# Prologue

The man lie there for a second, stunned, as he gazed up at the dark sky. He realized that even the stars hadn’t come out to bid him goodbye. Instead, he looked at the pale gray moon and the mocking way that it illuminated his ignorance. It forced him to acknowledge the things that he’d been too blind to see.

He had been a rotten louse of a man, and had only realized that fact when it was too late for him to rectify the problem. The very thing that he’d never given a damn about, now seemed like the most important person that he’d forgotten.

He’d fought hard for his success, never forgetting the trailer park by the lake that in which he’d grown up. He had made many poor decisions, stomped on many backs, and broken many hearts on his way toward the top.

Now, as he lay there dying, he focused on the disreputable life he had led, and all the horrible things he’d done. All of those shameful memories flooded his mind in a matter of moments, and he was overwhelmed with sorrow.

He had two regrets.

Firstly—there was a woman who he should have loved more. Secondly—there was a woman who he should have shot dead when he had the chance.

Now it was too late, and there was nothing he could do about it.

“You should have just done as you were told, instead of trying to force your ignorantly-enhanced brain to muster up some intelligence.” Her voice shot out in the silence of the night.

That damned voice, the voice he now despised, and the very same voice he would love to silence permanently. It was funny how things could change so drastically. He remembered a time when he couldn’t wait to hear her sultry voice. Now, her repulsive voice would be the last thing he would ever hear.

 “Now look at you,” she giggled sadistically, “still pathetic, even in death.”

He looked up to see her smiling smugly, as he began to lose consciousness.

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# Scarlett Sweet and the Raging Blaze

Scarlett Sweet stood in the middle of the blocked off street; her body separated from her mind. Her eyes were filled with smoke, and her bones felt as if they were filled with concrete. Her lungs were filled with the acrid remains of her entire life burning away. Looking up at the thick cloud of smoke, she realized it was a sooty collage of all her burned memories. Everything she’d ever owned was burning before her eyes.

She stood there in silence, her mouth clamped shut. Her heart was constricting as it screamed silently throughout her chest. Her whole body shook, and she felt so discomfited that she feared she would fall.

*Turn away, stop looking! Turn around*! Her mind silently cried.

Yes—that’s what she should do, she should look away. Any second now, her head would turn, and she would look away from the horror.

Any second now.

"This is a dream," she heard her own voice, but she couldn’t feel her lips move. She swore she heard relief in the chuckle that followed. "Just a bad dream, pinch yourself and you'll wake up."

So, she stood there in the middle of the street pinching her arm, while willing herself to wake up. Eyes wide and unblinking, tears made streaks through the soot on her face. She felt the wind shift, and she could no longer smell the smoke, nor could she see the thick ropes of fire. She couldn’t see the firefighters that were busy trying to extinguish the flames.

She saw nothing—heard nothing—felt nothing. She didn’t notice the heavy rain that had come from nowhere; drenching her. Then she felt herself shift and felt her body being carried away with the wind. She would smile if she could feel her face. She would allow herself to be carried away from here, far, far away where it had never existed in the first place.

That was when she heard it. It was a sound coming from her right. It was a voice.

"Scarlett!" Repeatedly the mysterious voice yelled, getting louder as it drew closer.

Scarlett was her name, and she almost recognized it. In the darkness where her mind was hiding, she could hear the voice growing loud enough to crack her eardrums. It was not an unfamiliar voice—more of a voice she remembered from an old dream. Invasive, yet melodic, and all too familiar.

“Scarlett, Scarlett, it’s me!” the familiar voice cried.

She panicked when the dark shadow that appeared to be attached to the familiar voice began to shake her! Scarlett’s fear renewed as she felt her body being pulled back and forth.

"She's in shock!" Now there was an entirely different voice coming from her left side. This was too much for Scarlett! Didn’t they realize that she was floating? She was in a safe, warm place, far away from the destruction and the despair. She didn’t want to be woken up yet; she didn’t want to be pulled down from the cloud that numbed her senses.

"Oh my God!" the first voice cried. "*Help*! Someone help us!"

"We need a doctor! Get over here!" a third voice screamed. The new voice added another jolt to her memory.

Scarlett was trapped between this semi-conscious state, and an abrupt awakening. She feared leaving the tranquil stupor where she felt safe, and couldn’t comprehend that her whole life was burning before her eyes. However, she knew she couldn’t hide forever, and she was beginning to feel her grim reality slipping back to her faltering mind.

She knew those voices; she knew them as well as she knew her own. Two of the voices were Olivia and Astrid’s. They were her best friends, and she had known them her whole life. The other voice was Astrid’s boyfriend, Sid. They were like her family.

She scanned her memory to make sure she was awake and aware.

Olivia was a self-proclaimed shopaholic and a bona fide workaholic. She was notorious for paying top dollar for the hottest couture. She imported her shoes from Italy, and her hair from India. She had her fingernails manicured with diamond dust, and was hands-down the classiest woman Scarlett knew.

Astrid had vivid red hair that she fashioned differently each day. She was full of humor, mixed with an airhead quality that only a genius could achieve. Japanese street fashion was her life, the bolder the better. She had a heart of gold, and was the first to console when trouble arose.

Olivia, Astrid, and Sid watched Scarlett abruptly snap out of it. Her eyes finally focused on them, and for a split second, they thought their voices were registering.

"Scarlett!" Astrid cried, hugging her, but Scarlett pulled back.

Scarlett quickly rescanned the trio that stood before her, covered in soot and forcing their condolences. She remembered them; she remembered every detail of their lives as well as her own.

Scarlett thought about herself for a moment, forcing the memory to come back. She was finally piecing together her own identity.

She was Scarlett Sweet and her friends and family called her Scar. She owned a small restaurant and a two-bedroom apartment above it. Her place was filled with memories that she and her parents had collected over their lives.

Yes, she was Scarlett, and she was standing in the middle of the road in a state of shock, watching her whole world burn to the ground.

Reality hit her like lightning. She turned to see Olivia, Astrid and Sid staring at her. She looked up high and saw the massive fire, then looked down to see the firefighters scurrying to put it out. She saw the crowd of people gathered around, eager to see what had happened. Just when she was sure that she would swoon from the overwhelming and chaotic scene that she was forcing herself to comprehend—she looked back toward Olivia.

"Can I stay with you tonight?" before she fainted.

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Astrid and Olivia watched as Scarlett rose from the bed and walked to the bathroom without making a sound.

“She’s like a zombie.”

“She’s one of the walking around, blank eyed dead,” Astrid added.

“Maybe we should try shaking her again.”

“It didn’t work last time.”

“Maybe some more cold water.”

“That’s just torture at this point. It’s obviously not going to work.”

“I am so worried about her.” Astrid closed her mouth when the bathroom door opened.

Scarlett walked back to the bed and dropped on top of it like a corpse.

“It’s shock. That’s what can happen when you lose your family restaurant, your home, and everything you've ever owned. There’s nothing we can do, we just have to wait it out.”

“I don’t want to wait it out; it’s been almost five days,” Astrid objected, as fresh tears sprung to her eyes.

“She’ll come out of it when she’s ready,” Olivia said with sadness; she was out of her mind with worry.

"I don't think we should wait; she hasn't spoken or moved in three whole days! We should take her back to the emergency room!"

"If she isn't up by tonight, we'll take her."

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Scarlet lie on the comfy bed in her best friend’s guest room. She could hear her friends talking around her, but she couldn’t comprehend their words. Her brain ached as if it had been working overtime, but she had no coherent thoughts. More like empty whispers rushing through her mind. Her brain couldn’t conjure up a clear vision, only a twisted tale made of fragmented memories.

As if her life were playing in reverse, she thought of her mother first.

Her mother had suffered terribly after her father’s death. The woman who had once spread love and joy like fairy dust, had become empty. She grew bitter and withdrew from the world. She became a veritable recluse, and refused to enter the café that she and her husband had built together. For the last year of her life, she didn’t even leave her room.

Scarlett was left running the café and looking after her mother. She had to make sure that her mother ate, and at least got out of her bed once a day.

“You’re keeping me here.” Her mother had told her the night before she died.

“How?” Scarlett asked, as she held the spoonful of soup to her mother’s lips.

“I can’t leave you, you’re my only child.” Her voice was frail and barely above a whisper.

“I’m sorry,” Scarlett answered. Her mother had grown bitter toward her. Scarlett chose to believe that because her mother’s heart was broken so badly, she had forgotten how to love anyone; even herself. She preferred to ignore her nightly rants, even though it hurt and eventually wore her down.

“You should be.” Her mother closed her eyes.

Those were the last words she ever said. The next morning, Scarlett found her dead.

The doctor had said she had a heart attack, but Scarlett knew that she had died of a broken heart. The day that her mother lost the love of her life was the very day that her mother’s life had ended. It was at her funeral that Scarlett vowed to never to let love take hold of her like that. She would never allow her life to be linked to another human being’s. She vowed never to fall victim to the dangerous emotion like her mother had. Love was fine and good if it came with a lifetime warranty, but life was never guaranteed.

She sat by, watched her friends fall in love and felt bad for them. She knew that one day they would be at the mercy of death and love. Love and Loss were a horrible mix—unreliable, unpredictable, and unavoidable. She would remain alone, that was the only way she could prevent the pain of losing another loved one. Besides, she had proven the odds thus far, she had done just fine without love. She was a twenty-four year old virgin who had dedicated her life to her parent’s café. She put her heart and soul into her cooking.

She had made the best of the life she’d been dealt, and was even happy at times. Now she felt the overwhelming grip of emptiness.

"You have to get up, please get up," she heard her own voice, but she didn’t want to get up.

Why would she? What was there for her to get up for? She had lost everything! The fire had swept through the entire building, and anything left was ash. She could feel the tears choking her; her chest was tight, and she found it difficult to breathe. Even her beloved feline hadn’t escaped the blaze.

She sat up abruptly, and took the deepest breath she had taken in a long time. The fresh air burned her clenched lungs.

'Don't think about it!' her mind cried; she had to be strong, or she would sink—she knew that. She had sunk low once before, and she had never been the same; her parent’s deaths still haunted her. That was a horrible time, and she wouldn’t allow herself ever to go there again in her life. She stood up on shaky legs, her heart racing; she put her right foot forward and leaned on it for stability. "If my foot works, then my hand works and my brain has apparently decided to work again." She stood as straight as she could, her chin up a little. "So, I will just have to force the rest to work."

"First things first, I need a job and a place to live," Scarlett said as she entered the living room.

Olivia had dropped the cookie she was eating out of her perfectly manicured fingers. Her half-full mouth was opened wide in shock. Scarlett grinned, seeing the cookie particles fall from her mouth to her expensive dress. Normally, Olivia would have been furious and worried about the cookie leaving a stain.

Astrid ran into the room hearing her voice.

"Oh, thank God!" Astrid said, going in for a hug, but Scarlett put her hands up to stop her.

"No, not yet, I’ll lose it. I need to go look for a job," she said. Scarlett knew that hug would be her undoing; she wasn’t ready for that yet. Right now she needed to be strong and not embrace her pain.

Her best friends knew that she was holding on by a thread, but fighting hard.

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“What do you mean I’m not entitled to the money?” Scarlett asked the snotty woman who worked for her insurance company.

“Miss Sweet, you knew that the stove in the café was faulty. You failed inspection the week before,” the insurance representative said haughtily.

“I told you I made the appointment to fix that stove a week ago, but they’re booked. Every appliance repair center in town is booked! The technician was scheduled to come fix it the morning following the fire.”

“I am sorry, Miss Sweet, but there is nothing that we can do for you.”

“There has to be something you can do.”

“Nothing.”

“So the fact that he was scheduled to come doesn’t make a difference.”

“Not as far as insurance is concerned. However, it’s a good thing that you made that appointment; at least you won’t be littered with fines. You should consider yourself lucky”

“Lucky? Did you just say that I was lucky?” Scarlett was ready to curse the woman out. Instead, she hung up the phone. She would have to figure it out later, she had a migraine and she felt light-headed.

