bastards eventually came back. Why did they keep trying to take her from me? She's *my* daughter God dammit, let her sleep!

"Shh," I hear from a distance, "It's okay."

Refusing to acknowledge the sound, I struggle to regulate my breathing. But then the voice is there again, followed by a soft touch and despite the circumstances it eased me. "Open your eyes for me, Bet," he urges me, "I got you."

Slowly opening them, I feel both of his hands on either side of my face and when I can focus my eyes I can see the concern in his.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, "Was I loud?"

"No, babe," he whispers back, "I was nearby."

"I think you should go," I tell him sitting up and wanting my space, "I'll be okay now."

"You asked me to kill you last night," he says very matter of fact. "You ain't okay. You and me are spending the day together, you came here for something, right? Tell me what it is and we'll go do it."

“I came here to make a decision,” I admit looking for blankets to eliminate the chill, “But I don’t think I’m strong enough to do it myself.”

“You ain’t gonna do that holed up in a hot room,” he says stealing the blanket back, “You came to find answers but found me instead. Gotta tell ya, it’s your lucky day. I mean really Bet, it could be worse.”

“How so?”

“You could be ugly.”

I couldn’t help it, I started to laugh. Glancing up at him I can’t help but appreciate his humor during a humorless time. This was a man that was always sure of himself. Yet I was a woman who wasn’t sure of anything, especially when it came to why I’m still here.

“That a girl,” he says kissing my forehead. Just that simple gesture turns my laughter to tears. Tenderness wasn’t an emotion that I’ve felt in six long years and I wasn’t sure how to handle it now. Who knew a stranger kissing my forehead would reduce me to a heap of tears? “Whoa now, none of that. Your girl would have been eight today, right? I don’t know shit about kids. What do you get an eight year old for her for birthday?”

“I don’t know, Rio,” I whisper, “Probably anything she wanted.”

“Let’s get our bikes, head into town and grab your girl some birthday shit.”

“What---”

“I wasn’t asking,” he says pulling me straight out of bed and standing me up. “You got ten minutes. I’d start with brushing those teeth.”

When he leaves I stand there completely uncertain. First, I couldn’t believe I was functioning. Second, I couldn’t believe I was getting dressed but mostly... I couldn’t believe I was looking forward to it. Before my time was up, I ran into the bathroom and brushed my teeth twice.

Two hours later, we had managed to hit almost every shop and I had only side-swiped one person with my bike. Now we were eating lunch at the Pink Pony, side by side. In my back pack were gifts I thought any eight year old would love, but mainly I knew mine would have. Indie may have only been a toddler but she had the eyes of someone who had been here before. My daughter was an old soul, like my mother. Thinking of what life

would be like if I'd made dinner at home that night or picked Indie up as planned, always stays with me. Though I can't change the past, I'm not convinced I have much in store for the future. That thought brings me full circle to the wolf in sheep's clothing eating a burger like it's his last meal.

Here we sit together yet we didn't say much at all, he was a stranger and I was a mess. Although I was grateful for what he did for me today, I knew it was because he felt sorry for me. Since that night, anyone's that approached me their first words were always, "I'm sorry for your loss." Maybe they were sorry for my loss, I was just sorry I wasn't in the car too.

Guilt assaulted me when I hadn't considered his reasons for being here with me. I was selfish and I was dragging him down in my misery. When people say misery loves company, they mean it. You want to spread it, let others know that you're suffering and you want to lash out that they aren't miserable too. For some strange reason he took the edge off my annual pity party but what did I know? I tuned out humanity years ago. More than that, when it came to people I was out of touch. I no longer knew how to relate with them on a personal level, I simply didn't want to. I allowed myself two days a year to fall apart, just two. Tomorrow I would put the walls back up and shove on until I end things but he doesn't know that.

"Rio," I start, "I wanted to say thank you for the last two days."

"It's no---"

"Please," I ask setting my drink down, "Let me finish." When he nods I do. "I used to be fun, believe it or not. But life has a way of sucking the fun out of you, I guess. Normally, for these two days I drink myself pretty much unconscious. But this year I tried something different. I tried facing it. It's obvious though, without you that wouldn't have happened. As much as I enjoy your company, the kiss I forced on you, and the offer I had no right making, you came here for your own reasons. Please accept my apology for ruining your trip. Is there anything I can do to make it up to you?"

"Glad you asked," he says smiling. As far as smiles go, his is sinister and charming all at once and I responded to it. "Need you to have dinner with me tonight, in public with you in a dress."

"Are you hard of hearing? I was letting you off the hook. You know I'm fucked up, why would you even ask?"

“Cause I bet you could make hearts stop in a dress.”

“Oh,” I mumble, “I uh---”

“Got visions of you in a dress,” he says staring at me, totally unaware of how off-kilter I’m feeling. “Probably don’t even need the dress since my heart stops every time you look at me.”

“Rio---”

“Fuck,” he laughs despite my resistance. “You wear a dress for me; I’d probably drop dead with a smile on my face.”

“I don’t get you. You want to go on a date with *me*?”

“I think you’re quicker when you drink,” he says taking my hand and kissing my inner wrist. No one has ever kissed my wrist before and I melted. “Fuck yeah, I wanna go on a date with you.”

“I don’t understand why?” I insist.

“Put the fucking dress on and find out.”

Now I’ve been asked out before. Granted, in the past I’ve always said no or played the widow card and men quickly backed off. But Rio isn’t asking me out, he’s telling me out. No one tells me to do anything and I should be furious that’s he’s doing it right now. Still the words are stuck. Why won’t my mouth work? No. It’s a simple word. Say it, Bet.

But I didn’t say it.

I nodded my agreement instead.

R i o

The woman was having a meltdown.

These walls are paper thin. I can hear her pacing, swearing and tossing shit around the room. No doubt my challenge was freaking her out. She wasn't one to back down from a challenge and I knew that, which is why I did it. What I didn't know was how someone who was dealt such a shit hand managed anything. Yeah, she had a day or two of losing it but fuck, who wouldn't? Given the circumstances, I shouldn't be playing with fire like this but I can't help it. I'm a fucking moth to her flame. Never have I been this attracted or this in tune with a female but she's magnetic. It's not just lust either; it's full on wake up in the morning attraction. She's all the things a woman is supposed to be in my eyes.

I didn't care about her baggage, even though she had more bags of it than she could carry. There was something happening here and it wasn't betrayal, it was... chemistry. It's was explosive.

Telling her out felt right. Yeah, I wanted her to feel better but I truly wanted a night with her. No way I was asking her. Asking meant she had a choice. Asking meant she could say no, I'd have to accept that, which obviously wasn't going to happen. Bet wasn't used to taking orders, she was used to giving them. Only with me that won't work. Around her my body and my mind were in a constant state of all things, Bet Lennox. For the first time in my adult life I wanted to know a woman before I fucked her. My dick wasn't in charge and I wasn't being led around by it for a change. Now that's some new shit that I didn't want to look into real hard.

Of all the things I did right, what I shouldn't have done was respond to Adrian asking me if I had her yet. I told him I was close, he told me to get her back here or he'd send someone else. That freaked me out so I assured



him I was making progress. When he said she's a just a rich whore, I ground my molars. Asking him why he wanted her so bad, he growled his answer. "That bitch has me by the balls, get her here, Rio 'cause if I don't get my balls back I'll take yours."

After he hangs up on me, I took a shot at looking her up. Adrian doesn't make threats lightly. Although he doesn't scare me in the least, he has a hard-on for her and I wanted to know why. I had a hard-on for her myself and I found I didn't care for competition. I also detected a note of fear in his voice which was a first because Adrian fears nothing. Typing her name in, instantly I'm flooded with pages and pages about her. First she was the heiress, then mogul and now the widow. She only hinted at her past but reading this more closely, I can feel myself getting depressed. Take all the nasty shit that had happened to her and set it aside. Bet Lennox wasn't just rich, she was elite. The woman had it all financially but lost it all emotionally. She was beyond rich yet slept without air conditioning. The circles she ran in called her a social recluse but a shrewd business woman. The media says she is generous but distant, they also said she used to be outgoing and a staple in the city when she had her family. Now they say she's mean, greedy and reclusive because of it. Thing is, I ain't known her long, but I do know they ain't got a fucking clue about this woman.

She bought her deceased daughter birthday gifts but gave them away to kids on the street. She slept with her daughter's blanket, wore store bought clothes and drank cheap wine out of the bottle. She was a woman trying to figure it out after an epic loss. Now Adrian wants to fuck with her too, and I needed to find a way to stop him.

Shutting my phone off, I'm startled by a knock on my door. Looking at the clock on the nightstand, she only took thirty minutes to get ready. Swallowing hard, I had to guess she was backing out because women don't get ready that quick and that bummed me the fuck out. "Hi," she says with a small smile. As for me, I had shit to say. There she was, in silver heels, a black strappy dress that hinted at her cleavage and wearing soft pink lip gloss. Knowing words wouldn't work; I take her tiny face in my rough hands and kiss her softly on the mouth.

"Hi," I moan into her mouth. "Thought you were gonna bail."

“I wanted to,” she admits quietly. Then looking me dead in the eyes she kisses me this time and whispers, “But I wanted to see you more.”

Taking her hand, I link my fingers with hers and together we walk toward the main dining room and wait for a table. Requesting an outdoor table to see the water, we’re ushered back and shown to a table on the patio. She glances around then looks at me. “It’s just us,” she muses, “The island must not be busy on Sundays.”

“Wouldn’t matter who was here,” I tell her, “All I care about is sitting right in front of me.”

“In that case, I won’t warn you about my behavior.”

She isn’t shy or afraid of compliments and I dig that about her. Women for me were a way to pass the time, scratch an itch and let’s be honest, shoot my load. But this woman ain’t like the others. She’s real, even if she is fucked up. Hell, I’m fucked up too considering I’m getting paid to essentially abduct her but I asked her out on a date. I can’t worry about that now, right now I have this beauty all alone and I wanted two things.

I knew if I played my cards right, I’d get both.

Told you I worked for a bookie for fifteen years, if I know anything it’s my odds.

During dinner I decided that the way to a man’s heart, my heart, was the ego. Making her laugh went from a goal to a mission. When Bet truly let go she’d catch herself laughing like it was a miracle it was happening. Several times she covered her mouth or looked around like she was going to get rolled for being happy. Taking her hands in mine to keep her from hiding it, I wowed her with joke after joke until her face was beet red and she started to hiccup.

For me, it was the best night of my life, so far.

# Bet

Dinner was easy and it was...fun. Rio made it a personal mission to make me laugh. Turns out, once I got going I couldn't seem to stop. At first, the sound of my own laughter caught me off guard but then little by little it got easier. Not only was he genuinely hilarious, he was the most authentic person I've ever met. He didn't have an agenda, at least not one known to me yet. For now, we were simply two people enjoying each other's company and I didn't want it to end.

I made the difficult decision to sip on my wine because I was determined to have a clear head when I asked him to fuck me. Not make love to me, but to fuck me. I hadn't made love since I was married and I wouldn't again. Fucking had no feelings involved. I could be as rough as I wanted, as loud as I wanted and I could make him leave afterward.

Rio didn't want someone like me long term and I told myself I didn't want him for more than a night. Let's face it, I'm young, emotionally unavailable, a sure thing and he has no idea who I really am. I knew I was lying to myself but I was okay with that too. Lying to myself has gotten me this far, and I wasn't looking to fix what was already broken. I've accepted my lot, mostly. When this trip was over, I would remember him as the man who brought me back when I was at my lowest and be grateful. He didn't know I was leaving tomorrow; there was no reason to tell him. He wasn't mine; I wasn't his and tonight was all we were going to get.

He broke through my thoughts when he offered me his hand. Looking at it, then at him, he stands up and says, "Dance with me."

There was no dance floor, or even any music for that matter. He didn't seem to care and right now dancing with him was the only thing I wanted.

Pulling me to him, I wrap my hands around his neck without thought. In return he wraps his hands around my waist allowing one hand to rest on my ass. Slowly we start to move, following his lead I smile at how graceful he is.

“You do this often,” I comment.

“You’re the first,” he says squeezing me tighter.

“I don’t believe you,” I accuse. “You’re too good at this.”

“What if I told you the only dancing I did with a woman was between the sheets, or up against a wall. Maybe even the bathroom if I was in a pinch.”

“I’d believe you. Although, the bathroom is way over there.” I motion with my free hand.

“Where could I take *you*? And don’t say the bathroom. You’re too good for a fuck in the shitter.” he whispers in my ear.

Sinking my hands in his hair, I lean up to get close to his ear. “You could take me here with these people watching if you wanted to. I’m good to fuck anywhere.”

“You’d let me?”

Reaching my hands down, placing one on his ass and the other on his cock, I smile up at him. “Oh, I’d let you.” Dipping me back and running his finger between my breasts I can feel the desire building. It hurts it’s so strong. I needed to fuck this man, this stranger, the one in between jobs. I’d allow him to fuck the hurt away and when it was over I’d go back to existing with at least a good memory as a buffer.

“Why would you let me? I’m nobody.”

“Neither am I,” I assure him. “We don’t need a reason to fuck. It’s what we both want, Rio. I can feel it. You strike me as a man who likes to take a woman to the brink, test her, and bend her to your will. I can feel it in you, I’ll let you take me but I’ll make you work for it. You don’t have the ability to break what’s already broken. You’ll have free reign with me. Fuck me tonight and I’ll ruin you for other women, I promise.” when he stays silent I push harder because I know he’s devouring my words. “After tonight every women you bend over, make scream your name and leave

your mark on, it's me you'll remember. We won't be able to forget each other and you know it."

"Tonight is all you'll give me?"

"Yes," I admit. "Tonight is all you'll give me, too. I'm not meant for you, though there's a part of me that wishes I was. Give me tonight, Rio. Whatever you want to give me, I promise you, I can take it. But I won't stick around after."

"What if---"

"I'm giving you permission to use me. That's it. I'm not offering my heart, because I don't have one to give you."

"Whatever I want?" he groans pulling me back to the table where he throws cash down. Grabbing the bottle, we take it with us as he leads us down the stairs toward the water. Rounding a set of bushes, we're shrouded in total darkness, minus the glow of the moon.

"Whatever you want," I confirm taking his mouth hard. It's a basic fact when a woman offers a man no holds barred sex that it's not too often he'll turn it down. When that same woman offers a man total control of her, she knows that he won't say no.

He can't.

Attacking me with his hands, he spins me around with my back at his front. "I'm gonna fuck you stupid," he growls into my neck.

"Never heard that one before," I groan when he pinches my nipples.

"No?" he asks pulling my hair. "Never had a man fuck you so good your IQ drops twenty points?"

"Are you telling me that it's possible? That you've done this?" I reply pulling his hair in return.

"The women in the past didn't have twenty to spare, Bet," he says grinding into me, "If there's a woman who needs to lose a few brain cells it's you."

"Another first then?"

"Yeah, now shut up," he orders me, "and show me your tits."

Doing as I was told, I slipped my straps down exposing my tits to the cold air. For the first time in six years, I wasn't freezing. The opposite actually, I was on fire and I liked the heat.

"Pinch 'em," he orders again.

"Like this?" I ask twisting each nipple. "Don't go quiet on me now, Rio. Break me."

He was watching me with hawk-like eyes. He was speechless, breathing heavy and he was savagely beautiful. For a moment I was worried he lost his nerve until he grabbed my hair, took my mouth and bit my tongue extremely hard.

Oh yeah, he wants to fuck.

Told ya.

Rio

*Don't go quiet on me now, Rio. Break me.*

Fuck, I can't say no to her, but for the first time in my life I don't just want to fuck someone. I mean yeah, I want to fuck her but I don't want it to be a one-time thing. She meant it too, after tonight she'd be done and I'd have to betray her sooner. I didn't want to betray her yet, I didn't want to betray her at all. I wanted her to want me. If she wanted me like I want her, it'd buy me more time to figure out how to rid both of us of Adrian while making her fall for me.

All them years I was blinded by Rion's light. Wanting just a bit of it to shine on me, maybe heal me. But it wasn't the light I needed, it was the dark. Because the dark was what I was made of, it's what I understood. Like me, Bet had a taste of the light. She knew what it felt like but she knows she ain't ever getting it back neither. Bet said fuck the light and stayed in the shadows. I admired that.

She wasn't an evil person. That's not what the darkness was about. Her light was stolen like mine was. Years of watching my old man beat my mother while she took it ruined me at an early age. He fucked other women, flaunted it in front of her so to spite him she killed herself. That fucked my old man up. Fucked me up too, he just didn't give a shit and left me to fend for myself. Sick of being poor, I started stealing. It didn't take me long to get good at it, turns out I had a knack. When my old man died I stole some more. At the height of my success stealing for Adrian, I was busted, looking at a serious sentence and offered a second chance by Rion's old man, Senior, instead of jail time. Instantly, I had a family and I fell for her brand of happy. Everyone called her Junior and I did too, to her face. For a minute

I called her Princess but she shut that down. Senior and Junior (both named Rion) took me in when no one else would have me.

All them years, I loved her.

She didn't love me back.

But as I watch Bet tweak her nipples because I demanded it, not for the first time I had to wonder if I really loved Rion or if I had my feelings mixed up. The thought of Rion doing this right now actually made my dick deflate. The day I said fuck it and kissed her, it pissed me off because it didn't do shit for me but I had convinced myself it would. For years I told myself I loved her, that she was the one. I'm thinking now that I did love her, still do love her but I'm not *in* love with her. Because the feelings Bet stirred in me, no other woman ever has.

Especially, Rion.

Regardless of Bet thinking she didn't have a heart, I knew she did. You could see it in everything she did. Bet was just lost and empty. She just needed the right man to fill her back up again. That man was me.

"Lay down," I order her. When she does, I watch as she opens her legs and crooks her finger. "Wider," I tell her. When she complies, I run my finger up one side of her panties then softly over her slit. "Lock your knees up."

When she does, I hook her legs over my shoulders and bury my face between her legs. Going down ain't my usual preference 'cause you never know what you're going to get. When you whore yourself out like I did, the odds were never in my favor so I kept my head above water so to speak. But with Bet it was raw, it was filthy and it was pure sin.

"I need more tongue," she pants sinking her hands in the grass. Gently biting down on her pussy lip she bucks her hips. "Shit Rio!" she screams and I'm rewarded for it when I can taste her.

"Again," I order her. She lifts her hips up while riding out her orgasm and I dig my fingers into her while I suck her down my throat. She's not even trying to be quiet and I loved that she didn't give a fuck. Right now, I'd give my left nut for an audience for this show.

Licking my lips, her legs drop and I crawl up to her. Kissing her, she sucks my tongue and mutters an "Mmm," while she lifts my shirt up, which



sets me off when she scratches me. Then she gently runs her finger over the stitches in my side and pauses. Shit, I forgot about those.

“Later you’ll tell me what happened, yes?”

“Yeah,” I groan. “Need to fuck you now.”

“Fuck my mouth first,” she says reaching for me. With quick fingers she has my dick out and her mouth on it in record time. Falling to my back she grips my balls and takes me long and deep. I can feel it rising too fast to stop it. Throwing her off me, I put her on her hands and knees, spreading her apart and without warning, I shove my dick in hard. Buried deep, I slap her ass and watch as she fucks me with my hands anchoring her. “You want this pussy bad don’t you?” she asks me.

“Too late,” I warn her, “Already got it. Now I’m going to tear it apart.”

“Do your worst,” she groans while her ass bounces in my hands.

So I fucking did.

# Bet

I was technically a virgin when I met Alan. I had one stupid fuck up before we were married and I've never forgotten that nightmare. I was reminded of it when I closed my eyes and heard his voice. Every time I try and figure out how it happened, I vomit at the memory. I never told Alan the truth, I couldn't. As far as he was concerned I was pure on our wedding night. In my heart, I was, so I didn't break his with the truth. Since Alan, I've been with countless men. Though I can't remember their names, I know after tonight there was one name I would never forget.

Rio.

A man whose last name I don't know, a past I know nothing about; yet he has me coming repeatedly. He commands my body with aggression making me *feel*. Feeling anything scares me because I vowed not to, but I can't hide from this. He spanks me hard but not too hard, he kisses me so deep I can suck his entire tongue inside my mouth, he pulls my hair to anchor me and he's currently fucking the hell out of me.

Coming again, I couldn't even scream with it. I simply closed my eyes and let the pleasure run its course. When he begins to fuck me with force, my knees give out and he follows me down but never stops. Lightning cracks somewhere in the distance or maybe it was us. For me it didn't matter. Him inside of me, owning me... even if it was just for tonight, mattered.

"This is the tightest pussy I've ever fucked," he yells out. The declaration shocks me considering I'm a bit of a whore, but his dick is huge and I was positive that played a role.

“Fuck it harder then,” I yell back, needing one more orgasm. He does but not hard enough. “God dammit, Rio! I said *harder!*”

Something in him snapped. Grabbing my hair again, he pulls my head back hard and growls in my ear. “One time ain’t gonna be enough,” he says pumping into me. “You want it? You’ll have to fuck me again to get it.”

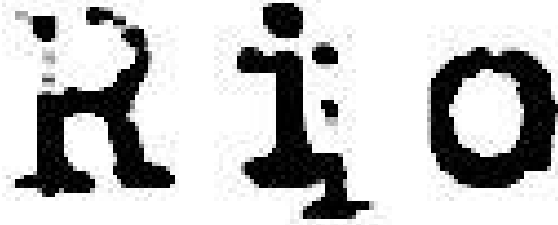
Staying silent because his words terrified me, he gives me a taste of what he’s holding back from me. Screaming from the orgasm that snuck up on me, he bites down on my shoulder then challenges me again. “I’m gonna fill that pussy up right. When we get back, I’m gonna tie you down, gag you, then fuck you until you beg for me to stop. Think I’m kidding?” he asks but before I can say or do anything he raises me back up and fucks me so hard my eyes cross.

“I ain’t kidding.”

True to his word, he wasn’t kidding. The next several minutes were of him destroying me both physically and emotionally. He talked me through it, using the right amount of filth to keep me on the edge. When he tensed up and pulled my head back again, I knew he was going to come and I knew it would be electric. Kissing me deep and rough, he filled me up right as promised and when it was over, I was face first in the grass with a smile on my face.

If this was holding back I was going to need a lot of wine, maybe some aspirin and definitely a visit to the chiropractor to survive the next encounter.

And there would be a next encounter, Rio just guaranteed it.



We were both shaken.

Sitting alone in my room, I didn't object when she said nothing and bolted for her own. Fuck if I knew what just happened. If she needed to get her head right, I couldn't blame her because mine was currently a fucking mess. When I walked in, there was a note under the door and I ignored it. I had bigger things to work through than give a shit about what was on that paper. In my life I ain't never fucked a woman like that. No holds barred, rough and filthy. I wanted to, but I never found one that I wanted to be around for more than ten minutes. She wanted harder, I gave her harder but not my hardest. Every man has that point where he knows it can go from rough to straight up abuse if he wasn't careful. That line between pleasure and punishment. She wanted that, she was gonna ask for it. For me to unleash on her full force, I needed to know she was down for it. Say what you want, but I knew she wanted me to hurt her and I wasn't sure I was able to be that guy.

We fucked outdoors, in the God damn shrubbery. Never once did she say no, beg me to stop, or run away crying. The opposite happened; she said yes, begged me to do it harder, not to stop and when it was over? She fucking purred.

After I helped her up, I didn't even have time to get the shit out of her hair because the sky opened up on us. She didn't make a run for it though; instead she tilted her tiny face up to the sky and closed her eyes. A crack of lightning had me taking her hand and pulling her back to the cottage. She may not care about her personal safety but I did. Now she's over there and I'm over here. Do I knock on her door? Apologize? I didn't know but when there was a knock on my door, I supposed my question had been answered.

Opening it up, she's standing there bare foot in her robe looking innocent when the grass stains on my jeans say otherwise. With a bottle of wine in her hand, she looks up at me and whispers, "Hi."

Pulling her inside I take the bottle, set it on the table and push her up against the wall. She doesn't protest, instead she pushes me back to where I'm against the wall. I almost laughed because she's maybe five foot four and I'm six three but she's mighty strong for a little thing and I dug that too.

"Is that offer still on the table?" she asks reaching boldly into my boxers.

"Which offer?" I groan as she strokes me.

"The one where you tie me up, gag me and fuck me until I beg you to stop."

"You ain't one to beg are you, little Bet?"

Squeezing my dick hard, she bites my nipple then licks the sting away. "No," she whispers, "I'm not. Not usually anyway."

"You want me to change your mind then?"

"Yes," she says jerking me off. "More than anything, I'd like you to try."

Lifting her up I take her to the bed. Most of what I said was bullshit, right? I didn't travel with ropes and shit, but I could fuck her like we both wanted. She shocks me though when she removes the cloth belt from her robe.

"Here," she says handing it to me. "Show me what you've got."

Sweating a little, I assess the situation. It's true I wanted to do these things, I just never have. Especially with someone as sexually open as she was. In the past, shocking women was easy, too easy. Most would back down with explicit dirty talk but not her. She watches me, waiting to see what I'd do next. Truth was, I didn't know.

"Another first?" she asks calling me out on it. "It is for me too, but we can figure it out. Start with tying my hands together." She instructs crawling back onto the bed. Doing as she says, I wrap her tiny wrists up and immediately she starts to squirm.

"Hurry," she moans, "I need you to fuck me, Rio."

Squaring the knot up, she falls back onto the pillow and opens her legs. “Stuff something into my mouth,” she moans. “As long as it’s not underwear. I don’t care, just do it.”

“Shit,” I growl looking for something to use. Running to the bathroom I grab a wash cloth, dampen it up and when she nods, I fill her mouth with it. “This is gonna be rough,” I warn her. “Ain’t never fucked like this before, you sure ‘bout this?”

She nods enthusiastically and I waste no time, getting inside those thighs. Opening her up with my fingers she hooks her bound wrists around my neck pulling herself up to watch me enter her. With her eyes on me and mine on her pussy, I slide my dick inside but I don’t let it rest there. No, I swing her legs over my forearms and start fucking her as hard as humanly possible. Her moans through the cloth are hot but it’s her God damn eyes that almost have me coming. Her eyes dare me to split her in half or break my dick trying.

Sitting back on my heels, I pull her up while still keeping her legs anchored over my arms. Using my strength, I lift her up then slam her back down. I managed this for several minutes until my arms threatened to give out. Turning her onto her stomach, I lift her up and without words or niceties, I literally fuck her right off the God damn bed. When she hits the floor, I cover her with my body and fuck her again. She screams, she thrashes but she never begs.

Perfect.

Just as I’m about to come I grab her face, tear the cloth away and suck her tongue to keep from scaring the neighbors. Fire blazes through my balls, up my shaft and explodes into her. Biting down on my lip, she lets out the most erotic scream I’ve ever heard. Watching her pant and attempt to get her bearings, my dick continues to throb like a bitch but fuck if it’ll go down. Refusing to pass this rare opportunity by because I haven’t been this horny since I was in my twenties, I’m the first to stand. Picking her up, laying her back on the bed and turning her onto her side I move in and out of her just as hard but at an even pace. This time neither of us are frantic. We don’t speak, we aren’t as rushed and as far as I was concerned we weren’t done either.

After this, I was keeping her.

When I came again, which was a record I wanted to tell the world about, I cracked the bottle open and met her in the hot tub when she was ready. It didn't bother me she was quiet; I imagine she has a lot on her mind. The one thing that bugged me though was wondering if she compared me to her dead husband, and since I have no manners I asked her. "You thinking about how he used to fuck you?"

Closing her eyes, she whispers "No, Rio, I wasn't. But thank you for the reminder that he's dead and I'm still here."

"I didn't mean it to come out like that," I admit handing her a glass, "Was it good with him?"

"He was my true first," she says taking it from me, "Had he not died, he would have been my only, too."

"You married young."

"Very young," she smiles, "At least it felt that way."

"Was he good to you?"

"Alan was gentle. That's the best way I can describe him. He didn't raise his voice, he didn't give orders and he certainly didn't fuck. I wouldn't find out what being fucked was about until he left me behind."

"He a good dad?"

When she chokes up, I pull her across the tub into my lap. Ain't easy hearing about another man, but this Alan sounded like a good guy. Also sounds like Bet used to be a good girl, too. Funny how shit works. Here I was with a beautiful woman in my lap and I worried about competing with the deceased. Then I realized the woman in this tub was who I was meant to meet. Not young Bet, but mature Bet.

"He was a great dad," she says whimpering into my neck. "And I miss him."

"You're always gonna miss him, Bet."

"If I was in a better place, at another time I'd want to have a chance at making you happy, Rio. Unfortunately for us, this is it."

"Running already?"

"No," she says kissing my neck. "Not running. Just being realistic."

“Cause I ain’t worth a shit? ‘Cause I don’t run in your circles?”

“It saddens me that you think this is about money,” she says pulling away. “It makes me mad that you took the time to search my name when I know nothing of yours. It pisses me off that you thought you had a right! I don’t give a fuck about that money! I had to lose them to get it, asshole! You’ve got me all figured out, do you? The poor rich widow? Well fuck you, stranger. You don’t know shit.”

Reaching for her to apologize, she slaps my hands away and storms out of my room naked. Slamming the door to her own, I can hear her moving around. Getting out of the tub and taking a chair I hold my breath waiting for her to come out. Minutes later she does, and I lean on the fence placing my hand there again.

“I’m sorry, little Bet,” I tell her, “I fucked up.”

I swore I could feel her on the other side, but I must have been mistaken because seconds later I heard the door click and I let my hand fall. Feeling the loss of her, I grab my phone to call Rion. Taking off on her was a dick move but a week ago. I felt like I had no other choice. Now knowing for sure my feelings were misplaced, I owed her an apology at the very least.

“Rio?” she asks on the first ring.

“Hey, Junior,” I say sitting at the table, “How are things?”

With her, talk was easy. She always had so much to fucking say. Hearing her voice helped too. Hearing about all things Loyal wasn’t gut-wrenching and she when told me she missed me, I told her I missed her too. When she said she loved me, I said I loved her too.

Only difference was, now I knew *why* I loved her. I loved her because she was my family and after meeting Bet, I knew the difference between the two.

Rion would always be a family, Bet though...



# Bet

Hearing him call me little Bet crushed me. It hurt because despite his apology, he didn't know me. Even after I told him about my family, that I was trying to find myself again, he brought up the fucking money. Throwing all my shit in my bag, which I'll admit wasn't much I storm back out to the deck to say something, goodbye maybe? Thanks for the fuck? When I heard him speaking to someone on the phone I knew right away it was a woman. His tone was different, he sounded loving, soothing and lighter to me. Whoever she was made Rio happy, something I didn't have it in me to do. Backing away, I stand between the deck and the door when I hear him say he loves and misses her.

Heart in my throat, I debate grabbing the paper that was left under the door to write him a note. Instead of doing something stupid because I had nothing to say, I quietly grab my bag and room key closing the door behind me. Wiping my eyes, I make my way toward reception. The walk I found peaceful on the way up, I found wet and dreadful on the way down. Stopping once to catch my breath, I want to smack myself for even considering getting invested in him. He could be fucking married for all I know. The thought of him having a wife at home gave me the energy I needed to get the fuck off this island.

"The last ferry," I say to the woman behind the counter, "When is it?"

"I'm sorry," she says, "Due to inclement weather the ferry isn't scheduled to run until at least Tuesday. We've been evacuating the island all day today. Didn't you get the note?"

Blinking at her, I'm at a total loss. "Note? No, I didn't get a note." I argue. "What's it going to take to get me a pilot?"

“A pilot ma’am?”

“I’m twenty-nine years old,” I growl. “I am not a fucking ma’am. A pilot for a helicopter, get me one.”

“Have you looked outside?”

“I just walked here in it,” I say raising my voice again, “Clearly I’m aware of the weather.” When she looks uncomfortable I feel like an asshole, this storm wasn’t nor was my meltdown her fault.

Switching tactics, again I ask her, “I’ll need another room then, any room just not one in the Straits Cottages.”

When she looks like she may cry, I let my head hit the counter. Tucking my face into the nook of my arm I whisper. “Please tell me I can get another room, any room. I’m not picky.”

“I’m s-sorry,” she stutters.

“Oh come on! This cannot be my life right now!” I yell in a rare form of anger. Scooping up my bag and walking right back out into the rain, swearing my ass off, I can’t dial it down. Bypassing the Straits, I soak myself to hit the island party store to buy wine, rum and cigarettes. Thirty minutes and possible pneumonia later, I’m standing in front of my door again.

“I just want to disappear,” I whisper to the hideous green door.

“Bet?” he says coming from his own room and standing next to me. “Where the fuck were you!”

Closing my eyes, I let me forehead hit the door again and wonder when I’m going to wake up from this nightmare. Even from here he smells good, he smells like chlorine and pussy. *My pussy.* Jealousy was at war within me even when it held no place. I belonged nowhere.

“Answer me,” he growls, getting in my face. “I’ve been worried God dammit.”

Turning myself to face him I ask him, “Why?”

“The fuck do you mean, why? Get in here before you get sick.”

Pulling away, I reach for my own door. “No thanks, Rio,” I tell him. “I’ve got big plans.” Taking my key from me, he opens my door dragging

me behind him. I was so emotionally exhausted, I didn't even have it in me to find the humor in this. Here we were, two idiots stuck together in a storm. I was the idiot who fucked a potentially married man and he was the idiot who assumed I'd let him do it again. Grabbing the bag he looks inside and makes a noise of disgust. "Gonna get drunk again? Need it to forget me is that it?"

"Huh?"

"You drunk right now?"

"No," I growl. "I'm not drunk, yet. I've been gone a half hour, Rio."

When he finally notices my bag on my shoulder, he takes it, throws it then has me pressed against the wall. "You were gonna fucking leave me?"

"I---"

"You what?"

"I---"

"Say it, you fucking coward!"

Choking on another sob, I allow my head to fall forward to hide my face. "I came out to say goodbye and heard you on the phone with what sounded like a woman."

"Fuck!"

"So I forewent the goodbye because it didn't seem to matter anymore."

