



*when i'm*

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When I'm  
Gone

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*When I'm  
Gone*

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**A  
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*To my son, Austin. May you become a man who is thoughtful, kind, considerate, giving, and knows how to really love someone. Those men are hard to find. I hope I'm raising one.*

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# Prologue

## Reese

“Come here, girl!” My stepfather’s voice bellowed throughout the house.

Instantly, my gut twisted. The sick knot that came from being near him and knowing what he would do to me was a constant companion.

I stood up slowly from my bed and put the book I was reading—or trying to read—down carefully. My mother wasn’t home from work yet. She was supposed to be home by now. I shouldn’t have come back from the library so early. A man and his young daughter had come up to me while I was looking through the children’s picture books. He’d started talking to me and asking me my name. He’d wanted to know if I was getting a book for my little sister.

The embarrassment that came with that question reminded me of my stupidity, as always.

“Girl!” my stepfather roared.

He was angry now. My eyes stung with unshed tears. If he would only just beat me like he used to. Back when I was younger and I brought home poor grades in school. If he would just call me names and tell me how worthless I was . . . but he wouldn’t. Once I had wished more than anything that he would stop hitting me. I hated the belt, and the welts he left on my legs and bottom made it hard to sit down.

Then one day, he stopped. And I instantly wished he’d go back to hitting me. The bite from the belt was better than this. Anything was better than this. Even death.

I opened my bedroom door and took a deep breath, reminding myself that I could survive whatever he did. I was saving my money from the housecleaning jobs I had, and I would be leaving here soon. My mother would be glad I was gone. She hated me. She had hated me for years.

I was a burden on her.

I tugged my shirt down and tucked it into the shorts I was wearing. Then I pulled the shorts down so they covered more of my legs. It was pointless, really. I had long legs that were hard to cover up. There were never any shorts at the thrift store long enough.

It was only an hour before my mother got home. He wouldn’t do anything that she could walk in on. Even if she did, I wondered if she would accuse me and say it was my fault. She had already blamed me for the way my body had changed four years ago. My breasts had grown too large, and she said I needed to stop eating because my ass was fat. I had tried not eating, but it hadn’t helped my bottom.

My stomach had flattened out, and it had only made my chest look larger. She hated that. So I

started eating again, but my stomach pudge never returned. One night, when I had walked into the living room in a pair of cutoff sweatpants and a T-shirt to get some milk before I went to bed, she slapped me and told me I looked like a whore. More than once, she called me a stupid whore who had nothing but her looks to get her anywhere in life.

Now I stepped into the living room to see Marco, my stepfather, sitting in his recliner with his eyes trained on the television and a beer in his hand. He had come home from work early.

His gaze swung to me and slowly trailed up my body, making me shiver with disgust. What I wouldn't give to be smart and flat-chested. If my legs were short and fat, then my life would be perfect. My face wasn't what attracted Marco. It was average enough. I hated my body. I hated it so much.

Nausea crept up, and my heart raced as I fought back the tears. He loved it when I cried. It made him worse. I wouldn't cry. Not in front of him.

"Come sit in my lap," he ordered.

I couldn't do it. I had been able to avoid him for weeks by staying away from the house as much as possible. The horror of having his hands up my shirt or in my pants again was too much. I'd rather he killed me. Anything but this.

When I didn't move, his face twisted into an evil sneer. "Get your stupid slutty ass over here, and sit on my goddamn lap!"

I closed my eyes, because the tears were coming. I had to stop them. If he'd just hit me again, I'd take it. I just couldn't stand him touching me. I hated the sounds he made and the things he said. It was a never-ending nightmare.

Every second I stayed back was a second closer to my mother getting home. When she was here, he called me names, but he never touched me. She might wish I didn't exist, but she was my only salvation from this.

"Go ahead and cry, I like it," he said, sneering.

His chair creaked, and then I heard the footrest slam down. I snapped my eyes open to see him standing up. Not good. If I ran, I wouldn't make it past him. The only other option was the backyard, but his pit bull was out there. It had bitten me three years ago, and I had needed stitches, but he hadn't let me go to the doctor. He'd told me to wrap it up; he wasn't putting his dog down over my stupid ass.

I had an ugly scar on my hip from the dog's teeth.

I'd never gone into the backyard again.

But watching him walk toward me, I wondered if being eaten by his dog wasn't better than this. It was a means to an end: death. Which didn't sound so bad.

Just before he reached me, I decided that whatever his dog would do to me was better than this. So I ran.

He cackled with laughter behind me, but I didn't let it slow me down. He didn't think I'd go out the back door. How wrong he was. I would face the dogs of hell to get away from him.

But the door was bolted. I needed the key to unbolt it. *No. No.*

His hands grabbed my waist and pulled me back to feel his hardness pressing against me. The sour taste of vomit burned the back of my throat as I jerked away from him. "No!" I yelled.

His hands moved around and grabbed my breasts and squeezed painfully. "Stupid whore. This is all you're good for. Couldn't graduate from high school because you were too damn stupid. But this body is meant to make men happy. Accept that, bitch."