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All three girls stood at the entrance of what was left of the café and the small home upstairs. They were not allowed to go up there, since the fire had made the floor unstable, and nothing had survived. There was one picture in the dining room of the café that had survived, they’d seen it through the smoke-stained window; and nothing in the world would stop Scarlett from retrieving it.

It was the picture of her and both of her parents. It was the picture her mother had used for support, to help heal herself, and after her death, it was all Scarlett had to hold on to. When they walked in Olivia and Astrid gasped, as Scarlett stood dumbfounded. It didn’t look anything like it had looked before; the once festive and upbeat vibrantly colored restaurant now looked like something straight out of a horror movie. It was all she could stand to walk over and grab the picture. She looked down at the lightly burned edges, grateful it wasn’t destroyed and thankful that she’d been careful where she had placed it. She looked back up, feeling the decayed and musty, acrid air filling her lungs.

“I can’t believe that picture survived,” Astrid said in shock. Nothing else had; it was a miracle the picture did. Especially since it was in the kitchen, and the kitchen had the most damage.

“We should go,” Olivia said, feeling the devastation so strongly that she knew Scarlett must be crippled with it. Scarlett nodded then walked toward the new door. The old door was burned away, so the firefighters had erected a makeshift door, made of thick, uneven boards.

Scarlet turned back around to look at the place. For one split second, it was back to normal, back the way it was before the fire. She saw the little girl running through, excited to taste the fresh pot of gumbo that her mother had just finished. She looked to see the mother full of life, in her favorite apron. She then watched as the father walked in with his bowl in his hand; he had been waiting for this gumbo for hours.

Scarlett closed her eyes, burning that image into her brain as she turned around and walked blindly out of the café. She heard the makeshift door slam hard behind her, then opened her eyes and walked to the car. She looked out the window watching the café until it disappeared as they drove far from it.

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# The Lone Driver

Knox was jaded; there was no question about it. He hated what he had become. He was sick of every aspect of his fake life, all of the false friends, and the phony people he’d surrounded himself with. He deplored the girls who secretly hated him for being an arrogant asshole, but adored him because of his celebrity. They took any shit he dished out, because they knew that being seen with him could further their careers.

A man could only take so much, and he was past his breaking point. He was miserable, and hated what he’d become.

He was leaving his life, his career, the shallow relationships, and all that artificial love behind. He was leaving Tinseltown once and for all. Sure, he knew that he should be grateful; he was twenty-nine and in the prime of his career. He was one of the top paid actors, and his last film raked in millions of dollars. It was a ridiculous amount of money, and he was almost ashamed now, especially with the current state of the economy.

How had he become so superficial? People were starving, while he dined on ultra-expensive meals that tasted like shit. The world was going to hell, and he refused to be a part of it any longer.

He packed only his bankcard, a case of his favorite sports drink, and a few essential things that he couldn’t live without. He then jumped in his Hummer and hit the open road, his destination unknown. He would never look back and never regret his decision. He needed something genuine in his life, something that he could believe in. He was searching for something real, and he would keep going until he found it.

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# The Survivors Guide to Starting from Scratch

Scarlett had applied for the cook position at 'Jimmy Jack's Bar-B-Q'. Unfortunately, Jimmy Jack had hired her to fill the waitress position. Although she was thankful, she would have preferred to cook. Just the thought of creating meals was one of the few, faint flickers of hope that she had felt in a while. Cooking was the only thing that relaxed her. However, she wouldn’t complain, at least she had a job and a means to rebuild the life that she had lost.

She was also lucky on finding her new apartment. She was leaving her job interview when she literally stumbled across the ‘For Rent’ sign; stubbing her toe in the process. The woman who owned the house had been showing it to a couple who weren’t interested because of the rough exterior.

She actually liked the house. Its appeal wasn’t instantly visible, but on second look, one could see the character and history that the old house had. She wrote a check for the first month’s rent and security deposit on the spot.

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Knox had been driving for days and was having the time of his life. He was alone for the first time in a long time. His mother used to say that it was important to take a little personal time now and then. He missed his mother; she was the only person he had known that had truly loved him. She was also the only person who had actually loved him before the fame had bombarded his life. Her death was untimely and had devastated him. Even though she had died over a year ago, he remembered that day as if it was yesterday.

His whole life had changed upon hearing the news of her death. It was at that very moment that he began to reevaluate his life. He needed answers and his misdeeds required atonement. He needed to understand why he had not been there when she was sick and why he was not there as she took her last breath. When he was younger, she had been the most important thing in his life.

How had his career been so damn important to him?

He shook his head, trying to expel the torturous thoughts from his mind. He turned the radio up as loud as it would go and rolled the windows down. He began singing as loud as he could and thumping his free hand on the dashboard in beat to the music.

He wouldn’t let the sadness overtake him again, he was finally free. His was in control of his life now, and there would be no more mistakes or guilt. There was no pressure and no demands. He didn’t even care when he dropped nacho cheese on his custom-made, imported, Italian leather seats. A year ago, he would have been enraged.

When did he become so obsessed with the way his car looked? He remembered his appointment to get his interior fixed the day before his mother died. Why couldn’t he have remembered to call her? That question would plague him for the rest of his life.

He was sick of his own standards, his carefully scheduled routine, and his freakish neatness. He used to be messy once, a long time ago. His mother always said a little dirt was necessary for you to appreciate a truly clean mind. Somehow over the years he had forgotten where he’d come from; he had forgotten his mother’s words.

He wanted no reminder of the shallow man he had become. He pulled over at a large dumpster and threw out everything he had brought with him. The duffle bag full of his clothes, the food, the case of sports drinks and his travel sized weight set. He even took the shoes off his feet and threw them in before closing the large dumpster. If he was starting over, he needed to do it the right way. He needed to stop over analyzing everything and just do what felt right to him.

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Despite Olivia and Astrid begging Scarlett to wait another night, she decided to stay at her new apartment. She had to get it over with; so she sat there, alone in her bare, wall-to-wall whitewashed apartment. The night sky cast a gray shadow over the vacant room and magnified the apartment’s emptiness. She wished she had her things, her mother's things from New Orleans. She leaned back against the living room wall, her mind racing with at least three million thoughts at once. There were just so many things that could not be replaced.

She had a migraine by sunrise, but was happy to see the sun. It had been a horrible, sleepless night, one of the longest of her life, and she was thankful that it was finally over.

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When Astrid got the call, it was the perfect excuse to go see Scarlett. They had agreed to give her a little space, since she swore she needed it, but they were her friends and knew what was best for her.

"The diner called, they want you to come in tonight," Astrid said as they were both scoping the place out.

"I think you need to take a little time off before you jump into this job," Olivia said.

"No, I need this job," Scarlett answered.

"Let us take care of you for a month," Astrid pleaded.

"No, I need to do this on my own."

“You don’t have to go through this alone Scar, you have us,” Olivia tried to reason with her.

“We’re your friends, we love you.” Astrid tried not to cry.

“We want to help.” Olivia held Scarlett’s hand.

“I know, and I appreciate your love and support, but I need to do this, for my own sanity,” Scarlett tried to explain.

It was devastating for them to Scarlett like this. She was the strongest girl they knew; she was funny, loving, genuine and real. She never lied, she didn’t start drama, and she gave outstanding advice. She had always proved to be the best friend in a time of need, always there to listen to any problem. Even Scarlett’s appearance had changed drastically. Her normally glowing skin was dull, and the hazel eyes that usually sparked with her emotions now appeared dead. Her long black curls were tied in the same bun she had been wearing since the fire. They were sick with worry and feeling very helpless. Scarlett’s empty apartment was a contrast to the vibrantly colored home she used to live in. Seeing it only made them feel worse.

"Just thirty days; you can relax and look for a better job," Astrid tried to suggest.

"The job is fine," Scarlett told her.

"Fine? You're a master chef Scar, you're not a waitress."

"Well, this job will pay my bills, so that's enough," she said, ending the subject.

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Scarlett was exhausted when she got off from work, but she was glad for it; she needed to sleep to get her mind off things. Since her new apartment was only a block away from her job she walked home. She walked as fast as she could, damn near running. She was shocked when she walked into her apartment and saw her friends there. She looked around her new place, and felt the tears instantly well in her eyes.

The plain wall-to-wall white apartment was no more; they had completely redone it.

"*Surprise*! This is your unofficial housewarming party," said Olivia. Scarlett looked at the housewarming banner hanging from the wall, the glitter filled balloons and the confetti scattered across the floor. She could also smell the food through the air. "Astrid made you a cake."

"Olivia even helped cook the meal." Astrid added.

Scarlett was in shock; Olivia didn’t cook—she ordered, and Astrid didn’t cook—she burned.

"I can't believe this," she cried in excitement as she looked around her living room. She had a couch and a love seat that she recognized, as Olivia's expensive, 'last year's furniture'. She had the matching coffee table, a TV, a few plants, and a small entertainment center.

"I got you another Aloe vera plant." Astrid handed her the small plant. "I know it's not like your mom's but—"

"It's perfect." Scarlett was holding back her tears.

They had gone through her whole house. She had a gorgeous bed and dresser set, towels, dishes, pots, pans, blankets, sheets, and a kitchen table with three chairs. Olivia even went through her extensive and expensive wardrobe and gave her all of her 'last season' clothes.

They drank cheap wine, dined on wings, fries, cake, and ice cream while they talked and laughed until the early morning. Scarlett had plastered on a smile and honestly tried to get into their little celebration, but she was having trouble feeling festive.

Scarlett sat on her bed after everyone had left for the night and looked around her. Her friends were beyond amazing, and she felt terribly guilty, because she couldn’t help but feel strange about all of this. She was proud and had never taken any handouts, even when her mother died. It came naturally; she remembered her mother had refused all financial and emotional help when her father died.

Scarlett felt blank and insignificant. She used to have her own personality, her own style, and her own things. Now everything she owned was someone else's. She would be wearing fancy, expensive clothes that Olivia was infamous for. She felt like a fraud, and she felt foreign in her own skin. She was alive, well and thankful, but she had no idea who she was anymore.

How had she let material objects define her personality?

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The rain was relentless, it had just come out of nowhere, blinding him. His windshield was becoming impossible to see out of. The tires squealed as he almost lost control of his car. He hit the brakes, then found himself in someone's front yard. He also happened to stop his car less than a foot from a woman who stood soaked and glaring at him from under a large, multicolored raincoat.

"Are you out of your mind?" Scarlett yelled, seeing only a black baseball hat with an unusual red symbol through the windshield. This guy was nuts, he almost killed her; but even worse, she was going to be late for work again. She did not need this; she was already on thin ice with Jimmy Jack. She saw the man getting out of the car, and with the mood she was in, she would have loved nothing more than to take an extra minute to cuss him out. Unfortunately, she had to go, so she turned around and walked away quickly before she changed her mind.

"Wait!" Knox yelled, getting out of his car, watching her turn her head around quickly as she continued her fast pace. Her face was still hidden under the huge hood of her rain jacket.

He stepped around to the front of his car to see the damage. He knew damned well that he had hit something, but was still thanking his lucky stars that he hadn’t hit that girl. He looked down to see the evidence—a 'for rent' sign under his front tire. He looked up at the large beat-up house, it reminded him of somewhere, but he wasn’t sure where. It seemed almost eerily gothic in the gray haze of the rain. He looked back down at the 'for rent' sign, and the large black phone number scrawled across the front. He looked back up at the house one more time; there was just something about it.

"If you don't know where you're going, sometimes it's best to stay where you're at," he said under his breath. It would just have to do for now.

"Are you alright dear?" An older woman walked toward him, almost dwarfed by her huge red umbrella.

"I'm alright, thanks; but I wrecked the sign."

"Oh, no problem at all dear as long as no one is hurt. Besides, I shouldn't have put it so close to the street, we're just trying so hard to rent it out."

What was the chance?

"You're renting it?"

"Yes," she smiled.

"Do you have time to show it real quick?"

"Yes I sure do, I have all the time in the world."

It was huge on the inside; the house had been divided into two separate apartments. He would have to share the basement, but at least there was a free washer and dryer down there. The property owner had informed him that his neighbor had just moved in as well, but she was rarely home due to work.