"Then why the fuck were you standing at your God damn door soaking wet?" he yells in my face.

"Because the island is fucking closed and we're stuck here until further notice, you fucking twat!" I yell back in his.

Stumbling back he runs his hand over his face and sits on the bed. "You would have left," he says quietly, "after hearing one side of a phone call? You'd have fucking bailed on me?"

"You sounded happy," I defend. "You deserve to be, so yes, I would have left because I can't offer you happy. Pretty sure I made it clear I can't offer you anything. I hope whoever that was on the phone *can*."

"That phone call was to a friend I owed an apology to. A friend that I *do* love and miss. I also treated her like shit when she didn't deserve it. A

friend that was fucking hospitalized after some crazy asshole took her, beat her and carved his God damn name in her chest and I couldn't help her in time! She's the only family I got!"

"You love her," I defend because I heard it; I know what infatuation fucking sounds like. "It's okay to say it, I won't---"

"My feelings were mixed up alright! I'm not in love with her for the last fucking time!"

"Bullshit!" I yell. "You're telling me that wasn't the real you on the phone?"

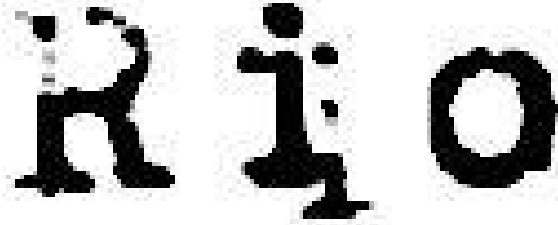
In a blink he grabs me, crushes his mouth over mine and growls into it. "*This* is the real me, the guy who fucked you three inches into the dirt. The same guy who tied you up and fucked you off the bed onto the floor!"

"I like that guy," I moan into his mouth. "Just be real with me, Rio, I don't have any expectations."

"Maybe I do," he says pulling my wet clothes off, a piece at a time. "Turns out after meeting you I got a lot of 'em. Good thing we got more time."

Once I'm naked, I start to shiver violently. When he notices, he takes his own clothes off and wraps himself around me. Crawling into bed together, we didn't fuck. Instead we touched a lot and listened to the rain fall in buckets outside. The lightning illuminates the room and the thunder shakes the windows. Despite all the reasons being here with him wouldn't work, I fall asleep on his shoulder with one hand over his heart and the other on his cock.

It's the best night's sleep I'd had in six years.



Waking up with Bet on top of me wasn't my idea of a bad morning. She's the first female I've ever spent the night with and instead of running for the door, I gripped her a little tighter. No nightmares plagued her, we spoke no words and I kept my dick in my pants. Yes, I plan to get back in that pussy soon, but for now we're stuck indoors and the two of us have some shit to talk about. How I'm going to get her to explain her relationship to Adrian without pissing her off or tipping her off, I wasn't sure, but I had to figure this shit out fast. Had the island not shut down, she would have left me. I needed her to want to stay and was thanking God for the shit storm currently holding us hostage. Had she gone and left, I would have lost it. The thought of losing her made me anxious. The thought of Adrian catching up to her terrified me. Without me there to protect her, he would crush her.

Adrian and I have a dark past, he's saved my ass countless times and there's some loyalty there, but there ain't no way I'm putting her in a position for him to harm her. I use the word loyalty lightly. Adrian is the prince of blackmail. He used his dirt on me to bring me to heel once and once was enough. He uses blackmail to get shit done and it never bothered me, until now.

Feeling her skin against mine has my body humming. Convincing her to take a shot on a nobody like me is gonna take some serious effort. That meant treating her as more than a fuck. Not that I knew what that meant, but I was hoping she could give me a few pointers. Hell, she was married once, she'd know.

"Good morning," she says into my neck. Squeezing her ass as a means of getting closer, I tell her "Morning to you too, why are you hiding from me?"

Lifting her head up, she floors me with her smile and bright eyes. “I wasn’t hiding,” she says wiggling on top of me, “I was savoring.”

“Savoring?” I moan, “Me?”

“Yes, you,” she giggles, “Have you seen yourself? You’re fucking beautiful, Rio.”

“I ain’t---”

“You are,” she insists. “Look, we both have issues, right? You can see mine as clearly as I see yours. Although, you know mine; if you never tell me yours, it’s okay. I’ll never tell a soul what I see but just know I *can* see it. You may think I spend my days moping but I am rather perceptive. Just know that I haven’t been in another man’s arms since Alan, this is a major step for me. I don’t know about any of your past relationships but I need you to know that for me---”

“Tell me,” I urge her with my heart pounding in my chest.

Taking a deep breath, she sits up so she’s straddling me. Running her fingers over my chest and stomach she sighs when she answers. “The fact that I’m still here means something, Rio. I’m just afraid to find out what it is.”

“When we get on that ferry, I want you with me, Bet.”

“We’re strangers and there is no way I can promise you that.”

“What can you promise me?”

“That while we’re here on this island, I’ll belong to you and I’ll do whatever it takes to make you happy.”

“You need to know that when we leave this island, I’ll do whatever it takes to keep you.”

Her silence after I drop the bomb doesn’t scare me. In fact, it gave me the opening I needed. Slapping her ass, she giggles and kisses my cheek. “Something wrong with my mouth?”

“Maybe the fact that it smells like shit?”

“Yours don’t?”

“Mine smells like shit *and* the cigarette I smoked. I’m doing you a favor, trust me.”

“Coffee?”

“Is it bad that I love it so much that you even mentioning it almost gave me an orgasm?”

“Coffee, coffee, coffee, coff---”

“Smart ass.”

Climbing off, she struts naked to fetch the cups while my bare ass makes the pot. Not bothering with clothes, we sit in the muggy ass living room drinking it together while the island floods around us. Fuck the heat, seeing her smile was all I needed. Right now, air conditioning was the enemy when the heat kept her naked and this storm as far as I was concerned could go on forever.

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# Bet

For the first time in a long time, I was genuinely happy. Don't get me wrong, the pain was there and I wasn't about to start singing Taylor Swift songs but keeping up with Rio took total concentration. Not only was he disgustingly funny, I couldn't take my eyes off the wrinkles around his eyes. Those are laugh lines and it proves that he's known happiness. As for me, I frown so much I started getting Botox a year ago to hide it.

We sat here butt-naked but the focus wasn't solely our bodies. The desire was there burning slowly but I found getting to know him took priority. He asks me simple questions that I'm happy to answer and I do the same. Running his finger along the inside of my thigh, I shiver before slapping his hand away.

"Your turn," I tell him, "When did you lose your virginity?"

"Seventh grade," he says with a smirk.

"Seventh grade? Your balls couldn't have even dropped by then!"

"So? My dick worked just fine." He smirks even more now when he asks me. "You? Let me guess, prom?"

"Oh fuck you, porn star," I snap while faking hurt and dodging the truth a bit. "Try my wedding night."

"No shit?" he says with a whistle, "Lucky bastard."

"Tell me about her," I say crossing my legs and tucking them beneath me. That, in turn, exposes my pussy which short circuits his brain and it's adorable how quickly he can shift. "Eyes up, stud," I say nudging him. "Rio, tell me about her."



“I told you some already,” he mumbles not wanting to look away. “One day I was facing prison, the next I had a family. Her old man, Senior, made it real clear she was off limits. He offered me a second chance, a chance to be better and I took it. You don’t look the gift of freedom in the mouth, at least a kid like me couldn’t. The second I met them my world righted itself. Right away he gave me his total trust and made me promise to keep her safe. Come to find out he made a bet he thought was a joke but the other guy didn’t. The whole thing started a chain reaction he couldn’t stop.”

“What was the bet?” I ask biting my lip.

“He bet, Rion.”

“He bet his *daughter*?”

“He thought it was a joke,” he reminds me, “Then the other guy started threatening him to hand her over and he made me promise to keep her safe. Not even knowing the full story, I did. All this went down when she was an infant, that’s how fucked up it is. I followed her everywhere she went, we were inseparable. I guess being attached to her and knowing all her shit meant that I loved her. I really thought I did, until I fucked up and kissed her.”

“This is getting good,” I smile. “Then what happened? Don’t leave anything out.”

“Then I didn’t feel what I should have and it pissed me off. I didn’t know what to do about it neither. Her heart belongs to an ex-marine named Loyal and when she was taken, he was the one that saved her. Wish I could hate the guy but he’s some military bad ass and I can’t compete with that. Shit, I tried to be the hero and got stabbed by his fucking brother, of all things. Hence the stellar stitch job.”

“You might just be the most interesting man I’ve ever met. Is it fair to say that maybe you felt like Loyal was taking your place? That maybe, you feel lost now that you aren’t her main focus anymore?”

“When it was happening, no.” he mumbles. Now, yeah.”

“Is she in good hands?”

“Yeah,” he admits. “He’s good people. He’s a total head case but he’d kill for her, I’ve seen it.”

“It’s obvious she loves you and you love her. You’ll always have her, Rio and be grateful that you do. I’ll tell you why. Alan and I met, dated and married. We were so young that our young feelings didn’t have time to mature into more. I was looking forward to growing up and growing old with him. I won’t get that now, but you still have a place in her life. You can still meet someone else and love her.”

“You don’t want me to give up on finding love but you can?”

“You’ve known me days,” I remind him. “You don’t know the depth of the grief I feel. You’ve seen moments of it, but that’s my life every day. That’s why I work so much, I can’t be still or I’ll fall apart. The difference between us is, you *want* to find love, I don’t. When this is over, you have a life to get back to, I don’t. When I get home I won’t have happiness waiting for me, but you do if you’re willing to take it. You have a lot to offer a woman and I’ll be honest, it hurts to say that she won’t be me.”

Just then my phone rang saving me from further explaining myself to him. I wanted to tell him I’d made the decision to end things but I kept it to myself. He’s heard it once already; I didn’t think it bore repeating. Looking down, I stare at the number wondering who it is and if I should answer it. Then I fucked up huge by hitting speaker after it went to voicemail. I may have only known Rio a short time, but the man can go from zero to bat shit in under three seconds.

It was really rather impressive.

Rion

My morning started off strong. Sitting there talking to her, hoping she'd let me stare between her legs until dinner. Then in my world, after dinner that pussy would be dessert. She asked about Rion and I told her. Her view on things was spot on and helped to take some of the sting away. When she said I wanted love and she didn't, I wanted to call bullshit, was even prepared to but, her phone rang before I could.

She frowned before checking the message and tried to shut the speaker off but it was too late. I heard the words and then I even surprised myself when I lost it. The caller kept it short; it wasn't more than five seconds.

*You want to end shit, take another seven days to make certain. In my line of work there are no take backs. You know the number to call when you're ready.*

The fear that swam through my veins was legendary. Not even when Rion was bleeding on that God damn bed did I feel what I felt now. My mind and body went on auto pilot, within seconds I had her up and off that couch pinned the wall.

"Not fucking happening," I yell in her face, "Give me your phone, now."

"If memory serves, I offered you the job, too. You turned it down. I'm not giving you my phone. You can have my body but that's it. I made that clear."

Pulling her away from the wall then slamming her back into it, I had to give her credit she didn't even flinch. Why should she? She didn't give a fuck about anything, especially her own life. "You called a God damn hit man?"

“He came highly recommended,” she says too matter of fact for my liking. “I’m a business woman. Over the years you would be surprised by some people’s professions I support, some are very creative.”

“Jesus I hoped you were being dramatic. This is some whack shit and I forbid it, Bet,” I scream at her while keeping her pinned to the wall.

“You aren’t in a position to forbid anything, Rio.”

Her life was at stake. I knew it, just as I knew for certain she was dead serious (no pun intended). Even the thought of losing her made me break out into a cold sweat. That’s when an idea formed, it was the only option that I had.

“What if I told you I’m not a good person,” I tell her while staring her down. “What if I told you I should have went to prison, deserved to go. What if I told you I’ve taken lives?”

“What if I told you that your past doesn’t matter to me?” she asks quietly. “What if I told you that my life means little? That I don’t want to suffer anymore? There’s a lot of what ifs here, Rio, let me ask you this, what if there is no saving me?”

“I’m going to make you a deal, Bet,” I tell her, still not releasing my grip. Right now this grip was all I had. “Give me those seven days to change your mind. Let me convince you you’re wrong. If I can’t do it, if you can look me in the eyes and tell me you still want to die, I’ll do it myself.”

Without even blinking she looks me straight in the eyes and says, “Deal.”

Leaning down and taking her mouth, she doesn’t hesitate in returning the madness I’m feeling. My concerns were two-fold. The first being I had no fucking clue how I was going to do it. The second being, I wasn’t sure that I could. The woman in my arms believed she didn’t want to live. But the man holding her needed her to live more than anything. Her life was tied to mine and fuck me if I knew why, it just was. Not only did I have Adrian’s shit with her, I had a fucking hit man waiting for her to make the call too.

No, I wasn’t going to kill her, but she doesn’t know that.

She'll never know it either, 'cause I intend to make her too happy to remember she wants anything but me or die trying.

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# Bet

This morning I was able to move money fairly easily. Smart phones should really be called genius phones. All it takes is an app, a Wi-Fi connection and some patience and you can move money anywhere in the world. While Rio is off doing whatever it is Rio does, I tie up loose ends. Making sure my money gets in the right hands isn't difficult, but assigning the bulk of my fortune will be. I'm kicking some ideas around and I have a pretty good feeling about my number one pick. Last night we didn't revisit his offer; instead, we talked more about what he believes made him a bad person. I, of course, didn't buy any of it because I see a goodness in him that he refuses to see in himself.

Granted, I haven't met Rion, but he dedicated years to protecting her. Bad people don't do shit like that. He thinks he can change my mind and I'll admit, I'm an asshole for leading him on. When the time comes, he won't do it and I won't ask him to. I saved the number of the man I will have do it because Rio doesn't need this shit on his conscience. When the seven days are up, I'll walk away on good terms with him never knowing my fate. Covering my tracks won't be easy, but for him I will. No man wants to be the last person a chick nails before she has someone kill her.

Finishing another transfer, I log off and grab the cigarettes off the counter. Heading out to the deck, I light up and stand in the corner where it's a mist versus a soaking. The weather broke only long enough for people to grab some food and then hunker down again. Never in a million years did I ever think I'd like smoking, but I do. It's like a big fuck you to the world, cancer can't take me because I'll be gone before it has the chance. It's like my own private joke with the universe, but I'm morbid enough to know I'm the only one laughing. When I hear the door open my heart skips a beat.

Ignoring it, I act as if his presence doesn't affect me. He wants seven days to save my life; I wanted seven days to change his.

"You make smoking sexy," he says from the door holding a coffee in his hand.

"Do I?" I laugh, "And here I thought the coughing and bad breath were kind of a turn off."

"Make sure this tastes right," he says handing me the cup, "If it don't, I'll get you another one."

Taking a sip, I moan my approval. Setting the cup down and flicking the cigarette, I pull him toward me. "The coffee is good," I whisper, "But you taste better."

"You need to fuck, little Bet?"

"You offering to fuck me, Rio?"

"Let me make love to you instead."

"No," I stand firm. "We can fuck, or you find someone else to---"

"You gave me the days," he says biting my neck. "If I want to make love to you, you're gonna let me. Ain't no way you make all the rules. You scared that you might let me in, little Bet, is that it?"

"I see you like challenges," I tell him. "But this isn't a challenge. You have enough obstacles in your way as it is, making love to me isn't a concession I'm willing to make. I don't care how good you fuck me, it won't happen."

"We'll see."

"No, Rio, we won't."

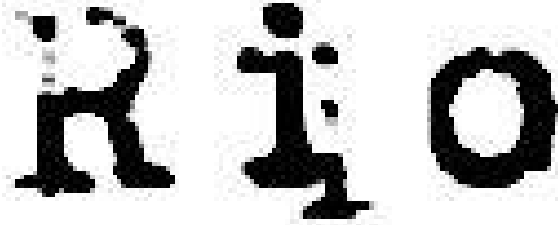
Then a wicked smile crosses his face and no doubt my gulp was audible. That smile spooked me because it spoke of confidence and defiance. Staying perfectly still because I didn't want to encourage him, I watch as he looks me up and down. I close my eyes as he turns my head to the side to lick my neck again. I groan when his hand slips between my legs and I scream in pleasure when he fucks me standing up with my legs wrapped around his waist. Refusing to let it end, he adds his fingers to the mix and I come again not even caring of the splinters in my back.

Even while his release runs down my legs, I refuse to admit I may have underestimated him.

It's terrifying how good he is at this.

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After hours of talking, we both passed out in her bed tangled in each other. I never took the time to talk to a female, but Bet ain't like other females. Her questions are deep and thought out. She don't ever judge, she just listens. Funny how the heat seemed overwhelming at first but now I hardly notice it. Seems I only notice her and the heat ain't an issue anymore. Waking before her, I sneak her phone out from under her and was surprised it wasn't password protected. If I was stupid rich I'd have a dozen passwords, but I guess when you're untouchable like she is, you don't need shit like that.

Opening it up, I go to the photos first. There were thousands, all of her family, few of her. Her parents looked like parents should, he looked like a husband who loved his wife should and her daughter was a mini version of her. Christ, you could see how the little one would have looked full grown. Looking over at Bet then back at the photo, her daughter was the loss that destroyed her the most, I knew it. When I saw one of the three of them together, I can't explain why I was jealous; I just knew that I was. He had her when she was whole, I could only figure I was the one who was meant to put her back together again. What I wouldn't give to have her smile like that for me every day. To be the one she took pictures of, to be the one she comes home to at night. Hell, to be her anything.

When she stirs I close the phone, tucking it back under the pillow where she keeps it. Glad I wasn't busted. My own phone is buzzing and when I grab it I see Adrian's blown my shit up for hours. Sliding out, I grab my wallet and set out to get her another coffee and call him back where she can't hear me. I wasn't even down the steps when my phone rang. "What?"

“What? Fuck you, what.” He yells. “Why isn’t she back in the city? Watch how you answer. You better not try teaming up with that bitch in an attempt to fuck me.”

“We’re both stuck on this fucking island, Adrian,” I snap. “The only one fucking you is Mother Nature.”

“Stuck, huh? You enjoying yourself some forbidden fruit then? Can’t say as I blame you, I had a sample once and I haven’t been right since. Once you get some of that the rest just don’t compare.”

The thought of him fucking her stops me dead in my tracks. It ain’t no secret Adrian has specific tastes but even with her no holds barred brand of fucking, I couldn’t see her stooping to this asshole’s level. Adrian is a lot of things but oddly enough he doesn’t lie. It hurt to know that he’s had her, when I just found her and wanted her for my own.

“Yeah, well who haven’t you had?” I mumble to which he laughs. “Let me use her while I’m stuck here and when I bring her back you can fuck yourselves to death.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time we shared a bitch would it?”

“No,” I agree even though the memory of that night never ceases to make me sick. The night we shared a woman at his order was horrible. Adrian damn near killed her and I’ve had nothing but nightmares since.

“I trust you, Rio. Don’t fuck me over by thinking she’ll return your feelings because she won’t. The bitch has no feelings and your loyalty belongs to me, don’t forget that because I’d hate to have to kill you. Enjoy her while you can, she’s a tigress in the sack. Oh and Rio, if she asks you to choke her go all in. Trust me.”

After he disconnects, I grab her coffee and haul ass back to the room. Every step was quick and sure. He fucked my woman and I wanted him permanently erased. Stepping in, I see her out on the deck smoking again staring up at the dark sky. She’s fucking gorgeous when she smokes and her mind wanders. Every time I look at her I can’t help but wonder what she’s thinking about. She’s so tiny but has balls to rival any man I’ve known, including Adrian. She likes me filthy and to fuck her hard, but to change her mind I have to change the way she does things. She needs to understand that I’m not like the others, they were temporary, I am not.

Handing her the latte, she licks her lips and moans after sipping from the cup. Setting it down, she pulls me down to her to take my mouth. Words were exchanged, a challenge was made but even though she claims one thing her body tells me another. While I fucked her standing up, I hoped anyone left in this place heard her screaming for me. Because she was going to be screaming *a lot* this week and we were making love just as soon as I figured out how to con her into doing it.

“I suck at this,” she says drinking wine from the bottle a few hours later. “Pick another game.”

“It’s rummy,” I remind her taking the bottle from her, “Honestly, you should be embarrassed you suck at this.”

“Meh,” she says stretching out on the floor, “I’ve never been good at card games. I don’t have the patience for it.”

“You didn’t play cards with your husband?”

“No,” she says sitting back up, “We didn’t play cards or any games really.”

“Why not?”

“I didn’t have time,” she says looking uncomfortable, “I’ve always worked a lot.”

“If what I read about you was even half true, you could never work again and be okay.”

“Did it ever occur to you that I *like* working?”

“Not really,” I admit, “I don’t think you like working at all. At least, not anymore.”

“Are you writing my biography now? What’s this leading up to, Rio?”

“Who’s Adrian and what does he want from you?”

“Is this part of your Seven Days to Salvation strategy?” she snaps while standing up. “Adrian is an opportunist, a bad seed. He thinks he’s owed when in fact he is *not*. He takes but never gives. He’s a disease that won’t die. He’s contagious and he’s cruel. He also has a loyal following of idiots wanting in on his brand of madness. He’s never done anything honest a day in his life and I will never give him what I worked my ass off for. He’s taken enough from me.”

“I’m not following,” I tell her. I can’t figure out if the link is Alan or her. “Seriously, you want to do this right now, Rio?” When I nod she throws the cards across the room and falls onto the couch.

“I started dating Alan in tenth grade. I knew who Adrian was but avoided him. Captain of everything right? Wrong. If anyone bothered to look, you’d see that while he was scoring touchdowns he was also scoring cocaine and selling to the staff and students. He was sneaky even then. The day I met him face to face, I hated him on sight. But Alan begged me to give him a chance. Anyone could see Adrian was jealous of Alan but no one would listen to me. The night I fucked Adrian was the second worst night of my life.”

“You said you lost your virginity on your wedding night,” I accuse. “Why the fuck would you lie about that?”

“Do not call me a liar, ever. I lost my virginity in earnest on my wedding night, thank you very much,” she says grinding her jaw. “I gave myself to my husband fully. He never needed to know about my fuck up but Adrian held it over my head for years unless I paid him off, so as not to hurt Alan, I did.”

“Explain why this guy would do that? Just for the money?”

“Adrian was Alan’s fraternal twin.” She explains and the link was the last one I expected. This link complicated things. “The night I was with Adrian I thought it was Alan. We were at a party, I was ripped and told him he better meet me in the upstairs bedroom or I’d ignore him for two weeks. I can only assume Adrian overheard us because after it was all said and done I found out Alan left directly after my ultimatum. Yes, I should have known better but I was a kid and I was piss drunk. I’d been pressuring Alan to have sex for months and I wanted him so badly. He said and did Alan things at first and I wanted him enough that I didn’t pay attention. The room was pitch black and the only way I would know they were twins were by their voices.” She ends on a whisper. “They are identical in voice but that’s all, I assure you. In the darkness of that room, in my mind it was my boyfriend. Alan would never have treated my first time like that, done the things Adrian did to me and I have regretted that night every day since. Adrian left his finger prints around my throat as a reminder. I had to avoid Alan for three days after that. On our wedding night, I wanted him to know

I was only his, that I kept my promise. His own brother fucked him over and he died never knowing the truth, but I can't forget. He won't let me."

"When did you stop paying him off?"

"The day I buried my husband."

"What else does he want?"

"Me." She says shrugging her shoulders.

"The fuck he will," I growl standing up myself.

"He won't have me, Rio," she whispers, "Trust me."

When she walks into the bedroom and crooks her finger to join her, I do. But my head is fucked up in a million different ways right now. He deceived her, used her and blackmailed her. Yeah, he wants her. But ain't no way he's going to have her.

And no, it wasn't lost on me that I was deceiving her, too.

# Bet

No matter what I did I couldn't get comfortable enough to sleep. Not when I was replaying my years of sins where Adrian Lennox was concerned. He was all the despicable things I told Rio he was but then again, all these years I played along and that made me as depraved as he was.

Adrian was the only link left to Alan. By law, he was even my family. That's not to say that I cared for Adrian, I didn't. But I will admit that holding what he wanted over his head had been a game I enjoyed playing, a game I excelled at. Alan and I worked hard, saved our money and invested it responsibly. Adrian stole what didn't belong to him, hurt innocent people to get it and skirted the system.

When it came to one upping him it was all about the money. Money was something I had plenty of and flaunting it felt righteous. Until he decided money wasn't enough, that instead of playing dirty to get my fortune, he wanted me as the grand prize.

Not-fucking-likely.

Looking over at Rio sleeping, I see a man who's known struggle. Who's brought himself back from dark places. The thing about existing in darkness is that it never cedes fully. Sure, the sun can shine through on occasion but it's the darkness that's there protecting you, hiding you, keeping your secrets. For people like us, darkness means safety. Rio, like me, has secrets.

Although, he was lucky. For many years he had Rio, who from the sounds of it, shared her light with him. But guess what happens when you step away from it? The darkness returns with a vengeance, sucking you

back in. Losing my light gained me a permanent spot in the shadows. I knew how to navigate the shadows better than most and Adrian fucking knew it. Regardless of how this played out with him, I knew one thing. I knew I would win. Smiling at the morbid thought, I snuggle in deeper into his side and promptly start to doze.

A phone ringing brings me back to consciousness. Dammit, I had just fallen to sleep. Reaching over to throw it across the room, I chose to answer it because if the staff is calling there may be news on this storm. It wasn't news on the storm though, it was an invite to the main hall for karaoke.

I happen to love karaoke.

Since the smart people left the island there were few of us left. Tonight the manager was opening the hall for food and fun for the remaining guests and employees.

"Who the fuck called?" he mumbles reaching between my legs.

"Front desk," I tell him spreading them wider. "We are cordially invited to karaoke tonight."

"We going?"

"I'd like to," I admit. "Does it interest you?"

"Watching you do anything interests me," he says rubbing my clit. "If I get to watch you come now and sing later, I ain't gonna bitch about it."

Laughing turns to moaning when his large fingers slide inside of me. "Tell me when I find the spot, little Bet," he urges. Until Rio, no man has ever found the spot. Not only did he find that spot, he found another in my heart. When my back arches he continues his rhythm, which I appreciate. In the past, the moment I said whoop there it is! The guy would stop or change course and I wanted to scream because I lost the buildup.

"Lookie, what I found," he purrs in my ear. "Ride it out on my fingers," he orders.

As it builds, I do as he says and begin my own rhythm. With his mouth on my neck, his hand between my legs, I close my eyes and enjoy the fact that I'm about to finally have a big O without a vibrator. Fisting the sheets and tightening my legs, I arch up and moan out the most beautiful, "Fuck yes," in history.

While my hips continue to swerve, he applies a small amount of pressure that hits something, I wasn't sure what, but it had my eyes rolling back. Limp, loose, and happy, I open my eyes to see his shimmering with pride. "Now that's how it's done," I say leaning up to kiss him.

"My turn!" he announces flipping me to the straddle position. Laughing hard, I reach between my legs to use my release as lubrication. "Jacking me off with your come? That's hot, little Bet." He says grabbing my hips. "And creative."

"Just call me the queen of improvisation," I say while speeding up.

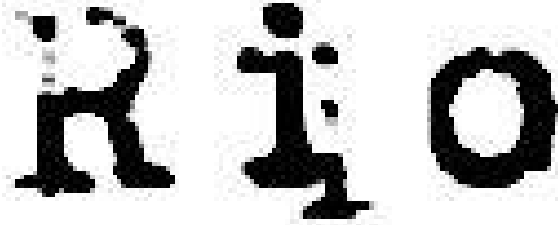
"I'll call you anything you fucking want as long as you don't stop," he moans.

I didn't stop. In fact, I sped up and enjoyed every word that came out of his mouth. When he tightened his grip hard enough to bruise me, I knew this was it. He was close. Breaking away and sealing my mouth over the head, I sucked him deep and hard until he yelled, "Harder!" Grabbing his balls, I gave him harder and in return he wrapped his fists in my hair and came down the back of my throat.

Several minutes later, he finds his voice, smacks my ass and announces, "You just earned breakfast."

While I showered and dressed, he went to the café and managed to grab us breakfast sandwiches and coffee. If a blow job got me breakfast in bed, I couldn't help but wonder what I could do to score lunch.





Most of the morning and afternoon was spent with Bet working furiously from her phone with me watching her. If I asked her a question about business she answered. If I asked her questions about our future, she went back to talking business. Refusing to let it discourage me, I took my own shower and a quick nap trying to ignore my phone that wouldn't stop buzzing.

At six, we both dressed and ran to the main hall. The rain had not let up at all and our clothes were proof of that. It was also so dark outside; you'd think it was midnight not late afternoon. Entering the main hall, we both look around and notice that next to us it was staff only.

"Twenty bucks we're the only suckers left on the island," she says on a laugh.

"If they feed us we ain't suckers, we're well fed," I tell her leading her to the bar.

Immediately we're greeted and told we can sit wherever we like. Bet wanted to sit at the bar to be closest to the alcohol but I call bullshit, she wanted to be close to the karaoke machine. Since we've been here I've had minimal to drink preferring to keep an eye on my neighbor. But tonight I had a feeling my self-restraint was about to take a huge shit. When Bet ordered each of us a shot of something I've never heard of, I clinked her shot glass and threw it back when she did. "The fuck was that?" I cough into my hand.

"Us pro's call that a Tijuana hooker," she says proudly.

"It tastes like an STD," I tell her wondering how anyone can swallow that shit with a straight face. Laughing harder than I've ever seen her, I

throw my fist down on the bar and say, “Give me another one.” Throwing that one back too, I knew I’d sell my fucking soul to see that smile again and if meant sugar shock, I’d do it with an insulin pump. The bartender immediately took a shine to all things Bet, how could he not? The man was only human and she was in rare form tonight.

Leaning across the bar trying to look intimidating she orders the bartender and staff of which there were five to match us shot for shot, her treat. Looking around for permission he laughs, shrugs then lines the bar up with shots. When the staff figures it out they run over and so it went for the next hour.

Bet called the shots and we drank them.

Jumping down off her stool, she throws her hands up and asks “Who’s singing?” to which everyone went nuts with excitement, myself included. The bartender, who was obviously a jack of all trades, hands us a song book and tells us to pick the songs that appeal to us. Scrolling down the list I’ll admit most of this is pop or country, both are shit in my book so I keep going looking for something familiar when Bet yells, “Ha!” then runs over to the guy and points to her song.

Grabbing the mic and flipping her hair, she clears her throat and adjusts her tits. Oh yeah, little Bet was fucking hammered.

There ain’t no way to explain what was happening in the main hall without bad shots and video but let me give it a whirl. Bet Lennox went from boardroom bad girl to pop singing slut in under sixty seconds. When the song started she sashayed across the floor and found a place between my legs and went-to-fucking-town.

The song? I had no damn clue until I asked the bartender. He says it’s London Bridge by Fergie, still no clue. But I got the lyrics just fine. Turning to face away from me, she looks over her shoulder and sings, “How come every time you come around my London London Bridge wanna come down,” while grinding wildly on my dick.

She was so bad vocally that I almost laughed if it wasn’t for the look of pure fucking joy on her face and the tent in my pants. Hands down, best lap dance in history and my girl did it with a captive audience. Biting her lip and then bouncing her ass, she finishes by slapping her own ass and dropping the mic.

For about three seconds it was silent before we all gave her a standing ovation. Bowing and then offering a curtesy, she skips back to me and climbs into my lap where she wraps her arms around my neck.

“I love Fergie,” she says catching her breath. “She’s fucking hot.”

“You’re hot,” I tell her. “You can’t sing for shit but you don’t have to when you do what you just did. Damn, little Bet, that was the hottest thing I ever saw. My dick is giving you a standing ovation.”

“I thank you and your dick. You’re up Ricky Martin,” she giggles reaching for her bag. She’s drunk and tossing out nicknames having no idea she nailed it. “Hang on, hot stuff, I’ve got some singles you can work for.”

“I don’t shake it for anything less than a fiver,” I announce. Laughing even harder, she pulls out a wad of cash and offers me a wink. Grabbing the mic, I head over to the bartender and give him my choice. If he knew the song you’d never know it. He just shook his head and looked over at Bet. He may not get it now, maybe not even later but she would get it and that’s all that mattered.

# Bet

No man I have ever seen was sexier than he was. Even when faced with singing live he did it with attitude, his way. Watching him watch me was scorching hot, but this... I have no words for this. But once he started singing I decided that I didn't need any words, listening to him sing *Crazy Bitch* to me summed it up and summed it up well.

I fucking loved this song.

It was raw, filthy and totally us.

There was no offense to be had, not by me. Listen to the song, how can a woman be offended when the man she's fucking sings it to her with lust in his voice? Yeah, she can't. Coming over to me, he sinks his hands in my hair pulling my head back and meets my eyes when he sings, "Hey, you're crazy bitch but you fuck so good, I'm top of it. When I dream, I'm doing you all night, scratches all down my back to keep me right on."

Putting my hands on his chest, I push him back because this solo was about to become a duo.

In perfect sync with my back to his front, I grind on him bending over slightly when we both scream, "Baby girl, you want it all. To be a star you have to go down," he yells into the mic pushing my head toward his dick and I comply. "Take it off, no need to talk," standing to face him again we finish with, "You're crazy but I like the way you fuck me!"

Both of us are panting, the air was thick with our lust and I was never more aware of my femininity as I was at that moment. Never taking his eyes from mine, he pulls me close, tilts my head back and kisses me with strength and need. Moaning into his mouth, I pull him closer but it will

never be close enough. The look of possession on his face screamed a million warnings and I gave a fuck about none of them.

“You and your wife have that spark so many couples who come here lack,” says the bartender breaking the moment. Oddly enough neither one of us corrected him and I would ask myself why later. “It’s good to see two people genuinely in love, I don’t see it enough really. We’ve got shots at the bar,” he says leading us back to our seats after his speech. “Unless you want to make your way back to your room?”