The tears ran down my face. I hadn't been able to stop them. He knew the words to hurt me. "No!" I cried out again, but this time the pain was there in my voice. It cracked. "Fight me, Reese. I like it when you fight me," he hissed in my ear.

How could my mother stay married to this man? Was my father worse than this? She'd never

married him. She never told me about him. I didn't even know his name. But no one could be worse than this awful man.

---

I couldn't do this again. I was done being scared. Either he would beat me until he killed me, or he would kick me out. I had feared both for so long. My mother had told me once that all men would do in this world was think about sex when they looked at me. I would be used by men my whole life. She was always telling me to leave.

Today I was ready. I only had eight hundred and fifty-five dollars saved up, but I could get a bus ticket to the other side of the country and get a job. If I got out of this house alive, that's what I was doing.

Marco's hands slipped down the front of my shorts, and I bucked against him, screaming. I didn't want his hand there. "Let me go!" I yelled, loudly enough for the neighbors to hear.

He pulled his hand out and jerked me around by my arm so hard it popped. Then he slammed me against the door. His hand punched my face with a loud crack. My vision blurred, and I felt my knees go weak. "Shut up, bitch, and take it."

His hands grabbed my shirt and jerked it up, then tugged my bra down. I sobbed, because I couldn't stop the horror. It was coming, and I couldn't stop him.

"Get away from my husband, you whore, and leave my house! I don't want to ever see your face again!" My mother's voice stopped Marco, and he moved his hands off my breasts. I jerked my shirt back down.

My face was burning from the punch, and I tasted blood on my lip as the stinging cut under my tongue began to swell.

"Out, you stupid, good-for-nothing whore!" my mother screamed.

That moment changed everything.

---

# Mase

## Two years later

**F**ucking hell. What was that noise? I peeled my eyes open as sleep slowly faded from my brain and I registered what had woken me up.

A vacuum? And . . . singing? What the fuck?

I rubbed my eyes and groaned in frustration as the noise got louder. I was sure now that it was a vacuum. And it sounded like a really bad version of Miranda Lambert's "Gunpowder & Lead."

My phone said it was only eight. I had been asleep for two hours. After thirty hours straight with no sleep, I was being awakened by bad singing and a motherfucking vacuum?

As she sang the first two lines of the chorus, I winced. She was getting louder as she sang. And it was seriously off key. That was a good song she was butchering. Didn't the woman know that you didn't come into people's houses at eight in the fucking morning and sing at the top of your lungs?

I was never going to get back to sleep with this racket.

Nannette must have hired an idiot to clean her fucking house. But then, knowing Nannette, she was pissed because I was here and there was nothing she could do about it. She had probably paid the woman to screech outside my bedroom door. Nannette didn't own the house; our dad, Kiro, did. He'd told us that while Nannette was back in Paris, I could stay at the house and spend some time with our other sister, Harlow, who lived in Rosemary Beach with her husband, Grant, and their new baby.

This must have been the bitch's way of getting back at me for staying at her place.

Now she was singing the chorus over and over again at the top of her lungs. God, it was like waking to a nightmare. This woman so needed to shut up. I had to get some sleep before I went to visit Harlow and her family. She was so excited about me coming all the way from Texas. But this idiot was messing up my sleep very effectively.

I threw back the covers and stood up and headed for the door before I realized I was naked. My head was pounding from lack of sleep, and I was getting angrier as I searched the room for the damn jeans I had taken off when I'd gotten here. My vision was blurry, and the dark curtains were closed. Fuck it. I reached for the sheet and wrapped it around my waist and went for the door.

I swung it open just as she started singing the opening lines to another song. Dammit. Not another song. This time, she was murdering "Cruise" by Florida Georgia Line.

I blinked and rubbed my eyes against the light, my vision still blurry. Shit, did the woman not see me standing here?

After a few seconds, I finally was able to open my eyes in a squint to see a round little ass wiggling

as she bent over. My eyes slowly opened wide as I took in the longest damn legs I'd ever seen. And holy fucking hell, her ass. Was that a freckle under her left butt cheek?

She stood up, and her tiny waist only made her ass look better. She continued to shake her bottom she sang off key. I winced as she hit a very high note. Damn, the girl couldn't sing.

Then she turned, and I hardly had a moment to appreciate the front view before she screamed and dropped the vacuum cleaner as she pulled her earbuds out of her ears. Big, round baby-blue eyes stared at me in horror as she opened and closed her mouth a few times as if she was trying to speak.

I took the moment of silence to check out her full pink lips and the perfect shape of her face. Her hair was pulled up in a bun, but it was the color of midnight. I wondered how long it was.

"I'm sorry," she managed to squeak out, and my eyes went back to hers. She was really something. There was an exotic quality about her. It was like God had picked all the best pieces and put them together to create her.

"I'm not," I replied. *Not anymore. Who the hell needs sleep? Oh, yeah. I do.*

"I didn't know, uh . . . I thought the place was still empty. I mean, I didn't know someone was staying here. There wasn't a car outside, and I rang the doorbell, but no one answered, so I used the code and came on in." She wasn't Southern. Maybe Midwestern. I just knew she wasn't from around here. She lacked the twang of the local accent. There was a softness to her voice.