Knox handed the property owner cash, and she handed him the keys in return. He went inside and sat on the empty living room floor wondering what he was doing. This time last week he was living in the lap of luxury; today he was in an empty apartment that he had rented without thought. He had no idea where he was, he didn’t even know the state, but he was living here now.

He was losing his mind.

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Scarlett was furious. As if it wasn’t bad enough that she was running late, or that she had almost been run over by some maniac in a strange hat driving up her front yard. Or that she was soaked to the bone, and her boss was bitching *because* she was late. Or that she was too late to change her soaked clothes, and she had to work in them until they dried or she got off, whichever came first. *Now* she had to wait on the Emerson family, and all of their six, extremely messy and destructive children.

She was having such a horrible night, she just wanted to go home and sleep.

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Knox hated having to hide, but if he wanted peace, he had no choice. Even with a hat and sunglasses, it was possible for him to be recognized. He looked in the bathroom mirror with his kit sitting on the sink before him. He’d been letting his beard grow all month, and it was already thick; it was always the perfect disguise and it drastically altered his appearance. He grabbed the clippers, then proceeded to shave the inky locks from the top of his head. When he finished, he looked up and ran his hand over his new buzz cut. He put dark contacts over his pale, blue eyes before putting his glasses and hat back on to finish the look.

He looked in the mirror with a grin. No one would ever recognize him; he barely recognized himself.

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The Emerson kids had left Scarlett the worse mess she had ever seen. There was a thick layer of chili spread across the entire seating area. There were also crushed biscuits on the seats, the tables, and one stuffed in an overflowing cup of chocolate milk. There was ketchup squirted on the window, and pickles spread across the rug.

Scarlett needed to sleep, she wanted to curl up in a booth and pass out, but she heard Mrs. Klein coming through the door. Mrs. Klein was the little old lady who came at the same time every day, ordered the same meal, and sent it back at least twice because it was not cooked to her liking. She had taken a particular dislike to Scarlett and left her only one penny for a tip every day. Since Mrs. Klein refused to sit in any other section, Scarlett had no choice but to wait on her. The other servers also refused, since the angry old woman had done the same thing to each of them.

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It was a small diner, just a few blocks from his new apartment. Only a few people were inside, and they all looked when he entered. Knox felt a moment of that familiar 'oh shit they recognize me' fear, but to his relief, they went back to what they were doing, so he found a booth and sat down.

"What can I get for you tonight, sir." The server came out of nowhere and Knox looked up to see her. She wore black-rimmed glasses not too much unlike the ones he wore. Her dark hair was pulled back tightly, and she wore a huge uniform that concealed her shape. She was also beautiful; absolutely stunning. She had warm hazel eyes, rimmed with thick, dark lashes. Her lush, bee-stung lips were begging him to kiss them.

"What do you recommend?" he asked, his deep, velvety voice forcing her to look away from the menu pad she held and straight into his eyes.

The fake smile she had plastered on her face all night immediately vanished when she saw the strange, black baseball hat. She looked out the window, to see the vehicle that had almost squashed her earlier.

"You!" She pointed an accusing finger at him, almost directly aligned with his aquiline nose

"Me?" He stared back at her, a bemused look on his face.

"It was you, you almost ran me over with your car!" Her eyes snapped with fury behind her glasses.

"That was you?" He would never have recognized her; she had been hidden beneath that god-awful raincoat. "I'm sorry, I was—" he started before she cut him off.

"Sorry? I'm still damp from that puddle wave your tires splashed at me!" She’d been uncomfortable all damned night, her shoes still squished with each step.

"The rain blinded me, I couldn't see anything. I thought that was it for me, too," he smiled awkwardly, "I'm really sorry. Let me make it up to you, let me buy you dinner."

Scarlett looked at him, ready to curse him out. She was still pissed and still damp, but he was nice. He was also darned cute, and she could tell that he was sincere. She had a lot on her mind right now, and she had no reason to take it out on someone who was obviously not having much better luck than herself. It was an accident.

"No, but I accept your apology." She smiled a little. She looked over to see if the ever-present Jimmy was watching. Jimmy Jack was not paying the least bit of attention, so she leaned down to the man in the hat with a grin, "The chili is the only thing fresh in this diner, *if* you consider leftovers from the night before, reheated for nine hours; to be fresh."

“What about a basic cheeseburger?”

“Bad beef; a customer was sick earlier.” She shook her head in disgust as she remembered the vomiting woman.

"The chili and a coffee, then," Knox grinned winsomely.

"Be right up," she said and was gone.

Scarlet was beyond exhausted, and she could barely keep her eyes open. She put the chili in the bowl, missing the sign that said the chili was cold. She filled the soda he didn’t order, forgot about his coffee, grabbed the cold chili and headed back toward the table.

She went to set the chili down, but it slipped out of her hand and spilled all over his chest. He jumped up and she gasped, as she threw the glass of soda at him, hoping it would cool the hot chili running down his chest. She quickly grabbed a handful of napkins to dry him off.

"I'm sorry," she whispered as she began wiping off his chest.

Her innocent actions of trying to dry him off were stimulating him. She smelled of vanilla and fresh flowers. He leaned in to smell her hair, and his cock immediately hardened.

Well, Jimmy Jack had seen it all and was actually glad; he was ready to fire the girl. He didn’t care for Scarlett; she was too opinionated. Who was she to make suggestions on his chili? He was Jimmy Jack; he was the master of chili and Bar-B-Q. This was Scarlett’s third spill today; he told her if she had one more spill or if she was tardy once more, she was fired.

"Are you alright?" Jimmy rushed over, fussing over his customer. He then turned and glared at Scarlett. “I told you one more spill, and you’re fired. Get your things and go."

Now, Scarlett was never one to lie, but for some unknown reason she couldn’t stop herself. She needed this job, regardless of how much she hated it. She was desperate.

"It was him, he spilled it!" she lied, instantly feeling guilty and a little ashamed by her obvious desperation.

"Me?" Knox looked at her in bafflement. "You came out of nowhere, attacking me with chili!"

"You attacked him? Oh sir, I'm so sorry! Are you burned?"

"It was a joke, besides the chili wasn't even hot." Knox tried to help her, but watched as Jimmy turned back to her and frowned.

"Not hot? Jimmy Jack is famous for his chili, freshly prepared, fresh from the stove chili. Jimmy Jack does not sell cold chili! The sign says hot chili! *Hot*!" He pointed to the little neon sign in the window that read 'Hot Chili'.

Normally she was not such a bitch, but today had just been a lousy day. Hell, the whole month had been crappy, and her bad nerves had finally caught up with her.

"No, Jimmy Jack is known for extreme bouts of diarrhea, bouts of severe reflux and the complete breakdown of the bowels!" Then she looked at him condescendingly. “And I know you got your famous recipe from Stack Jack’s Barbeque, I saw the old cut-out in your office.”

Stack Jack was Jimmy Jack’s only competition, and they hated each other.

"Why you little—" Jimmy fumed as she turned and walked away. "Where are you going? That suit belongs to me."

"I'll send it to you," she snapped.

"You didn't have to fire her, it was an honest mistake," Knox said, still smiling to himself. The girl had spunk.

"No, that girl is the worst waitress I've ever had! She is difficult, destructive and a horrible cook!” Jimmy wailed.

Knox turned away from Jimmy as he continued to talk. He left the restaurant and went straight after her.

"Hey, hold on," Knox yelled to Scarlett.

"Go away!" she snapped.

"Look, I'm sorry," he said, not sure why he was apologizing. He could see that the woman was stressed, and he knew that his little 'run-in' with her had probably not helped.

"No you’re not, why should you be, you don’t even know me. You don't care, it's not *your* job," she spat out, not sure why she was yelling at him. She was just so frustrated, and he had contributed to her troubles.

"You just threw me off when you blamed it on me," he grinned.

"You think I like lying just to keep a shitty job that I don't like? No, I don't!" she spat irrationally.

"If you hate it so much, why still work there?" he asked.

"Because I need a job."

"You need to be happy," his words stopped her in her tracks and she turned to face him,

"I don't have time for happiness, I have bills to pay," she snapped.

"Here. Take this." He pulled out a fifty-dollar note out of his pocket and handed it to her.

She snatched it, balled it up, and threw it at his chest. Then she started walking away, very fast. He shouldn’t feel bad, it wasn’t his problem. He tried to help, but she didn’t want it. He watched her storm off, walking hard, those lush hips swaying back and forth with each angry step. He took a deep breath before walking back to his vehicle. He would just have to pick up some burgers from the barbeque down the street, and then go back to his apartment to ice his erection.

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Scarlett put on her headphones and turned the music up as loud as it would go. She was dancing around the house, wearing only her lemon-colored tank top and matching shorts. It was laundry day, and since her wardrobe was sparse, she had to wash every item of clothing that she owned including the clothes on her back. Olivia had given her a lot of dresses and skirts, but only a few pairs of jeans. Scarlett rarely wore dresses; she had always spent the majority of her time working, so casual clothes made more sense.

She carried her laundry basket down to the basement. The basement was the only thing that she didn’t like about the place. It was creepy and dark, even with the lamp lit. It looked like a room taken straight out of hell. From the thick cobwebs in the corners, to the crumbled stone walls, it could have easily passed for the set of a horror film. She rushed down to put the laundry in, working as fast as she could so she could get out of the basement.

When she was finished, Scarlett ran back up the steps to the door leading to her apartment and froze; it was locked. She cursed at herself, wishing she had paid a little more attention. She knew that the lock was tricky; the property owner had told her at least three times to be careful not to get locked in the basement.

Well she wasn’t standing around to wait for anyone. She ran up the other set of stairs leading to the only other way out of the basement—the vacant apartment next door. She prayed it was unlocked and did a little cheer when it opened. Being locked down there for God knows how long wasn’t something she was prepared for.

The apartment across the hall had exactly the same layout as hers, just opposite. She quickly walked to the door and tried to open it, but it was locked.

"Shit!" she hissed.

"Hey!" she heard a man's voice.

Scarlett froze for a second, then tried desperately to unlock the door as she heard the footsteps getting closer. As her luck would have it, the damned door wouldn’t budge.

"Look, I'm sorry, I locked—" she began to explain, but froze when she saw the man standing across from her. "You!" she exclaimed, surprised to see the man with the deadly vehicle, standing in the vacant apartment.

"No, actually my name is not 'you'." He smiled that devastatingly handsome smile.

"What are you doing here?" she blurted.

"I rent this apartment. The question is, what are you doing in my apartment?" he held his grin.

"I got locked in the basement." She took a step back, and bumped the door with her butt; he was way too close for her comfort. That kind of sex appeal was just too much for a twenty-three year old virgin.

Knox felt it too, the heat radiating from her body, the familiar flush of her dewy skin. Her body was amazing! The tank top and shorts revealed her curves. He was a sucker for curvy women, he always had been. He knew he could get lost in the curve of her hips, her full upthrust breasts, that tiny waist, and that lush behind.

*Damn*! He wanted her.

"When did you start renting?" she asked suspiciously.

"The day that I almost crashed into you." He took a step closer, but she was as far back as she could go.

That was when she looked down, realizing that he was only in his boxers. His massive chest was bare, and she was tempted to run her hand across the sinewy muscles. His skin was dusted with dark hair that trailed down to his waistband. She turned around quickly, fumbling with the lock—she had to get the hell out of his apartment.

"Here, let me help, it’s tricky," he said, reaching across her. He was excessively close; she could almost feel him touching her. That quarter-inch gap between them had enough heat to catch both their shorts on fire. She breathed a sigh of relief when he finally unlocked the door.

"Thanks," she said quickly, before she opened the door, forcing her body back against his. She could feel him hard against her.

Out of instinct, he gripped her hips to balance her; he squeezed her skin tighter, loving the feel of her body. She could feel the heat from his hands penetrate to her bones, and she shivered before she slipped out of the door. She sprinted through the small hall separating their apartments and locked her door once she was safely inside. She leaned back against the door, panting, her skin still tingling where his hands had been. She released the deep breath that she wasn’t aware she’d been holding, promising herself that his moving in next door would have no effect on her.