This man thought we were married. Not a weekend fuckshow but a couple that took vows and meant them. “Shots,” I tell him breaking away from Rio. “Line ‘em up.” I could get my head straight tomorrow but tonight I wanted to enjoy this feeling. Pretending if only to myself, that Rio marrying someone like me was possible. Because when the real world comes calling I’ll be long gone and a man like Rio wouldn’t give a mess like me a second thought.

Throwing the first one back while reaching for the second Rio runs his hand between my legs and inhales my neck. Looking around the room every staff member watched us with envy so I lean further into him. Just one night, I tell myself. I can enjoy this for one night. “They think we’re married,” he says casually. “I notice you didn’t correct the bartender either. Why is that?”

“I like that they think I stand a chance with a guy like you, Rio.” I tell him honestly. “They look envious of us, I like that too. I’m enjoying coveting what others would like for their own. I’m extremely competitive, it’s my thing.”

“You want to covet here or back in the room?”

“I’d covet on this bar stool and not give a shit, you know that, *husband*.” I say with a smile but when he loses his my gulp was audible.

“You got no idea what I’d do to make you *my wife*,” he says without hesitation. “You got no idea what I’d do just to hear you call me yours. I want you to covet me because I covet *you* above my own God damn life.”

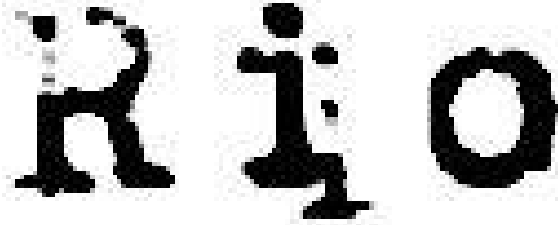
“Wow,” I whisper.

“You’re paying attention,” he says standing up. “Good.”

Reaching for my bag, I find a wad of cash, more than enough to cover the drinks, tip and their time. Throwing it on the bar, when he extends his hand I take it.

Waving on the way out, we weren't even to the steps when he throws me over his shoulder and takes me behind the side of the building where he wasted no time coveting me in the rain.

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When she said husband, I saw her fucking eyes sparkle just before she shut it down. With her pressed against the wall I didn't know who liked the idea of husband more. The woman who said it or the man who heard it, fuck, but I liked the sound of it coming out of her mouth.

Both of us are lit up enough that dirty talk wasn't important. Pushing my shoulders down, I take the cue falling to my knees to worship her. Pulling her bottoms off, I dive in face first (literally). Her moans turn into screams almost instantly. When she came, I felt it and I responded by freeing myself before standing up and forcing her to her knees.

Bet didn't question it. Not when I opened her mouth with my fingers and especially not when I shoved my dick down her throat and certainly not when she was gagging on it. No, she sucked me off to the point of coming and she did it with so much aggression it borderline hurt. Pulling her to her feet, I spin her facing the wall bending my own knees to take her from behind. With a spotlight above us, I could see every glorious inch of her from her bouncing ass to the breeze blowing her hair. Fucking her with blunt thrusts, she arches her back just how I like it signaling me to pull that hair of hers.

Taking one hand to get herself off, I fuck her even harder letting her know I approve. She lets out a loud moan when she starts to come so I pull her hair harder while she rides it out. Feeling my own coming on, she takes that free hand she'd been using and reaches under to grab my balls. The shock of it felt fucking awesome but when she started massaging them in her tiny hand it was game over.

“Come,” she orders me.

I did.

Inside of her, on her ass and even on her back. While we adjust our clothing enough to make the walk back, it's when she takes my hand that I take the risk of showing her how I feel. Stopping her, I kiss her forehead resting my lips there. "Fuck," I mumble. "You're the best thing that's ever happened to me little Bet."

Giving me a small sigh, she looks up and wrecks me. "I can't be your light, Rio." She whispers while wearing the saddest look on her face. "As much as I'd like to be, it's not who I am."

"There's beauty in the dark, Bet. You're proof of that."

When her mouth falls open, I take her hand this time and quietly walk back to the room wondering what happens next. After we both strip and crawl into bed, the craziest shit happens. Bet becomes an open book and the woman was a mother fuckin' novel.

"My father's name was Jeffrey, my mother Juliette. My maiden name was Bet Juliette Dawson. You'll love this," she says laughing. "As a kid, my friends called me BJ."

"What do they call you now?" I ask.

"Ma'am, usually," she says. "I don't have any friends, Rio."

"Money made it difficult?"

"Money made it impossible." She says but failed to hide the hurt. "What are your parents' names?"

"Frank and Cora," I tell her.

"Any siblings?" she asks.

"No," I answer.

"Me either," she says running her hand over my chest. "My father started a dot com at quite literally the perfect time. One minute I lived a quiet middle class life and the next I was invited to parties with kids I'd never understand." Sitting up she pulls her knees to her chest and whispers, "Even then, Alan was the only person I could relate to. I think the second I realized he was the normal I was searching for I hung on and refused to let go."

"Was he a rich kid, too?"



“Compared to some yes, I imagine he was but his parents each worked their asses off to send him and Adrian to school. I liked that he didn’t have a luxury vehicle or designer clothes, for me Alan felt like home.”

“What about Adrian?” I ask. “What’d he feel like?”

“Competition,” she says. “From day one he fought me for Alan. He hated that my family had money not understanding that I didn’t. When Alan proposed he upped his game. Basically, since I fucked up there was no way Alan was marrying into money and he was getting nothing. That’s when the blackmail started.”

“What really brought you to the island?” I ask pulling her down to lie next to me.

“For six years I’ve played the game,” she confesses. “Don’t ask me why, because I don’t have a straight answer. Now I don’t want to play anymore, I just want to be left alone. I believe I’ve suffered enough and it’s time for me to shut him down so I can die in peace.”

“Meeting you changed my life, little Bet,” I tell her. “Ain’t no way this was an accident. This right here is worth living for, you can’t leave me behind. I sure as fuck couldn’t leave you behind. Admit this is good, that it was meant to happen.”

“You mean like fate?” she asks. But I don’t answer her because it wasn’t an accident, it was a set up and I felt equally parts shitty and grateful for it.

“Yeah like fate.” I agree.

“Fate has never been kind to me,” she whispers. “I don’t trust things I can’t see.”

“What about trusting something you can feel?” I ask draping my leg over hers. When she yawns, I follow suit and we drifted off together with her never answering my question but never once letting me go.

# Bet

As much as I enjoy watching Rio try and convince me, I found myself drowning today. Last night I told him more than I've ever told anyone. What was the harm right? After this trip, I'd never see him again and it felt really good to say it, own that shit out loud. Reminding myself no amount of money can buy you a new conscience I don't bother with the one I have. However, every time I started to lose my way he was there to calm me down. Another thing about Rio is he's very persuasive. The man can get me to do just about anything, even agree to stay here until the challenge was up.

Not that it was that hard of a sell, considering the weather seems to be getting worse instead of better and I had Rio to pass the time with. Just this morning, there was a letter under the door alerting us the ferry was still delayed and they were sorry. Two days ago, that would have sent me into a spiral but today, I was rolling with it.

After transferring more money, I took a quick shower and promised to meet Rio at the main bar. The problem was I seemed to have trouble leaving the room. Last night I had genuine fun. Depressing thoughts were nowhere to be found when one man was my sole focus. That man believed our meeting wasn't an accident and so badly, I wanted to believe it too. I was struggling hard because one word kept banging around in my brain.

Fate.

I don't believe in fate, I can't. Because if I did then it was fated I'd lose them, that I was going to forever be this living breathing disaster. Fate aside, the scariest part of all was with him I was truly me, I wasn't drowning in guilt and that in turn piled the guilt even higher. I actually feel

guilty for not feeling guilty and that was my fucked up reality. My life was a vicious circle of emotional pain. Sure there were days I totally functioned without rocking myself in a corner but there were also days where the pain was clawing to get out. Those minutes which turn to hours as the grief turns into something so violent and vicious that I'd blackout from it.

Emotionally, I have never found a good place. But since he stormed into my life, I was feeling too much and I didn't like that I had no control over these new urges either. Christ, I had no control over anything anymore. The urge to keep him was seductive even though long term, I knew I wasn't good for him. The urge to say fuck it and ask him to sail the world with me was strong. The urge to scream that he's *mine*! The urge to hide in the bathtub because he has the potential to seriously hurt me was a potent taste in my mouth. Most of all, it was the urge to let him save me that had me walking out to the deck to sit in the rain instead of meeting him as planned.

Curling up in the plastic chair, I look at the tree line wishing that I had never met Rio. Not because of anything he did, but because I know my strengths and weaknesses. When it comes to this mystery man, I have no strength just weakness and I can't allow him to capitalize on that. I refuse to let him change my mind either. With him I'm cocooned in feeling. It's almost suffocating it's so intense. Just his skin touching mine warms me and I knew that regardless of how good he fucked me, I couldn't claim him. I refuse to destroy him; I refuse to let him go down with the ship.

Smiling inward, I was strangely content knowing that when I ended my life my last thoughts would be of Rio and that I'd die with a smile on my face. However my smile faded when the guilt took over once more. Since I was fifteen no man compared to Alan but today it's Rio's face I see, not my husband's. I vowed to him to love him all the days of my life and here I was thinking of how another man fucks me, makes me feel. Kicking the chair back, I reach for the nearest object which happened to be an empty wine bottle and throw it into the trees. Then grabbing a chair, I throw that too. Bending at the knees, I try lifting the God damn table, but couldn't.

Screaming "Fuck!" for being too much of a wimp to lift it, my ass hits the wet deck and I proceed to kick at it with my heels. When I look up and see Rio holding the table down with both hands, immediately my mouth dried out.

“You bailed on me,” he says in a dark voice, “Don’t know why you did, but you’re gonna march back in that fucking room and explain it to me, now.”

No one tells me what to do. Fire was in my eyes. I knew it. Just as I knew if I had a mirror handy they would be blazing back at me. Every time I get a handle on shit, there he is flipping the script. Fuck the challenge, fuck this island and fuck *him*. I’m done with him calling the shots. I’m the head honcho here, me.

“Got nothing to say? It’s cool, I got enough shit to say for both of us. Dry off, grab your shit and meet me on that fucking couch, Bet. We’re gonna have words.”

Still standing there in the rain, chest heaving, fists clenched I want to bust his jaw I’m so pissed off. He stands there daring me to defy him and I want to knock that look off his face. Come to think of it, I want nothing more than to kick his gorgeous ass all over this fucking resort. This was his fault. All of it from the flirting, to the fucking, and now the God damn feelings I’m having too. Reaching for me, he wraps his fingers around my upper arm to steer me inside, which was a bad move.

I don’t know why I did it; I’m not a violent person. But I did do it, then I backed the fuck up.

R i o

I've been hit before.

Hell, I've even been knocked out once or twice. But I ain't never been hit by a woman I cared about under these conditions. Thing was, the punch didn't hurt and if the situation wasn't so fucked I would have laughed about it. Another thing was, it was the fact that *she* did it that made the blow feel like a mac truck slammed into my face. That God damn punch had feelings behind it. She wanted to hurt me and she succeeded.

Realizing she just crossed a line, she backs away into the corner and I watch as shock registers followed by remorse. I don't react when she holds her hand; in fact I don't do anything. It wasn't but a week ago that Rion hit me. Granted, I was asking for it but her hitting me only annoyed me. Bet hitting me put me in a bad fucking place.

This woman says my past doesn't matter but she's full of shit. She likes me fucking her because she senses the danger inside of me. Bet likes danger, thrives on it. I feel it and respond to it in kind just like she wants me to. To her, this island is temporary. What happens here can be written off, forgotten. It ain't that easy and I think she just figured it out and that's why she flipped. Narrowing my eyes, I see hers are rimmed with red. She's trying not to cry and though it shouldn't matter to me, it does.

I knew the time would come when she would compare me to her dead husband. That she would feel guilty and maybe even lash out. Hitting me never crossed my mind but here we are having a standoff in the God damn rain. Bet isn't afraid of me and I never gave her a reason to be, that was an error that was getting corrected today.

If she knew why I was put her in path she wouldn't get anywhere near me. If she knew the vile things I've done to stay alive, she'd look at me

with disgust. If she knew how fucking badly I wanted to be better for her, she would have thought twice before hitting me. I tried being a good man; it's obvious she doesn't see the real me yet. But she will because Bet Lennox just fucked up.

"I ain't him," I tell her while staying perfectly still. I don't want her to know how I'm hurting right now. Bet can slay you with words and I wasn't giving her the opportunity to dig the knife in further. "I ain't never gonna be him either. I ain't never gonna be your precious Alan. He's dead, I ain't. You ever fucking hit me again, you ain't gotta worry about paying me to end you. I'll do that shit for free."

"Do it now then," she says bravely. She doesn't lower her eyes either, just stares me down. She wants this, she wants it over with. "Rid yourself of me, Rio. Rid me of *myself*."

"You shouldn't have put your manicured hands on me, little Bet. I'm afraid I can't let that go."

"So you want to hurt me back?" she asks wiping her hair from her face. "That's fair; go ahead. I won't fight you."

"Little Bet," I laugh as I advance on her, "I love that you think you could."

Then I let the darkness take over.

# Bet

Oh shit.

He's going to hit me. I've never been hit before, I didn't know if I should cover my face or curl into a ball. The fault is mine though, I know that. My father used to say that if you ever put your hands on a man in anger, you best be prepared to get hit back. Moral of the story, don't fucking hit people.

I deserved to get rocked upside the head. That doesn't mean that I was okay with it. In fact, I thought of offering him a ton of cash *not* to hit me back. Then I said fuck it, I had it coming and closed my eyes. He towered over me, not touching me but I could feel his anger and intent. I wondered if I would respect him more for his vengeance or less? Then I wondered why the thought of him hurting me was appealing. Knowing that train of thought was fucked up; I opened my eyes willing to take his punishment head on. If he wanted to hurt me, there was a strong chance I may actually enjoy it and keeping my eyes wide made sense because I didn't want to miss it. At that moment I couldn't name why I switched gears from fear to anticipation but I did and I figured I may as well embrace it.

Alan never got angry, emotional, or overly excited, he was just...level. Nothing riled him up, nothing made him keel over in laughter either. Everything between us was what *I* wanted, what had made *me* happy. I wanted him to be happy too, yet he never asked for a thing. I even wondered if when death came for him if he just shrugged and went with it. Alan was not a fighter. The man breathing in my face was.

"Hurt me," I whisper with our eyes locked on each other.

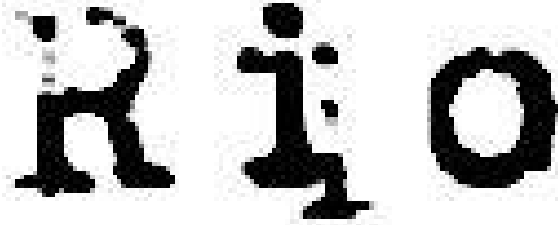
His large hands come up and slowly span my throat. Without a word or change in his breathing, he tightens his grip. I wait for the panic to come but it's noticeably absent. I wait for my vision to dance and my fight or flight responses to kick in but that doesn't happen either. I'm actually disappointed how anti climatic this is. I was a cruel person for wanting this but I'm smart enough to know that if I push hard enough, he'll snap. Rio is not as unaffected as he appears to be. "Hurt me," I demand him but he still doesn't move. Bringing my own hands up, I cover his and stare him right in the eyes before I scream my head off. "Make it hurt you fucking pussy!"

A man's hands tell a story. His story was he's done this before, this was a skill. A skill he's perfected. His eyes were black, his brows furrowed and his strength was legendary. Pushing Rio to hurt me was the only thing that mattered. God knows he's been pushing me from the moment we met persuading me to do things out of character for me. Now it was his turn to be pulled from his comfort zone. It was when his lip turned up in a mock grin that I knew he wanted to punish me and so I grinned back letting him know that I wanted it too.

"Be careful what you wish for." He says losing the smirk.

Ah, there it was...the pressure.





She wanted it.

No, fuck that, she *needed* it.

That hurt, that fear that reminds you, ain't shit you can do when you're defenseless. Thing was, the only one in control here was her because this is what she wanted. Bet, in that moment, truly wanted to die. She'll never know how much that scared me, how much I needed her to stay alive and breathing. What started out as a job turned into a craving I refused to deny myself. Switching tactics, I let her think she was getting what she thought she craved most. Applying the right amount of pressure I let her think that she was getting the ultimate release.

Death.

Thing was, it wasn't about what she thought she wanted anymore it was about what I needed. Bet wanted a taste of my darkness and I was willing to submerge her in it. I wouldn't stop until she begged me to. Any sane human would struggle because it was the natural thing to do. Not her though. Just as she started to lose consciousness she fucking smiled almost like she was thanking me.

When she went limp in my arms, I fought back a moment of panic. Knowing I crossed a line today, I reminded myself that Bet needed help, she needed *my* help. I told myself I was justified in doing this because if I get through to her it would mean she was willing to try. Carrying her indoors, I took my time getting her settled because when she woke and realized she wasn't dead and that her fate was truly in my hands she was going to lose it.

Bet was convinced she wanted to die.

And she would.

In pleasure.

Her soft moans make my dick stiffen in anticipation of what's to come. As she rouses herself and tries to rub her sleepy eyes, I see the moment of disappointment set in when she realizes that she's still breathing. In the beginning, I thought she was talking shit but she wasn't. I've met some wacked out people over the years but never a pint-sized stunner with more money than Moses that wants to off herself. Bottom line, if I don't change her mind she'll call that number and she would follow through. I found that I couldn't accept that.

A small growl escapes her when she realizes she's bound. I was a gentleman and gave her a bit of room to move, but not much. Staring me down again, she has the balls to look at me like I betrayed her for *not* killing her. Christ, the way she smiled when she thought I *was*, fucked with me and made me desperate.

"Welcome back," I say pulling up a chair. "Why so angry, little Bet? 'Cause you're still here and I'm still an asshole?"

Turning her head away she does her best to ignore me. I let her do it because if there is one thing I know for sure about her is that even when she pretends she's not listening, she is. Bet doesn't miss anything.

"Kinda disappointed in you, little Bet, never pegged you for a quitter."

"Go fuck yourself." she says closing her eyes.

"Babe, if I could fuck myself I'd never leave the house. Now we can finish having words or you can suck my dick. I'm a gentleman, so I'll let you pick."

"Put your dick in my mouth and see what happens," she dares me. There was no lust behind the statement and I had to seriously weigh my options here. Yeah, I wanted it in her mouth but if she so much as nibbled, I'd be screaming for a medic. Bet ain't a violent woman but she does have a mean side, she may just bite the fucker off out of spite.

"Look at you," she laughs. "You want it in my mouth but you're wondering what I'll do. Smart man, because right now, you fucking prick, I don't even know what I'll do."

"Tell me you want to live, I'll untie you and even let you get another swing in."

“No can do,” she says instantly, “I don’t negotiate with terrorists.”

“Just with thugs like Adrian.”

“You have a tone in your voice when you say his name, why is that? What aren’t you telling me, Rio? Oh that’s right, you don’t tell me anything!”

She was getting too close to the truth, so in an act of self-preservation, I did what any man with a bound woman would do. I took advantage of my good fortune and pulled my dick out.

There ain’t no situation a blow job can’t fix.

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# Belt

I didn't like this. It wasn't because I was essentially helpless; it was because I woke up feeling again. I sensed him the moment I came back to awareness and it pissed me off. Obviously he's taking this challenge seriously and I didn't know what else I could do to prove to him I wasn't worth the effort. The second he applied pressure to my throat restricting my air, I thought it was poetic that the only man to ever make my body thrum with pleasure would be the one to give me the ultimate release.

Oblivion.

Refusing to let him see how his presence affects me, I go on the offensive. He's brought Adrian up multiple times and I swear there's something there, a thread, a tie, but he won't spill. He wants me to tell him that I want to live and part of me wants to, just to shut him up but I won't lie. For me, there was no shame in being realistic. I didn't want to be here any longer, not even for him. You hear people beg for more time when death nears and there is no shame in that, so why should be ashamed that I want to die sooner rather than later. To me, there is something beautiful about embracing death on your own terms. I don't expect him to get it, hell I don't expect anyone to get it which is why I've never said a word.

Screaming at him because of his secrecy bullshit backfired. I had hoped he'd back off, he didn't. Instead he tied me up with the belts from my robe, knelt between my legs and spread my knees apart with his shoulders. Initially I found it odd that he only bound my wrists leaving my legs free. But now that he's spread me open I wished he'd taken this a step further. I don't like the look he's giving me; it's one that says I belong to him. Closing my eyes, I tell myself I belong to one man.

A dead man.

Without saying a word he runs his finger over my slit. Biting the inside of my cheek I refuse to encourage him while also praying he doesn't stop. Removing his hand, he takes his index finger and trails it between my breasts, down my stomach and back over my slit again. Opening my eyes, I watch him. He pays the rest of me no mind, his sole focus is below the waist. Minutes pass and he trails that fucking finger over every inch of my skin, except my face. When he backs away, I wondered if I drew blood I bit my cheek so hard. I wanted his touch back and I hated myself for needing the contact. Without warning, he nudges my thighs further apart with his shoulders even further; he takes one long inhale between my legs and runs his tongue slowly over my sweet spot. Clenching my fists, I still watch him.

He's in no hurry, instead he finds a rhythm; and lust strong and swift takes me over. I watch him lick me, he watches me fight the urge to scream. When my first orgasm strikes I was able to be silent about it. The only indication I exploded at all was the hitch in my breathing and the juice he licked from his lips. Finally able to breathe normally again, he reaches in with thick fingers spreading me apart. He won't allow me to come down from this gracefully. Spearling me with his tongue and fingers, I come again and again and again.

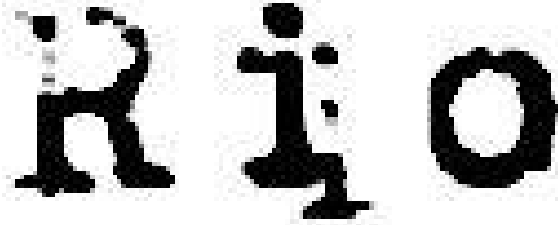
Four orgasms later, I was close to tears. This was the best and worst punishment ever. For a full hour he didn't move from between my thighs and I couldn't stand it anymore. Death by orgasm sounds like heaven but it's hell. As sleep calls me, I listen and start to shut myself down to rest. He flicks my clit hard with his fingers, which not only startled me, but it actually hurt, he gives me that smile again and in return I tell him with my eyes I've had enough.

“Tell me you want to live.”

Refusing to play his game, he nods accepting my silence and steals yet another piece of me away. Losing count of how many times I came from his skilled mouth, I shut my eyes and if I came again after that I was none the wiser.

As if I wasn't struggling enough, when sleep finally came, I didn't dream of Alan and that shamed me to my core.

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She's been out for hours. It's a good thing she passed out giving me a break, because I was positive I had lock jaw. My tongue spent more time attacking her pussy in one night than it has eating ice cream and I love ice cream. Until her, I'd man up and tell you I wasn't even all that good at easting pussy but feasting between her legs changed that. There was nothing better than my face between her legs. While she slept, I looked at her phone again and the woman had about a thousand apps. Most were of banks and she kept herself logged into those accounts. Naturally, I read the history and saw that in the last two days alone she's moved millions.

Not hundreds, millions.

All to charity.

I read that she was generous but damn. Opening her email, I see she's also updated her living will. I don't know what the updates were just that attorney said he handled it. I'm not all that savvy with business but I do have common sense. If you asked me what I thought she was doing, I'd tell you she was putting her affairs in order.

"What you're doing is akin to fraud."

Setting it on the nightstand, I don't respond to her. Bet may act like she's not into this but she is. She gets wet and stays wet, for *me*. Even in her sleep if I touched her lightly her lips got wet instantly. Staying quiet, I open her up again and when her breath catches I look up and see the want on her face. You can't hide that look when what you want that badly is within reach, even if you're scared of it. Leaning in again, I'm just about to start up when she whispers, "Please don't, Rio."

"Tell me you want to live."

Squeezing her eyes shut I can see the life there. She's over flowing with it. She's stubborn, I'll give her that but she can't fight this and neither can I. The suns not up; I have no clue what time it is either. When I was spying on her phone I didn't look at the clock because it doesn't matter. Time means shit to me. Getting her to see that life was worth living was.

"You can stop all this, little Bet," I whisper as I kiss her inner thigh, "Just tell me the truth."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because the truth hurts too much."

"The truth is your family is gone, they ain't coming back. Quit finding reasons to die and find new ones to live."

"That was cruel," she whimpers.

"That was the truth," I remind her "bad shit happens to good people, always has, always will. It's just you and me here in this room, ain't a damn thing wrong with wanting to move on."

"You can give me a thousand orgasms but that doesn't mean any moving on I do will involve you. I vowed to honor my husband to the day I die. Fuck you for not respecting that."

"Fuck you for not making a little more room in that shell of a heart you got. I ain't asking you to stop loving him, which I noticed you didn't say. You said honor, not love which we'll get into later. I ain't asking to take his place, Bet; I'm asking you to open yourself up to the chance to try again. A chance with me. Don't you believe in second chances?"

"Don't ever speak of love to me again, ever!" she screams and thrashes "I don't want to live, I don't want to suffer, I don't want love and I don't want *you!*"

Laughing in earnest because she is so full of shit, I shut her up quick by rolling her to the side and spanking her ass. When she gasps but makes no move to fight. I do it twice more. "You do want me," I tell her turning her back over. Then pulling my dick back out, I straddle her face. "You want this dick, too."



“If it wasn’t yours it would be someone else’s. The only bonus is with you is, it’s free.”

“Fuck, you got a mouth on you,” I laugh as I inch closer, “How about we shut you up for a bit? You’re a terrible liar, little Bet. Now open up.”

She doesn’t open up. Nope. She sets her lips in a hard line refusing to take what I’m offering. Well, only one way to learn a lesson, I suppose. In that moment my dick was the happiest appendage on earth.

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# Bet

Son of a bitch.

How can I command a board room but not one stubborn man? He doesn't listen; he just pushes and pushes until I snap. He doesn't believe me when I tell him I'm done, I want out. He just laughs at me. Yes, I want his dick but he doesn't need to know that. Christ, his dick is all I can think about. But I wasn't begging for it, not today, not tomorrow, not ever.

Refusing to open my mouth, he keeps his hard veiny dick in one hand and squeezes my jaw open with the other. He wasn't hurting me because he's not a sadist, he's doing the alpha thing and dammit it's working. No woman I know could have a dick like this within sucking distance and not want to swallow it. So when my mouth opens wide, he sinks his hand into my hair and guides my head up. He wants his dick sucked? I'm about to show him he made a fatal mistake. I'm like the Jet Li of oral favors.

Rio just fucked himself.

Filling my mouth up, he stretches both corners to the point of splitting. I didn't mind this. I wanted this so badly my mouth was starting to fill with enough spit for a dozen blow jobs. Wrapping my lips around him I suck him in deeper. He tries his best to slow me down, give me a chance to adjust to him filling my mouth but it wasn't needed. With my wrists still bound to either side of the bed, I improvised by sucking him extremely hard and not letting go. Getting him to that spot that bordered on gagging, he tries to withdraw but I bear down and start to swallow.

"My dick looks right in your mouth," he says as he watches my neck muscles strain to keep up. Deciding not to hold back any longer he starts to

fuck my throat with aggression. “Gag on it,” he orders me, “Learn your lesson.”

I gagged on it, alright. Jesus, it was almost more than gagging; it was like being impaled and for some reason I loved it. “That’s my girl,” he praises me, “You ain’t never gonna swallow again and not think of me, are you?”

Looking up at him, I was awe struck. Sexually, there wasn’t anything I wouldn’t do for him and I was too wound up to think about my emotions. Without permission a memory of Alan surfaces quickly and I couldn’t stop it. It was when we were having sex, I wanted to ride him and he said *another time*. Not taking no for answer, I tried to blow him but he stopped me then, too. “Your mouth is too beautiful for that, Bet. I want my tongue in your mouth, not my penis.”

Swear to God, he lost me at penis. Yes, I managed to have sex and it was like it always was...gentle. That was the first time I wished that he would let go with me and was angry when he wouldn’t. Then I immediately felt like a whore for having the thought and never asked him for anything like it again. Right now, with Rio’s dick stretching my throat and testing my limits I actually felt...loved.

He was bringing out in me the very thing I thought I’d lost forever yet never really had until him...

Freedom to be myself.

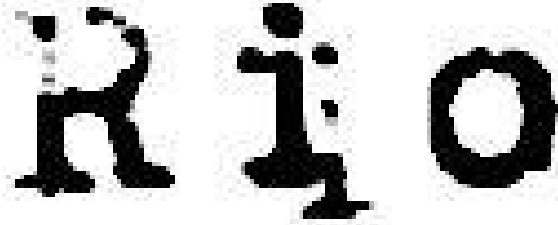
With renewed fever, I went at him with every ounce of lust I had in me. Though I wouldn’t say it aloud, this was my way of saying thank you. “Gonna come,” he yells pulling my hair and sliding down the back of my throat with ease. I felt his shaft contract and started swallowing eagerly waiting for my reward.

When I got it, it shredded me.

Because for a few moments, I had a part of Rio inside of me and I knew right then... I wanted more. I had to have more, if I wasn’t so fucked up, I’d ask for all of him.

I’d even fucking beg for it.

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After hands-down the best orgasm I've ever had in my life, I briefly untied her and let her use the bathroom. She didn't fight me when she came back out. Nope. She walked back into the room, crawled on the bed and held her arms out allowing me to tie her down again. Making her some coffee, I watched her sip it while I held the cup. Then I fed her a fruit plate and she ate every last bite. Twice she sucked my fingers into her mouth to get the juice and she was as turned on by it as I was.

Had I made progress? Maybe, but until she said the words I wasn't releasing her. I have four more days to change her mind and I didn't think keeping her tied up all them days was the smartest way to go. I was running out of time and ideas. She dozes in and out of sleep for about an hour until she goes into a deep rest. A few hours after that, she woke me when I caught her in the middle of a nightmare.

"Indie," she cries in her sleep, "Wake up for mommy!"

Trying to calm her, I run my fingers over stomach and when she continues to cry I don't stop her. She holds too much shit back. The woman needs to get it out. "Mommy's sorry." She quiets some then her body tenses and she lets out such a wail I covered her mouth with my hand.

"Bet," I say forcing her to wake up, "Enough."

Gasping for air she looks over at me and then closes her eyes. "Shit," she whispers hanging her head, "Sorry."

"Ain't no shame in missing your girl," I tell her while I move her damp hair from her face, "She had a mom that loved her, lucky kid."

"I want her back," she whispers and my heart kicks when I see she wants the use of her hands to hide herself. I hate it, but I can't let her do it.

“I’d give anything to have her back. I want to die so I can find her. I need to be with her, God I just want to be with her.”

“She ain’t coming back, little Bet,” I remind her gently. “I don’t know why shit happens like it does but this is something you gotta face. Dying isn’t going to fix this, you know that. I won’t let you take the easy way out.”

I wait for her to demand that I untie her, but she doesn’t. Instead, she slowly lies back down and I watch as the tears run freely out of the corners of her eyes. Wiping them away with my fingers, I lean down and kiss her mouth gently. “If I had a mom like you growing up, my life would have been easier. I wasn’t given that chance and neither were you when she was taken from you but, you’re still here. I gotta believe there’s a reason.”

“I think God forgot about me.”

“Or maybe you were spared so you could save me.”

“You don’t need saving. Therapy maybe, people skills definitely, but you don’t need saving.”

“A lot of shit you don’t know about me, Bet. Why don’t I tell you a few stories, let you decide.”

“Your past isn’t going to change my mind about you, I told you that.”

“Give me the chance to tell you some things, alright?”

Nodding to me, she puts her head on my chest while I spend the next few hours giving her all the reasons to run but still hoping she’ll stay.

I wanted Bet to know who I really was and maybe during the process I’d find out too.

# Bet

Listening to Rio tell me about his life was comforting. He wasn't lying, he had a very colorful past but I still don't see him as a bad person. He admits to using women, stealing and even killing two men when he was only nineteen. Turns out he wasn't facing jail time for murder but for running drugs. However, a fellow thug higher up on the food chain helped him out and then he ran into Senior and he was given his fresh start.

I wouldn't judge him for surviving. In fact, I was pretty proud that despite the odds, he did.

When he asked me if my wrists hurt, I told him the truth. No, they didn't. I wasn't ready to tell him that I wanted to stay like this because I knew he'd take that knowledge and flip it around on me. But I did want to stay like this because having someone else take control for once felt fucking awesome. He fed me, pleased me, and though he still tries to convince me to live, I was enjoying his company while I had it.

Who am I kidding? I enjoyed him, period.

"You stayed straight to make them proud, didn't you?"

"Yeah," he says quietly, "I owed them big."

"Are you still straight?"

"Define straight," he says playing with my hair, "It's like any addiction, Bet, it's always there wanting to pull you back down. You hunger for it, can't help it. I ain't smart like you, but I do have skills. They just aren't in your kind of business."

"Explain what an enforcer does," I ask. When he told me he was an enforcer for a bookie (Junior), I was intrigued. He'd told me some but once

he got going I wished I'd gotten into the betting business. Seriously, it sounded like fun.

I was a workaholic no two ways about it, but it wasn't fun. Rio could convince people to anything he wanted them to do, I'm proof of that. In my life, I've never done anything I didn't want to do, yet here I am. Our time together would run out, I knew that but I didn't want to say goodbye even though it was unavoidable. Here in this tiny room hours away from real life, I saw the potential between us. The reality was my life and his were very different, not only because our professions were miles apart, but that I was still pretty intent on ending things.

If anyone could convince me to stick around though, it's him. However, even if I did manage to say the words how long until I changed my mind? Money can buy you a lot of things, but peace isn't one of them. Lying here in total quiet I want to say the words, but I can't. What if I'm only a project? Someone he wants to help, not someone he wants a future with? I wasn't big on being a charity case. I funded charity cases, I had no intentions on becoming one.