'What are you worried about? You don't even know his name”' she chided herself.

Knox shut his door, staring at it with a grin. He was glad he crashed into the yard. He was beginning to like it here.

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# Rebuilding and Breaking Down

‘Academy Award Winner—Knox Stone Missing'

The word blazed across every newspaper and magazine across the United States of America. It was also the top story on every news channel as well as the Internet.

It was already being called the scandal of the century. The mysterious, 'without a trace' disappearance of one of the world’s highest ranked celebrities, had the paparazzi in an uproar. There were rewards for sightings, pictures, or any source of information, no matter how mundane, surrounding Knox’s disappearance.

There were hundreds of '1-800-SEEN-Knox?' toll free numbers. The public was more than willing to go along with the ‛I just saw Knox’ game. Consequently, there had been sightings of him all over the world, from France to Japan, and in every borough of New York City. The rumors were the worst, everyone from the daydreamers, to the conspiracy theorists, were eager to voice their opinions and the inaccurate fabrications were spreading out of control.

There were thousands of different theories and scenarios that ranged from Knox being executed by a mafia related hit man, to Knox running naked through the mountains while under the influence of narcotics. There was even a rumor that he had sold his soul to the devil for anonymity, and was now traveling with a murderous, brainwashing cult. However, some of his more dedicated fans believed he was on a spiritual journey or a religious calling, while others suspected that it was just plain old-fashioned murder.

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Lola Lane stood in front of the paparazzi, forcing her joy and her gleeful smile of satisfaction to remain hidden behind her mask of sorrow. There were at least a hundred journalists surrounding her like hungry wolves, desperate to hear her story. The six-foot honey-blond was getting high off the flashing camera bulbs, and was close to an orgasmic climax with all the attention the media were giving her.

She lifted the softball-sized wad of tissue in her hand up to her eye. She had a tiny vial of fake tears hidden deep inside the tissue for when her eyes dried out. With precise moves, no one would ever know what she wasn’t actually crying.

"We were going to get married," she sobbed, before taking a deep breath to steady her voice. "That's why I’m offering a one million dollar reward for his safe return home to me, his loving fiancée." She looked as sad as she could, but still managed to bat her eyes flirtatiously toward the camera. "I miss him so terribly." She stopped to cry dramatically, putting her limited acting skills to the test.

In all honesty, she was having the time of her life now that her ex-boyfriend Knox was gone. Truth was, his sudden and mysterious disappearance was working to her advantage on many different levels. She was able to do the things that Knox would never allow. Without him around, she had unlimited use of his mansions, access to one of his bank accounts, and all the press she could ask for.

The publicity was the best part. She was a narcissistic attention junkie; so naturally, she was working the press for all it was worth. She was going to get every second of her renewed fifteen minutes of fame.

Lola finally had the advantage that she needed to reobtain her stardom. She was the last person to have seen Knox alive, which gave her the upper hand. Any information regarding the last days of Knox Stone was the golden ticket to instant fame. Her personal knowledge was more valuable than gold, and she would milk it for all that it was worth. She needed as much camera time as she could get, and decided to start giving daily updates to his possible whereabouts.

The media jumped on any lie she told them, and she was handing out lies as fast as she handed out her business card. She was even planting rumors about a possible pregnancy, which was actually a possible reality. She was the star again, and she was thriving, secretly praying that Knox never came back. She’d slipped enough poison in his case of sports drink to kill several cows, but Knox was resilient.

Lola knew Knox well enough to know that he needed some time to himself. He was a hothead with a low tolerance for the politics of fame. If for some reason he didn’t drink the poisoned drinks, he would be back in a few months. She also knew where he was going, one of the few places he always went when he got like this. He would lock himself away in a remote area with no human contact. Fortunately for her, he never watched television, and she was willing to bet that there wouldn’t be a TV where he was going. This meant that it would take an exceedingly long time before he knew he was listed as a missing person. Even then, she had a plan; she would act as if she had been truly worried about him. She would claim that she was afraid he’d done something bad or had hurt himself.

Nevertheless, *if* he did return, it would be under her rules. She was pregnant, and she would demand everything that she wanted from him. She wouldn’t take no for an answer. She knew that this child gave her the upper hand with Knox. Although the child growing inside of her wasn’t Knox’s, she would make him believe that it was.

If Knox was not dead, she knew that he would come back; she wasn’t buying the whole ‘fuck fame, fuck fortune’ rant he gave before he left. He was angry, but he would eventually cool off. Although she hoped that Knox would find the other life that he wanted so badly, she also hoped that the poison would do its job. She would be more than happy to fill his shoes in the limelight, spend all of his money and own his homes. She would become the queen of Hollywood, and find another piece of celebrity arm candy to replace Knox.

Yes, right now Lola was on cloud nine; loving life, and enjoying the fact that her ex-boyfriend was missing.

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Knox was trying to avoid any reminder of his previous life, but it was becoming impossible. All he wanted to do was forget, but the news of his disappearance, as well as his pictures, were plastered everywhere he looked. With all the chaos going on in the world today, he couldn’t understand why his story was the main focus. Who cared where he went or what he did? He was embarrassed by the overwhelming interest in his life; he was only a man, the same as any other man out there. He just wanted a normal life, he wanted to be plain old Jake White, the 'happy to be unknown' man from down the street. He needed to be a man that no one paid attention to, a man that never received a second look. He strived for insignificance and seclusion.

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Scarlett spent the next few days searching for a job, and desperately trying to avoid her new neighbor. Although, at this point, she had been unsuccessful in both areas.

She had applied to every fast food joint, restaurant and grocery store in town, as well as a slew of assorted odd jobs, but she was still unemployed. Her anxieties were rising, and her stress level was reaching its peak. Everything seemed to be catching up to her, and she was fighting hard to keep her mounting anxieties restrained. She was desperately trying to keep herself rational and was trying to be as optimistic as she could be. Despite her calm appearance, she felt like running to the middle of a deep forest and screaming until her head exploded! She wanted to slam her fists against the trees, and stomp the ground until it cracked! However, that display of emotion was a weakness that she refused to engage in. Instead, she walked around like a zombie, trying to keep her scattered mind clear, and her sleep-deprived body moving.

Then, as if her employment situation wasn’t serious enough, she failed to stay clear of her nuisance of a neighbor. She’d almost collided with the bad-luck hunk at the mailbox, when he did the one thing that would only intensify her aggravation—he smiled at her. That deliberately enticing smile made her want to forget all of her rules, her morals, and all of her deeply embedded superstitions. She fought the overwhelming urge to drag him into her apartment and learn firsthand about the birds and the bees. Instead, she kept her head down, trying not to look at him, as she reluctantly grumbled good morning before stalking back to her apartment. She refused to take any unnecessary chances. Sure, he seemed genuinely apologetic, but the man was a walking liability. She feared that if she even looked at him for too long, a catastrophe could possibly befall her.

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Astrid and Olivia were seriously worried; they tried not to let Scarlett out of their sight for too long. It was just a matter of time before that carefully crafted control Scarlett had over her emotions slipped, and they were waiting for it. They wanted to make sure that they were there for her when it happened.

They had a new plan to shock Scarlett into letting go of the emotion that was paralyzing her. Astrid had read in some magazine that retelling horrific details could possibly make her snap, talk about the tragedies, and get it off her conscience. They loved her and even though they hated doing it, they were willing to hurt her, if it meant that it would help her. With all their good intentions, they didn’t realize the added pressure they were putting on Scarlett.

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Scarlett had finally fallen asleep, when her sleep was disturbed. She abruptly sat up, her body immediately reacting to the high-pitched fire alarm echoing through her apartment. She felt the familiar fear creeping up her back, freezing her bones and paralyzing her soul. She couldn’t move, her body was shaking, and she instantly began to sweat. Try as she might, she couldn’t make her legs move from the bed, and then she smelled the smoke. The smell was overwhelming her, and the large dark room began to shrink around her. She felt her lungs begin to constrict her breathing, and the rapid beat of her heart mixed with the shrieking alarm, pounded viciously in her ears.

Everything rushed back to her at once—her place, her parents, her cat, her burning restaurant, and her home. Without another thought, she dove from her bed and sprinted to the front door. She then ran straight outside, almost colliding with her neighbor. He was waving his front door, trying to fan the smoke out of his apartment.

“Hurry we have to go, there’s a fire!” she squeaked.

“No, there’s no fire, it was me,” Jake answered her.

“It was you?”

“Yes.”

"You, you—" she pointed an angry finger at him, unable to finish her sentence.

Great! This was just what he needed, another reason for this woman to hate him. He had actually planned to invite her out to lunch and apologize for the series of unlucky events she seemed to experience around him. It made perfect sense for him to befriend her, she was his neighbor, and the escalating arguments were creating an unstable living environment for both of them.

He knew that she detested him and was going out of her way to avoid him. He had tried to talk to her when he saw her at the mailboxes, but she looked at him as if he were the local serial killer smiling at his next victim, before she bolted off. Jake was not used to the opposite sex reacting to him like that; he had never experienced any form of bad luck when it came to women. He’d never had to prove his worth to a female before, and he found that task daunting, albeit irresistible.

Unfortunately, as his luck would have it, he had done nothing but add fuel to their already hazardous relationship. Now she’d caught him red-handed with a smoke-filled apartment. He had only ensured that her negative opinion of him would never falter.

"It's out—"

"You did this?" Scarlett almost growled.

"Yes, I—"

"You’re out to get me, aren't you?" She was serious, but her eyes were slightly wild, like a deer in headlights look.

"It was one of those oven dinners—"

"You’re the devil—," Scarlett said accusingly, delirious from the panic attack that was about to overtake her.

"No—“

"The grim fucking reaper." She took a step back, trying to breathe air into her deprived lungs, the room was getting dimmer and she felt her head start to sway.

"No, I—" he took a step toward her.

"No, you stay back," she put her hands up too ward him off, "bad things happen when you’re near." The room began to spin around her, and she could feel the thick smoke clinging to her lungs; she was going to pass out. He saw it and was ready to catch her if she went down, but she was trying to back away and had unknowingly backed herself against the wall.

"Calm down." He grabbed her, preventing her from sliding down the wall. “Take a deep breath.”

"Are you trying to kill me?" she cried irrationally, leaning against the wall for support while trying to pull away from him.

"I fell asleep with it in the oven—"

"Fell asleep?" She stood up straight, not believing her ears. "*Asleep*?" she roared stepping closer, becoming more alert with the knowledge that her life may be in the hands of a knucklehead who falls asleep with food in the oven. "You don't close your eyes with the oven on!"

"I know, I—"

"Do you not know the seriousness of fire? What it can do? Did no one teach you about fire safety?" She was yelling hysterically, thinking of her life just burning away again. Sure, she wasn’t happy with her new life, it was taking a lot of getting used to, and she still wasn’t comfortable in her own skin, but it was hers. Just like the cherished items of her previous life, all of the physical mementos that had been reduced to a thick layer of soot clinging to the city street; the memories still belonged to her, and they were all that she had. Mentally, she couldn’t handle starting over again, and there was no way that she could face another fire. She would do anything to prevent that from happening to her again.

"Look—"

"No, you look. I have enough bad luck of my own, and I don't need yours on top of it. Every time you’re near me something terrible happens, you’re a hazard to my wellbeing," she pointed her finger at him again, "you’re jinxed, you stay the hell away, you’re a walking liability!" She backed away toward the front door.

"I'm sorry" he said.

"Yeah? Well you can be sorry—from far, far away!" She backed out of the front door. "*And use the damned microwave*!" she yelled with a glare, and then slammed the door as she went outside.

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Knox couldn’t sleep, he was rock hard, his lungs were still filled with smoke, and he couldn’t get his neighbor’s reaction out of his head.

Even though she had cussed him out and thought he was the devil, she was still one of the most unusual creatures he had ever encountered. He wondered if she had that much passion when it came to sex. She was like a hot-tempered, little hellcat, with killer curves, and a body that had to have been made from pure sin, to provoke such a lust from him.

She was teasing him, tempting him, hating him, and fearing him. He wasn’t sure if he wanted to put her across his knee for talking to him like that, or kiss those perfect, full lips until she calmed down. On the other hand, maybe he should find out what was really at the bottom of her fear. He felt guilty for scaring her so badly, he knew by her reaction that some way or somehow she had a bad brush with fire; it was all over her face.

He needed to think, and his smoky apartment was too stifling to do so. He grabbed a beer, went out back, and sprawled across one of the lawn chairs on their adjoining porch. How did he expect to sleep tonight with that curvy little minx hating him from across the hall? It was just too much; he was seriously attracted to someone who was afraid to be near him. He hadn’t had an attraction for a woman like this since he was a teenager, and even then, it wasn’t this strong.

Sex had become a routine, just something that his body constantly demanded, with no more emotion than eating food when hungry, or sleeping when tired. He had tried for years to feel something—*anything*. He had experimented with many different, willing women. He had spent insane amounts of money for new material objects, just trying to spark something in him, some type of feeling or emotion, anything that chipped at his stony numbness. Nothing had worked.

He had stopped looking for love a long time ago, convinced it didn’t exist. Now, here he was, far from the life he once knew, and he was beginning to reconsider his beliefs on love.

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It was 3:00 a.m. in the morning and Scarlett still couldn’t get back to sleep. The long walk she took hadn’t even helped, that false alarm had freaked her out more than she realized. When she finally got home and tried to lie down, she just kept getting up to check the stove and sniff the air for smoke. Her body felt electrically wired, her adrenaline still pumped, and the lingering smoke made her remember the images she had been trying to block from her mind.

She told herself that she despised the man across the hall for his hazardous ways. So why was the mere thought of him making her tingle from head to toe?

It was insanity! What foolhearted idiot was attracted to a constant source of bad luck? Had she become a glutton for punishment? Did she not have enough rotten luck already? What the hell was wrong with her?

The man was jinxed! He had a hex on his back!

Or was she the one that was jinxed?

She went to her closet and stripped naked, throwing on the only bathing suit she owned, a shimmery gold, micro mini string bikini Olivia had picked out for her. Before, she would have never worn something so revealing, but now she didn’t care how skimpy it was. She immediately needed to evacuate from her confining apartment before she physically imploded. She needed tons of fresh air, no walls, and a vigorous swim to help her tame her raging emotions.

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When the pool lights came on, Knox looked up from his comfortable position on the back porch and saw the outline of her figure going down the steps. As she walked closer to the lights, he clearly saw her lush behind before she dove into the pool. He watched her silently; she was swimming as if the devil was chasing her. She was obviously trying to clear her mind.

He had no idea what possessed him to walk down by the pool, but he couldn’t stop himself, he was drawn to her. He stood close to the edge, looking down; he could watch her swim all day. Her body was magnificent, her movements so precise, so smooth and yet so angry, he could almost feel her frustration.

She stopped when she saw him, swimming slowly to the ladder, her cautious eyes never leaving his.

He watched her climb out of the pool. He did a silent appreciation for being able to secretly adore that luscious body in that barely there bikini. He held the groan forming in the back of his throat.

She looked like a distressed, earthbound goddess. The moonlight bounced off curves, and the long raven locks falling wildly around her. The scandalous light-gold bikini made her appear nude in the pale light. Her heavy round breasts stood proud and perky, jutting toward him, and he would do anything to pull aside the small triangles that were covering her nipples.

"Are you OK?" he asked, seeing that the thick emotion she was holding back was ready to escape.

"Yeah, I'm alright," Scarlett lied, her eyes locking with his. His eyes seemed so sincere and so full of comfort, that she was caught off guard. Before she was even aware of what she was doing, she was yelling. "No! I am not OK!” she exploded. “I lost everything I have ever owned in my entire life in a fire because of a stupid, fucking faulty stove! I lost my cafe, the best cat in the *entire* world, and *all* of my memories! Now I have to work shitty jobs with shittier pay, if I could keep a job, *which I can’t*! I owe rent, and I hate my bare, boring, all-white, hand-me-down apartment! My friends, who I love dearly, are smothering me, and begging me to talk about something I don't even want to think about, let alone discuss!" she ranted, stepping toward him. "I can't cook anymore, I'm starving but I can't eat, I'm exhausted, but I can't sleep. I have a new neighbor who I think is secretly trying to kill me," she said, stepping even little closer to him. "And now I'm out here telling him all the crazy drama of my life at three o'clock in the morning." She shook her head, realizing what she had just done.

"A stranger who has added to your stress, and who is now intruding on your private time," he said apologetically. She looked at him, she almost felt bad. She couldn’t blame him for her misfortune.

"You’re not intruding," she took a tiny step closer; "it's your pool too." He stayed still, afraid to take a step toward her and freak her out. "I'm sorry for dumping all my problems on you." She bit her bottom lip, standing so close.

He wanted to kiss her so badly.

"Don't be, it sounded as if you needed to get it out."

"I guess," she whispered, feeling herself sway toward him, "I'm sorry I called you the devil." She was so close, her nipples almost touched him, and he was so tempted to run his fingers over them. He couldn’t help himself; he leaned down slowly, his lips touching hers ever so lightly.

The moment they made contact, it sent a jolt straight through her body, crashing so hard it brought her back to reality, and she abruptly pulled away from him.

"I’d better go," she gasped nervously, then turned around and walked to her back door. She shut it hard and then locked it faster.

What was wrong with her? She saw firsthand what love did in the end, she watched her mother commit a slow suicide after her father’s death. She had lost too much already; she didn’t want someone else to love, to just eventually lose them. Everyone she truly, deeply loved had left, and she refused to feel the sharp pains of love again!

What she needed to do was find a job and move out of this building. Being around that particular man was unwise and unhealthy on so many different levels. He was too handsome, too nice, too tempting and too dangerous—she couldn’t be anywhere near him. He made her forget her defenses and lose herself in an emotion that she couldn’t handle.

Scarlett ran straight to her room and jumped under the covers. If she couldn’t have him in real life, then she would have him in her fantasy. She slid her hand down to the intense tingling between her legs.

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He watched her walk up the steps, and all he wanted to do was yell for her to come back. He knew something was wrong, but he had no idea how serious her situation actually was. He admired her strength; she was a survivor who was still trying to survive. All she wanted was for everything to be normal and simple again, he could certainly relate. He wanted her more now than even he could comprehend, he wanted to help her, but he knew her pride wouldn’t allow a handout. He had way too much money not to be able to help this beautiful girl out of a bad situation.

He had to think of a way to do it and not insult her; he needed a solid plan.

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Knox had spent the night analyzing the situation and thinking about what his neighbor had said to him. He didn’t even know her name yet, but he wanted to help her more than he wanted to do anything else.

He looked through the real estate advertisements and found a restaurant for sale. He called the company the moment they opened and arranged to meet them. He met up with the real estate agent, and after taking one look at the place, he handed her cash.

He went home and rehearsed the speech he wanted to give to his neighbor. Him, Knox Stone, the super actor, had to rehearse his apology to a female. It was incomprehensible, and no one would ever believe it.

After an hour of coming up with what he believed to be the perfect speech, he found himself standing in front of her door—his mind suddenly blank. He was ready to turn around and go back to his apartment when she opened the door.

He couldn’t stop the smile on his face. Even with the frown on hers, she was beautiful. She was wearing a cream-colored robe with bright, scarlet-colored blossoms printed on the silk. The robe stopped midthigh and gave him a lovely view of her smooth legs. They weren’t muscular, but he could tell that she was on her feet a lot. He had never been fascinated with calves and feet before, but looking at hers was stimulating him beyond measure.

With no recollection of his perfect speech, he opened his mouth to wing it.

"I'm sorry for almost running you over, helping you get fired, moving next door to you, smoking you out of your apartment, and trying to kiss you," he blurted out before she told him to get lost. He handed her a sad looking little daisy from the yard. Scarlett smiled ear to ear as she took the little flower.

"And I'm sorry for spilling chili on you, dumping soda on you, yelling at you, accusing you of planning my murder, calling you the devil, being friends with the grim reaper, and for cursing you with a foul case of smallpox."

"You never cursed me with smallpox," his grin started to spread.

"Oops," she smiled.

"At least the chili was cold," he grinned, then in a voice that sounded exactly like Jimmy Jack’s he mimicked him, "Jimmy Jack does not serve cold chili!" They both laughed hard, and continued teasing the crotchety, self-proclaimed chili-king for the next few minutes.

Scarlett had not laughed in a long time, and it felt good. It was as if more weight were being lifted from her shoulders and freeing her sinking soul.

Olivia threw open the front door and sashayed inside with a smile on her face. She stopped dead in her tracks with a dramatic look of shock. She hadn’t seen Scarlett laugh since the fire; this was a good sign!

Who was this new neighbor?

"Just in time for the party!" Olivia said to Knox, smiling happily as her perfectly even, $15,000 teeth glowed. "I brought Asian food," she held up two large bags.

"And I got the champagne." Astrid came in the door behind her, holding up a bag of assorted flavors of champagne. Knox and Scarlett smiled at Astrid before he turned back to her.

"Well, have a good night." He took Scarlett’s hand and kissed it lightly. He was ready to slip back into his apartment when Olivia stopped him.

"Where are you going? You can’t leave; you have to help us eat all of this food." Olivia handed him a bag of food, which he promptly took.

"As usual, she bought too much," Astrid added.

"I can never decide what I want, and we all know how picky she can be” she shrugged, and then looked toward Scarlett.

“So, you must help us eat.” Astrid grinned, willing to do anything to keep this guy around. No one could make Scarlett smile like that.

"Actually, I was just going to throw in another one of those oven dinners," Knox said.

"*No*!" Scarlett objected. "Didn’t you do enough damage with those dinners last night, Mr. Oven-Master." Scarlett grinned, and he smiled happily, obviously enchanted.

Olivia was damned near shaking with excitement, even though she and Astrid stayed silent, watching the exchange between the two. Scarlett hadn’t used sarcasm since the fire; this was too good to pass up.

"No arguments, you’re coming with us." Olivia grabbed his arm and led him into Scarlett's apartment.

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"So what’s your name?" Scarlett asked, sitting close to him on her couch, drinking her second glass of champagne.

He looked deep into her eyes and frowned a little. After all this, they still didn't know each other’s names; he pushed an errant curl, that had escaped from her ponytail, behind her ear.

He’d left his life because he felt that everything in his life was a lie, an elaborate hoax, and he wanted to start over. He wanted honesty and true, meaningful relationships, with absolutely no lies. He certainly didn’t want to start their new friendship with a lie. For some strange reason, she was the last person he ever wanted to lie to. However, if he told her his real name, she might derive a conclusion; her friends had already commented more than once how familiar he looked. He knew how that usually ended.

"Jake." Knox lied, feeling guilty again.

"Jake," she repeated the name, it felt wrong on her tongue, "it doesn't fit."

"What’s your name?" He changed the subject, secretly liking that she could sense the truth about him.

"Scarlett." She looked at his dark eyes, wondering if he was wearing contacts.

"Scarlett," he rolled the word on his tongue, loving it, "it fits."

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"It's late, I’d better go," Knox said standing up. "Besides, I can't remember if I put that dinner in the oven or not." He grinned, and Scarlett busted out laughing, following him to her door.

"Here—" Scarlett passed him her seventh glass of champagne. When he raised a brow she said, "for later," her little giggle tickled him to his very soul and he deepened his smile, "and just in case your oven is smoking, you can dump this on it." She hiccupped. He was smiling so hard the corners of his mouth ached; he took the glass, brushing his hand across hers.

Who was this girl?

"Thank you." His voice was low and husky as he dipped his head and kissed her cheek. She took a deep breath and held it, that simple, innocent kiss did disturbing things to Scarlett's virginal body. Her panties were getting damp, her mouth was slightly parted, her head beginning to spin again. He turned and walked away before he slid his tongue between her parted lips.

Olivia and Astrid were trying to be quiet enough that the two at the door completely forgot they were there. At one point, they held their breath as he went in for the kiss, delighted but disappointed it was on the cheek. Olivia was hoping he would just grab Scarlett and lay one on her.