“Ever think about trying again?”

“Trying what again?” I ask.

“Having kids,” he says tickling my arms, “You're young, you know, maybe it would help give you closure.”

“No,” I tell him bluntly, “I'm not replacing Indie with another kid.”

“We ain't exactly been careful,” he reminds me, “There's a chance you could get knocked up.”

“People still say knocked up?” I ask, “Change the subject, alright? No kids.”

“What about marriage?”

“Jesus!” I growl, “What is with you? No! No marriage, no kids, nothing. By this time next week I'll have a pathetic obituary and a funeral no one comes to, okay? That's my future, try paying attention when I speak.”

“When you said *husband* at the bar, I saw something, Bet. Felt it, just like you did. What if I want to be your future?”



I'd had enough. Fuck, he was pushy and though I wouldn't admit it, I was beginning to see a future with him too. "If I had a dick I'd shove it in *your* mouth to shut you up."

"If you had a dick---" he begins then pauses. "Hell, if you had a dick, I probably wouldn't even care. It might take some getting used to but I could get down with it."

"Ew."

"You're hot, little Bet," he says squeezing my breast, "A hot chick with a dick is better than an ugly chick with a decent pussy. You ain't gotta get it but it's playing out in my head and I ain't all that upset about it."

I couldn't help it, I laughed. Not just a little bit either, full on snorting took place. Settling down, I watch the crinkles at his eyes and wish I'd met him years ago. I wanted to be responsible for some of those crinkles. "What's your full name?" I ask.

"Ricardo Martin."

Blinking, I feel it coming on and no doubt this is old hat for him but I couldn't help myself. "This is just too easy. I can't believe it, this never happens to me. Ricardo Martin? What's JLo like in person?"

"Yeah, Ricky Martin jokes never get old," he dead pans, "Why don't you see the world with all that money you got? Why hide?"

"I never had anyone to see it with," I admit, "Seeing it alone didn't appeal to me."

"If you could go anywhere, where would it be?"

"I'm happy where I am right now."

"Of course you are," he says looking me up and down. Running his hand over his dick and squeezing he looks back at me again. "You got this hard dick at your disposal so I can't blame you. But, if you could have this anywhere in the world where would you take it?"

"I want a boat," I blurt. I couldn't stop staring at his hand holding what I wanted to hold.

"A boat's a good start," he says rubbing harder to hold my attention. "Where would you take this boat?"

“Anywhere you told me to.”

“You need this, little Bet?” he asks sliding his free hand to cup his balls. “You need some dick?”

“I need *your* dick,” I pant, “Now.”

“Tell me you want to live.”

“No.”

“Then the only one getting this dick is me, but I’ll let you watch.”

The son of a bitch actually straddled me giving me no choice but to lie there and watch him get himself off. We both enjoyed it at first, but I was only going to be patient for so long.

Ricky Martin was about to live la vida loca for real.

Rio

She's a stubborn female, I'll give her that.

She wants this dick *and* she wants to live. She may not say it, but I can see it. Each time I push she fights me on it. My woman wants a boat, to set sail and be free and all she has to do is say the damn words. With my knees on either side of her, I work myself over with her heated cheeks as a catalyst. I slap her tits with it, I run it over her lips and when I try to pull back she uses her legs to bring me closer. No woman has ever wanted me like she does. We've been getting each other off for days. We both need to fuck, but fucking her would be too easy. To make this work, she needed to suffer just long enough to give in. When the time comes, I'm making love to her, nothing less. If that doesn't do it, nothing will.

"Would you just fuck me already?"

"I'm just getting started, little Bet," I say slapping her with it again, "But all you gotta do is say the---"

"I hate you!" she yells to the ceiling, "Don't play with me, Rio! All you have to do is slide it in; I'm so wet right now it's on the God damn sheets."

Peeking down she lifts her knees and I see the proof. "Shit," I moan, "I do want back in there, but for now this'll work."

Spreading her apart with my fingers, the index literally slides through and while her eyes roll back my balls tighten. Raising her hips and grinding on my fingers, I'm close to saying fuck it and taking her. "That's it," she moans again, "Make me come, Rio, then fuck me."

"Yeah, no." I tell her, stopping all together.

"What the fuck do you mean, yeah no?"

Getting her riled up works for me and my dick, we like playing dirty. Knowing how badly she wants me has me jerking faster, harder and leaning up near her mouth. “Please don’t leave me like this,” she half demands half begs and that’s all I needed to let it go.

All over her face.

“You look awfully proud of yourself,” she says while making no attempt to scream at me for jizzing in her eyes and hair. I was hoping she’d flip, but no, once again she acts as if nothing fazes her. “Just making sure I still have my aim.”

“Your aim is good,” she says licking it from her lips. “Then again, this is probably par for the course with you, so why I should I expect preferential treatment?”

“Excuse me?”

“Excuse you? You brag about your prowess, tease me, then leave me like this? Either get me off or free a hand so I can do it myself. Seriously, you’re better than that.”

“I see what you’re doing,” I warn her. Granted, I felt like kind of an asshole for doing it but this isn’t my MO I have a good reason, her fucking life.

“Give me ten minutes; I’ll be back in the game.”

“I’ll be over it by then,” she says rubbing her legs together. “Oh fuck it, I’m taking a nap.”

“I’m sorry, little Bet.”

“No, you’re not.”

“You’re right,” I tell her smirking, “I’m not.”

Doing her best to ignore me and the need blazing through her, I only felt slightly guilty. The payoff was worth the discomfort we both suffered. Getting her to say the words was my main focus now.

She’s close.

“We’ve got ten minutes before I can get in there; tell me something about you no one knows.” Her face hardened before she answered. Like all things Bet, the first thing she says is the very last thing I expected to hear.

“I agreed to get married because it’s what my parents wanted.”

“You said you loved him.”

“I did love him,” she says and believe me, it was not at all convincing. “He was my first boyfriend. But I wasn’t ready to get married yet. When he asked in front of them I couldn’t say no and break their hearts. I knew I could be a good wife but I wanted to do things first. I wanted to travel and be irresponsible. I got pregnant on my wedding night and then in a blink, I grew up. I loved him the best I could, but I could have done better.”

“He know you loved him?” I ask her. The fact that she thinks she could have done better tells me she wasn’t in love with him. She felt for him like I felt for Rion. We both thought love was something it wasn’t and in this we’re both learning the truth.

“I didn’t say it as much as I should have but I hope he knew. Alan was a good man, he deserved better than me.”

“I think he knew he was a lucky son of a bitch,” I tell her while wiping my shit off her chin. “I also think he died knowing he was a lucky son of a bitch too. You were tight with your parents then?”

“Very,” she smiles, “They were great parents.”

“I ain’t no shrink but I think you struggle with losing Indie the most. You got years with your parents and even a few with Alan. You got fucking robbed with your daughter and for that, I don’t blame you, Bet. But dying ain’t the way to go, you can still travel and be irresponsible. Don’t just do it for you, do it for them, too.”

“I hurt all the time, Rio,” she whispers, “It never stops. The void just gets bigger and bigger. I’ve been giving my money away, I don’t want it. I just want all the bullshit to stop. I don’t think it’s selfish to want peace.”

“It is selfish when you got somebody who don’t want to live without you but you plan to leave him anyway. Tell me you haven’t been happy with me; tell me you don’t think we deserve a shot. You look at me and see something, little Bet, what is it?”

When she seals her mouth closed, I press further. “What do you see when you look at me, Bet. I want an answer.”

“Heartbreak,” she says sadly, “I see heartbreak.”

“You trust me with your body; trust me with your heart.”

“It’s empty, Rio.”

“Wrong,” I tell her. Pulling her up to take her mouth, I say it again. “You’re wrong. You melt when I touch you, you laugh when I tell a joke and you seek me out in your sleep. You ain’t empty, you’re filling up. I can see it happening.”

When the tears run down her face I say no more. In fact, for the next several minutes I don’t do anything. I leave it up to her. These were, by the way, the longest minutes of my life.

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# Bet

He's right. It doesn't mean that I *like* that he's right, but I can't deny that with him I feel things other than hurt. But he *is* heartbreak and I'd be foolish to think otherwise. Rio didn't want me long-term even if I wished he did. It *was* losing Indie that cut me the deepest. Losing her pretty much ruined me. I was a good daughter, a decent wife but, I was amazing as a mother. No, she wasn't planned but the best things in life rarely are. Alan said to me once, *I wish you looked at me like you do our daughter*. I hadn't known what to say to that, so I didn't say anything. That was the first time I could say Alan was annoyed with me. He said other things like, *when you hold her it's what true love should look like and, I wonder if she has any idea how lucky she is*.

Funny that I chose to think of that right now. Remembering the good was what I focused on, that way I could avoid the memories that weren't so good. All these years later, I can admit that I didn't give Alan the love and respect he was due and he knew it. But he loved me enough to stick around just the same. I can also admit that's why the guilt stays with me too. I wanted to love him better, harder, and longer. I wanted the chance to show him he was my everything but I have to admit to myself that, maybe he wasn't. I did love him, but I was a kid and marriage was shoved down my throat and I had accepted it. I knew that in time I could be perfect for him as soon as I figured out who I was but, I didn't have time.

Before I could be who he needed me to be, he was taken from me. He died knowing I didn't love him enough and that tears me apart daily. Yes, I wanted them back. I wanted them back so I could do *better*. I failed my parents and my husband. The only one I didn't fail was Indie. I gave her all

I had. Even if I never say it out loud, I miss my daughter most of all and I feel guilty about that too.

Rio was right.

But so was I.

I didn't feel that I belong anywhere anymore. Not when I failed at the most basic part of life, I failed at love. Money doesn't define you or bring you happiness. Love does, family does, and I had neither. Sticking around to get my heart broken again didn't seem worth the risk so I changed the subject to money.

"If you were given a million dollars," I start, "and you could do anything in the world with it, what would you do?"

Rubbing his chin, I see him thinking on it. A million is a lot of money, but to most people a million anything is more than they'll ever see in one lump sum.

"I'd open a spot where people could come for a second chance. Wouldn't matter who you were or what kinda shit you were into, you'd get another shot."

"Where would this spot be?"

"Detroit."

"Why Detroit?"

"Maybe because I live there?"

"You do?"

"Yeah, little Bet," he says leaning forward to wipe the residual tears from my face, "I do."

"You never said anything."

"You never asked."

"There's a good chance we've passed each other on the street," I say smiling at the thought, "You never know."

"I'd know it if I passed you," he says winking, "but unless you hang over off 8 Mile and place bets you can't pay, you wouldn't run into me. You don't belong on my side of town."



“Why do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Separate yourself from me like that. You look at me and see money, like it’s who I am when it’s not. I may have it but it’s not *me*. You think I sit in an office and count stacks all day? I actually live off of very little. In fact, when I’m not helping people start businesses---” I stop myself from explaining it to him. Why should I? Like he cares?

“Finish your sentence,” he demands, “You got shit to say, say it.”

“When I’m not helping them financially, I help them physically.”

“I’d buy that,” he says casually, “Why was that so hard to say?”

“Because, I shouldn’t have to prove myself to you.”

“I didn’t ask you to.”

“What the fuck is your problem?”

“Glad you asked,” he says, “I love being with you, first female I can ever say that about. I got shit invested with you, my feelings are in play now. I’m just wondering how this works. I’m thinking maybe I made a mistake. Even if I get you to say the words, the fuck kinda future can I offer someone like you?”

“Someone like *me*?”

“You got money, I don’t. You got knowledge, I don’t. Yeah, I got a dick and you don’t but you gotta see the gap here.”

“Actually, I didn’t see a gap but it’s moot. I’m not saying the words, so any potential future is irrelevant. Especially, when you put me in my place about where I belong. By the way, *Pretty In Pink* was a stupid movie.”

At that point I’d had enough. It always comes down to money. I’d give it all away to fit in somewhere. But mostly it was when he said that maybe this was a mistake, because that terrified me. I didn’t want to be a mistake, I wanted... Oh fuck I had no God damn clue what I wanted. Yes I did. I wanted to be wanted for me, just once. Shutting him out I think about the loose ends I need to tie up when I get home.

You’d think planning your own death would be simple, yeah not so much.

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R i o

With less than forty-eight hours to convince her, I realized my error immediately. Personally, I didn't give a shit about her money but it was an issue. I had hoped she'd say something to prove me wrong but she didn't. She fell back on the wanting to die bullshit and that left me with no comeback. Watching her tune me out, I wonder what she's thinking about. Whatever it is has her total concentration. Bet was a deep thinker.

Grabbing us both some food and a bottle of wine, I come back to the bed to get her attention. I have until tomorrow realistically to get her to say the words. After that, we need to pack and jet the day after if the ferries are on schedule. I haven't checked my phone, but if I did no doubt there'd be a dozen threats from Adrian on it. As far as that fucker goes, I got nothing on him either. Other than he was blackmailing her because she stopped paying, I had nothing else to go on. Bringing the sandwich to her mouth she opens it, takes a bite, chews and swallows. It's robotic and it's pissing me off. Bringing the wine to her mouth she takes a deep pull and my dick felt it. Looking outside, it's still ass-pouring and this room is muggy as fuck. But watching her eat and drink butt-ass naked ain't a bad reward either.

"You up for a shower?"

"Yes."

Untying her, she slowly stretches and makes her way to the bathroom not sparing me a word or glance. When I hear the water starting, I remake the bed, fluff the pillows and wait her out. Ten minutes later, she's standing before me in a towel smelling like lavender while staring down at me. "Fuck me," she whispers.

"Say the words."

Dropping the towel and climbing back on to the bed, she holds her arms out and I tie her back up. Dammit, I didn't want to. I wanted her to say it so I could beg her to stay with me when we left and promise to handle Adrian for her. Sitting next to her, I decide to level with her as best I can. "I don't want to say goodbye to you," I tell her. "I want to exit that ferry with your hand in mine, little Bet. I want to take you to my place, fuck you there. I want to go to your place, fuck you there and I want to be your reason for living. I want to be the reason you're happy."

"You're the reason I'm happy right now, Rio." She whispers. "With you, I'm the happiest I've been in six years. It's seductive to think that this kind of happy stands a chance but I won't drag you down with me. Sex only gets you so far. Believe me; I used to pay men to fuck me, I understand all new things wear off."

"You just said that," I mumble, "How many did you pay?"

"How many women have you been with?"

"Don't pay anyone else and I'll drop it."

"I haven't paid anyone in a long time," she says smiling, "But I'm guessing your number is much higher than mine."

"Not one meant shit to me."

"Not one meant shit to me either."

"This means something, little Bet," I tell her as I run my fingers across her stomach. "You and me, it's real and it means something. Give me at least that much."

"It's real," she admits quietly, "and it means something, Rio."

"Good answer."

Taking her face into my hands, I slide my tongue in and just like that I'm primed. If her hands worked she'd have them buried in my hair or clutching my shoulders. Right now though, she uses her legs to pull me closer and when I position myself between them she uses her heels to signal she's ready.

"Need inside," I warn her. So I may be full of shit. I do want inside but she wants to fuck, whereas I want to go slow making love to her properly. Making love for the first time in my life, with her. She'll figure it out quick

enough but all I need to do is let her think she's going to get pounded, then I'll switch it up. "Spread those legs, let me see my prize."

Doing as she's told, I watch her chest rise and fall. My dick is jumping around like a fish out of water and my own breathing sped up. Taking each leg, I put them over my forearms and take my time sliding in. Her moans are loud and long, my moan is more of a grumble. Taking it slow is new for me too and no lie, it feels pretty fucking good to feel her like this. Pulling back out slowly, sliding back in slowly, I can feel her contracting around me and I love it.

"Faster," she pants, "harder."

Giving her a taste of it, I slam into her one good time and her head falls back. I dial it back down and watch as she thrashes. She's letting me set the pace, trusting me to speed back up, but I'm not going to.

In fact, I may even stop.

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# Bet

Okay so this is different. Not bad different, more like over-stimulation different. The sensations were so intense I couldn't tell if he was going to drill me or make me work for it. He slid in with little effort. My body was screaming for it and the second he was close, my legs opened up begging him to come in. The pressure was welcome, his skin was damp with sweat and my back was arching of its own will. I ask him for more, needing to be fucked and he slams me good but then he pulls back and just stops.

Every internal alarm I had went off. I knew I shouldn't have agreed that this meant something because it gave him hope. Fuck, the truth was it gave me hope too. I want him, there's no denying that but how long can I possible have him? If I agreed to stop my suicide mission what happens when we get home? We date? Really? How long will that last? It's not even long distance; he lives in the same city as I do. But if I could have this kind of happiness, even sometimes, I would be okay with it. There isn't one thing I don't like about Rio. He says what he's thinking, he's honest and he's between my legs right now. If what he says is to be believed, he wants me too, the real me. At the risk of sounding like a broken record, I was scared. I felt guilty for wanting to be selfish. I was selfish once before and it cost me everything. Am I brave enough to take the chance twice?

“Ask me to make love to you, little Bet.”

It was that moment I knew I had a decision to make, one that would change my life forever. Digging down deep, I asked myself if I was safe with Rio. Could we make each other happy? Do two people from different sides of the tracks stand a chance? I knew my answer. Not only did I know it, I couldn't wait to say it. I needed to see where this could go. For the first time in years I felt something more than despair. I felt desperation, I felt

like I had found a home, a second chance. Putting the fear and uncertainty behind, I looked into his eyes looking for a reason to say no but finding none. What I found instead was acceptance, a chance at peace. If he could truly accept me he would help me accept myself, I knew that and that's what gave me the courage to take the leap.

“Will you make love to me, Rio?” I whisper and I was so proud of myself for being able to say it without crying. My life would never be perfect, the grief wasn't going to disappear but if he's a willing buffer, I'd be foolish to let this pass me by. Smiling at me he leans in kissing me softly, yet it's the deepest kiss I've ever had. It was an emotional kiss and I'd never had a kiss like this before. Parting my legs further, he slowly maneuvers himself back inside of me and with a gentleness I didn't know he possessed, he started to move.

It was a slow rocking. He stared at me and me at him. My moans were quiet as were his. Our breathing was filling the room and when I bit my lip in pleasure, he kissed my nose. I don't know why that did it for me, but the next thing I knew he was whispering the most beautiful words to me and that combined with our bodies meshing sent me over. The orgasm was slow and liquid. It left me shattered and completely open to him. He sensed it and when his hands covered my tits and he whispered, “Every day for the rest of my life, I'll convince you if you'll let me,” I felt all of it.

Just like that, I knew happiness was possible for me again.

Deep and sure, that forever feeling hit me. A few hours ago, I still had myself convinced life wasn't worth living but he was right, it *was*. This change hit me hard. I wanted it all but was terrified of it too. We brought something out in each other that I couldn't explain. It wasn't just this, sex and the forbidden it was...more.

Speechless, I watch him take care of me. Kissing my neck, my ear and running his fingers over me all while he pumps me slowly. We were making love and it was hands down the most poignant moment in my life. When I feel another orgasm come on I wrap my legs around him as tight as I can and take the first step toward forgiving myself.

“Say it for me, little Bet.” This was it, that first step in accepting an alternative to dying. “I want to live,” I whisper through the bliss of having

him inside me, connected to me in real time. So when the tears came, he watched each of them fall with the most perfect look on his face.

At that moment, those four words made Rio the happiest man on earth.

Picking up his pace a bit, he brings me onto his lap. The position made no sense to me at first until he leaned me back and unties me. Letting both arms fall, I wait for the numbness to pass but focus on how he feels inside of me like this. Bringing my hands up and sinking them into his hair, I take his mouth hard.

“Missed those hands,” he moans into my mouth.

“If we do this, promise not to leave me without saying goodbye.” I beg of him.

“I ain’t leaving,” he growls, “Neither are you, we’re doing this. Now come, woman.”

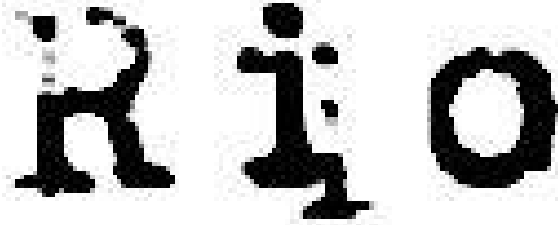
Taking me to my back then flipping me onto my side, he slides back in and buries his face into my neck. Still making love to me but with more urgency now, he grips my hip and groans, “Say the words again,” he orders me, “Need to hear it.”

“I want to live,” I choke out. Because of him I did want to live, more than I wanted anything in six long years. Spanking me much harder than I was prepared for, my body bows and a loud gasp leaves me. “Looks like you want me to live too.” I gasp.

Pumping into me with more force, he tilts my head back and gives me his tongue. “Need you alive to love you, little Bet,” he groans, “Gonna love you forever.”

My final orgasm blisters through me like fire. His words sent me to a place I’ve never been. Though I didn’t voice it because I simply couldn’t find my words, I wanted to say it back. Instead, when his own orgasm hit him I helped him ride it out until we were both too destroyed to move after.





One step forward, ten fucking steps back.

After getting her to say the words the weight of the world fell from my shoulders. Telling her I loved her was a driving force I couldn't stop, she had to know. When her mouth opened and closed, I knew she wanted to say it but she physically couldn't. Instead of getting pissed, I called on my patience. Getting Bet to say the words was priority one, getting her to love me back was happening, just not as quickly as I'd like it to. Pushing her to say it wouldn't work, she had to do it in her own time.

She fell asleep first, I stayed awake, content to watch her breathe. At least I was until she woke from a nightmare and completely shut down on me, hell on herself. Her eyes were open but she was...void.

No emotion, no comprehension and no movement.

Hours go by and she refuses to acknowledge me. Not when I offer her food or when I try to engage. The only time I can get her to even blink is when I try moving her to which she starts kicking and screaming until I let her go. Maybe this meltdown had been a long time coming. She said she usually drank herself into a coma for them two days, did I fuck up the healing process for her? Honestly, right now I was so strung out over her behavior I didn't have an answer. It ain't like I have experience with a female losing her shit like this. I could handle Bet taking a swing at me, I couldn't handle...this.

Having no idea what time it was because truthfully I was afraid to look, I crawl into bed next to her hoping my presence would bring her back to me. Careful not to touch her, I stay above the covers and then I start talking. About everything, nothing, and even some shit I made up. The

quiet was getting to me. Making me nervous and riling me up at the same time.

Finally out of shit to say, I get up to take a piss and sprayed the God damned bathroom wall when she starts screaming her fucking head off. “Bet!” I yell to get her attention. Nothing. Grabbing her she immediately goes buck wild somehow managing to toss me off the bed.

Before I can get back up she rips the bedding clear, breaks the lamps, throws the remote straight through the TV, chucks her phone at the door wall and then does the unthinkable. She tries harming herself. Scratching at her face, neck, arms and stomach I kick into gear tackling her to the bed. I wrestled for about a semester in school and pretty much figured out how to hold her down without hurting her. Finally running out of steam, she went from thrashing and screaming to...sobbing.

The sobbing undid me.

If you told me two weeks ago crying for hours was possible, I’d call you a liar. But that’s what she did, she cried her fucking eyes out for hours upon hours before losing her voice and passing out for good. Carefully releasing her, I grab a bottle of wine and sink down the wall until my ass hits the floor.

Emotionally and physically exhausted, I felt my own eyes build up but it wasn’t for me it was for her. In all my life I’ve never seen utter despair. When Senior died, Rion had a few breakdowns but nothing like this. Then again, she lost her old man but Bet lost every fucking person she loved in her life at that time.

When she whimpers, “Indie,” in a broken voice, I feel the first tear run down my cheek. Wanting to go to her, comfort her, I stay put hoping she’d call out for me. She didn’t and for some reason that hurt too. When morning hit I stretched my crooked neck and back out heading over to the bed to check on her. With closed eyes, she clutches her daughter’s blanket and weeps silently into it.

Not able to take it another second, I crawled in next to her and covered her as best I could. In hushed tones, I let her know that I was here, that she was safe and that I loved her. I begged her to open her eyes, to look at me and promised her somehow I’d make it better. When she stilled I worried she was about to flip again but she didn’t.

Instead she turned toward me, opened her tear-stained puffy eyes and said, “Hi.”

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# Bet

When it's your time to lose it, it's your time to lose it.

Six years ago, I learned to never say never. Plans change, people change and priorities change. I suppose you can fight it but eventually it's going to happen whether you like it or not. Events will happen that are out of your control. People will always surprise you in good ways and in bad. Just when you think you've got life figured out, that ending it would be easier, you meet someone who convinces you to try again.

That's what prompted this overdue breakdown or rather breakthrough.

Rio had looked me in the eyes and told me he loved me. With pleasure zinging throughout my body his words combined with ecstasy took me over the edge. At the time I was emotionally over charged, having just said I wanted to live and meaning it, to hearing I was loved while he fucked me, it was pure bliss. But once I came back down to earth, fear crept in and thoughts of losing him like I did them, briefly stole my sanity from me. So easily comes loss right? By car, disease, a gun or even by choice. This man found me in my darkest hour and made me believe again. How could I cope if he ever left me for any reason? The fact was, I couldn't. At that reminder, my mind and body went on auto pilot. Yes, I was aware I was being destructive but I just didn't care. All of my losses blended into one catastrophic meltdown.

Suddenly he was there, wrapping me up in safety, saying things I couldn't understand but wanted to. I was sick of crying, of being weak and unstable. Clinging to his stability I did what I was good at and fought my way back. I said the words, I even meant them so I had to soldier on and trust that I was strong enough to do this with or without him. Yes, I wanted

him. Desperately. But to get on with life, I had to do this for myself, no one else. It wasn't Rio's job to help me function; it was my job to do it. But it helped to know that I could call on him if it got too hard.

Taking a deep breath, I roll over to face him. Immediately, I see he's been crying too and I knew, I fucking knew the decision to trust in this, in him was the right one. "Hi," I whisper.

"Where you been, little Bet?" he asks sniffing.

"I wish I had an answer that would make sense," I offer.

"I'm so sorry for putting you through that."

"Why'd you come back?" he asks.

"For you," I whisper kissing his cheek. "I came back, for you."

"You scared me," he confesses. "Thought I lost you, I didn't know what to do for you."

"You're doing it," I tell him as joy slowly flows through my veins. "You stayed. You matter to me, Rio, and the thought of losing you made me feel---"

He cuts me off by rolling over to straddle me. Securing both arms over my head, he leans in and kisses me perfectly hard. "Losing you would ruin me," he says panting. "Do you got any idea what thinking you know what love is only to find out what it *isn't* feels like? That didn't come out right," he mumbles shaking his head. "You're my second chance, little Bet, and I'm yours." Oddly enough I knew exactly what he meant. What he thought was love with Rion wasn't. What I thought was love with Alan wasn't either. What we were feeling wasn't familial like it had been with them, this was love that you couldn't live without because it was true.

"I thought I loved Alan," I tell him. "I tried so hard to love him how he deserved. He was safety for me, Rio. I can say I did love him for that but I wasn't in love with him and that eats at me. He died knowing I didn't love him."

Taking a deep breath and watching as his eyes soften, he eases his grip. "I thought I loved Rion, too," he says. "I got confused about it, all them years with her needing me. She was my one constant and even though it was my job to protect her, she was safety for me like he was for you."

“I struggle with grief, I probably always will and I know that. But it’s not just grief but guilt, too. Alan was robbed of a future because I wasn’t strong enough to let him go. Because of me he paid the ultimate price.”

“Your husband loved you, little Bet,” he says pulling me up and into his lap. “Pretty sure if he could do it all again, he wouldn’t change shit. He got to have you for a time, Indie too. A man knows when he’s hit the lottery.”

“So does a woman,” I whisper into his neck. “Rion loves you, Rio, she’s your family. Please don’t run from your family, she loves you unconditionally.”

Clearing his throat, he leans me back so we’re face to face. “We’re good then?” he asks.

“We’re good,” I smile up at him.

“You still wanna live?” he asks.

“You still want a woman with emotional issues?” I counter.

“Turns out I got a thing for fucked up females,” he says giving me a light spanking.

“Mmm,” I moan. “Turns out I got a thing for alpha males. Hey Rio?” I ask.

“Yeah?”

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For loving me at my worst.”

“If this is your worst, I’m going to enjoy the fuck outta your best.” He laughs pulling me from the bed and pushing me into the bathroom. “You smell like salt,” he says. “Wash that shit off and come have breakfast with me.”

Giggling into my hand, I turn back to him once more. “Hey, Rio?”

“Yeah, Bet?”

“Wash my back for me?” I ask with a smirk. Like a shot he plowed into the bathroom closing the door behind him.

“Wasn’t hungry,” he says backing me into the stall. “For food anyway.”

Like the previous night was an old memory, we moved forward. After the shower, which was sadly quick because the hot water ran out, he grabbed more wine, plus the cheese and crackers then fed me on the couch. By late afternoon, I was still exhausted from losing my shit the night before and fell asleep in his lap while watching the one working television. For a moment I felt guilty that we couldn’t watch it in bed because I sorta broke it, but he said this TV was better anyway and I went with it. At some point, I felt him carry me to bed where he climbed in beside me and true to his word, he never let me go.

It was the second best night’s sleep I’d had in six years.

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RiO

Letting her sleep, I wait at the front desk to see when the first ferry off this island is scheduled. Turns out the storm was the worst we've seen in twenty years and shit was seriously behind schedule. Checking my messages while I wait, I see two from Rion, one from Loyal, and a dozen from Adrian. Right now with a naked Bet in our room I don't want to talk to any of them, especially Adrian. Twenty minutes later, I'm told the first available ferry is in two days and knew we'd be on it, together.

Heading down the hill for coffee, it doesn't seem possible that an overcast day could be beautiful but it was. Even with everything soaked from the storm, I enjoyed the view. This was freaky shit because until her I never noticed the weather one way or the other. We've been holed up in that room for nearly a week and despite dozens of orgasms we both needed fresh air. Honestly, I wanted the people on the island to see the woman who wants me and wants to live. I wanted to show off my good fortune.

Every mother fucker on this island wanted coffee today, so while waiting in line when Adrian calls again, I answer. Whatever he wanted was going to have to wait, now was as good a time as any to tell him that. "What?"

"Are you avoiding me?"

"No," I tell him handing the barista my cash. "My signal sucks and I have to walk into town to use my phone. I'm in town, hence why I answered."

"I checked the weather, the storm passed and ferries depart in two days. You'll have her on the first one out?"



“Yes, mother. I told you I would bring her back, you got trouble hearing me?”

“Oh no,” he laughs, “I hear you, I just don’t necessarily trust you. The Rio I know would have had her privileged-ass back here within twelve hours and stole her wallet. The shit you’re pulling don’t add up. Get her here.”

“She ain’t who you think she is,” I growl, “Ever think of that?”

“She’s got you snowed; you’ll see exactly who she is soon. Clock’s tickin’, partner.”

When my name is called, I grab both drinks and nearly dump them all over her when Bet startles me.

“Whoa,” she says taking a drink from me. “Who was on the phone?”

“An old friend.”

“Who ‘isn’t who he thinks she is’?”

“A chick he used to deal with,” I answer vaguely. Walking out onto the street I’m sweating, wondering how much she heard and afraid to find out. “He wants her back.”

“He wants your help?”

“Something like that.”

“What if she doesn’t want to go back?”

“She doesn’t have a choice, little Bet,” I say taking a seat on a hard ass concrete bench. “They got business.”

“The first ferry runs Wednesday morning,” she says absently sipping her drink. “I figured we’d take the eight thirty.”

“That works for me.”

Leaning her head on my shoulder she’s quiet for a moment. Then she speaks and everything in me stills. “You wouldn’t be trying to fuck me over would you, Rio?” she asks in a steady voice. It’s that boardroom voice, the one that says if you answer wrong you’re going to be out of a job and possibly beheaded. “I’ve already got a long list of people who want to see me fall, if you’re one of them, please tell me now.”

Swallowing hard but not hesitating, I pull her even closer to me. “Not sure what you’re talking about, again you’re only hearing one side of a conversation. Helping out a friend is all, little Bet. They got some shit to settle, but it’ll work out. Just repaying a favor is all.”

“Okay Rio,” she says quietly, “I’ll trust you. Let’s head back, the sky’s about to open up again.”

Kissing the top of her head, I close my eyes in thanks for her buying it. Bet made me the happiest man in the world when she said the words. I wouldn’t betray her, not to Adrian, not to anyone. I just have to figure out how I’m going to get her back and keep her out of his reach until I figure something out.

I had to figure something out, I couldn’t lose her.

Maybe killing Adrian was the way to go. No one would miss his ass and the city would probably thank me. It would be worth it as long as Bet was my payoff.

# Bet

We spent the rest of the day snacking and chatting indoors. It was easy and the only black cloud was his phone call. I didn't get to where I am now by being trusting. I hated that with one quick call my trust in him was shaken, but it was. The fact is, back on dry land I don't know Rio and he doesn't know me. Whoever he was speaking with had him on edge. And this favor he was doing wasn't sitting well with him either.

I'm not big into the mantra *everything happens for a reason*. Humans are calculated and they can be cruel. He knows my reasons for being here; I however, don't know his. If I was venturing into a future with this man, I had to know exactly who I was getting. While he showered, I emailed a man I do business with and asked him to do some background work on Rio. He said to give him a few minutes and until I heard back from him, I was reserving judgment. Once he was out, I headed in to take my own shower but I kept my phone out of his reach. Taking it with me into the bathroom, I played music so he wouldn't question why I wasn't parting with it.

If he was sent here for me, he would pay for his betrayal.

If his presence on an island he clearly hates is coincidence, I'll punish myself by eating low fat foods for a month. Bottom line, something felt off and I trusted my instincts.

As I was drying off, he said he was going to grab us a bottle of wine so I continued my routine until he returned. When my phone lit up, I wasn't expecting an answer so quickly but there it was for me to see.