Scarlett shut the door looking at it for a second, and then walked over to the couch, plopping down between them.

"He seems nice," Astrid said sitting to her left, watching Scarlett intently as she moved closer.

"Real nice," Olivia said from her right.

"Yeah." Scarlett thought about that kiss on her cheek. She was shocked that something so innocent could take her to another whole level. She let a little sigh escape.

"And cute," Astrid tested her.

"Very cute," Olivia added, both girls studying Scarlett’s reaction.

"Yeah," she whispered, with the dreamiest look on her face that made both her friends smile. Olivia knew better than to push things with Scarlett, she was a stubborn one. Olivia had to play it cool and not mention the hunk across the hall again before Scarlett suspected what they were about.

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Scarlett was convinced that she was losing her mind. She had already masturbated twice, and not some quick little fix—it was a full service, deep tissue masturbation that left her fingers cramped and achy! She was fighting that inner demon, that little voice in her head screaming at her to go next door and just kiss the man!

She paced, she fretted, fussed, whined, cursed herself for her weakness, and kept drinking from the strawberry champagne bottle.

She had to get out of this apartment; she felt like a caged, oversexed animal. Her body just would not let her forget him for a second.

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Knox was up thinking about her, he had jacked off his sore, but still hard dick to no relief. He saw the dim pool light come on, he went to his kitchen and peeked out the window blinds. He watched Scarlett go to the edge of the pool, slipping her shirt off and tossing it to the ground. She tugged her jeans down her lush hips, revealing a tiny pair of lacey, peach panties that matched her bra. She sat on the edge of the pool for a second, taking another sip from the bottle in her hand, then she slipped into the water.

He felt like a pervert, pulling his cock out of the slit in his boxers as he stood there watching her swim. He imagined himself in the water with her; there were so many things that he wanted to do to her. He stroked himself for the third time that night, the sensation climbing, and then bursting as he watched her get out of the water and walk toward the back porch. He stepped away from the window so she wouldn’t see him, as his ejaculation streamed out all over his kitchen floor. He would just have to clean it up in the morning; right now, he had to force himself to sleep before he went back over to her apartment.

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Scarlett walked very slowly to her back door; just knowing he was close was making her crazy. Her whole body was on alert and hardening to attention, in tune to his. He was right there, that door, that ugly offline, large, wooden door would lead her to him. She could feel him, smell him, sense him, and before she even knew what she was doing, she was knocking on his back door.

He heard the knock, his heart skipping three beats as he ran back out to the kitchen and opened his door.

There she stood, looking so beautiful, the half-naked goddess glowing in the dark night sky behind her, and dripping water all over the floor. Knox was actually jealous of the moon and how its beams were able secretly to caress her in the way he longed to. He opened the door all the way, standing back to let her in—she walked up to him, not saying a word. She stood close enough for the tips of her breasts to touch him, looking up at him. Entranced, she raised to her tiptoes, sliding her hands up the sides of his face, and pulling his head down to her. She slowly let her lips touch his, pressing a little harder, and then finally kissing him.

He couldn’t believe it; he thought he would ejaculate again—just from the touch of her lips. He was instantly overwhelmed and overzealous. He grabbed her and held her tight as he slipped his tongue between her closed lips, squeezing her to him. He wanted to hold her so close that it wasn’t physically possible. He just couldn’t get enough of her, fast enough. He had waited too long for her, fantasizing about her, constantly thinking about her.

It was too much, too fast for her, despite the fact that she had initiated it. She was ready to cry, scream, and laugh. Her body was doing things it had never done before, and feeling things it had never felt before. Her mind was also thinking about things that she wasn’t prepared to think about. Her head was spinning, and her pelvic bone was pushing so hard against him, she feared it might crack. She knew that she couldn’t do this; she wasn’t ready yet. This was too quick, and way too soon.

"I…I can't." She pulled away, her lips quivering as she backed up to his door. She put her finger to her burning lips before she turned and ran out.

He was still in a total state of shock. Had she just come over here soaking wet and kissing him, only to leave as quickly as she came? Did he just let her leave?

She ran in her back door, locking it then leaning against it. What was she doing? She had utterly lost her mind! What had she started? What had she done?

She had held onto her virginity like the last glass of water in a drought, so why did she want to say the hell with it? She was just starting to get her life somewhat in order. Today was the first day in a long time that she didn’t feel like crawling back in bed and crying. Why would she risk it all?

Love was the last thing she needed right now. Love was a curse, the worst luck of all for the one unfortunate enough to fall into the trap. She had vivid memories of her mother suffering, her heart aching too badly for her to survive. She watched her mother slowly lose her mind and her health. Despite all of the horrific memories, Scarlett’s old-fashioned superstitions were just not holding up to the sudden craving her body had developed.

Her mind was at war with her body!

She slid her hand between her legs, sliding down the door to the floor. Her fingers would be paralyzed by morning, but right now, she could care less.

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Detective Balthazar Cole was a hardass, son of a bitch. He also happened to be the best homicide detective in the state. He left no stone unturned, and no lead uninvestigated. Even the tiny pieces of junk that most would overlook were analyzed as evidence. He had been on the force for over forty years, he worked hard to get where he was, and he was proud. He always went with his gut, and he followed it all the way to the top.

Now at sixty-three, he was the head detective in an ultra-elite section of California. He was ready for a peaceful retirement in a few days and wanted to enjoy the rest of his life. He was ready finally just to relax and spend the rest of his days eating, loving his wife, and his huge family.

Everything changed the minute the body washed up on shore. Bodies did not just turn up dead in this posh area of town, especially not fingerless bodies without toes and smashed-in teeth.

"I got that missing person’s report you asked for, sir." His assistant Mason Ward strolled into his office. "Only one male missing from this area." Balthazar raised his brow. "You'll never guess who." He dropped the paper on the table. Balthazar looked at the picture on the report, his thick salt-and-peppered brow rising higher.

The corpse had the same black hair as the missing person, the same pale eyes.

"Bring me all of the measurements from the corpse, and height and weight from Knox Stone's last known physician,"

"Right away, sir."

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# Opportunity and Jealousy

Scarlett opened the door and felt a strange tingle low in her belly when she saw Jake standing there with that smile on his face.

"Do you still need a job?" Knox asked. He had forgotten all about the job the last time that they were together.

"Yes." She looked at him quizzically.

"I need a cook for my restaurant."

"Your restaurant?"

"Yes."

"You have a restaurant?" She raised her brows as she questioned him.

"Yes." He owned one now. As of this morning, he had signed the paperwork using his false identification and paid the former owner in cash. "Can you start in the morning?"

"Sure." She nodded, still stunned that he owned his own restaurant and had actually asked her to work for him.

"9:00" He said, and she nodded again, before he turned around and walked into his apartment.

Scarlett shut the door then walked back through her living room in a daze, before sitting on her couch in a dumbfounded state.

She had no idea he owned a restaurant. She thought about it for another minute before she abruptly rose from the couch, raced through her house then nonchalantly walked over to his apartment. She regained her full composure before knocking on his door. He had barely opened the door before she started talking.

"You’re not doing this because I freaked out the other night and you feel sorry for me are you?" Scarlett asked, watching his expression.

"No," he said honestly.

"And you're not doing it because I kissed you, right? I mean, that was an accident, I was drunk, and it will never happen again." She tried to keep her embarrassment from coming to the surface.

"No, I just need a cook." He frowned a little as the word *never* echoed through his mind.

"OK, I'll be ready at 9." She smiled, then turned around and walked back to her apartment, leaving him to shut his door then sit on his couch in a state of worry.

He analyzed her words for a moment, and his unease escalated as he remembered that women could sometimes be tricky. To make matters worse, his relationship with his new neighbor was complicated, and he hoped that she had not taken his invitation wrong. He truly wanted to help her, and although he couldn’t change the fact that he was highly attracted to her, he wasn’t doing it for that reason.

He quickly jumped up from his sofa and stalked over to her front door, which Scarlett promptly opened with a look of surprise.

"I want you to know that the only reason I asked you to work for me is because you’re an amazing cook. That meal you prepared was the best thing I have ever tasted in my life," he informed her. Scarlett’s lips split into a beaming smile as he warmed her heart with his words. He grinned at her beautiful smile and fought the overwhelming urge to kiss her lips, "9:00."

"9:00." She nodded then slowly closed the door before she strolled back through her living room. She felt exhilaration as she sat on the couch.

At first, Scarlett couldn’t stop smiling, and then she suddenly felt disappointment wash over her as she realized that she had doubted his honorable intentions. She jumped up from her couch and then sprinted back over to his door.

Knox opened his front door with a look of concern this time.

“You didn’t change your mind already?” he asked.

“No I didn’t change my mind. I’m sorry I misjudged your intentions and thank you very much." Scarlett's smile went straight to his heart. She couldn’t help herself; she wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him. He froze, trying to pull back a little, if she leaned in any closer she would be able to feel his stiffening erection and she might rethink her apology. She misinterpreted his actions and quickly pulled away from him, a slight frown rearranging her dazzling smile. "9:00" she said, before she turned and went back into her apartment.

He shut the door with a curse, thinking she had pulled back so quickly because she felt his rampant hard-on.

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"This place is amazing." She looked up at the ceiling, an intricate replica of a fiery sunset in a pale amber sky.

"I just bought it; you’re the first person I hired." Knox stood behind her as she looked around the restaurant in awe; he, on the other hand, was looking at her ass in awe. Curvy women were his weakness, and this girl could be his ultimate destruction.

"Shouldn't you have, like, a gourmet cook or something for a place like this?" she asked. Her eye for detail was on overdrive as she looked around the swanky restaurant. Everything screamed 'fragile and expensive', from the crystal, to the deep russet and chocolate-colored Italian marble floor. Even the thick, silk, rust-colored curtains cost more than everything that was in her parents' cafe.

"I do," he smiled, "I have you."

"No, I mean someone that has, like, degrees and stuff."

"You don't have degrees and your cooking is better than any of the expensive and overrated 'top' chefs of the world."

"How do you know? Have you tasted many famous chefs cooking lately?" she joked.

Actually, he had. He had been served by some of the most sought-after chefs, but none of their meals could make his mouth water the way that Scarlett’s had.

"Just yours." They were locked in each other's eyes for a minute before she snapped out of it, remembering his reaction to her hug yesterday.

"So when do you start the interviews?" she asked.

"Did you hire and fire at your restaurant?"

"You mean tiny cafe that could fit in this restaurant's bathroom? Yes, I did, but on a much smaller scale."

"Think you could do it here?"

"Hire a full staff?" She looked at the large restaurant, and tried to calculate how many staff members they would need.

"Yes, do you think you can handle it?" he asked.

"Of course," she nodded, she could handle anything when she put her mind to it. It was technically no different than increasing the servings for a recipe, do what you always do, just do it in bulk.

"Then I leave it up to you." He handed her the keys and an envelope.

"What's this?" she asked, her eyes widening as she looked at all the money inside the envelope.

"Your advance."

"But this is a lot of money." She raised her brows in astonishment.

"This place is a lot of work."

“This is too much, I can’t take this.” She shook her head.

“Yes, you can.”

“No, I can’t, I—“

“I insist,” he cut her off, “You’re going to need emergency money for the times that I’m not around,” he lied, ready to say anything he had to just to get her to take the cash. He would make sure there was never an emergency that forced her to spend that cash.

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Detective Balthazar Cole looked at the evidence spread out on his desk before him. He had reviewed it repeatedly, but something just wasn’t right. He was baffled. Everything pointed to it being a positive match—the height, the weight, the hair color, the eye color, and the fact that there was no other missing persons fitting that description anywhere in the area. Yet Balthazar couldn’t shake his gut feeling that the corpse wasn’t Knox Stone.

He’d learned early in his career that just because everything added up, didn’t necessarily mean that the evidence was correct. Evidence could sometimes be tricky, like the holographic pictures you spend hours staring into, just to clearly see the image hiding in the mess. He’d realized even earlier that most words had three meanings; coincidences usually boiled down to precise, premeditated planning, and the most obvious answer could blind you to the truth if you didn’t look hard enough.