*Ricardo Martin: age 35 (single male)*

*Parents: deceased (no siblings noted)*

*Employer: unknown*

*Criminal History: Assault age 16 (no charges filed) Grand theft auto age 17 (community service) Larceny (misdemeanor) age 17, Larceny (felony) ages 18, 19 (eighteen days served in county with community service). Felony murder two counts (case unsolved) age 19. Possession with the intent to distribute, (charges dropped pending work program) age 20.*

His history didn't shock me, he pretty much told me he had a colorful past and I didn't see how any of this could possibly link itself to me. However, I was smart enough to be cautious now. Even if he didn't mean me harm, if I was in fact who he was here to deliver, whoever he was working for may. Adrian and his threats came to mind but I don't see how they would even know each other. Adrian dealt in drugs, hookers, and underground fighting. Yes, it seemed too convenient that we all lived in close proximity but I had no more to go on.

Emailing him back, I asked him to also run Adrian Lennox and see if there was a connection between the two. As far as I knew, Adrian's record was clean. Why wouldn't it be? He always had his thugs do his dirty work for him. I wasn't expecting to find anything and minutes later when he emailed me back, I was proven right.

Shit.

Deleting the thread and logging out, I dress and wait on the couch for Rio to return. Checking myself in the mirror, I notice a glow that I hadn't seen in years, if ever. Despite the betrayal of looking him up and being proven wrong, I was in a good place emotionally. So I needed to trust Rio, I could do that. It was time to put my trust in someone and I decided even with his past, he was a safe bet.

"You look fucking edible." He says standing in the doorway looking all sorts of yummy himself. He may be a jeans and t-shirt kind of guy but damn, he does it right.

"Would you like to skip dinner and stay in?" I ask crossing and uncrossing my legs slowly.

"No, you and me are going out. We got all night to scratch that itch."

Helping me up, he dips me and had me rolling in laughter when he actually motor boated me. "Couldn't help myself," he says pouring me a

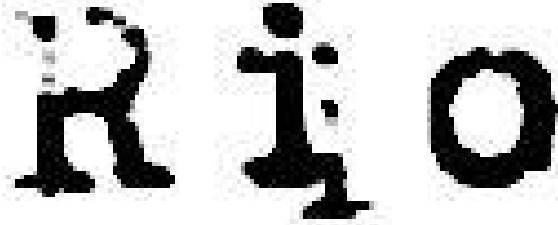
glass of white wine. “Those tits get me fired up.”

“Cheers,” I say lifting my glass and pushing my chest out.

“Cheers, little Bet.” When our glasses clink I felt like absolute shit for doubting him and promised myself I wouldn’t do it again. Dinner of course, was amazing too, we laughed constantly and at about nine o’clock we started doing shots. At eleven, I was on my way to total oblivion when he cashed our tab and he helped me stumble out of the restaurant.

Taking advantage of a break in the weather, he leads me to my favorite spot. We each fall into an Adirondack chair and when he takes my hand and kisses my wrist, I wasn’t too drunk to miss what came next.

With lightning showcasing his beautiful face, it was that exact moment I fell in love with Rio.



There was nothing better than Bet smiling, that was a fact. Even buzzed, she appreciated what surrounded her. No, I wasn't a fan of island life but she was, so I decided for her I could deal. Kissing her inner wrist, she let out the smallest sigh and her eyes softened. Those beautiful eyes lit up for me, the guy who fell for her in no time flat. There was no denying it, no hiding it either.

Which was why I needed to tell her the truth about why I'm here. If I lost her because of it, that's on me but she's levelheaded and I had to believe she would forgive me. She would understand it was business. I couldn't think of anyone who would get that more than her. Adrian had me by the balls as much just as he had her, we could work this out. Reaching over, I pull her up and onto my lap and let her settle in. Bet is a small woman who happened to fit perfectly under my chin. Running her fingers over my arms, she tilts her head back and speaks into my ear before I can confess.

"Here's something else about me you don't know," she begins. "In college, I was once arrested for public intoxication."

"You?" I laugh, "Don't see it."

"It's true!" she says sitting up and turning to face me. "I used my fake ID to get into the bar and then security called the cops when I refused to climb down from the table I was dancing on. Granted, it didn't stick because of my father but I was cuffed, fingerprinted and photographed. I even threw up on the cot! Wow, I can't believe I forgot that."

"My woman has a record."

“That was the last time I did anything like that. My father was pissed. Alan never said a word one way or the other, and my mother thought it was a phase.”

“Was it?”

“I think it was pre-wedding jitters,” she admits quietly. Looking out over the water she tenses up a bit so I try and calm her again.

“Keep going,” I tell her while rubbing her back.

“I was so young and scared. I was a sophomore in college and I was getting married. He loved me so much. I knew one day I could love him too,” she says “I just---”

“Who you trying to convince here, little Bet, me or you?”

“Shit, I don’t know,” she says falling back onto me. “I suppose there’s no use in what ifs. Even if I could go back and change anything I’d still be where I am now. Moving forward, no matter the step, is difficult. I’m trying really hard not to let you feel the fallout from it, but I know you won’t be exempt. Guilt is what’s kept me going for six years. Hell, long before that. I felt guilty that I didn’t love him like he loved me, that I didn’t do *more*. I thought I had time to get there.”

“All this work you do, that help with the guilt?”

“No, but I tell myself it does. How about you? All those years protecting Rion, did that ease your guilt?”

“Some,” I admit, “But I gotta tell ya, every day was a struggle to do good. Making them proud and keeping her safe was important to me. I did the best I could but I ain’t ever going to be straight like you deserve.”

“What if I told you that I’ve backed several ventures that provide less than legal services? That I believe in their causes and support them fully. That my money helped a certain group of people locate missing persons as well as eliminate future threats to the public. Because the city doesn’t have the resources and I do, I keep them well-funded. Women and children were being stolen in broad daylight, but these guys are good, Rio, like mercenary good. My point is, no one is straight as an arrow. No one. Sometimes you have to do a little bad to get to the good. If I had the skills and the stomach for it, I’d help them myself.”

“I was a thief, Bet,” I remind her, “You’re like Robin Hood with a hot ass, you give back. I took what didn’t belong to me.”

“What if you got involved with the group and helped them retrieve what was stolen? I have to believe you’re good at finding things, being a thief and all.”

“Are you offering me a job?”

“I hadn’t meant to, but you’ve got to admit, it makes sense. People are missing, their families are devastated and they were stolen, right? You’ll just be stealing them back.”

In a moment of seriousness, I put it out there, needing her to know how I felt. “I’m in love with you, little Bet.”

“You’re sure, right? No take backs?” she asks breathlessly.

“What’s it gonna take for you to fall in love with me?”

“I want it to be you, Rio.” She admits quietly.

“Then I’ll keep convincing you until you do.” I tell her.

At that moment, I knew I had a chance of winning her heart and I wouldn’t stop until I did. My debt to Adrian didn’t matter, her being loaded didn’t matter either. What happened here with us was real; nothing and nobody would ruin this for us.

“So tell me something no one else knows about you, Rio Martin.”

“That one’s easy,” I tell her, whispering in her ear.

Slapping me on the shoulder she lets out a loud laugh followed by, “You whipped your dick out in *church*?”

“It’s called holy water, Bet,” I mumble. “The priest said it washed away your sins.”

“You dip your finger in, not your dick---” she says trying to piece it all together. “Please tell me the priest didn’t catch you.”

“Nope,” I say as my face heats up. “Senior did.” When she falls down, curls into a ball and laughs her ass off I had to admit, it was pretty funny. Now, not then. Definitely not then. I’ve never lived that down and thinking of Junior meeting Bet so they could laugh together made the whole thing worth it.



Standing up, I extend my hand and she takes it while dusting off. Walking back to the room hand in hand, I have to admit making her laugh was the second most rewarding job I've ever had. Loving her was the first.

At least it felt pretty rewarding until we were attacked.

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# Bet

Holding hands wasn't overrated.

I used to think it was when I was in college. I hated it, actually. When Alan would grab my hand I would take it back and get frustrated with him. I used to think it was his way of showing others I was taken, a guy thing. To me it felt like I was being led around because I was thought to be too stupid to walk unassisted. Looking down at us walking casually hand in hand, I realized it was Alan's way of showing me he cared about me. It was a connection between two people and I didn't take the time to see that.

The amount of guilt one person can carry can't be measured, it's specific to that individual. Even with Rio claiming to love me, it was going to take time to adjust to having someone in my life. Putting someone first again, being considerate and compromising. Here we are sharing this new connection and I felt no guilt. What I felt was at ease, open, and vulnerable, in a good way.

He said 'I'm in love with you' so easily but he meant the words. Both of us have made some serious declarations this week. When Rio did it he didn't blink or sound nervous, if anything he sounded confident. It was proof that he was good for me, that he had this beautiful heart and I had to do everything in my power not to destroy it.

Turning the corner to head uphill, I looked down at our hands again and smiled. He didn't just hold my hand, he guided me, protected me in the dark. It also felt like he wanted to show me off and was looking for any excuse to find someone to share his good fortune with. I know this because I felt the same way. I wanted to gloat, puff up and point at Rio and say "Oh yeah, this guy? All mine bitches!"

For the first time in my life, I felt possessive.

This man belonged to me and me to him. I wouldn't share him. I'd scratch eyes out and sling insults at women thinking to poach my territory. I was an alpha female claiming her male with no one around to witness it. All of these things felt fanfuckingtastic, even without an audience. So much so that he needed to know right now. For me timing was everything and this was the time. Pulling him to stop, he stops easily, looks down at me and I stick my chin out proudly while clutching his hand. "Rio, I---"

"Whoa!" he yells and yanks me a few steps back.

"What---?" I try but he cuts me off.

"Did you see that?" he asks looking around.

"See what?" I counter because it's so dark but even though I couldn't see it, seconds later I *felt* it.

With an unholy scream, I break away from Rio and run in the opposite direction. In the back of my mind I knew running was stupid and clearly not fixing the problem but I was too petrified to identify what the problem *was*.

"Bet!" he yells after me. "Wait! Stop running woman, you've got a fucking bat in your hair!"

Skidding to halt, I throw my hands in the air and start shaking my head furiously. Oh God, I'm going to get rabies. I'm going to die from a bat bite. Reaching me he immediately bends me over and the two of us go at my hair until I feel the blood sucker free itself.

"Oh God, I've got rabies! Oh fuck! Am I bleeding? Did we kill it? We have to kill the host right? I know I read that somewhere. I think I'm going to pass out."

"It's gone," he says as out of breath as I am. "It didn't bite you, it was as scared as you were."

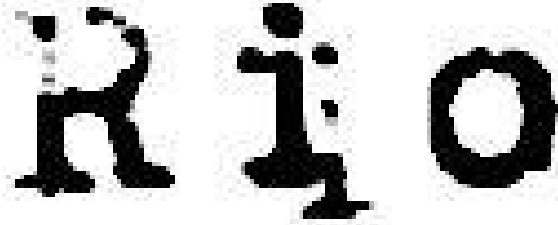
"Check my scalp!" I demand. "I swear it bit me!"

"Let's get to the room first---" he starts but then his eyes go round and like he was set on fire, Rio took off like an Olympic sprinter. Jesus, he even screamed louder than I did.

Apparently loving someone meant chasing after them when they lost their damn mind. So that's what I did, until he needed me to rescue him.

For the first time in my life I was the hero not the villain.

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Fuck keeping calm.

There was a God damn bat stuck to my back.

With my heart on my sleeve, I told the woman I loved her flat out and then this shit happens. When she stopped me she had something to say but I cut off her off. There was no way to prepare for a rabies infested bat attack and screaming was all I could come up with. The fact was, Bet handled her attack much better than I was handling mine.

Now I'm running in circles and I can't shake the damn thing. Out of fucking nowhere, Bet comes at me tackling me face down into the grass. Screaming like a banshee, she starts beating the holy shit out of me.

"Die, fucker!" she screams punching me in the back. "Oh God, it touched me!" she yells running around me. "Roll over!" she demands but ain't no way I'm rolling on this thing.

"Get it off me!" I order her.

"Okay!" she cries out. Waiting for her to kill the son of a bitch took forever. Then finally, I can hear her talking herself through it and though I kept waiting for a kidney shot, it never came. Let me say the kidney shot would have been preferred over her beating me with a God damn sandal. Wallop after wallop came and I'm pretty sure I counted seven licks to my back before she stopped. "It's gone," she says collapsing next to me.

Rolling to my back and opening my eyes, I ask her. "Where's your shirt?"

"Over there," she says throwing a hand out. "You used your fucking sandal on it so why'd the shirt come off too?" I ask.

“The sandal was a last resort, thank you very much. I tried shooining him with my shirt first but he was too strong!” she cries out burying her face in my chest.

“You saved my life,” I tell her with a smirk.

“Damn straight, I did,” she says looking up at me. “This kind of shit doesn’t happen in the city.”

“Bastards didn’t put this in the welcome flyer.” I point out.

“Oh, I’m totally writing a letter.” She says.

“They say a traumatic event can make couples even stronger. We just had a near-death experience, you love me yet?”

Her silence and the look of want was all the answer I needed. Helping each other up, dusting each other off, she may not have said she loved me back but she did take my hand first this time.

That had to mean something.

# Bet

Before the bat invasion, I came to terms with my feelings and the simple act of holding hands. After it, I took his hand first needing to be as close to him as possible but chickened out on the, *I love you*. Now that we're back to our perspective rooms, I had the opportunity to wig out privately in the bathroom.

He's really in love with me.

Why am I smiling? I shouldn't be. What I should be doing is running over to the bar and speed drinking. He can't love me. I worked so hard to be unlovable. Where are my cigarettes? Probably misplaced, right along with my common sense and underwear. Oh God, moving forward is making me fucking manic. I love him, I know I do, I can feel it but now I'm afraid to say it. It's new and it's frightening because I can't say if it's the crazy circumstances making feel this way or if it's genuine I fell hard and fast kind of feelings. Who falls in love in less than two weeks? Oh that's right, I do. The woman who wanted to die did. I'm not a pussy, I'm a hard core boss but also still a woman running scared. Looking over my shoulder, I hear him come in and watch as he pours us each another glass of wine. I start to lose my nerve again too dammit. He looks in control whereas I'm an emotional shit show.

Changing into my robe, I tie an extra knot in it hoping to give myself a barrier and time to figure this out. Push him away, that's what I've got to do. That's easy, right? Women do it all the time. Sitting down on the bed, I wanted to hyperventilate. Being purposefully mean wasn't what I was about. Besides, he was right. I was a horrible liar, oh and I loved his ass.

When lightning cracks snapping me from my meltdown, I jump letting out a squeak. “It’s getting closer.” He says reaching out for me. Pulling me to my feet he puts a glass in my hand and I’m too freaked out to say thank you. Taking a huge gulp, I follow it up with another. Tilting my chin up he kisses me once and whispers, “God didn’t forget about you, little Bet, he wanted me to find you.”

At a loss for words because his were perfect, I watch him wondering what other methods he had for breaking me because if it was a religious experience, I couldn’t handle it. Growing up in church, God was praised for all the good he did; I was taught he died for my sins. If there was good in losing my family I didn’t see it. Life hasn’t been good since, I can tell you that much. My brain nor my heart could understand why I had to lose so much *then* to find Rio *now*. My mom used to say, God will never give you more than you can handle. God, I decided, gave me way more credit than I was due. Until Rio, I wasn’t handling anything and I knew it.

The thunder chose that moment to rumble again saving me from saying something I couldn’t take back like, maybe God knew something I didn’t. If Rio was right that he was my second chance and I was his, I probably owed God an apology and a bottle of red wine.

Another crack of lightning causes me to tense up and holding me still he whispers, “You’re always safe with me.” Looking up at him I want to say the words again but the room fills with white light then we’re bathed in total darkness.

“Surprised it didn’t happen sooner,” he says backing away, “But I’ll take my good luck where I can find it.” Rooting around the closet, he produces candles left by the resort for instances like this one. Lighting them, he places one on each night stand then takes my hand, guiding me to the living room. Lighting the last candle, he sets it on the coffee table and tosses my lighter over his shoulder.

“Come here,” he says summoning me with his finger. As for me, the candlelight makes me feel vulnerable. It’s too intimate, too soft and I can’t move. “Playing hard to get?” he says with a laugh. “I don’t mind the chase.”

“What are we doing, Rio?” I whisper. Having so much to say with the right time constantly passing me by has me chewing my lip in worry. I



needed another right time to show up and this gentle side of Rio was seriously throwing me off my game. Cupping the back of my neck and leaning in, he kisses the vulnerability from me the moment our lips meet and I was grateful.

“We are about to do something wild.”

“Wild?”

“That’s what I said.”

“But what does it mean?”

“It means I’m about to rid you of this robe, then we’re going to dance. Naked.”

“Oh.” I whisper.

Since meeting him I’ve been naked more than I’ve been clothed. Truth was, I loved being naked with him. Another truth was, outside of sex I was never naked with Alan. Ever. Rio looks bigger in the dim light, menacing and formidable. It catches me off guard when he uses one finger to slide the material from my right shoulder. Kissing my collarbone, he repeats the motion slipping the robe from my left. With my breasts exposed I couldn’t help but notice how heavy they felt. The only other time they felt like this was when I was pregnant and there was nothing sexual about that. This however, was more than sexual this was heady.

Lifting them in his hands, he licks around them slowly before sucking each nipple. My moan was instinctive, necessary. When he removed the belt, dropping the robe to the floor my breathing hitched.

“She’s beautiful.” He said wrapping his arms around my waist and pulling our bodies together.

“She’s fragile.” He said as he slowly started to move us in synch.

“She’s granite.” He said dipping me over his forearm and running a finger between my breasts.

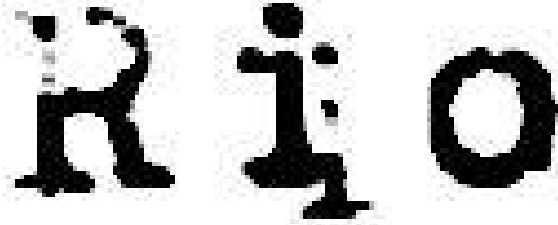
“She’s filthy.” He said while trailing that finger between my legs.

“She’s mine.” He said dropping to his knees before burying his face in my pussy.

Never in my life have I had anyone speak to me like this or had an orgasm standing up. Anchoring my hands on his shoulders I moan with it, when I orgasm a second time, I cry out with it. When his index finger slips into my ass, I absolutely scream with it. And when he stands back up, kisses me and said, "I love her," I didn't hide my tears.

Here was a man who owned his feelings. I on the other hand was a coward and did the only thing I could think of. I hugged the hell out of him hoping he got it, that this was me loving him too.

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For the first time since meeting Senior and Junior, I felt like I'd come home, a true home. Bet Lennox has this way about her, this vulnerability, she was a survivor. The woman radiated love like a furnace whether she knew it or not and I wanted her heat. When I told her I loved her, I swear she fought the need to say it back. Instead of the words, she just fucking hugged me.

It was the best hug I'd ever gotten.

This woman was love, period. Her family knew that, I wish Bet knew it too.

Feeling good about making her come three times, plus that look of awe on her face, I decided to lighten the mood. For some reason, the storm was keeping her on edge. If I was a guessing man, I'd say the storm going on outside ain't nothing like the storm she's got going on inside so, I needed to shift her focus.

Ease things up a bit.

Grabbing her robe from the floor, I toss it to her and she catches it. "Put it on." I advise her.

"You just took it off and I like being naked." She points out.

"It'll be back off in oh," I say looking at the clock, "sixty seconds."

"You'd give the devil a run for his money," she laughs sliding it back over her dainty shoulders. Shoulders that look small and weak in appearance but carry the heaviest of burdens. "You trust me, little Bet?" I ask opening the door and signaling her to follow me out into the dark hall.

“I trust you,” she says taking my lead. No lie, when she said I trust you it sounded like she wanted to say I love you.

Right then, I was so proud of her because she didn't trust easily and I promised myself I'd do what it took to be worthy of the gift. Once we're out on the steps looking over the resort, I reach for her belt and undo it.

“Atta girl.” I tell her tossing the robe back inside. Then dropping my boxers, I stand there with my cock out and take in her naked body being pelted with rain. Lightning blazes across the sky giving her an aura that I can't look away from. She reaches up and runs the back of her hand down the side of my face making me shiver. Bet isn't an overly affectionate woman and the touch affected me.

“I don't know what you've got planned but, I have a feeling it's a really good thing I'm loaded. We may need bail money.”

“Unless that rent-a-cop on a bike is out, we're safe.” I tell her leading her down the steps. “I'm gonna count to ten, little Bet. You best get going.”

“Where am I going, Rio?”

“The island's yours. Think of it as the wolf hunting the lamb.”

“Oh!” she giggles. “What happens when the wolf finds this lamb?”

“He eats her.”

“That is wild. Yum.”

“10, 9, 8,---”

With a squeal she takes off like a shot. Closing my eyes, I promised myself I'd give her a head start but I lied. The moment she ran I had to follow her. It was two thirty am, no one was out. The island was ours and suddenly I was starving.

For her.

Hell, I'm in the Upper Peninsula everybody hunts here. To *not* do this would be un-American.

# Bet

Adrenaline was coursing through me.

Having no idea where to go, I just ran.

Here I was, the middle of the night, naked, running downhill. Even with my tits bouncing and leg fat rippling, I ran with gusto, I didn't care about my flaws right then. Actually, with Rio I didn't care about my flaws at all. As far as flaws go, I earned every one of them. Knowing he was seconds behind had me wanting him to find me quick just so he would stay true to his word sooner. But I didn't stop. Covered in mud, soaking wet and aroused beyond words, I kept pushing. Splashing through puddles and dodging trees, I finally found myself beside the bushes about twenty yards from the Adirondack chairs I can't seem to stop sitting in.

Those chairs called to me, but I forced myself to stay put.

Bending at the waist to catch my breath, I push the wet hair from my face and let out a loud squeak when he tags me around the waist and whispers, "Gotcha" into my ear.

Taking us to the ground he lays me down and spreads my legs with his knees. Had you asked me a week ago if I'd be okay laying on my back in the mud the answer would be no. But with this man above me with his breath coming in short bursts I will say today that there is no place else I'd rather be.

"You found me."

"I'd find you anywhere, little Bet."

"What does the wolf do to the lamb now?"

There it is, the smirk.

Without another word, he backs away, he moves to a squat balancing his weight on the balls of both feet. Staring at his meal, that's what he was doing. He was savoring his find, toying with his prey. Now he's on all fours and the rain has picked up again to a straight down pour. It was a struggle to see him but what came next I didn't need to see.

I felt it just fine.

The first lick was my undoing. Every muscle in my body went taut then relaxed. My legs fell open like a butterfly spreading her wings. His hands gripped my hips and I hoped it left marks. He alternates between sucking my clit and biting my inner thigh. He releases my hips only long enough to spank me before he goes back to licking and sucking. The chaos of it, the rhythm on it was beautiful.

Staring up at the black sky completely uncaring of the rain pelting my face, I smile. All my life I wanted one thing, freedom. To do what I wanted instead of what was expected. Just once I wanted to be selfish and take. From the time I was a kid, I did the right thing. From boarding school to marrying Alan before I was ready, getting my degree in a field not of my choosing and taking over the family business. All of these things I did for others. The fault though, was my own. I wasn't forced, I conceded and I accepted that.

The only thing I ever did for me was raise Indie, *my way*. When I found out I was pregnant, I swore she wouldn't grow up too soon like I did. She would get those years to be irresponsible and learn lessons her way, not mine. College would be a choice not a requirement. Marriage would be on her terms, not her parent's' and most of all, I'd teach her to have *fun*. Christ, I know I've had a good life and that I was blessed but the weight I carried wasn't easy. At a young age my life was centered around money. Earning it, investing it, donating it and these last few days, giving it all away. I'd gladly wake up with nothing if I could keep having this, him. As my orgasm builds I swore it was stronger than the storm I was surrounded by. Digging my fingers into the earth I let out a scream and it felt so damn good, I did it again and again.

When a bolt of lightning sizzles across the sky, I take a moment to lift my head up and that's when our eyes met. His were fierce, mine were

territorial and demanding. “More,” I scream. “Give me more!”

See, now that’s the thing about him, he always has more to give and selfishly, I took it.

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# RiO

Try not blowing when your dream woman is writhing around in the mud wanting only what you can give her. It's a real effort, trust. Her back was arched as she screamed for me to give her more. More is my new favorite word, one with many meanings and I planned to explore them all. I've never witnessed fierce unharnessed carnality like this. With my face buried between her thighs and her knees caving in my skull, I could feel her life's energy.

She was electricity. She was addiction. She was totally fucking *alive*. Little Bet Lennox was the storm.

What was happening here was primal, no doubt about it. This wasn't the type of shit humans experienced every day. It was rare and I treasured it because I never expected to find it. Not for one minute did I think I was *king pussy pleaser* but no matter what I did, it got her off. Suck on her clit, orgasm. Bite her thigh, orgasm. Add a few fingers to stretch her out, screaming orgasm. A guy could get used to his woman wanting him that badly.

So to take it to the next level, I grab her hips and drag her through the mud. Putting her legs around my waist, lifting her up on to my lap, she takes my face in both hands and kisses me hard. Returning the favor our tongues battle it out while I slip two fingers back inside of her. Moaning her approval and grinding on my lap, she goes still for a few seconds when the other hand decided to play with her ass a bit.

Saying no wasn't going to happen so I didn't ask because I knew Bet loved it.

Working a second finger in, she bites down on my lip and earns a growl of appreciation from me. "Ride my fingers," I order her. "Do it."



Another thing about her? She takes orders *really* well. Starting off slow to get her body adjusted, she begins a slow rocking rhythm then within seconds she starts fucking my fingers with abandon. “So damn tight.” I moan into her mouth. Never one to mess with the back door for multiple reasons I took it off the to-do list. Now, since meeting her, it’s on the to-do-it-often list. While she about breaks my wrists from the ride she’s giving me, I knew it was a matter of time until she came again. The woman was an orgasm waiting to happen. Swear on my balls, it’s like she had an endless supply of O’s and wasn’t ashamed to use them.

“Fuck me.” she demands.

“Thought I was.”

“In the mud, face down with you breaking my ass in. Be the first, the only. Fuck me.”

“Oh, that kind of fuck me I can do.”

Clumsily making her way from my lap, she slides the small distance back into the mud. At this point she was completely covered and didn’t seem to notice. Wasting no time, she gets on all fours, anchors herself and offers me a gift no woman ever has.

It just so happens, I like presents.

# Bet

There was some serious trust taking place in these bushes. After Alan, hooking up was just that, a quick fuck. Not once did I know the man, care to know the man, or what it took to get the man off. It was about scratching an itch, taking pleasure anyway I could find it. However, it wasn't until he slid a finger into a space no man has filled, that I realized prior to him it wasn't pleasure, it was pathetic. A substitute, those encounters were a farce. This. This was pleasure.

It was raw and filthy, it would hurt and I wanted him to be the one who delivered that hurt.

I've heard about it, read about it, and always wondered what it would be like. Looks like I was about to find out and I was so turned on by it, I almost came again just from the thought of it.

This island and what happened here was like Vegas. Only I was gambling with more than my money, here I was gambling with my heart oh...and my ass.

"You sure?" he asks rubbing my muddy cheeks.

"Yes." I answer digging my fingers into the soaked ground for support.

"Never done this," he says looking as bewildered as I felt. "You gotta tell me what to do on this one."

Peeking over my shoulder I take him in once more. He looks equal parts terrified and excited. Jesus, what a pair we make. Two whores who have no idea how anal works, a match made in the mud.

"Yeah about that," I say hiding my face. "We'll just wing it because, I have no idea either."

“Wing it? I don’t think winging ass play is the way to go here, little Bet. A lot could go wrong.”

“Tell you what,” I offer. “Start slow, like stupid slow. You have a big cock, Rio. Oh God you’re smiling right now aren’t you?”

“Showing all my teeth, too,” he says spanking me.

“As much as I like to think I’m a trooper, if you’ve got the patience for it, this might take us some time.”

“Start slow,” he mumbles staring at my ass. “I can do slow, maybe. Shit.”

“Think of me as a virgin,” I begin completely aware that this is the most insane situation I’ve ever been in. Virgin and Bet Lennox in the same sentence alone is comedy material. “How would you treat me if I’ve never done this before?”

“Christ!” he groans rubbing himself all over me. “You can’t start talking virgins to me. I want your ass and this ain’t helping the start slow rule.”

“You are so hot when you’re fired up.”

“I’ll show you hot,” he says rubbing faster. “Stop talking and raise that ass up for me.”

Doing as he says, I raise it up and balance on my right arm leaving my left arm free. The moment I felt him there, seeking entrance, I started getting myself off because I was going to detonate and I wanted him in deep when I did it.

Neither one of us was walking straight after this one I just knew it and I’d never been happier.

# Rio

Since the day I started having sex I made myself two rules.

- 1) Don't put your face in a female's pussy
- 2) Don't put your dick in anyone's ass

Not only have I broken the first, I was about to destroy the second. The fact is pussy *is* messy. Even if they won't admit it, women know it. Sometimes it's a gamble a males gotta take, most times it ain't. Over the years I've been around my share and trust me, plenty of times I ran, fast.

But hers is fucking pristine, she's got a handle on it and I can't get enough of it.

Asses got nothing positive going on, but hers is small and puckered. If she handles that like she handles the rest, I was happy to be all up in it. I want to be the first, the only to break it in. My balls were heavy, my ass was clinched tight and all at the thought of putting my cock in that tiny hole. *Never say never* is my new motto.

"I'm going in," I warn her as I get her in position.

"It's not a tunnel, Rio, it's my ass hole. Go slow but do something, I'm eating mud here."

"You ain't in no position to be pushy, little Bet," I tell her, "Now let me do this."

"Fine," she groans, "But when this is over, it's my turn. Payback's a bitch, if you want her to be. P.S., you want her to be."

It shouldn't have caught me off guard but it did. Bet wanted to play with my ass, too? Jesus, I have to marry her and put that shit in our vows. For real, my woman was a giver and I couldn't wait to receive.

The rain was still coming down in buckets and with my tip just inside she keeps pushing back like she wants to swallow it. Lightning cracks giving me a brief window of pure light and it's the need on her face that did it for me. I'd go slow first, but all bets were off after that. We both needed this, badly.

When I sunk in a bit further without issue it took effort not to just slam the rest of the way in, it felt that good. Trying to feed myself inch by inch was torture for me but judging by her groans it was painful for her. "Hurting you?" I ask wondering if I should pull out. When she doesn't answer me I said fuck it and started to back up.

"Don't!" she yells while bearing down and wow I liked that. "Don't pull out, Rio. Just... give me a second to adjust."

Coming up to her hands, she eases herself back and forth slowly impaling herself on my dick. "That's it," I praise her, "Take that dick, little Bet. Work for it."

"Oh fuck, it's too much," she cries out but doesn't stop what she's doing. "It's not enough! It hurts really fucking good!" she screams bearing down even harder. As for me? Well, I just made sure to hold on to her because she was gearing up to fuck the shit outta me. Or am I fucking the shit out of her? Oh, who the hell cares, it was happening and that's what mattered.

"Okay," she pants, "I'm ready now, go for it but remember, I'm a lady."

"You're a lot of things but a lady ain't one of them. I'm saying this with love."

"That's the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me, Rio." She says working faster. "Now shut up and let's do this."

Grabbing her hips, I start to move myself with shallow thrusts. I've never had a dick in my ass and I had to imagine it wasn't as glamorous as she was making it out to be. Even covered in mud with a dick stretching her, she was the most gorgeous thing I'd ever seen. Her moans and grunts were even gorgeous, whereas all I could do was say 'fuck' because that was all I was capable of. Once she relaxed some, I went in even deeper and

that's when my eyes crossed. There's tight then there's *tight*. These sensations were different because they were taboo, forbidden, dirty.

Each one felt fucking fantastic, too.

"I'm close," she says pushing against me, "Come with me, Rio."

"Ain't gotta ask me twice," I tell her mounting her fully. Pounding into her she screams her orgasm and just as I started to follow suit, I was blinded by a flash light.

Did that stop me from coming in her ass?

Nope.

"Jesus, Bet is that you?" the voice asks but I'm too busy riding out the aftershocks to give a shit. Although, once I recovered I was killing somebody.

"Neil? What the fuck?"

"I thought someone was getting attacked," he says shutting the light off. "This is worse, Christ look at you."

"Oh she was getting attacked alright," I tell him while pulling her behind me. The fucker was a buzz kill and I didn't appreciate his timing, at all. "She's fine *Neil*, you can go now."

"I expected more from you, Bet." He says shaking his head. But just before I could defend her honor or kick the guy's ass, Bet like always, handled her shit.

Butt naked, freshly fucked and covered in mud was the Bet Lennox no one but me was supposed to see.

# Bet

With Rio's come dripping down my legs, I could think of a lot of words that summed up how I was feeling right now and shame wasn't one of them. First and foremost was, no one could see us or hear us which means Neil had some explaining to do. Second, it was pouring outside and the only way anyone would even know we were here was because they'd followed us.

I was sick and tired of being followed.

Although it was sweet of him to try and hide me from Neil's line of sight, I wasn't embarrassed or feeling vulnerable. Hell no, I was pissed.

"You don't know me, Neil, so you couldn't possibly know what to expect, right?"

"Fucking this guy in the bushes? Look at you, you're filthy!"

"Damn right, I am," I argue back. "I earned every speck of this mud too. You've got three seconds to turn around and leave before you lose your job."

"Lose my job?" he laughs. "How exactly do you plan to do that? I'm not the one breaking the law here, Bet, you are."

"Which law am I breaking, Neil? Oh wait, voyeurism isn't a crime, it's just nasty. Don't push me. You aren't getting paid enough to do this, trust me."

"Just following orders, Bet." He says clearly uncomfortable. "I'm still an officer and whether you believe it or not, you aren't the one giving orders here."

Pushing away from Rio despite him trying to hold me back, I stand before Neil butt ass naked with both hands on my hips. “You know who I am, don’t you? But now I know who you are too. One phone call asshole and it won’t be to your captain, turn around and walk away. Now. This is me being nice. Ask around, it doesn’t happen too often.”

“I’m just doing my job,” he says again as he slowly backs away. “I have to make that call. Sorry it had to be this way.”

“I’m not.” I bite out. “Rio, we’re leaving right after he does. He’s not getting the privilege of staring at our asses.”

As Neil walks away, he looks back to me once more where I offered him the one finger salute. Fuck Adrian and his hired thugs. I knew he’d pull some shit and Neil was just one of many. That fucker’s reach was unreal and it had to stop. Neil was too stupid to understand what would happen to him when he called Adrian to say he’d failed. Right now, I didn’t care what happened to Neil. He did this to himself. Working for the devil will get you burned. Coming to stand next to me and draping his arm over my shoulder Rio asks, “Did I just miss something?”

“No.” I tell him taking his hand.

“Bullshit,” he argues, “What just happened here? At least let me go kick his ass.”

“Everyone has a price, Rio.” I tell him as we start the walk back to our room. “*Everyone.*”

Without another word we navigate our way back in the dark. It wasn’t the fact that Neil watched us, it was the fact that he would take a payoff from someone like Adrian. These days it’s difficult to find someone who can’t be bought. Glancing up at him though I have to admit, he’s the first I’ve ever met.

These days loyalty like that was hard to find, yet I did.



# Rio

One hot shower later and no questions answered later, we crawled into bed and within seconds she was asleep. It wasn't that easy for me though. All sorts of shit was keeping me awake and on edge. Ain't a woman alive that wouldn't have flipped out when someone catches her naked with a dick her in ass, except Bet. Ain't a woman alive that wouldn't have fallen into hysterics after either, except Bet.

She threatened him and he backed down, why? The guy was a cop and we broke at least two laws I can think of. What the fuck did she know that I didn't? I hated being out of the loop. To keep her safe I needed to be inside the loop protecting her. Nudging her awake, she tries shooin' me away but I wasn't having it.

"No, Rio," she groans, slapping me away. "Jerk off if you have to but my ass is tired, literally."

"Why didn't you panic when that cop showed up?"

"Right now?" she growls at me. Our time together taught me something quick, she doesn't like her sleep interrupted. "You want to do this right now?"

"Yeah now," I tell her. "I wanna know."

"He was watching us."

"How'd you figure that?"

"The first indicator was he was hard." She says rolling back over.

"You were looking at his dick?"

"Jesus! He tried covering it, you ass. He didn't want us to know he was hard but he was, very much so."

“So, he’s a pervy cop on a bike?”

“He’s a pervy cop on a bike bought off by Adrian to keep tabs on me. Now can I go to sleep?”

She wasn’t lying or even worried about it which tells me this has happened before. The fact that she knew this but I didn’t sent me to another place and it wasn’t pretty there. “Were you gonna tell me?”

“Tell you what exactly? I wasn’t even sure until I made the threat. Look, it’s what Adrian does. I’ve been dealing with this shit for years. Stop worrying about it. I’m always a step ahead of him so go to sleep.”

“What if you ain’t a step ahead of him this time?” I ask her. Jesus, he sent me too.

“Adrian Lennox will never get the drop on me, Rio. I didn’t get to where I am from being fooled easily. Now rest, you’re going to need it. Tomorrow it’s your turn.” Then kissing me on the lips, she rolls over and passes right back out. Watching her take her rest, I wanted to fess up, warn her, work something out together but I did none of those things.

Because, I was a pussy.

Because she was being fooled and when she found out she’d never let me near her heart or her ass again.

# Bet

When we found out we were having a girl, Alan was happy. Throughout the pregnancy he came to every appointment, sat through each class and pampered me. He thought the name Indie I chose was cute but he really wanted to name her Louise after his deceased mother. There was no way my first born would be named Louise. So like Alan always did, he compromised with me.

Thus, when she came into the world with wide eyes and a crooked smile we named her Indie Lou Lennox.

Indie was short for Independence; it's what I wanted for her most in this world. For a small amount of time, I was her world and she was mine. The void she left would never be filled, never replaced and it would never leave me.

I refused to let it.

Indie was the one thing I did right. She was the one thing that was instinctive, natural, and love in its simplest form. Not once did I look in a baby book or research online. The moment she was tucked into my arm I just knew what to do. Right now though, I needed a book on revenge because I had no idea what I was doing.

This bullshit with Adrian used to be entertaining. His games kept me on my toes and I can admit I was competitive enough to play along. I liked to win, had to win. But since meeting Rio, I didn't know which way was up or down. I didn't know if I wanted to win anymore and I knew Rio wouldn't give into compromise with me if he felt passionate about something like my safety.

Proof: he convinced me to live.

Rio was the anti-Alan and I was drawn to it, to him. I liked when he pushed, demanded, and took control. My problem is trusting people, as in, I don't. Telling him the full history behind the blackmail, stalkers and bullshit ploys was appealing but, he's already dealing with my emotional issues. Could I really be the woman that unloads all her crap on a man? No, I couldn't. Not just because it's semi humiliating but that this relationship was new, still evolving. We haven't been tested yet, hell, we haven't left the protection of the island yet. Voicing it would drive Rio to seek Adrian out and that wasn't going to happen. Adrian was my problem, not his.

He even admitted that until very recently, he thought he was in love with someone else. Granted, he wasn't, but the facts are the facts and I had to proceed with caution. Here, in this place, we can pretend, be whoever we want to be. We have permission to be Oscar-worthy actors. Perhaps I should be content with the fantasy while I have it because when I get home the real world could very well destroy us.

Because in it, I have to confront Adrian to move on with my life. There was a real possibility that when my sins came to light, he'd realize that I stopped being a victim a long time ago. That the truth was in this game, I was a player.

Adrian had been infecting me and for years I was twisted enough to let him. Alan died none the wiser so the charade could stop now, I could have peace even if it meant losing Rio because of it. Days ago I had planned to end my life as a means of escape. Now I want to be there breathing down Adrian's neck when I nailed his dick to the wall.

"You always think so deep?" he asks draping a leg over mine.

"Sadly, I do." I tell him tickling that leg. "I'm alone a lot so it's all I know."

"What else do you know?"

Turning toward him which puts us face to face, I level with him as best as I'm able. "That I'm afraid."

"Of Adrian?"

"Of this."

“This makes no sense, little Bet, you gotta see it like I do. Nothing to be afraid of, I’ll take care of you now. Adrian, we can deal with, together.”

Reaching up to stroke his stubble, it’s an effort not to cry. Rio has dark brown eyes that can turn black with extreme emotion. I’ve seen it happen several times already and if things didn’t work out, I would miss it. “What I see is an amazing man with a big beautiful---

“Cock, right?”

“Heart.” I laugh. “A big beautiful heart. You deserve the chance to have a whole woman, someone who will give you children---

“I’m thirty-five,” he says squeezing me. “Kids ain’t something I ever gave much thought to. The way I feel about you isn’t---

“Real.” I finish for him and clearly that was the wrong thing to say.

“Don’t speak for me,” he says sitting up. “The fuck it ain’t real. This is the realest shit that’s ever happened to either of us and you damn well know it. You got problems, I got problems. As far as I’m concerned, now *we* got problems and ain’t a one of them we can’t fix as a couple. We’re getting a second chance here, you don’t want to take advantage of it?”

“What is it with you and the second chances hard sell?”

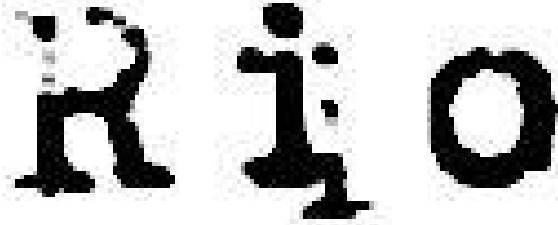
“Get dressed,” he says pulling me up, “It’s about time you hear the speech.”

“Speech?”

“The fucking speech.”

Smiling at the sincerity he’s displaying, I do as he demands and put my robe on. Ushering me into the living room he sits me down and hands me a warm glass of wine. Normally I couldn’t exist without coffee but it’s his company I care about, not personal habits. The power could stay out forever if I could keep him close just a little bit longer. Because every minute I’m with him, I’m one minute closer to losing him.

I could feel it.



Never in my life did I think I'd be giving this speech to another human being. Truth, I always wanted to though. No way I'd do it justice like Senior did, but I could put my own spin on it. Current betrayal aside, I was a walking talking second chance and so was she.

Senior was the father I never had. What the man did for me ain't no way a man can repay that. But he could pay it forward and today was finally that day. Little Bet needed to hear it, understand it, and implement it into her own life. Watching her put her robe on and make her way to me, I knew right then Senior would be proud. Not just him neither, Junior too.

They'd both be proud and the lump in my throat was proof.

When she crosses her little legs, I plop down next to her taking a deep breath and then her hand. Smiling at me, she nods her head for me to start and the nerves I had vacated.

I could do this.

“Some people get good parents, learn right from wrong and know they're loved. I ain't one of those people. I got my ass beat for breathin' or blocking the TV, got locked in a closet if I mouthed off and watched my mom kill herself to spite my old man. Point is, I met two people at my lowest who changed my life when I needed it most.”

When her eyes soften, I suck in a breath and keep going. “Back then I didn't even know I was low. The world fucked me over, I was only doing what I could to find my place. It didn't need to be good or even legal, I just wanted what was mine so I took it. I liked it so much, I took more and when I was standing in front of a judge facing a sentence I'd die before I completed, there they were. A man and his daughter, my saviors.”

“Your second chance.” She says smiling up at me.

“My second chance,” I agree. “He got out of his row bringing Junior with him, stopped the judge from handing down his judgment and said; there’s good in that boy, give him a chance to prove it.”

“Then what happened?” she asks cocking her head.

“The judge said I’d abused the system long enough. I was an adult, I needed to receive my punishment. Senior was there for a small claims deal, but he let that go to save *me*. With Junior by his side they plead their case to the judge and asked to take me on as part of a community service program.”

“Wow.”

“Funny how shit works. All these years later, Junior waltzed right back into that courtroom to that same judge and gave him the same speech to save her man, Loyal. Senior and Junior knew what family meant. I wasn’t with them two hours before I had a room, a job, and a purpose. A few weeks later he took me aside and told me not only was I part of the family but his top enforcer. He also made me promise no harm would come to her if something ever happened to him. I was a piece of shit, little Bet, I ain’t sugar coating that. If them two weren’t legit, I’d have robbed them blind and left. But they taught me about family and I loved them for it. Not a thing I wouldn’t have done for either of them.”

“I am so proud of you, Rio.”

“You didn’t let me finish,” I tell her gently. “Sometimes you get a second chance when you least expect it. When you don’t think you deserve it and you damn sure don’t think you want it. It was that way for me and it’s what you’re feeling right now. Don’t be scared of it, trust it like I do. I didn’t expect you, Bet, I doubt I deserve you either but I do know I want you more than I’ve ever wanted anything. You’re my second chance and I’m yours, too.”

“You really don’t know what you’re signing up for here, Rio.”

“Bet,” I start but she covers my mouth.

“Shh,” she says silencing me. “My turn.”

Nodding at her and the determined look on her face, I let her say what she had to say. “Money changes people. Loss changes people too. Losing

them changed me and there is no use pretending it didn't. Being surrounded by selfish people in turn, made me selfish. That was no excuse because I still let it happen. I allowed it just so I could rub their petty faces in it. These people loved to pretend they cared about my pain but they didn't, they cared about the depth of my pockets. Shutting down was my choice and maybe it was the easy way out, too." Taking a deep breath her eyes fill up but she soldiers on. "Before I lost them I wasn't appreciative. I took all of it for granted, I know I did and had I not lost them, I still would be. That's who I am, an unappreciative brat who is trying to be better. Not you though, you take nothing for granted, Rio. You see the value in everything because you've had to fight for it, earn it. I want you to know it's *you* that showed me what's valuable. You are worth more than money, you're worth living for."

Leaning forward she grabs my face and whispers, "Thank you for the second chance. I won't ever take it or you for granted." before she slid her tiny hand into my boxers.



# Bet

After a heart felt hand job, we stayed up and talked until the sun broke through the windows. There it was, pure sunlight and a reminder that this was it. Quite possibly our last full day here on the island. Given my new outlook on life, I didn't want to spend it indoors or drinking. I wanted to be outdoors taking in the scenery with him by my side. His speech sanded away the sharp edges around my heart, these deadly edges that would slice me every time I so much as tried for happiness. Now those edges were smooth, still present but less painful. The cuts I've received would leave scars as all injuries do, but if I've learned anything since meeting him it's that scars are an example of survival. I *am* a victim of loss, but I'm also a survivor, I'm human and I wanted love.

I wanted my second chance.

While he slept, my first order of business was taking a shower followed by digging out something not wrinkled. Thumbing through the random pieces of clothing that have been discarded while we've been here, I find a clean pair of shorts and a light sweater I didn't remember packing. Dressing quickly, I jump on the bed intent on getting the day started.

Slowly waking from sleep, he groans rolling over. Ignoring my tickling him, he farts then scratches his ass and I lost my shit. Flying backward off the bed, I hit the floor laughing. Coming to stand on the side of the bed he looks down at me on the floor with one hand in his boxers and I see he's scratching his dick now too.

"Morning, little Bet," he says yawning, "Were you in the blast zone?"

"You're disgusting," I squeal as he helps me up.

“But you love it,” he says squeezing my ass.

“I do,” I agree watching him touch himself. “So explain morning wood to me.”

“Why tell you when I can show you?”

“Are you ever not horny?”

“If you weren’t hot, I wouldn’t be horny.”

“So it’s based on appearance?”

“My hard-on is based on *you*,” he says pushing me toward the living room. “I wake up with it, walk around with it and go to sleep with it. This morning’s chub can go one of two ways; we can fuck and get rid of it or I can take a piss and get rid of it.”

“Decisions decisions, huh?” I ask licking my lips.

“Stop staring at it,” he groans, “Now taking a piss is going to suck.”

“Or I could.”

“Oh, I know you could but we got time, let’s get outta this room for a bit.”

“Are you turning me down? Seriously?”

“My dick needs a time out,” he says rubbing it like it has a boo boo. “Don’t worry, he’ll be hungry by lunch.”

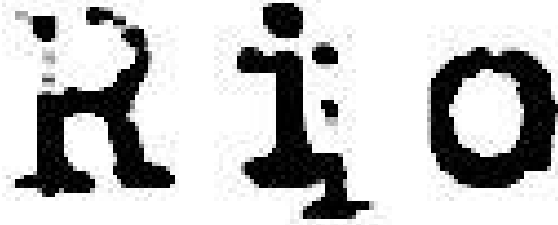
“Fine.” I pout sitting on the couch to wait him out. I didn’t have to wait long. Like all things Rio, he does his three S’s in record time. Oh and he told me what those were too.

Shit, shower and shave.

Not that I asked or anything but, I was wondering if all men shit first thing in the morning. That seemed odd to me. It just goes to show you I knew nothing about how males worked. They shit in the morning, really? Of all the things to do when you wake up, that’s the priority? Now I was totally intrigued. How else did men differ from women? There was so much I didn’t know, wanted to know, simply needed to know.

Men always seemed so simple, basic even, only they aren’t. Using Rio as my learning curve, I was chomping at the bit to know what made a male tick. It had to be more than his dick.

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Once we secured coffee and breakfast we set out to do whatever felt good. Mostly it was her asking questions and me answering them while we walked. She asked me the most bizarre shit, too. Do erections hurt? Did I trim my nose hairs? How much porn did I watch? Did I cry at movies or animal commercials? Do I like Sarah McLaughlin? Oh and do I moisturize?

My answers went something like this...

Yes, yes, as much as possible, no, who? And why? Am I supposed to?

As much as her questions intrigued me, I had to wonder why she didn't seem to know anything about men. She was married to one but you'd never know it. Not that I like thinking about it, but she even admitted to paying men for their company so how can she not know? Letting her get a few more in, these were deeper and required me to think. They were questions about character and chivalry. Needless to say, both topics left me unsure of what to say. Changing the subject seemed to be the way to go, besides, women love to talk about themselves.

"How come you're asking me questions about everyday shit you'd know a few months into being with someone? You were with him for years, Bet, you didn't ask him?"

"No," she says staring at her feet. "I didn't ask him."

"Why not?"

"Because Alan wasn't like that. He was quiet, private and very traditional."

"You never saw him take a piss?"

"No."

“He ever watch you take a piss?”

“No.”

“Did you like watching me take a piss?”

“Oddly enough, yes.”

“What’d you like about it?”

“I don’t know, it was manly. The way you stood, the way your arm braced you. The sound of it too, you’re a loud pisser. I have a feeling few men can make peeing attractive.” She says smiling then immediately slaps her forehead. “I can’t believe we’re talking about this.”

“Who cares?” I tell her pulling to me. “Women spend too much time worrying about what they think men think. ‘Cause bottom line? We don’t think all that much, you just think we do. You females over think not thinking, ever think sometimes men just don’t have shit to say?”

“This is exhausting.”

“Try having a dick,” I tell her, “Women are exhausting.”

Laughing she takes my hand to resume walking. Suddenly she stops and gives me a tug. “Am I exhausting?”

Leaning in and kissing her in broad daylight I tell her the God’s honest. “Hell yes, you are, but in a different way.”

“Explain a different way.”

Taking her hand and putting it on my still hard dick I tell her, “The best way.”

“Oh.”

“You’re not like other women, little Bet,” I remind her, “Nothing wrong with that.”

“What’s right with it?”

“Everything.”

With that, I took her hand and even though she had a thousand more questions she didn’t ask a single one. What I said was the truth. She was different and it just so happens that I loved different.

Two hours and three bags of carry out later, we're back inside when she suggests a movie. We were down to one TV but if she wanted a movie, she'd get a movie. Scrolling through the channels she squeals "Wait!" when Monster's Inc. shows up.

"Oh come on," I groan, "Not a kids' movie, little Bet."

"First," she says cuddling into my side, "Pixar movies are for all ages. Their movies resonate with adults, trust me. Second, I love Sully he's the top scarer until he meets Boo. She's the cutest by the way."

"Christ, what's the third thing?" I ask her but the light in her eyes is all I care about. We could watch infomercials if it made her happy like this. "Oh, number three is shut up and watch it." she says pinching me.

Look, I'll admit, she was right. This flick wasn't for kids. The content, while not dirty, was some heavy shit. The thing was I felt like Sully and that Randall prick was Adrian. Sully loved Boo and I love Bet. He wanted to risk it all to save her, like I do.

But it was the ending that got me.

After it was all said and done, he knew she didn't belong with him. Boo belonged at home surrounded by what she knew. Sully loved her enough to let her go. Boo didn't belong in his world any more than Bet belonged in mine. Looking down at the woman who I love, that I convinced to live, I knew what I wanted wasn't what was best for her.

When this was over, the right thing would be to place Bet back in her world, a world without me in it.

Fucking Pixar.

# Bet

For almost two hours Rio was perfectly still.

He didn't razz me for the movie choice or make a play for my boobs. He laughed at the comedic parts and tensed when Randall was hot on Sully's heels. Occasionally, he'd play with my hair or kiss my head but other than that, the television had his total attention.

Since I was a kid, I have loved cartoons.

But Pixar didn't make cartoons, they made miracles. I'm not ashamed to say that I've spent years searching for my own but until that happened, I watched these cartoons.

Every movie they've made, I own. The first time I watched 'Up' I didn't leave the house for three days. Whoever does their writing is either an emotionally unstable person or has life figured out. For me, the life lessons in these movies moved me deeply.

When Sully tucked Boo back in her bed prepared to say his final goodbye, I knew this movie moved him too. Especially, when he gripped me tight and used his free hand to wipe his eyes.

Pixar takes no prisoners.

"You lied to me." I tell him not looking up because I don't want him anymore off kilter than he already was.

"What?" he whispers.

"You said you didn't cry at movies, you lied."

"This ain't no movie," he groans. "Hell, I don't know what the fuck it is but if you ain't crying there's something wrong with you."

“So you liked it? It was good right?”

“Gimme a minute,” he says. “My heads all fucked up.”

Leaning up on my elbow and kissing his cheek I whisper, “Yeah, you liked it.”

“My turn.” He says stealing the remote.

For several minutes he flicks through every channel we’ve got which thankfully isn’t many. When he finally lands on one, I offer up a groan of my own. “Zip it,” he says “I sat through that emotional cluster fuck, you can sit through mine.”

“Yeah but I feel the need to point out Top Gun is kind of a chick flick.”

“Take that back,” he says sitting up. “The movie is about flight school, trusting your co-pilot and---”

“Getting the girl.” I finish. When he fights for words I toss him another one. “Did you like Jerry Maguire?”

“What guy doesn’t? Football flicks kick ass.”

“That’s it!” I say sitting up. “Seriously? Jerry Maguire was *not* a football flick. It was made for men to watch with women so they could get laid. Hot scout falls for mousy office girl who happens to have an adorable kid with a speech impediment, really, you don’t see it?”

“But there was sports in it!”

“Face it, you were duped. Most movies aren’t meant for men anyway, they lure you with guns and sports and bam! Love story. It happens, no judgment.”

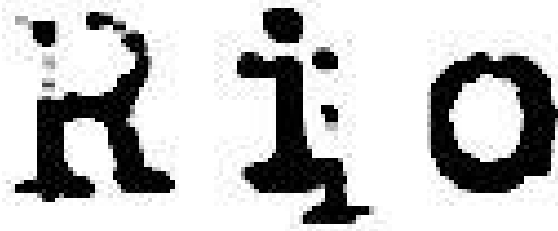
“Fuck,” he groans tossing the remote. “How did I miss that?”

“See? We both learned something today.” I state proudly.

“True,” he says smiling, “Now let’s talk about tomorrow.”

That’s when I lost my smile.





Dammit, I knew I should have kept my mouth shut.

Thing was, tomorrow wasn't goodbye. Far from it. Granted, I switched topics and caught her off guard but I thought we were on the same page. When she fidgets with her hands, I realize it's the first time I've ever seen her nervous.

I wasn't sure what she was nervous about but now she was making me nervous. Tilting her chin up it's her perfectly clear eyes that put me at ease. "Tomorrow we board that ferry together."

"Okay."

"When that ferry docks we get off together."

"Okay."

"We're going to be separated for about six hours minus any fucking construction but after that, we'll be inseparable." When she stays quiet I prompt her, "Repeat that back for me, little Bet."

"Six hours of separation followed by inseparation."

"Is inseparation a word?"

"Yes?"

"Are you asking me or telling me? You're the brains of this outfit."

"Can it be a word? It seems fitting."

"Then it's a word," I tell her, "and it's a promise."

"You won't break your promise?" she asks in the quietest of voices.

"To you? No. Never."

“Then I’m good with our itinerary.”

“These ain’t just plans for travel, these are plans for our future. You with me on this?”

“I’m with you.” She says smiling but then holds her hand up.

“Why’d you raise your hand?”

“Because I have a question?”

“We ain’t in school.” I tell her but then add, “Alright then, ask.”

“Are you going to be a control freak like this when we’re back in the city?”

“Yeah,” I tell her “Any other questions?”

“Nope,” she says “Just making sure we’re on the same page.”

“Admit it,” I tease her, “You like me bossy.”

“I won’t deny that.”

“You’ll get used to someone telling you what to do for a change,” I tell her. “Look how well you’re doing so far.”

“I have a line, Rio,” she smiles. “Remember that.”

Kissing her hard on the mouth, we exit our room in favor of the Pink Pony one last time. The woman has a thing for whitefish dip and what Bet wants Bet gets. Even with my phone blowing up in my pocket I focus on her. Reality is waiting back home and I still ain’t got a plan. I was hoping inspiration would come to me on the long ride back and if it doesn’t I’ll just kidnap her as a last resort.

So tonight while I was buried inside of her I made it a point to tell her I loved a thousand times. When she fell asleep on my chest I wanted to wake her and tell her a thousand more.

Because no matter which angle I approached this, I felt like our happy ending was in Adrian’s fucking hands.

# Bet

As he sleeps, I quietly pack my meager belongings up and slip out to get him coffee for a change. Rio takes his coffee black with two creams and one sugar. My coffee is like a dessert compared to his, it was also my favorite vice. Walking back, I stop briefly at the bottom of the hill to look over the lake one last time. With the sun shining bright and the ground still damp, I knew I was going to miss this place. We've been here far longer than we'd intended but I wasn't going to ignore my good fortune. If it wasn't for him and this storm, I'd probably be dead by now. If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't be entertaining love right now either. A week ago I had no idea feelings like this existed. Even last night, when he told me he loved me at least a thousand times, I didn't return the words out of pure fear. This morning I decided while pouring the cream into his coffee that I didn't just want to tell him how I felt, I needed to. Fear could fuck right off.

The fact that one week ago I was positive I wanted to die scared me. One week ago, I would have followed through with it, too. Bottom line was, I feared the unknown. Then I met him and if it wasn't for Rio, I wouldn't be going home with hope. So here I am holding two coffees, taking in a gorgeous view knowing I had my own happiness asleep in my room. My breath caught thinking about showing him my home. Excitement peaked at the thought of seeing his. I wanted to meet Rion and Loyal, maybe even invite them out to double date for dinner one night. It was the idea of a double date that put extra some pep in my step and I practically jogged back up to our room to share it with him.

Rio needed her in his life, she's been his family for years and I wasn't jealous of it. Maybe if we hit it off, she could one day become a girlfriend to me? Taking the steps two at a time, I balance the coffees in one hand to

manage the door. Resuming my pace I stop when I hear his voice coming from the great room to my right. Standing just to the side of the door and out of sight, I listen as Rio speaks to who can be no other than Adrian himself.

“How can I trust you? How do I know you ain’t gonna try and hurt her?” Even as what little heart I had, started to break, I had to give Rio credit for at least sounding like he cared for me. “If she gives you the money, you’ll back off then?” he pauses and I lean in closer. “The fuck do you mean she owes you more than money? You asked me to find her, I found her. You want me to bring her home, I am. But ain’t no way I’m coming in blind. Tell me what the fuck to expect here. I ain’t just handing her over.”

Closing my eyes in agony, I supposed it shouldn’t have come as a surprise that Rio was here to bring me home but honest to God, it was. I ignored my instincts and had chosen to believe him. His words slap me in the face, the touch I craved minutes ago disgusted me now because I still wanted it. Rio was planning on handing me over to Adrian, what the fuck! Backing away, I drop both drinks into the trash bin in the hallway before entering my room and closing the door behind me.

“Where’d you run off to, little Bet?” he asks coming up behind me moments later to nuzzle my neck. Not noticing my distress, I stow it away in favor of getting answers instead. Rio thought he could fuck me? Yeah well, he was about to get fucked by the master.

“I went to make sure the ferries were running on schedule and I didn’t want to wake you.”

“I was thinking,” he says stuffing his own bag, “We could stay at my place tonight. I could take you for a drink, show you where I used to work and---”

“I’m going home, Rio. I have almost two weeks of work to catch up on, but you’re welcome to stay with me if you’d like. Maybe we could order in and watch a movie? We could do your place another night?”

“You can’t work from my place?” he asks taking my bag. “It ain’t much but it’s got Wi-Fi.”

“I’ll make you a deal,” I offer holding in my hurt. “My place tonight and your place the following. I’ll even bring my toothbrush to make it official. I’d like to go down to the water one last time before we leave, if you don’t mind.”

“I like the sound of that, little Bet,” he says opening the door for me.

Taking in the scenery from the white Adirondack chair, I couldn’t help but let the sadness take me over. So many amazing things happened here and it was all a setup, a fantasy. A God damned lie. The only real moments have been spent in this chair. When I arrived the beauty of it all soothed me, when he kissed my wrist before the sky opened up and now when I wanted to live again. Being blindsided was nothing new but I never thought the man I fell for would be the one do it. Right then, I felt like I lost them all over again.

He was good, a professional even. Rio needed me to live so Rio could get paid and he did what he set out to do. He convinced me. To say that didn’t cut deep would be a lie I couldn’t speak. The man who gave me back the reasons to live was only taking them right back away again. “You gonna miss this place as much as I am?”

“I truly will,” I admit, “I liked who we were here.”

When he didn’t respond, I waited until we stopped and took his hand as he led me to the dock to board. Twenty some minutes later when we were hand-in-hand at my car, he leaned in to kiss me and it took everything I had not to hit him. “I’ll follow you,” he says holding me close.

“Okay,” I whisper climbing in.

“Little Bet?” he asks quietly.

“Yes?” I answer.

“You know I love you, right?”

“You’ve said so, yes.”

“I’ll take care of you,” he offers, “I just need you to trust me when we get home. Trust me no matter what.”

“You know I do,” I tell him hiding the lie from my features. His conscience is eating at him and fuck him, it should! “Let’s beat the traffic okay?”

Nodding, he kisses me hard on the mouth then jogs over to his pickup. He drove a pickup too, figures. Throwing it in drive, I pull out in favor of the freeway and start the task of pulling favors. I've got about six hours to kill before I arrive back home and this girl had her own plans.

The beautiful thing about being wealthy was I didn't have to resort to violence. I just paid people to be violent for me.

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# Rio

When she drove off it felt rushed and it felt wrong. The fire in her eyes was gone, the lust she had reserved for me for the last week and a half was gone, too. When I kissed her it wasn't returned and it didn't go unnoticed. Part of me wondered if she was done with me, refusing to give us a chance; she was going home and planning to forget me. Staying on her ass, I watch through the rear windshield as she makes a phone call. The call lasted maybe fifteen minutes, and then she tossed the phone onto the passenger seat. Grabbing my own, I dial her number (which I stole for a moment like this, of course) and hit 'call'.

"Bet Lennox," she says on the third ring.

"Rio Martin," I respond.

"Hi, Rio," she says "Long time no talk."

"Speed limit's seventy, little Bet, you're pushing eighty-five."

"Maybe I'm in a hurry to get you home." She says in a voice that is very at odds with a comment made to be sexual.

"Maybe you're in a hurry to get away from me," I offer in return, "You writing off the island already?"

"No," she says switching lanes, "I know what's waiting for me when I get back is all. I have a lot to do."

Again, it wasn't what she said but how she said it. Now I was starting to worry that she didn't trust me as much as she claimed to. "Anything I can do to help?"

"Thanks for the offer," she says quickly, "but it's just loose ends. Once they're smoothed out, it'll be business as usual."

“Still want to live?”

“Yes.”

“Still want me?”

“What do you think?”

“Pull over at the next rest stop, little Bet,” I tell her, “I ain’t asking neither.”

Disconnecting, we drive another four miles before we find one. Once we pull in side-by-side, I knock on her window and she unlocks the door for me without fuss. Climbing into her Range Rover, I don’t bother admiring it. I didn’t ask her to stop to talk about her upgrades, I asked her to stop so I could remind her how I felt.

Reaching for her and resting my hand on the back of her neck, I pull her toward me gently. Kissing her mouth, I take my time licking the seam of her lips then gave her my tongue. At first she wasn’t receptive which is when I knew I was right that this felt wrong. But seconds later, her hands come up to cradle my face and she gives it to me.

“Love you, little Bet,” I tell her, “Life’s gonna fuck with us, try to separate us but I always got your back. Stop pulling away from me and tell me what’s wrong.”

“Stop talking,” she mumbles trying to kiss me again.

“Knock it off,” I warn her, “You been bitchy all fucking morning and now you’re acting like I wasn’t just plowing you hours ago. The fuck happened between there and here?”

“Life happened, Rio,” she says pulling back, “Since you convinced me to live I have two weeks of work to catch up on, bills to pay and new businesses to back. The amount of responsibility I carry is heavy, I don’t expect you to understand but that’s what’s waiting for me when I get home. Reality.”

“Am I part of that reality?”

“That depends.”

“Depends on what?”

“How good you can fuck me in this parking lot.”



“You testing me, Bet?”

“You want to pass, Rio?”

God dammit, she was dodging me. I knew it, but I just didn't know what to do about it. She wanted to fuck, I could see it and I also couldn't help but to respond to it too.

There was no saying 'no' to her, not now not ever.

Even in this parking lot with her deflecting and holding something back from me, fucking her was the most important thing in the world.

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# Bet

There was no way I was answering his questions. However, I was telling the truth when I said reality was waiting for me when I got home. I tried running from it, but it found me and now I had to deal with it. When he climbed in, I had intended on starting a fight to get him to leave but then I caught his scent and knew despite his betrayal, I still wanted him inside of me. Fuck having his heart, I wanted his dick and based on what I'd heard, an orgasm was the least he owed me.

“Well?”

“You're pushing me, why?”

“Because I can,” I tell him leaning forward. “You pushed me every day on that island and now I'm pushing you back. Don't act like you don't like it, because you're dick says otherwise.”

“My dick ain't a rational thinker.”

“My pussy isn't looking for logic.”

Right here, this moment, is the beautiful thing about Rio. Despite his claims to care for me, to want to save me, he does in fact think with his dick. I knew it and I was counting on it.

“What's your angle?” he growls.

I don't answer because not answering gets me what I need. Which is him stripping my jeans from me, followed by my panties. When his finger slips inside, I can feel myself getting greedy for him.

“Answer me,” he says pulling my hair back. “The fuck are you playing at, Bet?”

Pushing him back into his seat, I excuse the loss of his finger in favor of climbing over the seat to straddle him. The beauty of my vehicle is the blacked out windows. Not that I'd care if anyone saw us, they'll know soon enough when it's rocking all over the parking lot but an audience wouldn't bother me. Why should it? After today, Rio will never get this pussy again, anyway. I consider this a going away fuck.

Ripping his jeans open, I reach in past his boxers and wrap my fist around his dick to shut him up. It works but then the novelty wears off and he's back to thinking he's owed answers.

"The hell is your hurry?" he asks trying to push my hands away. Thinking on my feet, or rather my knees, I impressed even myself.

"We don't have long before someone calls the police," I tell him, "Aren't you the one who could fuck anywhere? Even the bathroom if you were in a pinch?"

"This is true."

"That's what I thought." Then jerking him harder, I wait for his slit to drip before I settle myself over his dick and slide down.