Most importantly, Detective Cole knew above all else, that Miss Lola Lane knew more than she was admitting to, and he had all intentions of finding out what it was.

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Knox was amazed by Scarlett’s dedication; he stood back in awe, and watched as she worked like a dog for four full days. She had hired a cleaning crew, and had all of the appliances repaired then thoroughly inspected. She also hired Astrid and Sid, as well as a full staff of hard working, reliable employees. By the fifth morning, they were a fully functioning restaurant and open for business. By the following day, after a few very favorable reviews from happy customers, the restaurant was packed wall to wall, and there were even a few people that were waiting to be seated.

“Wow, we might need to expand the waiting area,” Sid joked.

“I was just thinking the same thing,” Jake said as he watched two more customers come in.

 “Scarlett told me to give this you.” Sid handed Jake a glass of juice. “We should probably get a couple more tables while we are at it. It was like this at her parent’s café too, once people get a taste of her cooking they keep coming back.”

“Of course we do, dear.” An older woman with dark auburn hair and tiny silver cat glasses interrupted them. Jake turned away, still not fully trusting his disguise. “The food is sensational enough to delight the taste buds to the point of addiction.” She winked before she was led to her table.

“Oh, and Scarlett said the steak is almost done, so come back to the kitchen soon,” Sid finished before going over to help a customer who was waving toward them.

Knox stuck around the restaurant although he had no reason too, since Scarlett had everything under control. The past week had been a big revelation for him. He found that he enjoyed being near her, and felt the frustrating tickle-of-dread when he left her side. Her ambition was refreshing, and he loved to watch her multitask without breaking a sweat. In truth, he was drawn to her for several different reasons, but above all else, he loved to watch her cook. He’d discovered that he could sit around all day long and do nothing but watch her prepare food. He looked forward to seeing that twinkle in her eye that was there every time that she cooked.

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“They got up early the next morning, Scarlett wanted to get a head start on the new desert she wanted to try. When they got in the car Knox stated the engine and stopped.

“Whats wrong?” she asked.

“Look.” He pointed to the butterfly on the outside of the windshield. “My mother loved butterflies, she had pictures all over the house. She even had a tea set with butterflies. She said they were a sign of change and hope.

”

“Your mother is very wise.” Scarlet smiled and Knox turned to her.

“Yes she was.” He started the car.

“I’m taking flowers to my parents, we should take some to her too.”

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It was a gorgeous day, and the restaurant was packed. Knox was talking to a few men from the construction crew who were going to expand the restaurant. Scarlett had mentioned that she would like a more secluded section for the diners. He was hungry, and was eager to tell Scarlett about the plans.

Knox walked in to the kitchen see a man leaning over the counter talking to Scarlett and another woman.

“Who are you?” Knox barked a little more aggressively than he’d meant to.

“Hi, I’m Penny, I’m your new waitress.” The bubbly brunette winked at Knox, who ignored her in return.

“I’m Jefferson, I work here.” Jefferson extended his hand, but Knox looked at him as if he were crazy.

“If you work here, then why aren’t you working?” Knox questioned him.

“I’ll get back to work.” He headed out of the room.

Scarlett hid her smile as she watched Jefferson scramble out of the room. Scarlett had just hired Jefferson a couple of days ago. From his interview she had assumed that he would be a hard, fast worker, but having been in the restaurant business most of her life, she was familiar with slackers and Jefferson was definitely that. Unfortunately, Jefferson was a natural flirt who fancied himself a comedian and was constantly cracking jokes. Astrid constantly had to tell him to quit talking and to get back to work.

 Scarlett turned to see Knox staring at her.

“That looks good.” Knox nodded to the raspberry pie she was making.

“I’ll save a couple pieces for you,” Scarlett smiled. He nodded then went into his office.

“When you get a chance, I want you to look over the designs for the expansion.” Knox was focused on her lips. He had a powerful urge to kiss her, and he was having trouble controlling it.

“I would love to; just give me ten minutes to finish this pie.”

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Knox had never eaten as much as he had in the past few days, Scarlett loved to feed him, and he *loved* that she loved to feed him. She was always checking on him, making sure that he had something delicious on his plate and that his glass was always full. She gave him samples of everything that she cooked, and wanted nothing more than his honest opinion in return. He liked being her taste tester more than he had liked his entire career in film. It felt nice to have someone that was genuinely concerned with his comfort and his well-being. Scarlett cared about him because she wanted to, not because she had to, she didn’t even know about his fame or his fortune.

Knox almost told her the truth one evening as they closed up for the night, everyone was gone, and she had just finished up in the kitchen...

"I have something for you," Scarlett smiled, handing him a pie with a large J formed out of crust on top. Knox grinned ear to ear already knowing what it was; he had found yet another addiction, her caramel peach pie. It was the most delicious thing he had ever tasted, and now she had made one just for him, complete with his false initial.

He barely controlled the urge to kiss her, and to keep his mouth shut and his identity a secret. One day, he knew she would make him a pie with his real initial, a huge K. He felt the most comforting thrill in the fact that he would finally be able to hear her call him by his true name.

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After a long, busy day, they decided to open a bottle of wine and relax before leaving work.

“This is heaven,” Astrid said, as she took a sip of her wine. She was sitting on the counter next to Olivia. Sid and Knox sat on barstools, both eating barbeque ribs Scarlett had made.

“I made a chocolate cake with strawberries,” Scarlett said, as she sat the gourmet cake on the kitchen counter. She smiled when she noticed that Jake was too busy eating to answer.

Scarlett loved Jake’s reaction as much as she loved cooking for him. He would do all the ‘oohs and awes’ just like her father would do when she cooked for him. Jake loved food as much as she did, and she loved watching him eat, so she kept feeding him. She loved a man with a healthy appetite, and Jake had a *very* healthy appetite.

A few times she had to turn away, for some irrational reason, watching him devour his food filled her mind with wickedly delicious carnal images.

What was wrong with her? Since when did food sexually stimulate virgins?

“That cake is divine Scar, you outdid yourself this time,” Olivia cooed after she took a bite.

“It’s sinfully delicious. You should name the restaurant something like that,” Astrid added with a big grin.

“Sinfully delicious? I don’t think so,” Olivia scoffed

“Can you picture Jake telling people the name of his restaurant?” Sid joked.

“It should be something sophisticated and elegant,” Olivia added.

“No it should be something clever like, you could name it—The Restaurant,” Astrid suggested.

“How is that clever? It *is* a restaurant,” Olivia asked in bewilderment.

“That’s why it’s clever,” Astrid smiled, and shrugged as if they should understand.

“What about your name?” Olivia asked.

“Jake’s place does have a nice ring to it, man,” Sid said, as he grabbed a slice of cake and a glass of wine.

“The sign was finished today; it should be up by morning.”

“Really?” Olivia and Astrid said in unison.

“What did you name it?” Scarlett asked as everyone looked at him min excitement.”

“You’ll see,” he grinned.

\*\*\*

The next morning, Knox and Scarlett arrived late to work. Knox had deliberately killed some time until he knew the sign was finished. He parked out back and walked around to the front to see Astrid and Sid looking up at the building in astonishment. Astrid had her camera in her hand, and a mist of tears in her eyes.

Scarlett looked up to see the large sign that read*—Sweets*. She turned to Jake in bewilderment.

“That’s my last name.”

“I hope so,” he grinned as he turned toward the restaurant.

“You named it after me?”

“Of course,” he finished, as he unlocked the front door and walked inside, leaving Scarlett to look at him in confusion and awe. Sid followed behind Knox.

“I can’t believe it,” she mumbled.

“I know, it’s so-so beautiful, it’s amazing! “Astrid cried as she took another picture of the sign.

Scarlett’s phone began to buzz, and she was surprised to see the text from Olivia

*“OMG, it’s perfect! I love it! You deserve it! Let’s celebrate tonight! I think he really likes you Scar!”*

“How the hell did she know?” Scarlett’s voice was barely above a whisper.

“I told her, I posted the picture online,” Astrid answered.

Scarlet sprinted into the restaurant and straight to Jake’s office.

“I can’t believe you named your restaurant Sweets.”

“What’s so hard to believe? You make this restaurant what it is; it’s your cooking that brings this place to life. I just own the property. Who else would I name it after?”

Scarlett abruptly grabbed Knox and hugged him tightly. Jake could feel his cock instantly swell and push against his pants. He could feel her soft curves crushed against his body, and he wanted to strip their clothes off. He held her as close as he could without hurting her; he didn’t want to let her go.

Knox growled when he heard the knock at his office door. Scarlett pulled away from him, and he had a sudden urge to strangle the person interrupting them.

“What?” he roared.

“Sorry,” Jefferson walked into the room with a grin, “but you’re needed in the kitchen, Scarlett.”

Scarlett left his office as he glared at Jefferson.

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Balthazar stood at the huge glass paneled front door of Knox Stone's mansion, his partner Mason Ward on the left side while he observed from the right. He was not entirely shocked to see the "grief stricken" Lola Lane buck-naked and riding a tied-up man. However, he was surprised that she was foolish enough to do it right there on her missing fiancés water fountain in the middle of the main hall.

"She just called me crying this morning, trying to see if it was her beloved fiancé lying stiff in the morgue," Balthazar shook his head.

"Yeah, she looks *real* worried," Ben grinned.

Balthazar straightened up, stood in front of the door, and knocked hard.

"Miss Lane, I'd like to ask you a few more questions." He frowned as Lola squealed and ran up the circular stairs to the right. She neglected her bound friend, leaving him to stand there looking stupid and confused. It took him a moment before he finally started to hop toward the identical set of stairs to the left.

Balthazar and Ben looked at each other.

"Possible motive," Balthazar said.

"Jealous boyfriend, cheating fiancée," Ben added.

"I think we should come back, once we have a little more background info on the grieving fiancée." Balthazar turned to leave, he had seen enough.

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"I told you to lock the gate!" Lola hissed at Ramone her chauffeur, as he scrambled naked into her room. He used his butt to slam the door behind him.

"I'm sorry, Mistress, I got so excited I forgot." He hopped over to her, his bondage constricting his movements. He almost toppled over before he went to his knees before her.

"You are a sorry, pathetic excuse for a slave!" She kicked him in the chest with her needle-heeled stilettos, and he fell over. "Because of your incompetence, now I have to explain to the police why I’m fucking my chauffeur, when I should be depressed and worrying about Knox!" She kicked him again.

"Please, forgive me Mistress!" he cried pathetically.

"Forgive? No. Punish? Yes."

"Yes, please punish me, please!" He loved her cruel punishments.

"I promise to." She walked over to her dresser, and grabbed her cell phone out of the new purse she had bought with Knox’s credit card. "Now, do I have to gag you, or will you keep your mouth shut while I call my lawyer," she glared at him

"I'll be quiet, Mistress," he said bowing his head, and despite the possible disaster stirring in the air, she grinned maliciously at his submission.

Ramone was the perfect slave for her; he was obedient, reliable, and as loyal as a little lap dog. He would do anything for his mistress, and always went above and beyond the call of duty when it came to her acting career. Publicity was the key to fame, not morals or ethics. Lola was not above having Ramone slashing some tires, breaking some kneecaps, bribery, or murder...

Whatever kept her name in the news.

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Scarlett wore a low-cut, red top that Olivia had given her. Even though she had her own clothes now, she had kept a few of the things that Olivia had given her. She liked the way the shirt fit and was anxious to see Knox’s reaction.

She kept her jacket on during the ride to work, opting to take it off when she got into the employee’s lounge.

Knox didn’t have time to react as he watched Jefferson walk toward Scarlett.

“You look fabulous today, Scar,” Jefferson attempted to smile seductively. Knox scoffed at his cheap attempt to impress Scarlett.

“I pay you to work, not to compliment my manager,” Knox spat.

“Sorry sir, I’m sorry, I was just going to ask if she needed any help.”

“What she needs is for you to do your job. Now get back to work,” Knox said as he stood next to Scarlett. Jefferson was looking at Scarlett’s cleavage with blatant lust in his eyes, and Knox was ready to tear his eyes out of his head.

“Yes sir.”

“I’m going to start the steak,” Scarlett told Knox as she headed toward the kitchen.