"Right there, little Bet," he moans while gripping my hips, "Fuck, you feel nice."

Not bothering with words, because I don't have any that won't ruin this right now, I continue to fuck his dick silently. I pay no attention to his perfect face, his toned stomach or his rough hands. Just his dick, that's all I need.

With our skin slapping and his words of praise, I feel it come on much quicker than I expected. He spans my ass hard and with perfect timing I let it sweep me away. Several pumps and a "Love you, little Bet," later, Rio fills me up with his come and his bullshit too. "Shit," he moans riding it out. "Never letting you go."

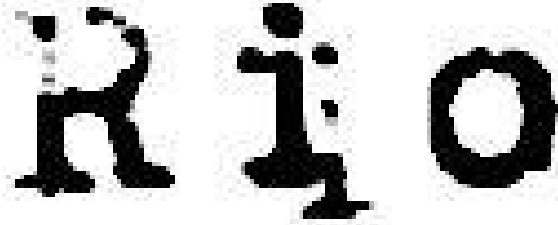
Slowly climbing off and back into my seat, I dress myself and wait for him to leave. "You hungry?" he asks, tucking his wet dick back into his pants. Watching him do so pisses me off because he's taking part of me with him. This asshole has no idea this is the last time I'll ever come on his dick. He thinks he'll be getting it again in four or five hours.

“Actually I’m not. If you can hold out, we can order in when we get back?”

“Sounds good,” he says reaching for me. Allowing him one last kiss, I fill his mouth with wasted emotion. Might as well give it to him, after this I have no use for these feelings anymore. “Drive the speed limit,” he says opening his door. As he walks over to his truck I wipe his taste on the back of my hand. I wish I could convince myself he tasted horrible, but I’d be full of shit. The fact was he tasted like my future.

A future I was being denied.

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Something was fucking wrong.

Everything that went down in her truck felt forced. Not the orgasms, oh hell no. Of course, I was too busy thinking with my dick to stop her from using sex as a distraction. Because that's what she did. Watching her speed off the service ramp and back onto the freeway, it hit me hard.

The way she fucked me was how I used to fuck other women, without emotion.

My guy started to cramp wondering what brought that on. The night before we were fine, weren't we? Before I can work out in my head my phone rings. Hoping it's her, I don't even look at the caller.

"Yeah?"

"No more pit stops, mother fucker," says Adrian using a tone that was begging for an ass kicking. "I am not paying you to fuck her all over Northern Michigan."

"You tracking me?"

"You? Please. Her, asshole." He says, "No more games, you make one more unnecessary stop you don't get paid."

Not giving me time to answer, he hangs up. "Fuck!" I yell inside the cab where only I can hear it. He had her followed; well that explains why he knew where to send me. Had I paid the smallest amount of attention to detail I would have got it.

When my phone rings again, I'd had it. "What!"

"The fuck is your problem?" asks Loyal.

“You got some shitty timing, head case,” I tell him while I keep up with her driving like the devil’s on her ass. Oh wait, he is. Shit.

“Need you home,” he says, “Well not me, ‘cause you give me nothing but heartburn but she needs you.”

“She okay?”

“Is she ever not okay? She misses you for some fucking reason. Be at Senior’s plot Sunday afternoon at two o’clock, or I will find you and hurt you. I don’t like it when my woman pouts.”

“Junior doesn’t pout.” I remind him.

“She does when you’re not around,” he says. “There, I said it.”

Then he fucking hangs up on me, too.

Dialing Bet, I expected her to pick up but it goes to voicemail. Trying again, the same. Hitting redial another four times she finally answers and it wasn’t pretty.

“Really Rio?” she says, “What, you want to pull over again already?”

“No,” I tell her, “I just wanted to talk.”

“About what?”

“Anything.”

“I’m coming up blank,” she says after a brief pause.

“I get you’re pissed about something and you got no plans to tell me what I did, but whatever I did I’m sorry, little Bet.”

“You’re apologizing for something you’re not sure you did? Does that mean you’re guilty of something and I may or may not know what it is? Or, are you just covering all of your bases?”

“The thought of you mad at me for even the smallest thing fucks me up,” I admit, “Driving separate blows too. I just want to be where you are.”

“Why do you love me?” she asks, “What if I decide I don’t care for living again and want out?”

“I love you ‘cause you got so much life in you, I just wanna be a part of it. Are you having second thoughts?”

“Yes,” she says quietly, “A lot of them.”

“Name ‘em,” I tell her, “Name all of ‘em. We’ll work through it, together.”

When she stays quiet, I feel my nerves start to crumble. “Bet?”

“Yeah, Rio.”

“Don’t give up on me.”

For the next hour, we both sat on the phone but neither one of us spoke. I wanted to tell her everything but stayed quiet. I owed her an explanation but waited too long to deliver it. This was the end, I fucking knew it.

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# Bet

While Bastille's *Oblivion* fills the silence between us, I fight back the tears. Not only is this song haunting me, it essentially sums up the last week with him. When I came to my time in Mackinac, oblivion was calling my name. At that time, I had lost the will to live. Then my idea of oblivion changed. Because of one man's touch, his words and the way he saw me I wanted his kind of oblivion. Hours ago, my idea of oblivion was forgetting the world and moving forward with a man I knew for only a small amount of time but he had stolen my heart just the same.

Because the man saw the woman I was desperate to be.

His voice, when he asked me not to give up on him will torture me for the rest of my life. Since my epic loss, I found that I don't forgive easily. I am so tired of being taken from that the slightest betrayal is unforgivable to me. Reminding myself that this isn't a slight betrayal, that this was my life he was fucking with gave me the strength to disconnect the call.

Wiping my eyes and clearing my throat, I call up the anger but it's not there. Right now, I just...ache. Driving through Saginaw is a blur, the sporadic traffic jams were too. My heart was stuck on Rio and the way he changed my life only to destroy it all over again.

Does he have any idea who he's dealing with when it comes to Adrian Lennox? Stupid question, of course he does! He's a fucking criminal too. *I used to be in collections* he'd said, the fucking prick. Scrolling through my phone I go to contacts, swipe *cocksucker*, hit call and record.

"There she is," he says on the second ring.



“You’ve been a busy boy, Adrian,” I tell him while white-knuckling the steering wheel. His voice is almost a match to Alan’s and hearing it tears me apart. “The cop on a bike was a nice touch.”

“Oh, come on now, Bet,” he laughs, “I always have eyes on you, you know that. Besides, that cop rides a bike for Christ’s sakes. He would have been happy with a gift card to McDonalds.”

“How many more?”

“This time? Just two. One of my guys followed you to the island, gave me your location and paid the rent-a-cop off. I think you know the other one rather well, judging by how protective he is of you.”

“How much are you paying him to do this?”

“Fifty large,” he says “Besides, he owes me anyway, he’s lucky he’s getting paid at all.”

“What’s this going to cost to go away for good? No more bullshit, I want my life back. There’s a number, what is it?”

“Six mill,” he says, “Plus one month with me in my loft, uninterrupted.”

“Uh huh,” I say trying not to vomit, “What happens to Rio?”

“Rio dies.”

“I’ll be in touch,” I tell him keeping the emotion from my voice.

“Never doubted you wouldn’t be, Bet. It’s business after all. You, of all people, don’t fuck around when it comes to business.”

“Blackmail is pricey,” I tell him, “To think, all these years I busted my ass to build an empire when I could have just have just fucked my way to the top.”

“It’s too bad I hate you, little sister,” he laughs, “We really do have a lot in common.”

Disconnecting, I stare out at the road ahead and think. I had to force myself to think because the alternative was running this fucking truck into a ditch.

Adrian plans to kill Rio and I found that I couldn’t accept that. But what I did have to accept was that for Rio, I was a job. I had to recognize

that I went from a job to an opportunity. That opportunity turned into caring and that caring morphed into love. If Adrian called in his marker, Rio was a man who specialized in retrieving things not people and I would gamble he didn't know I was the target when he agreed. While I was accepting all of these things, I knew that I would do what it took to spare him but still knowing when it was over I wouldn't keep him.

If Rio was all about money, he'd have taken the five hundred grand I offered and been done with me and disappeared. But no, he's going along with Adrian for a mere fifty large. In keeping his word to Adrian, he had to know he'd lose me in the fallout. None of this made sense to me. He knew my history with Adrian, he knew I planned to destroy him. Why not just tell me? Help me? I know what it's like to be under the prick's thumb, we could have brought him down together. Rio chose to betray me instead.

Punching in the number, I knew this was it, I just put the wheel in motion and there would be no going back.

"Was hoping you wouldn't call." he says on the first ring.

"I'm not calling about me," I tell him, "I'd like to offer you two million for a job that will take place in about three hours."

"You alright, Ms. Lennox?"

"Actually, no," I tell him, "I don't know how this works. What you need to know versus what you don't but, the man I'm referring to is dangerous and you'd be doing the world a favor by eliminating him."

"What about you?" he asks "Would I be doing you a favor, too?"

"This would benefit me most of all."

"How many unknowns can I expect?"

"Four to six but, no more than seven. I'll text you a current photo. Him first, the rest as you please. But I'm also sending you another photo of a man I want spared. My address will be in the thread."

"You are a woman to be admired." He says with a laugh.

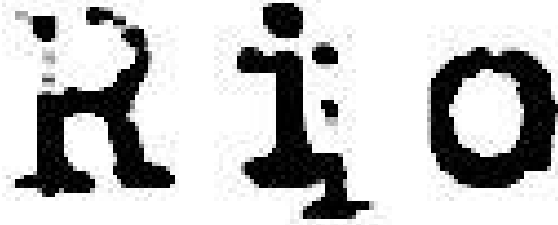
"No," I counter, "I'm a woman not to be fucked with."

We chatted a few more minutes and I listened as he spelled out what I needed to do and I had no problems with his instructions. Finally getting rid of all things Adrian felt justified. My conscience wasn't even aware that I

just ordered a man's death. That's how I knew I'd made the right decision and quite frankly, wouldn't have changed my mind if it was the wrong one. I let this man fuck with me for years when it was simply about money. Money I didn't care about, I could always get more. However, it was the mention of hurting Rio that had me calling in my own favors. This was one of those times it was good to know the wrong people.

Yes, I'd spare Rio. But only because he convinced me to live again and this was my way of saying thank you, we're even, right before telling him to fuck himself.

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When she disconnected our call, I knew she was done. Whatever it was that changed her mind I'd probably never know, but I did know that when I pulled up at her place it would be goodbye. Even though I wanted to bitch, I couldn't. Bottom line was, I convinced Bet to live and to open up to me but I'd never be able to convince her to forgive me.

Why should she? I couldn't forgive myself.

Setting her up and lying to her were not acts that a person forgives, even if you want them too. When we merge onto I75, I start to get a raging headache. When she pulls into the Palmer Woods subdivision, I start sweating. Two blocks and two turns later we pull into her wrap around driveway. I watch as she pulls into her garage but I park facing the road for an easy exit. Grabbing both guns, I secure them on my right and left side, just in case. I then climb out of my truck, follow her into the garage and wait for it.

"How about an early dinner?" she asks grabbing her bag from the back seat. Nodding, I follow her inside and she closes the door behind us. When we walk in I found myself standing there with my jaw open. The exterior of this place is brick, brass, and vintage architecture but the inside is contemporary and fucking unreal. The house is huge, yet practically empty. Everything inside is the bare minimum from the single love seat, to the kitchen island with one stool. The walls are empty, minus one photo, a family photo. Studying it while she's otherwise occupied, I see a man that loved his wife, a kid that adored her mother and young woman who at one time had it all. It was that photo that did it, I got it now.

Christ, when I met her she really did want to die.

She wasn't living here, she barely existed here.

“Years ago I was accused of being a pack rat,” she says opening the refrigerator. If you call that restaurant-sized freezer a refrigerator. Hell, restaurants would kill for what I’m seeing right now. “Now not so much.”

“Where’s all your stuff?” I ask as she removes frozen pizzas and transfers them to tin foil. “Storage,” she shrugs, “I’m hardly ever here.”

“Where’s your office?”

“Downtown,” she says vaguely while handing me bottle of water and leaning against the counter that probably cost more than my truck. I didn’t unscrew the cap, my throat was so dry, this water wasn’t going to fix it, only the truth could.

“Tell me, Rio, how exactly were you hoping this would go down? Were you hoping I’d go willingly? Or were you holding out for more money? Have I wronged you in the past?”

“Bet, listen to me, I wasn’t going to betray---”

“Oh, this I’ve gotta hear,” says Adrian walking in from the living room. He offers her his sinister smile ignoring me altogether. “Don’t stop on my account. Any time my partner plans to fuck me, I pay attention.”

“Hello, brother in law,” she says rolling her eyes. “As usual, your impatience isn’t appreciated. I wanted answers before you showed up but thanks for ruining the fun for me again.” His presence doesn’t stop her from moving around her kitchen, or the arrival of his whole fucking crew either. In fact, she seemed more annoyed than surprised. Now I had to wonder how long she knew. I should have seen it sooner, she knew before we left the island.

“You couldn’t even give me time to unpack first and you brought six men too? As history proves you do everything prematurely. Ba dum dum!” she says banging her hands on the granite counter top.

“Think of it more like, not giving you time to set me up,” he says producing a pistol. Keeping it at his side as a threat, I sit there stunned that she isn’t freaking out. Fuck, I know I’m freaking out. “You, little sister, I’ve learned not to under estimate.”

“You said you wouldn’t hurt her!” I bark at him.

“And I won’t,” he says standing next to her. “She’s worth more alive. Besides, she’s fun. Although, I can’t say the same for you. Loose ends, Rio. Come on, this isn’t your first job. Man the fuck up.”

“Forget about him, I have.” she says turning to face Adrian, “Now let’s deal. You want six mill and one month of my body in exchange for what exactly?”

“That’s easy, Bet, your life.”

“Yeah that doesn’t work for me, Adrian,” she says casually. She even went so far as to load the pizza rolls into the oven instead of begging him to back off. “It’s not so much about the blackmail but your tactics. See, while I was gone I gave away most of my fortune. I’m afraid I don’t have much to give. How about we settle at five hundred thousand? That seems like a good number. Rio still gets paid because that’s just good business. Besides, having a thief in my pocket could benefit me later. You get to avoid prison time, as my way of saying thanks for the memories. I think that’s more than fair.”

“Fair?” he laughs. “When it comes to you, nothing is fair. I had to drug you to get you to fuck me, I had to pretend to be *him*. He never got you and you fucking know it. He was weak and his head was always ten feet up your perfect ass. He was your bitch and the days of me being yours is over. I killed my own brother for you, little sister. You think I give a shit about a two-bit thief? Rio dies either way; he can’t be trusted and I don’t employ do-gooders. You will give me six million and one month or I’ll kill him now while you watch.”

“You killed my family?” She whispers.

“Like you didn’t know,” he laughs again, “Jesus, what the fuck else left was there? I did everything to make you see me.”

“I suspected,” she says quietly, “But no, I didn’t know.”

“You didn’t love him, don’t act like you did.”

“I wanted the chance!” she screams so loud the veins popped out of her neck. “She was my daughter! Indie was your niece! You fucking murderer!”

“Indie should have been *my* daughter and she wasn’t supposed to be in the fucking car!”

Stumbling back she holds on to the counter in an attempt to pull herself together. In a sure voice she says, “You took everything from me, I can’t let you take any more.” Then I saw it, when she went back from feeling to frozen.

“He dies. You’ll come to me willingly or you die, too. You choose me - I get the money, you die - I get the money. At this point, I’m okay with either outcome.”

“Didn’t Alan tell you? Oh shit, that’s right he died before he could. You aren’t the beneficiary, Adrian. How could I forget to mention that?”

“You lie.”

“All the fucking time, but not about this.”

“Who’s the fucking beneficiary, Bet?”

“He is.” She says looking over at me. Speechless and positive I heard her wrong it’s when he loses it that I realized she was serious. Christ, she was actually serious. “If he dies everything I worked for goes to the state, you’re welcome.”

“He betrayed you, on my order!”

“Whatever. You’ve infected me long enough and the biggest ‘*fuck you*’ I can think of is giving the money to him. Side note, this is the same guy I offered five hundred grand to kill me and turned me down. Money isn’t his motivator. Who the fuck saw that one coming, right? This moment for me is like Christmas because I get to fuck you with an audience just like you did with me.” she says laughing at her own joke.

“One last warning, Bet, agree to my terms.”

“Eat a dick, big brother.” She counters holding her ground.

“Disarm, Rio,” he instructs his men. In seconds, both guns are gone as well as my wallet and my plan b. “Only two weapons? To think you used to be worth a shit. That bookie and her old man made you soft, my friend.” Then looking over at Bet and ignoring me because I’m no longer a threat, he ups his game.

“You think you’ve suffered? They died quickly, how about I make you watch him die slowly? Then while his bloods runs over your marble floors, I’ll fuck you on the countertop.”

“Or how about while you bend over I shove my foot up your ass sparing my floors the mess?”

“Bet,” I interrupt but she, like Adrian, ignore me like I don’t exist and for her I can see that it’s true.

“I want the money and your body, Bet, you fucking owe me.”

Adrian wasn’t bluffing because he didn’t need to. He had six men that were willing to do his dirty work for him, like always. I’ve only known Bet about two weeks and I can tell you this, she knew he wasn’t bluffing, but neither was she. The Bet Lennox squaring off against Adrian was, in that moment, a stranger to me.

“Then I’m afraid we’re at an impasse because I’m not buying you off or letting you fuck me. Trust me, once with you about ruined me for men. Who will make the next move, I wonder?” It was the smile that did it. “Oh wait, that’s right! *I am.*” When she giggled it didn’t take him long to figure out she had a plan. It took him even less time to react.

“You fucking whore---”

“I learned from the best.” She says grinning from ear to ear before briefly looking over at me. Then there’s several bangs followed by flashes of light and during it all, the smile never left her face. Well that’s not exactly true, the smile did leave her face. Right before she took a bullet meant for me.



# Bel

Remorse, anger, and fear were etched into Rio's face like a bad tattoo.

Had he told me on the island, the outcome could have been different. We could have worked together. But no, he continued to lie and even put me directly in Adrian's path. Had I not called my favor in, he or I, probably both would be dead by now.

My pocket buzzed twice letting me know not to move. It buzzed again to let me know the shit storm was coming in 3, 2, 1... Holding my ground, I smile when I tell Adrian I learned from the best and checked to make sure Rio was not in the line of fire.

Clutching my countertop, I mourned them all over again. My choices caused this. Drugged or not, I had sex with my brother's twin. To hide my shame I started a vicious cycle I couldn't break. The one time I stood up to him ruined life as I knew it. Their deaths were my fault and I had to make it right. Six long years later, I finally had the guts to do the right thing. Even if it was paying a hit man for mass murder, it was worth the money. Somehow I'd find a way to write this off on my taxes. Since the night my life changed, I always suspected Adrian played a part but I never knew for sure. As fucked up as it sounds, the closure meant something. It meant the universe couldn't be that cruel, but that Adrian could be. I couldn't silence the universe but I could silence him. That ending made sense to me.

Adrian knew something was up but before he could react, several canisters rolled across the floor and then it was a symphony of explosions. Smoke filled the air making it impossible to breathe or see and through it all I still smiled.

Gunfire was heavy in my ears and I didn't care about that either. Staying put as instructed, I watch as Rio hits the floor to make his way toward me. Coming up next to me he reaches to push me behind him but I resist. Bottom line, I wasn't missing any of this. When one of Adrian's thugs takes one to the chest mere feet in front of me, I don't even flinch. Maybe this shouldn't be a proud moment for me but it was. These men were as dirty as he was, for playing along with his bullshit. They'd be buried right next to him.

So I kept right on smiling until Adrian came charging through the smoke with his gun aimed at Rio's heart. My smile died as instinct kicked in and protecting him was my only thought.

No one else would die because of my bad choices. Especially the man I loved. At that moment the betrayal was forgotten. Saving him was a no brainer, it really was.

It was also like a tank when it hit me.

All I knew was that in the blink of an eye I was shot, there was so much pressure and I was going down hard. In the next blink, Rio caught me before I hit the floor while still managing to put a bullet right between Adrian's eyes.

Looking up I see him lower his arm letting the gun fall.

Just like that, the nightmare was over.

Rio killed Adrian for me.

And I had a bullet in my shoulder.

Then I passed out.

Sometime later, I woke to find myself in my bedroom. How I was hooked up to IV poles and had a bandaged shoulder, I wasn't sure. But when I saw Rio next to the bed looking destroyed, I knew this was it, we ended here.

"Was it about the money, Rio?" I ask.

"It was, until I heard your voice."

"I see."

“No,” he says getting closer, “You really don’t. I don’t take people, Bet, I never would have done it. Once I heard your voice it wasn’t about owing him, it was about making you smile. Then it was convincing you to live, convincing you to love me back.”

“And do I? Love you back?”

“In my perfect world, you do,” he whispers in my ear, “In my perfect world you can’t fucking live without me.”

Fighting back the tears I whisper, “Perfection doesn’t exist, Rio and neither do we. You didn’t have to lie to me, if you loved me you wouldn’t have lied.” Then closing my eyes because his nearness hurt, I hear someone enter the room and when I open them I knew right away it was the man I hired.

“Thank you,” I tell him ignoring Rio.

“No thanks needed,” he says coming to stand next to me. “My men and I took care of you here. I’ll stick around for the next day or so then when I know you’re clear of infection, I’ll get paid and you can forget you ever met me. Until then, is there anything you need, Ms. Lennox?” he asks eye balling Rio.

“Bet,” says Rio in a pleading voice. “Don’t do this, this is our second chance.”

“Please see Mr. Martin out, that’ll do it for now.”

Just before he makes his final exit, I call for him. “Rio?”

Turning to me he waits for me to continue, “If I were you, I’d see if Rion held your job. If I find out you’ve stolen from anyone else, I’ll put you in a cell myself. Consider that your second chance. Now we’re even.”

Not bothering to look or answer when he calls my name, I hold the tears in. Even as he was forced from my property, he never stopped screaming for me. Yes, my heart was broken but I’d get over it. I always did. I learned another lesson tonight; it was that I was made to be broken. I expected him to fight back, make his way to me, convince me to keep him but he didn’t.

He walked away.

Several hours later when the house was quiet, I couldn't stay in bed anymore. Wincing as I maneuvered my robe into place, I stare out the window hoping for answers. Secretly hoping I'd see him there out in the street waiting for me. When the dull ache becomes a loud roar, I remind myself he wasn't coming back and that the pain, like Rio, was temporary. Besides, I had bigger problems than a bullet hole.

The whole in my heart hurt worse than my shoulder did and there was no medication for that.

Tonight would be the first night I'd be sleeping alone since meeting him. I missed him instantly and the moment my head hits the pillow the tears exploded from my eyes. Letting them fall freely, I do my best to accept this loss. I accepted it because I chose to let him go. Saving his life made us even, nothing more. Clutching Indie's blanket, I stare at the ceiling wondering what had to be done to make this look like this blood bath never happened. But none of my thoughts were occupied with Adrian or his bullshit, they were about Rio and his.

Climbing back out of bed slowly, I shuffle out to the patio off of my bedroom and take a seat in my chair. Grabbing my phone from the pocket of my robe, I thumb the screen avoiding pushing the button. If there were messages there I didn't want to see them. If there were no messages, I didn't want to see that either. As usual, curiosity won and I swiped it open. When I see my screen filled with messages from him, I start from the top and work my way down.

*Ain't got no words for what you did for me.*

*Gonna love you forever, little Bet.*

*This is me telling you goodbye.*

*This is me telling you to live.*

The phone slips slowly through my fingers and crashes to the ground. Sobs rack me, the cold comes back into my bones with a vengeance and my heart split in two. Curling up into my chair, I figured out another lesson, a harsh lesson.

Love hurt worse than a bullet wound.

Hours later, the sobs still hadn't left me but the pain returned with a vengeance. I couldn't ignore it. The hit man knocked on my door, came in

with meds and shot me in my good arm. Minutes later the pain started to wear off and my mouth decided it was a great time to pour my heart out to a man that kills humans for a living.

Right now, that man was my only friend.

He listened as I babbled. He held me while I screamed for answers then he left me with his own advice. “You are a woman to love. You are a woman to kill for. The man you had escorted out knew that. Even knowing he was hired to betray you, you still left him everything. Ever ask yourself why?”

With that he kissed the top of my head, grabbed his check from my dresser and didn’t say goodbye as he left. Before passing out, I stood up and looked at what he left behind. It was a business card.

From the first company I ever backed by myself. This was the company I hid from Alan all those years ago.

Flipping it over it said, “You and I are even now. You chose life, now go live it. ~Gage”

Clutching it in my hand, slowly I sink down to the floor. So I asked myself, why despite the betrayal would I leave him everything? My answer was easy, because I knew in the end he wouldn’t betray me. Because the man I loved was good.

And he just let me go.

# RiO

Convincing Bet to love me seemed like the biggest job I've ever had. I was wrong. Convincing Bet to forgive me was. Granted I ain't talked to her since but it's killing me because I let her go without knowing the answer. Flashbacks of the showdown in her kitchen never leave me. Bet taking a bullet for me, my shooting Adrian in the head for her. It was a miracle there was a gun within grabbing distance because without it, she could have died.

Watching a hit man work on getting a bullet out of her shoulder was rough. Then her asking me to leave when she woke up about killed me. Not knowing what else to do I sent her a few messages then shut my phone down. Sully did it for Boo, I had to do this for Bet. Doing the right thing sucked a dick. My God damn heart was broken.

I broke my own heart.

After squaring some shit up at my place, I showed up to see Rion, like Loyal demanded. Come to find out, in my absence, she married his ass. I wasn't surprised or jealous, in fact, I was happy for her. Meeting Bet changed my life, showed me that sometimes what you think you know, you don't. Sometimes it takes someone else to show you. Loyal did that for Rion and Bet did that for me.

Bet believed in me, saw good in me, she had fucking trusted me.

Loyal stepped up when Rion needed help. I put Bet in harm's way when she needed help. Loyal rescued Rion. Bet rescued herself and saved my life.

And let's not forget kept me from prison, too. Had she called the cops there's no doubt that's exactly where I'd be. That's exactly where I deserved to be.

So that's where I went.

The weeks without Bet turned into months without her. My life had one purpose and I was where I needed to be now to make that happen. Rion and Loyal both told me I was fucking stupid, that what I was doing was pointless, but did I listen? No.

I owed Bet a debt and the days of people keeping me out of trouble stopped with her.

Letting her go wasn't what I wanted but I had to do it. Now I owed it to her and myself to right this wrong. Rion insisted she could help, demanded to even, but I refused. Rion is big on second chances and Bet is too, considering she could have set me up to take the fall and didn't.

I didn't deserve a second chance this time, I didn't deserve to be a free man either.

So my decision had been easy.

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# Bet

Despite a broken heart, I started a new tradition. Every morning I went into the city for coffee and engaged people for no other reason than to get back to basics. I am a member of this community and it was time to get back out there and at the very least, get some fresh air. Okay so that lasted three days, whatever I tried. With winter only weeks away, I do as I always do and sit out on my patio curled up in blankets embracing the freeze. To say I'm cold would be an understatement. I've tried to move on but it simply wasn't possible. Some days I managed it by staying too busy to melt down. Tonight though, the grief over missing Rio was crushing me. Two weeks ago I wrote a check made payable to Rio for the project we talked about. There was passion in his eyes when he spoke of opening a place where people could come for second chances and I wanted him at the very least to have that.

After all, it's what he'd done for me when I needed it most and it was my way of saying thank you without the go fuck yourself attached to it.

I had called in a favor to a few guys I know and asked them to track him down. They had given me his last known address and that was all they could find. I sat out front wanting to knock on his door but I didn't. Instead, I punked out and mailed it. But today, the envelope was returned to me unopened.

When he had said goodbye, he'd meant it. Even knowing I was bequeathing my money to him he never asked for a dime and I knew he never would when the return to sender stared at me from the table.

All hope I'd had vanished.

With no wine to dull the pain, I embraced it.



Grief and I were old friends and part of me missed it. Grief was what I knew, like riding a bike they say. Crying myself to sleep wasn't anything new, I'd been doing it for months now. At first the guilt over missing Rio more than I missed Alan made me cry. Then it was wondering what having a family with Rio would be like that made me do it. It was not having parents to talk to that tore me up and it was wondering if they were disappointed in me that made me bawl.

Everything made me fall apart because not only did I lose my family, I lost *him* and right now I missed him more than anything. This was the loss I feared, the one I'd hoped to be spared from but wasn't. The simple truth was I wasn't handling it well, at all.

So this morning when I woke up, I decided to work from home. I never work from home because it's not a home, it's an empty house. After making my calls, returning emails, and scheduling appointments, I put on my rubber boots, roll up my sweat pants and sink to my knees to plant my mums.

This was a tradition I shared with my mom that I planned to share with Indie only... changing that train of thought, of course my mind goes right back to him. It's been months, I scold myself. Quit waiting for something to happen because it isn't. He's gone, he's not coming back.

Digging my fingers into the soil I wanted to scream. He didn't love me. He didn't want to save me. He wanted to save himself and maybe in his shoes I'd have done the same. Rio was in a bad situation and wasn't anticipating me but then he still lied now, didn't he? But it felt so real! People can't fake love! Digging my fingers in further I remember that I was, in fact, one of those people and my spiral went out of control. The finality of it all was hard. Days after he left I even texted him asking him to come back, I begged for it and he never answered. For two weeks I slept with my phone, just in case. God I was a glutton for punishment.

"Excuse me, Bet Lennox?"

Without turning toward the voice, I close my eyes in frustration. Nice security system, Bet! Shit. "I think she just figured out we overrode her security system." This from an unknown male.

"How much?" I ask while continuing to plant.

“How much?” she asks clearly confused.

“Yes,” I repeat, “How much do you want?”

“Uh, I don’t want anything but a minute of your time, if you don’t mind.”

“I do mind,” I mumble, “I was in the middle of something. You didn’t give your names, or was that on purpose?”

“Sorry,” she says while reaching for the large man’s hand to hold. “My name is Rion and this is---”

“Loyal,” I finish, “How can I possibly help you?”

“You’ve heard of us?”

“A lot actually,” I tell them brushing my knees off to stand up, “I’d invite you in bu---”

“Here,” says Loyal handing me an envelope, “Read it, that’s why we broke in.”

“Jesus, Loyal,” she says smacking him, “Lighten the hell up.”

“Why don’t you just tell me what it says.”

“I’d really prefer if you read it---” she tries before he finishes for her. “Rio’s in prison.”

All the breath leaves me in an instant. Just like that my knees leave me too. But just before I hit the dirt, Loyal uses one big arm to hold me up. Holding onto him with all I’ve got, I focus on my breathing and find that I can’t.

Then he’s there rubbing my back while Rion taps my face gently. “Prison?” I whisper, “What did he do?”

“Well---” starts Rion but again it’s Loyal who cuts to the chase and I appreciate that. “Turned himself in for setting you up, told that detective the part he played in following you and bringing you home to Adrian. Then he confessed to killing him.”

“What?” I sputter, “I went to a lot of fucking trouble to cover that up!”

“We said the same thing,” says Rion coming to my side. “He’s punishing himself.”

“Punish---,” I try and find myself getting weak again.

“When’s the last time you ate woman?” he asks me.

“Ate?” I return, “What in the hell does food have to do with any of this?”

“I’m the only thing holding you up,” he reminds me, “You smell like shit, too. So I’ll ask again, last time you ate?”

“I don’t know,” I admit waving him off, “I have to get him out.”

“That’s why we’re here,” she says, “I’m an attorney, sorta, but he’s even refusing my help. Rio can’t go down for killing Adrian or he’ll never get out. Please read that letter, Bet.”

“Okay.”

Opening it up with shaky fingers, I spread the paper out and start from the top. It’s short and to the point with no declarations of love which I was secretly hoping for. Blinking rapidly, I stare at the letter not quite believing what I’d just read. Rio had asked for prison, refused Rion’s help and requested that I specifically was never to visit him. Looking back up at the pair, I sum it up. “Rio won’t spend another night in prison for killing Adrian,” I offer, “I’ll handle it.”

“Thank fuck,” says Loyal pulling her to his side. Rion wipes a tear away and smiles at me then out of nowhere pulls *me* into a fierce hug.

“He loves you,” she whispers, “Rio shines with it. He told me he owed you, that you gave him a second chance instead of putting him away, which no one would blame you if you did, by the way. Thank you for doing that for him, but he needs another one, don’t you think?”

“Absolutely,” I tell her, squeezing her back. “He’ll be out by dinner.”

“You can do that?” asks Loyal.

“I’m stupid rich,” I tell him, “I can do whatever the hell I want.”

“I like you,” he says, “You could do better than him but---”

“Loyal!” she says on a screech.

“What? I’m just saying, I mean look at her then look at him.”

“If you knew me, you’d realize you have that backward,” I tell him, “Rio saved my life.”

“Care to explain?” he asks.

“Had he not come into my life, I was in the process of hiring someone to kill me.”

“You’re fucking joking.” He says narrowing his eyes.

“Uh, I don’t think she is, Loyal.” She says looking at me with fresh eyes.

“You ain’t joking are you?” he asks doing the same.

“Fraid not,” I say showing them to the garage, “Come inside, we have work to do.”

“Yeah,” Loyal says agreeing. “Let’s start with gettin’ you a sandwich.”

Two hours, lunch, and one phone call later, it was done.

Rio was a free man.

R i o

Of all the schemes I've run over the years, confessing to murder probably wasn't the brightest. It was almost comical how the DPD didn't even know how to arrest me over the death of Adrian Lennox. Granted, I had to lie my ass off about how I got rid of the body and his buddies involved but when I was done, they locked me up. Around here, people don't confess to anything so when someone does they waste no time in making their numbers look good. Especially when you have a record.

The thought of righting my wrongs is what pushed me to do it and now I'm left with nothing but regret. The regret was a pill too big for me to swallow. I left my life undone, I ran from her, I was a coward. I didn't fight for her like I promised I would. I didn't make her fall in love with me either.