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Jefferson walked out of the room with a giant smile. He had a serious thing for Scarlett, he couldn’t help it, there was just something about her. That smile was amazing; it brightened the room for him. He spent most of his days trying to remember to keep his mouth closed and get his work done, but, unfortunately, the only attention she showed him was when she was scolding him for slacking. God help his twisted little soul, but to him, bad attention was better than no attention.

He wasn’t surprised the men on the job didn’t like him, most men didn’t. He was a suave, devout ladies’ man, despite his recent infatuation with Scarlett. He preferred to believe that most men were just intimidated by him.

What did surprise him was his boss, Jake. He could never understand why Jake didn’t seem to like him. Jefferson wasn’t attracted to men, but he could safely say that Jake was a real handsome guy. Although Jake didn’t advertise it, it was obvious that he was wealthy, so he had no reason to feel threatened.

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She was finishing up with the main course when Jefferson walked in.

“Yum, that steak smells delicious,” he grinned as he stood across from her.

“Well, let’s hope that it tastes delicious, I forgot one of the key spices.”

“I guarantee it will taste good, everything you make is delicious,” Jefferson flirted, but Scarlett didn’t realize it. She thought he was just being his usual nice self.

“Thank you, Jefferson.”

Knox stood outside the door listening to the tail end of their conversation. He was livid.

“Jefferson, if you don’t get back to work, I’ll fire you,” he barked.

Knox saw the way that Jefferson’s eyes were glued to Scarlett’s chest. He also knew that Scarlett was oblivious to it, as she always was.

“Sorry, I was just seeing if Scar needed any help.”

“She’s fine, and stop calling her Scar, she’s your boss,” he barked, and Jefferson nodded before leaving the kitchen. Knox turned to Scarlett, unable to hide his irritation. “I want to speak to you in my office.”

He led her into his office and slammed the door behind them.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“There is a dress code here—no revealing clothing.”

“It’s not revealing.”

“It’s too low-cut to be professional. You’re breasts look as if they’re ready to pop out of your shirt.” He felt himself harden the second the words were out of his mouth. He wanted to cover her up, and keep her away from Jefferson. He didn’t want anyone to see that much of her skin.

“They are not.” Self-consciously, she covered her breasts with her hands.

“I don’t want you to wear that shirt again, it’s too distracting.”

“How is it distracting?” she snapped back. She had worn the shirt hoping that he would be the one to compliment her, but here he was berating her.

“Jefferson is neglecting his duties. He’s won’t leave the kitchen for long, he’s afraid your breasts will pop out, and he’ll miss it.”

“Bullshit,” she shook her head. “If he’s afraid to leave the kitchen, it’s because Penny is in there.”

“Penny, the waitress?” he raised his brow.

“We think he has a crush on Penny.”

“We?”

“Astrid and I.”

Knox didn’t believe it; he saw the way that Jefferson looked at Scarlett. The only female that Jefferson wanted was Scarlett; he could see it in his eyes. The crush that he was pretending to have on Penny was just a cover-up.

“The two of you seem close,” he asked suspiciously.

“Who? Me and Penny?”

“No, you and Jefferson.”

“We’re not close at all. He works for me—that’s the extent of our relationship.”

“Good, keep it that way. I don’t like him calling you by your nickname; it’s not professional.”

“I understand,” she nodded, realizing how strict of a boss he was.

“And don’t let me catch you exposing that much cleavage again.”

Scarlett glared at him for a moment before she left his office.

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Instead of heeding Jake’s word, Scarlett decided to provoke him. Olivia had given her a baby-blue shirt that was the same low-cut design as the red one. Once she got to work, she slid off her jacket and held back her smile when she saw the look of shock on Jake’s face. The blue shirt was a size smaller and managed to show a little more cleavage.

“What did I tell you yesterday?” Knox hissed as he grabbed her arm.

“You told me not to wear that red shirt again. I’m not wearing it,” she smiled.

“We have a dress code.” He was glad that it was Jefferson’s day off.

“It’s not that low-cut. Penny shows more cleavage than this, and you don’t seem to have a problem with it.” She frowned as she thought about Penny’s blatant flirtation with Knox.

“I don’t care what Penny wears. I don’t want you walking around here with your breasts on display! Go and change.”

She watched him storm into his office. She had a mind to go in there and curse him out. Instead, she would keep the shirt on.

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“Hi Scarlett,” Jefferson said as he walked into the kitchen with a big grin on his face.

“Hi. What are you doing here? It’s your day off.”

“He’s such a good worker, he even comes to work on his day off.” Penny smiled seductively at him, but he ignored her.

“I was telling my father about that steak you made, Scarlett. He said my mother used to make it for him before she died. I was wondering if you could teach me how to make it one day. He would love it.”

“I can teach you right now, I have a little time before I get back to work,” Scarlet said, and pulled out her notebook.

“Would you? You are amazing Scarlett,” he beamed.

Scarlett had just begun to write down the recipe when Knox walked into the kitchen.

“Isn’t today your day off?” he barked at Jefferson

“Yes.”

“Why are you here?” He was livid; he assumed that Jefferson had come to see Scarlett.

“She’s teaching me how to make the Hawaiian steak.”

“His father loves it, and he hasn’t had it since his mother died. I offered to teach him.”

“No, I don’t want my employees hanging around on their days off. It sets a bad example. If you’re not a customer and you’re not on the clock, there is no reason for you to be here. Now go.”

Jefferson held his anger in check, he wanted to give Jake a piece of his mind, but he opted against it. The look of disgust that Scarlett was directing at Jake was enough.

“I understand; I’ll see you tomorrow,” Jefferson nodded, then gave a pathetic look to Scarlett before leaving. Once he was gone, Scarlett turned to Jake.

“That was mean.” She raised her chin.

“No, that was loitering. This is not a hangout spot,” he grumbled before he went in his office.

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The next day at work was busy, but by lunch, they were able to slow down and take a break.

“I want to paint my apartment this weekend,” Scarlett told Astrid.

“Sounds like a fantastic idea. What color are you thinking about?”

“Peach, I already bought the paint.”

“I heard you say that you’re painting this weekend.” Jefferson walked into the break room. “Sorry, I wasn’t eavesdropping, I’m taking my break now too.”

“Yes., Scarlett answered.

“I would love to help. I worked for a house painting company for a few years; I’m really good. I could bring a small team of painters with me—free of charge.”

“That’s a good idea,” Astrid nodded.

“I still have a lot of supplies too,” he added

“I guess,” Scarlett answered. She still felt bad for the way that Jake had treated him.

“Perfect, What time should I be there?” His eyes lit up, as a look of accomplishment crossed over his face.

“We’ll probably start early, so we can get finished in time enough to celebrate the paint,” Astrid answered him.

“I’ll come bright and early,” he said before leaving.

Scarlett and Astrid just looked at each other.

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Scarlett, Jake, Astrid, Sid and Olivia had spent the entire day painting and had finished the room in record time.

“It looks amazing!” Scarlett said, with a huge smile and hugged Astrid.

“I love the color; it brightens the whole room up.” Astrid was awestruck by the difference.

“And it complements the furniture,” Olivia added as she hugged Scarlett.

“Thank you so much!” Scarlett was overwhelmed with emotion. She was so fortunate to have such incredible friends.

“You don’t have to thank us; I would have painted the whole room by myself just to get rid of those stark, blinding white walls,” Astrid grinned.

“I would have helped,” Sid smiled as he kissed the side of Astrid’s forehead.

Scarlett turned and hugged Jake, who held her longer than he should have. The feel of her body pressed against him pumped his dick up like a balloon.

“No more white walls,” Jake said as he pulled back.

“No more. Thank you so much for helping us.” Scarlett hugged him again. He understood her torture about the plain white walls.

“You never have to thank me.” He was tempted to kiss her lips, but was aware of the silent trio watching them. Scarlett was also tempted to kiss him, and was using intense self-restraint. She decided to use humor to break the tension she suddenly felt.

“So does that mean you’ll help me paint the rest of the house?” she winked.

“I’d love to, but now, I need to go wash off this paint. Peach is not my color.”

“Come back over as soon as you’re done, I’m ordering pizza and wings,” Scarlett called to him as he headed toward the door.

“I will,” he finished before he left.

“I brought a few bottles of wine too,” Olivia told her.

“Yeah, and like two dozen bags of potato chips.” What, did they have a sale or something?”

“No, I couldn’t decide what I wanted—so I bought them all. Besides, look what you brought, three bottles of whipped vodka and root bear,” Astrid shook her head.

“Um, I brought a cream soda too,” Astrid reminded her.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” Olivia said sarcastically.

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Since Astrid and Sid lived close, they went home to clean up and get ready. Olivia stayed at Scarlett’s apartment. She had brought three different style dresses with her. Olivia chose to wear her black empire waist sundress with the neon orange pencil belt. She managed to find a pair of platform pumps in the same shade of orange.

Olivia looked at the peach dress that actually matched the walls they had just painted.

“Look at this,” Olivia said, as she turned to Scarlett, “it’s the same peach as your walls.”

“Wow, how did you manage to find the exact shade?”

“I wanted to wear something peach to match the color of your walls. I had no idea it was the exact shade. You should wear it.”

“It’s way too short, my butt would hang out.”

“No it wouldn’t, just try it on.”

“Alright,” Scarlett grinned and slid the dress over her undergarments.

“OMG Scar, you look hot, you have to wear it.” Olivia clapped in excitement.

“Are you sure it’s not too much?” Half of her was horrified at the tight minidress, the other half of her was excited to see Jake’s reaction.

“No, it’s perfect. You’re going to drive Jake wild.”

“That’s not what I’m trying to do,” she said defensively.

“You don’t have to try. “

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The painting party was in full effect.

Knox had left to clean up, and by the time he got back to Scarlett’s apartment, some of their employees had arrived. Knox felt his lungs stop working for a moment, and he was unable to see anyone else in the room but her. She looked incredible and just the sight of her astounded him. As she drew closer, he felt his cock swell to a painful degree.

“You look beautiful,’ Knox said with a look in his eyes that she didn’t recognize. He looked around the room and felt relief when he saw that he and Sid were the only men there. He didn’t like the thought of someone seeing the amount of cleavage she had on display.

“Thank you.” She couldn’t stop the blush from spreading across her face. Sid and Astrid waked over to them.

“Try this.” Astrid handed Jake a glass.

“What is it?” Jake frowned at the creamy looking drink.

“Just try it,” she urged him.

“He doesn’t want that sweet shit. Here, man,” Sid said as he handed Jake a glass of cognac instead.

“Thanks.”

“Damn, who invited Jefferson?” Sid frowned when Jefferson walked into the apartment.

Knox was ready to lose his temper when he saw Jefferson.

“Why is he here?” he asked Scarlett.

“He offered to help paint.”

“He didn’t help.”

“I know, he said he had to help his father, he’s very sick,” Scarlett explained, but Knox didn’t believe a word of it. “Besides, Penny came, so you know that Jefferson was going to come.” She smiled, still oblivious to Jefferson’s affection. “Are you hungry?”

“No.”

“I’ll go get you a plate.” She walked toward the kitchen.

“Hi boss,” Penny purred as she came over to stand next to Knox. He could smell the liquor from where he stood “Are you having a good time?”

“Yes.” He nodded, still watching Scarlett.

“You look very handsome tonight. Don’t you live close or something? Maybe we could go check out your place. I’d love to see your room.” Penny winked dramatically.

Out in the kitchen, Scarlett was fixing a plate of food when Jefferson came up to her.

“Do you need any help?” he asked.

“No, but thank you.”

“Sorry I wasn’t able to come help earlier. I had my painting friends ready, but my dad’s fever was so high I was afraid to leave him.”

“Yeah, I got your message. How is he?”

“His fever broke and he was doing better when I left. He understood, I told him I couldn’t miss the painting party. You have paint on your cheek,” he lied. He reached up and wiped off an imaginary speck of paint. There was no paint on her face; he just wanted the chance to touch her.

“Thank you,” she smiled.

“Jefferson!” Knox roared as he stormed into the kitchen. “What are you doing?”