And now I'm stuck here.

Fuck.

Thoughts of her is what keeps me sane. Hoping she's happy, thinking about her making a difference and maybe even finding a man that could make her smile. No, I didn't want her with someone else but I let her go and it wasn't fair to expect her to never find love again. Even if deep down I wanted it to be only me. Prison life ain't easy. Granted, I'm not in a maximum security facility but, fuck you, prison is prison. A few hours of daylight and fresh air ain't enough to get by on. Working out is the only activity I have that passes the time and time passes slowly here. I've dropped weight, leaned out and stopped shaving the second day in. My last trip by a mirror was so shocking, I hardly recognized myself and stood there for a solid three minutes just staring at what I'd become.

I looked like a savage.

A criminal.

In reality I was both of those things, yet I still wanted to be more.

I wanted to be better.

“Martin,” I hear from outside the door. Turning my head, I see a guard coming toward me so I put the weights down.

“Yeah?” I return.

“Let’s go.” He orders me and having no choice, I follow. He leads me to a generic holding room that looks like a spot for conferences or where you’d meet your attorney. Walking in, I’m instructed to sit, so I do. He leaves but doesn’t lock the door behind him. Okay, so that’s new.

Resting my elbows on the table, I run my fingers through my long hair wishing I could see her one more time. Hold her, tell her she’s fucking priceless and beg her to forgive me. I’d let her know she changed my life the second I heard her voice from my side of the privacy fence. I’d promise her that for the rest of my life, I’d be straight. Only doing good and making her happy, but fuck even I know that’s not in the cards for me.

When the door opens, I don’t bother looking up. Whoever it is doesn’t matter because it wouldn’t be her.

“Hello, Rio.”

My heart starts to race the second her voice registers. Closing my eyes, I can’t even look up for fear I’m imagining it. Christ, I want her so badly I’m hallucinating now.

“Rio?”

Slowly raising my head and opening my eyes when they focus on her it’s all I can do to stay seated. Then shame washes over for me for what I did to her, what she did for me and I didn’t want her to see me laid low like this.

“Made it clear, no visitors. Especially you.” I tell her bluntly then turn away so she can’t see how much it hurts.

“You can’t mean that,” she says quietly. God dammit I can smell her. She smells like sunshine and salvation.

“Not big on saying things I don’t mean, leave Bet. This ain’t no place for you.”

“But it’s a place for you?”

“I belong here.”

“No, Rio,” she says firmly. “You don’t.”

“The fuck do you want?”

“I’ve missed you,” she whispers, “So much.”

“Leave the way you came in and you can miss me from out there.”

“Don’t do this,” she pleads and it’s fucking killing me. “Rio?”

“You hard of hearing?” I yell, “I already scrapped you off once, I really gotta do it again? Need me to convince you I don’t give a fuck?”

“Who are you?” she barely manages because she’s started to cry. Those tears gutted me because Bet wasn’t ever supposed to cry over me. She also looked different but I was too fucking ashamed to place the change.

“This *is* me!” I yell again only this time, I toss the chair from the table to the corner. “This is who I am! A thief! I’ll steal from anyone for a price. You should know that considering how easily I stole from you! Get the fuck out! Go find your charity case elsewhere!”

“I thought you loved me,” she says standing her ground.

“I did, too,” I tell her while looking her straight in the eyes from across the room. “Then I stopped listening to my dick.”

Nodding once she backs away from me in favor of the door. Not once did her eyes leave mine. Watching as the tears rolled down her cheeks, she didn’t say another word, when she opened the door and not even when she closed it. Grief takes me over and I stumble to the door to place my hand there. I may have gotten my wish but all I had to do was look at her and know she deserves a good man.

Not a fucking two-bit thief.

“Love you, little Bet,” I whisper, “I’m sorry.”

Then taking my seat, I put my hands in my lap and wait for the guard to take me back to my hell hole. Five minutes pass, ten then another five

when the door opens and he tosses my bag on the table.

“See you on the outside,” he says crossing his arms over his chest.

“What?”

“You’re free,” he says turning away, “Second door on your right down the hall is processing. Make sure all your shit’s in that bag when you sign out.”

“Sign out?”

“Your woman,” he says smiling, “She must really love you and know the right people.”

“Fuck.” I mumble.

“That’s exactly what I’d be doing if she were mine, bro, not sitting in here staring at the floor. You didn’t belong here in the first place. Go.”

Jumping up like I was on fire, I grabbed my bag and hauled ass to processing. Twenty minutes later I was standing outside the doors staring at an empty lot and she was nowhere to be found.

She came for me and I destroyed her for it.

What have I done?



# Bet

With my palm pressed against the door, I swore I could feel him on the other side doing the same. But then his words registered and I took a step back. Even knowing he didn't mean them didn't remove the hurt. He may have said it but you could see doing so destroyed him. He may love me like he says, but he didn't want a future and I couldn't force him. I'd done my part and was rejected anyway, so I ran to my truck and never looked back.

Rio didn't want me, I knew for certain now.

The thought of staying in town didn't appeal to me. Everything hurt right now, even my hair. I just wanted to lick my wounds in private. Merging onto the freeway I knew exactly where I wanted to go. Back to the one place where I was able to be me. When my phone rings, I look on the display and hit answer.

"Hello, Rion."

"Do you have any idea how cool it is to have a friend named Bet?" she asks enthusiastically. We haven't known each other but a handful of hours but she's dear to me already because she's as real as they come. All these years I waited to have a girlfriend and I couldn't keep her. God, the hits just keep coming. "You knew I was a bookie, right? I mean the odds of a bookie having a friend named Bet are... Okay, well I'd have to work on those odds, but that's later. Is Rio with you? You guys wanna be alone first for some.... some.... or maybe do dinner at our place?"

"Thank you for the offer, Rion, but he isn't with me."

"Explain that," says Loyal which tells me I'm on speaker. "He out?"

"Yes," I admit, "At least he should be."

“Bet?” asks Rion quietly.

“He asked me to leave,” I choke out. “So I left.”

I can hear her giving Loyal orders but I’m too lost in my own hurt to listen too closely. Picking up speed, I decided the faster I drove, the sooner I could put him behind me.

“Where are you right now?” she asks me.

“Headed out of town to think,” I tell her. “I wish you and Loyal the very best, but I have to go.”

“Bet,” she begs. “Don’t run away. Please stay, you know he didn’t mean it.”

“I’m so glad you have Loyal in your life, treasure it, Rion. In a blink,” I whisper, “it can be taken from you.”

Then I hit end and promptly shut my phone down. Three hours and far too many songs that reminded me of him later, the tears come again as do thoughts of the family I lost. When I come upon a pocket of traffic, instead of having a fit, I found the opportunity in it because at that point I couldn’t take anymore. My breakdown was so swift it consumed me on a physical level. I could feel my heart squeezing in pain. My lungs felt dried up and my eyes were almost swollen shut. Punching the steering wheel felt good so I did it repeatedly. Everything else hurt, why not break my hand while I was at it. It only took six and a half years to show up but, this roadside release was the one I’d needed to happen. My days of living in grief needed to come to an end.

With or without Rio, it was time for me to live. I decided to implement this new lease on life tomorrow.

Traffic disperses and I floor it to get to my destination even faster. Like the devil was on my ass, I flew. When I saw my exit, I let out a cry of relief. I was so close. Several miles later I was parking, twenty five minutes after that I was boarding the ferry and forty minutes after unloading, I was jamming my key in the door. I needed that bed more than I needed anything. Closing the door and dropping my bags I was close to losing it again but there was something I had to do first. Literally running down the hill to the store, I bought enough wine, liquor and cigarettes for an army.

A heartbroken army.

By the time the sky darkens, I'm already half-way to forgetting my own name. I couldn't feel my tongue and I sure as hell was too numb to cry anymore. Instead of dwelling on that, I thought back to our time here and how for the first time in years I finally felt an emotion other than grief.

With Rio I was happy.

Refilling my plastic tumbler that cheerily said 'I left my ♥ in Mackinac' I roll my eyes at the generic marketing and knew it should have said I left my ♥ with Rio. Being left behind aside, I was able to admit that I was grateful for the time I had with him. He taught me so much and money couldn't repay him.

"Wanna talk about it?" I hear from the other side of the privacy fence. With round eyes, I sit up straighter in my seat fearful of answering. He's here and I didn't know what to do. So I did the only thing I could think of. I started from scratch.

"I'm not sure what I'm supposed to say," I admit, "I'm not in the habit of talking to strangers."

"I'll ask the questions then," he says, "Ever lose the one thing you valued most?"

"Yes," I say clutching my plastic tumbler for support. "I've lost a lot actually, but this most recent loss was even more devastating than the others."

"Why?"

"Losing true love isn't something I can come back from."

"What if you didn't lose him?" he asks and his voice sounds closer. Standing up, I tip toe over to the fence and place my hand there. "What if he got himself sent to prison to right his wrongs? What if he thought about you every day? What if in trying to save you he made a huge fucking mistake?"

"That's a lot of what ifs."

"How 'bout this then, he loves you. He loves you so God damn much that he was willing to let you go so you could be happy."

"Well that's dumb," I mumble, "Considering I'm *not* happy."

"All he wanted to do was convince you. You still need convincing?"

“No,” I say crying into my free hand, “I don’t need convincing, I need *him*.”

“Come to me, little Bet.”

Dropping my hand from the fence, I was through the living room and tearing the door open in seconds. When it opened fully, he was there in all his glory.

“I couldn’t wait no more,” he says stepping inside and closing it behind him. As for me, I stood there unsure of what to do. He looked so different to me. His hair was longer, he had a beard and he was even more stacked than the last time I saw him. “Told you I’d always find you. Tell me you missed me,” he says reaching for me.

“I missed you.”

“Tell me you forgive me.”

“I forgive you.”

“Tell me you love me.”

“I love you.” I tell him in a sure voice. I was proud of myself for not breaking down. He looked equally proud of me too.

“Good,” he says pinning me to the wall, “Now show me.”

“No, not yet.” I tell him firmly. “I have a few things I need to say to you first.”

Taking a deep breath, I look up into all of his eyes and let him have it.

Rion

Loyal picked me up from out front of the prison which surprised me, considering I was a pain in his ass. A smart man would have called a cab or a friend but I had no money on me and to my knowledge, I didn't even have friends. Yeah, I had Rion but she was family and I wasn't putting her down for this shit.

He grabbed my bag, slapped me upside the head and told me to get in. We weren't on the road a full minute when he let me have it. "Don't know what you said to Bet 'cause she was tight-lipped but, whatever it was, you best be saying sorry in person."

"I can't," I mumble. "I fucked up for good this time."

"I showed her the letter, right? Couple hours later? Your ass was free. Woman made one phone call, one and that's was that. That woman ain't holding a grudge, fuckwit. She comes to get you and you treat her like a piece of shit? Couldn't even get my woman to come with me to get your sorry ass. She's that pissed."

"Loyal, if memory serves, you fucked up too, lay off, alright?"

"Can't," he says getting on the freeway, "You need her and she needs you so I'm taking you to where she is before it's too late for you. I got plenty of chances with Rion, but they ain't all like her because she's the best. Your woman's got some chances in her but gotta say, judging by her voice earlier, you might be out of luck."

"Where the fuck are we going?"

"Where the fuck do you think?"

"How do you know---"

“Rion figured it out, now shut up and think of a killer apology. You got about six hours to nail it.”

The drive up was quiet. I did as he suggested and thought of about two hundred apologies but none of them sounded good. Loyal hauled ass and managed to get me on the last ferry and when I got out he gives me a parting jab like only Loyal could. “You best hope she still loves you, dickhead,” he says tossing me my bag, “’Cause it’s a long ass walk home. Oh and feed her ass, woman’s too fucking skinny.”

Fuck. That’s what was different about her. She’d dropped weight. Within the hour I had bribed the manager to put me next to her claiming it was an anniversary surprise. Well, that and I paid triple for my room with Loyal’s credit card. The next couple of hours after that hurt though. Listening to her out on the deck with the fence between us, I heard her cry, sniffle, moan, and burp.

Bet’s heart was broken.

Seeing an opportunity to start over, I took it. This place was special to her which is why she came back. She came back to remember so I was going to let her. I startled her, I could tell, but when I repeated our first few conversations, she joined in. When I asked her to come to me, I heard her feet running across the deck and couldn’t wait. I needed to be on the other side of that door when she answered it.

Just like I’d hoped, she missed me. Not only that, she forgave me. Then she knocked the wind out of me when she told me she loved me. The second she said it, I wanted to bury myself inside of her as a reminder of where we started but she had other ideas.

Them ideas scared the shit outta me.

“No, not yet,” she says staring me in the eyes, “I have a few things I need to say to you first.”

“Bet,” I start, “You drunk?”

“Yes,” she says, “But I’m not that drunk and this needs to be said. Please, Rio, it’s my turn for a speech.”

“Wanna sit down then?”

“No,” she says wrapping herself around me, “I like it here, I missed it here. I felt warm here.”

“Go ahead then.”

“For six years I asked myself, why take them and not me? Why was I the exception? At my lowest moment, I ran fast, right? Straight into you. Just when I was convinced it was game over for me, you changed my mind. Not only did you convince me to live, but you convinced me to love again. To love *you*, Rio. My love for Alan was soft and gentle, it was good. My love for you is hard and aggressive, it’s even better. I believe I was meant for Alan, for a time anyway. But I know that I was meant for you...forever. I’m not going to allow you to pass up our second chance.”

“Let me---”

“I’m not finished,” she says leaning back to look up at me, “I have two conditions.”

“Name ‘em.”

“You owe me one orgasm for everyday you’ve been gone, that’s one. Two, you need to tell me you still love me and that we can work this out. Third, don’t you ever put yourself in danger for me like that again, I had it covered. You don’t go to prison to prove a point, that’s just stupidity. There’s a lesson here, don’t do dumb shit.”

“You said two, that was three and you took a fucking bullet for me.”

“Yes well, I’m amazing like that,” she says with a smile, “I’m waiting, Rio.”

Taking her face into my hands, I kiss each eye lid then pull her into a hug. “I’d kill him for you again,” I tell her, “Either way, what I did was wrong, little Bet. When he called in his favor I never thought it’d be you. I’m sorry for a lot of shit, but not if I get you out of the deal.”

“You love me,” she says.

“Fuck yeah I do,” I tell her, “but it’s more than that. I can’t explain it, but it was thinking of you that kept me going. It was thinking of you that made being in that hole tolerable. You’re everything to me, little Bet. Every-fucking-thing.”

“Thanks for convincing me, Rio.”

Taking her hand and leading her back toward the bedroom, when we stand at the foot of the bed I find myself nervous. Things are different now, solid. We have a foundation, we're starting over. She's mine, I'm hers, we had no secrets and I'm overwhelmed.

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# Bet

I was warm again.

Just like that I felt my insides warm like someone wrapped me in an electric blanket. Standing here at the foot of the bed we just stare at each other. If the situation wasn't what it was, being that we've both made the decision to move forward together, I'd have him on his back by now. But this was unfamiliar territory for me, probably for him too.

Rio raises his arm slowly almost like he's asking permission. My breathing catches but I don't take my eyes off his hand. He uses his finger to brush the hair from my temple then hooks it behind my ear. Running that same finger down my neck, between my breasts and settling on my navel. I swear I was close to passing out.

Taking his other hand he tilts my chin up where our eyes meet. Leaning in, he kisses me once on the lips and then on each cheek. "You need a good man," he says. "Didn't know I could even do good until I met you."

"I love you just as you are, Rio."

"I know," he says quietly, "but we started off wrong. Gonna spend the rest of my life making it right."

"No," I tell him, "The past is the past, I can't live in it anymore and neither can you. Our future can't begin until the guilt ends. Let it go, Rio."

"You letting it go, little Bet?" he asks running his finger up my thigh. Letting what go? I don't even know my name right now. "I am," I tell him, "I've had enough guilt for a lifetime. I'd like to give happiness a shot."

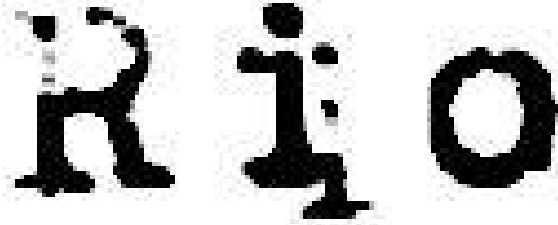
“Alright then,” he says slipping a finger inside, “that’s done. Can we fuck now?”

Smiling up at him I take in his new appearance and if I was desperate before, I was mad for him now. “Yes Rio,” I moan, “We can fuck now.”

Wasting no time, he inserts a second finger, then a third. Feeling stretched, full and loved I let my head fall back and did as I said I would and let the guilt go.

My family would want me happy, I had to believe that.

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Life with Bet Lennox was anything but boring.

We spent two days on the island before coming back home. On the drive back she spent hours blowing my mind. She started by letting me drive her Rover but she ended it by letting me know she's moving in.

With me.

On 8 Mile.

My only condition was taking that refrigerator with us. Man, I've dreamt about that appliance and she didn't think twice before agreeing with me. Weeks turned into months and all kinds of shit has happened since then. I'll try to summarize without breaking down like a bitch about it.

First, Bet surprised the three of us with a trip. Wait, not just a trip though. No, it was an all-expenses paid week in Bermuda. She rented a house on the beach where Rion, Loyal, Bet and myself had the time of our fucking lives. The females are attached at the hip and are forces to be reckoned with. Loyal and me, turns out we're a friendship neither one expected but let it happen anyway.

The fucker even laughs from time to time, too.

On our last day of vacation, Bet tossed a set of keys to Rion and said, "Someone needs to make that house a home." And Rion, not understanding, looked to Loyal who was looking at me. "Huh?" they say in unison. "Selling property takes too much time. I have a house that I don't live in, so I was thinking you two take it and expand the business on 8 Mile this way we all win."

"You're giving us your house?" asks Rion clearly in shock.

“We’ll take it,” say Loyal grabbing the keys.

“Loyal!” she screeches. “You can’t take her house!”

“I can’t take something she’s giving, now can I?” he counters.

“Well no,” she sputters.

“Good, that’s settled, now who wants to do karaoke?” says Bet eager to sing again. The woman fucking loved karaoke.

But the real kicker was when we got home. Carrying her in, she giggles demanding to be set down and for me to check the mail. On the kitchen table was the envelope she mailed to me months ago and I didn’t want to touch it.

“Open it,” she says taking a seat.

Removing the tape holding it together, I pull the slip of paper out and quick thinking had me grabbing the key that fell with it. Starting at the top I read the letterhead that said *Lennox Holdings Limited* first followed by:

*Dear Mr. Martin,*

*Congratulations on your new business venture with Lennox Holdings Limited. We are pleased to inform you the commission has approved 400 8 Mile Rd, Detroit MI DBA Second Chances for R-2 zoning. Attached is the information you will need to successfully begin the process of your remodel per the city’s requirements. Please keep the deed and ordinance list in a secure location.*

*If you have any questions, please contact our office at your convenience.*

*Sincerely,*

*Courtney Cain, Assistant to Bet Lennox of Lennox Holdings Limited*

“Second Chances?” I ask as I re-read the letter. Even I knew DBA meant *doing business as*.

“What we talked about,” she says “It’s what you said you’d do with one million dollars.”

“I know what I said,” I choke out “But that address is below my apartment, Bet.”

“I realize that, Rio,” she says batting her eyes at me. “We bought the building.”

“We who?”

“We us.”

“We...us?”

“You’re usually quicker than this,” she says standing up. “Us, Rio. You and me. What’s mine is yours, what’s yours is mine.”

“But I ain’t got shit.”

“And now you do.”

“Jesus, you gave everything.” I whisper wiping my eyes. Standing on her toes and kissing me she takes my hands placing both on her stomach.

“Almost everything,” she says “The last surprise doesn’t get here for about eight more months.”

Blinking was all I could manage.

No seriously, it was. I was overwhelmed. Bet gave me a gift she swore she’d never give.

I convinced her to give me a family and she looked happy.

Okay I lied.

I managed to do one other thing.

Pass out at her feet.

# Bel

Pregnancy suited me.

Well, maybe it was Rio gunning for *fucking father of the year* (his words not mine) that sealed it. Rio asked me when the wedding would be but I didn't have an answer for that. I knew he was mine and he knew I was his. We both agreed that when a wedding happened our child would be a part of it.

I've got less than two months to go and now the nerves are setting in. Women want you to believe that you forget the pain, that you only remember the joy. Those women are on crack. In fact, it was the pain to come that was front and center because birth hurts.

Rio claims if I can take a bullet I can squeeze a baby out and says that sex daily will help keep things loose. Rio is currently hiding down at Second Chances and probably icing his balls. Rio's dream was coming together at a rapid pace. He's as bossy at building his business as he is with telling me what to do. But he's even more determined that it be completed before I gave birth so we had his full attention.

I'll never forget the morning I woke up and just *knew* I was pregnant. Running my hands over my stomach, I look over at him sound asleep with his big leg covering mine. There was no regret, no panic and no fear. My child's father fought its mother's demons when she couldn't do it herself. My child's father was ass-over-elbows in love with its mother. When it came to telling him, I waited for the right time though I was bursting with it. I wanted him to have his dream before I sprung the news. The last thing I expected was him to pass out.

But that's Rio, always doing things his way. Although when he came to, he made slow love to me and after that he spent an hour singing to my stomach. He made promises, I made promises but in this we were in total agreement. We'd kick ass at this parenting gig.

Weeks later when my doctor pinpointed my due date I sucked in a breath while Rio smiled and whispered, "It makes sense, little Bet. Now you'll have something happy to fight the sad."

Nodding to him, I knew he was right. If I did go into labor on my family's anniversary it would fight the sad. If I didn't go into labor that day, I'd do whatever I could to make it happen on Indie's birthday. He was right about that too. My daughter's life was something to celebrate even in death.

*Our* child was something to celebrate too, and it was okay to be happy.

A year ago, I was convinced I wanted to die. That this precious gift of life wasn't worth living. I was wrong about that. I was wrong about a lot of things.

But I wasn't wrong about him.

That man that convinced me to live, made me believe in second chances, wanted me to love him back and I did.

In the months that followed life wasn't just good, it was great. Each morning I wake up attached to Rio and I have to pinch myself that not only am I going to be a mother once more, but that I had a family again too.

I was loved.

When Rion asked us to come over to see what they've done with the house, I held no sadness about it. Truly, I was happy that they were making it a home. Rio was a hovering father-to-be, opening the door and taking my hand he leads me into the kitchen where the couple were arguing about the empty space where my refrigerator once sat.

"You still ain't got a fridge?" asks Rio pulling out a chair for me. "Says the guy housing the appliance Emeril would sell his own kid to have," says Loyal winking at me.

"So order one you cheap bastard," says Rio giving Rion a hug. "Your man is cheap, Junior."

“Yeah, well my man can’t locate a fridge at Home depot that fits this space, Rio. Instead we’ll build a small pantry here,” she says showing us. “Then we’ll order one for that space.”

As for me, I just listened to them all while eating the food left out on the table. These days I couldn’t eat enough and I loved every bite. I didn’t care that these burgers and fries were for the group, I was eating for an army it seems. “We gonna have to roll you outta here?” asks Loyal handing me a bottle of water to wash down my feast.

“Wasn’t it you that told me I didn’t eat enough?” I counter.

“Good, a woman that listens,” he says taking a seat next to me. “Just between friends, how much did that fridge cost you?”

With a mouth full of food I wasn’t ready to swallow yet, I answer him. “fifty fousin.”

“Fifty thousand!” he sputters.

“You understood that?” asks Rio shaking his head.

“Loyal speaks several languages including French fry.” Says Rion smiling over at him.

And so it went, the four of us spent the afternoon together doing what families did. It was about five o’clock when Rio wanted to bail and he said it was because we had an appointment to be somewhere. Not one to pass up an opportunity for snacks, Rion packed me a to-go bag and twenty minutes later we were on the freeway.

For some reason he kept playing *Come Sail Away* by the Styx and when it came on a fourth time, I shut it off.

“Hey!” he pouts reaching for the volume. “That songs a classic, little Bet.”

It was sweet how he still calls me little Bet when in fact, these days I’m big Bet. “What are you up to?” I ask. “Why are we in Novi? Oh God is that Cracker Barrel? We’re going to Cracker Barrel? Yes! Oh man, you get me.”

“One-track mind,” he laughs. “Surprise first, food coma after.”

Offering him a huge smile, I sit back and only had to wait a few more minutes for the surprise of a lifetime.



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Rio

She couldn't sit still.

It was too God damn adorable for words watching her face light up and not acting like she was bursting at the seams. Once traffic cleared, I drove us in the back way behind the Novi Suburban Showplace so she couldn't see the glaring billboard from the freeway.

Parking and getting her out of the car, like always I take her hand and lead her to the double doors that open to the warehouse. She grips me tight but stays silent as we walk. Our salesman sees us and wastes no time coming over, smart man this one. He had one job, make my woman happy.

"You must be Bet," he says shaking her hand.

"And you are?" she prompts.

"About to make your day," he says smiling.

"Ookay?" she draws out. "Rio? What's behind those doors?"

"Patience, little Bet," I tell her giving her a quick peck on the nose.

Following our guy, he opens the showroom doors and when she takes it all in she lets out a gasp. With one hand coming to cover her belly while the other squeezes me, she blinks several times before it sets in.

"Oh my God," she whispers looking from floor to ceiling. "It's beautiful! It's huge!"

"Way to kill a guy's ego," I mumble. "Nothing is more beautiful or as huge as you and your dick, Rio, but that's a glorious boat. Don't get jealous, but can I touch it?"

"With that guy watching?" I groan. "I love it when you talk dirty."

“The boat,” she laughs. “Come on, you can watch me touch it. I don’t mind.”

Clearly uncomfortable, our salesman clears his throat to remind us we aren’t alone, but fuck him, he just made about thirty grand today and if we want to talk dirty, we will talk fucking dirty.

Helping her aboard, she was slow in touching all of it. The glass, gadgets, sails, upholstery and even the bed. Coming up behind her, I wrap both arms around her placing my hands on her giant beautiful belly and whisper, “Surprise.”

Whipping around she grabs my face with tears running down her face. “You boat me a boat?”

“Try that again.”

“My mouth won’t work,” she mumbles while trembling in my arms. “You bought me a boat?”

“Oh a boat? Yep.”

“I love my surprise and I love you, Rio.” She says through her tears. “Where will we put it?”

Handing her a set of keys with an address on the tag I tell her, “Guessing it will sit at our lake house until you’re ready to set sail.”

Speechless she looks from the keys, around the interior of the boat then back to me. When she starts to tremble almost violently, I pull her back to me and slowly move back and forth until she grasps my intent and rests her head on my chest. Dancing in the center of the living room of her new boat I sing to her.

*I’m sailing away, set an open course for the virgin sea*

*I’ve got to be free, free to face the life that’s ahead of me*

*On board, I’m the captain, so climb aboard*

*We’ll search for tomorrow on every shore*

*And I’ll try, oh lord, I’ll try to carry on*

“Someone has been going to karaoke behind my back,” she whispers. “You, this, it’s amazing, Rio, thank you. I can’t believe you remembered.”

“I have one more surprise for you,” I tell her. “You ready?”

“I’m ready,” she smiles up at me.

Helping her back down, I instruct the salesman to get lost then take her to the stern. Twirling her around and dipping her, I give her a deep kiss and I tell her how much I love her. Running her fingers along the side of my face she tells me she loves me too. Putting her back to my front, I let it happen on its own.

It doesn’t take long before she cranes her neck and because I know my woman, I was there to hold her up.

I’d never let her fall again.

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# Bet

Rio was a man full of surprises. Two weeks ago while rubbing my feet he asked me how long I planned to work. Would I go back to work after the baby? Had I considered taking a break? He asked because he worried about me taking too much on. This touched me so deep that I knew the idea banging around in my brain was the right one.

“How would you feel if after the baby I didn’t go back to work? I was thinking I’d really like to be hands-on this time. Lennox Holdings is a well-oiled machine and---”

“I want you to stay home,” he blurts. “Let me work, I’ll handle shit. I want my day to begin and end with you two here, safe and waiting for me.”

“Okay.”

“You’d do that for me? Let me be the bread winner?”

“You’d do that for me?” I counter. “For your family? You’d work all those hours just so I could stay home?”

“I do anything for you,” he insists. “I know it ain’t about the money, we got plenty, but working is a part of you and for you to give that up for me---”

“I’d do anything for you,” I insist, repeating his words. “I would have the occasional meeting but we could always ask Rion and Loyal to babysit.”

“Loyal would put our kid in military school,” he says deadpan.

“Oh he would not,” I laugh. It’s funny because Loyal has baby fever and uses our baby to coax Rion into joining the party every chance he gets.

Let me also say she's considering accepting the invitation but he doesn't know yet.

"So we got a plan."

"We do."

"We're gonna rock this shit." He says proudly.

"We'll rock out with your cock out."

"I love your filthy mouth, little Bet."

For a long time the emotion I knew well and even depended on was called grief. My constant companion, my nemesis and my excuse. Never did I think I'd be strong enough to feel anything more than sorrow. Since falling in love, learning to forgive and how to move on, the emotion that never leaves me now is, awe.

I'm in awe of everything.

Life.

Him.

Us.

Even myself.

The night I mentioned a boat to him it sort of slipped out. I hadn't meant to say it but was certainly glad I did because it opened the channel of us getting to know each other. Since that night Rio knows me better than anyone ever has or ever will. He was truly my second chance. My second chance at *everything*.

I will remember him singing to me for as long as I live. I'll call on it when we hit tough times and need the reminder that we were special, rare and everlasting. The way he touches me, holds me and keeps my body at the perfect temperature. Around him it was true, awe was what I felt morning, noon and night.

Right now though, while he leads me to the rear of this magnificent boat, I was in awe of this moment between us. He did this for me, for no other reason than to see me smile. Last night he introduced me to the movie *Elf* and I can say with a huge grin now that, smiling's my favorite.

Because of Rio.

Dipping me back, he kisses me passionately and tells me I'm loved. Returning the endearment, he slowly faces me forward and slides his hands under my arms to rest on my belly. Looking up I take in the beautiful sparkle in the paint knowing it will change color depending on how the light catches it. The boat is a soft cream color with beautiful sails that look like Lake Huron at sunset.

Bringing my eyes back down I see it. It knocks the wind out of me, causes my heart to speed up and my legs to give out all at once. In perfect script was the most beautiful memorial I could have ever imagined. Penned across the back was:

## Independence

"She will always be with you, little Bet. No matter where you go." He says holding me gently. For once the tears didn't consume me, just the feeling of peace did. As always Rio was right, she was with me.

Whispering her name, I nod up to him in agreement. Then turning to face him I decided it was the perfect time to give him my surprise. I had planned to wait until this evening but the scene was perfect, it needed to be now. I wanted this day to be momentous for both of us. Twenty years from now we'd look back on it and smile, together.

"I have a surprise for you, too," I tell him. When his eyes light up, I watch as he brings his hands back to my belly to talk to the baby.

"Hear that, little one? Mom has a surprise for me. I wonder what it could be?" he says sweetly. Then whispering to me so the baby can't hear he asks, "Anal?"

Laughing loud, I squeeze his hands covering me and tell him. "It's not little one, it's little *ones*. Plural."

"My surprise is an English lesson?"

"Your surprise is twins."

For a moment he stays silent but then, like he's miles away, he mumbles, "Gonna need a bigger boat," before his eyes roll back and he crashes to the ground.

"Rio!" I yell coming to my knees next to him. "Wake up," I beg him. Oh God my timing was horrible! I should have waited until we got home

and had the safety of a couch for him to land on. Stupid Bet, stupid. In under a minute his eyes open and he blinks once, reaches up with both hands and gently pulls my body on top of his.

“Twins,” he says with a look I know well. It’s the one on my face these days; it was awe pure and simple.

“Twins,” I confirm with a smile.

“Twins means two,” he says for clarification.

“It does,” I nod.

Pulling my face to his, we kiss again because it’s what people in love do. Helping each other up, he takes a moment to look back at the Independence then to me before taking my hand. Walking out of the warehouse, he quickly sets up the delivery date before escorting me back to the car. The second the double doors close behind us, I’m in his arms again.

“Two kids,” he says kissing my neck.

“I wonder which one will be just like you?”

“It’s a good thing we’re loaded,” he says into my hair.

“Why’s that?” I ask.

“These kids are gonna need a lot of therapy.”

“These kids will have us, Rio,” I tell him proudly. “I’m sure we’ll get a discount for family sessions.”

“Like I could ever convince you to go to therapy,” he smiles at me. Neither of one of us actually need it but, if our kids do one day, we’ll provide it. Looking him in the eyes I tell him the truth as I know it. I’ve known it since the day he barged into my hotel bathroom to save me.

“You could convince me of anything.”

The End.



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## Author Bio

K.S. Adkins is a full time everything. When I'm not wifing, mothering or being bossy, I'm reading, writing or shooting. A full time realtor, lifelong Michigander and all around lover of all things guns and Detroit, I believe in freedom of foul language, gratuitous nudity, tattoos and mosh pits. I've recently taken up drinking wine and feel like I'm really making progress with it. I think my chances at finding a place within the Romance genre is 50/50, but I suck at numbers so what do I know?

My stories are written with heavy dialogue and are Detroit-based. If you don't like heavy dialogue or Detroit, don't read my stories. My characters are typically dark and fairly fucked up so if you want sappy characters without issues, don't read my stories.

I love violence, guns, blood, naughty words, awkward sex, rap, metal, and untraditional people. Every fight scene was tried and tested by me. I have the bruises to prove it too.

I write romance, but my characters are not always romantic. Each is a work in progress. My stories are about strong women and the alphas who try to tame them, but never do.

At the end of the day, you may not like my stories, you may also think I suck as an author and that's okay, but I have to tell you, I had the best fucking time writing them and for me, that's what it's all about.

I love new likes so hit me up on Facebook @ K.S. Adkins or Twitter @ Hoodwrites and let me know if you loved it or hated it. ♥

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