"I flew in. Had a car drop me here," I said.

She nodded and then looked back down at her feet. "I'll be quiet. I can come back up and do this area later. I'll just go downstairs and start there today."

I nodded. "Thanks."

Her cheeks flushed as she let her gaze drop to my bare chest. Then she turned and hurried away, leaving the vacuum behind in her escape. I watched, enjoying the way her bottom bounced. Damn, I hoped she cleaned several times a week. Next time, I wouldn't be exhausted. Next time, I'd find out her name.

Once she was out of sight, I stepped back into the room and closed the door. A grin tugged at my lips when I thought about her face when she'd realized I was only wearing a sheet. How did Nan have a housecleaner who looked like that? The girl was gorgeous.

I lay back down and closed my eyes. The image of that freckle sitting right there under the plumpness came to mind. I really wanted to lick that freckle. Cutest fucking freckle I'd ever seen.

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# Reese

“Ohgod, ohgod, ohgod, ohgod,” I chanted as I sank down on the nearest sofa and covered my face with my hands.

I hadn’t realized someone was staying here. I’d woken him up. He seemed annoyed, I thought. Oh, God, I couldn’t tell. I’d been so nervous that he was going to fire me. This was my best-paying job, but I’d never met the owner. I worked for a cleaning service, and they got me the jobs. This was the biggest house I had, and the once-a-week cleaning paid the monthly rent on my apartment and all my utilities and food. The other houses I cleaned were smaller, so if I lost this house, it would take all those other jobs combined to pay my bills. I wouldn’t have anything left over to save. No safety net.

The image of his bare chest taunted me, and I closed my eyes tightly, pushing it out of my head. I didn’t trust men. Well, except for my neighbor Jimmy. He was the one who had hooked me up with the cleaning service. He liked men, not women, so I felt safe with him.

I also didn’t normally enjoy the view of a guy’s chest. But that chest . . . well, it was *really* nice. His arms were so thick and corded with muscles. What was I thinking? Yes, his body was beautiful, but men like him who lived in houses like this didn’t want someone like me for more than a booty call.

That man was rich and gorgeous and possibly had a woman in bed with him who was just as rich and gorgeous. In fact, I was sure he did. The largest bedroom upstairs had a walk-in closet full of the most beautiful clothing I had ever seen. I figured a woman lived here, and this guy could be her boyfriend. I just wasn’t sure why he’d be staying in a different room. But it wasn’t my business. So no matter how nice those arms and that chest were, or how chiseled his face was, even with several days worth of stubble, he was not safe to think about.

I had to make sure I didn’t lose this job. The place was usually pretty clean, because no one had lived here in the months since I’d been working, but I cleaned it weekly like it was filthy. No dust could be found anywhere, and I even went as far as organizing the pantry and the cleaning closet, scrubbing the cabinets and throwing out any expired food.

Standing up, I shook off my humiliation at having woken up the client by singing God knows how loudly and vacuuming right outside his door. When he saw how clean everything was, maybe he’d overlook my mistake.



Three hours later, the downstairs was immaculate. I had even wiped out the fridge and the freezer completely again, giving the client plenty of time to sleep. I went to the second floor and cleaned every room thoroughly until I couldn’t find anything else to clean, before I finally stood at the foot of

the stairs and looked up to the third floor. It was one in the afternoon, and he was still in bed. I had ~~three bedrooms and three full bathrooms to get to, plus a theater and a game room with a full bar.~~ The game room was far enough away from his room that, if I was quiet, I could probably clean it without waking him.

I tiptoed up the stairs and eased past his room. When I was safely in the game room, I let out a sigh of relief. I closed the door behind me and turned to face the large, untouched room. The bar was stocked with every alcohol imaginable and so many different glasses I couldn't even begin to figure out what went with what. I walked across the room and set my basket of cleaning supplies down on the floor. I decided today I would spend some extra time cleaning the windows. I grabbed a chair and covered it with a clean cloth before standing on it. The ceiling was at least twelve feet high, which made the windows hard to reach. Sometimes I brought a ladder in here, but it would make too much of a racket if I tried to bring it up today.

I had reached up with a cloth to begin scrubbing the windows from top to bottom when my cell phone rang. *Crap!* I always put the ringer on high when I was working so I could hear it around the house. I scrambled to get down, but my foot slipped. I winced in pain just before the chair turned over and my arms shot out to grab for the closest thing next to me. A massive, ornate mirror.

The sound of breaking glass came just before my butt hit the floor with a resounding thud.

And my stupid cell phone was still blaring at top volume.

I turned and desperately reached for my phone but couldn't grab it. The loud ringing continued as I wiggled over to it, my legs all twisted up.

The door swung open, and I froze in place.

Here I sat, with shattered glass all around me and an upturned chair. The only bright spot was that my phone had finally stopped ringing.

"What the hell happened? Are you OK?" he asked, as he stalked toward me in a pair of white boxer briefs. At least he wasn't totally naked. I jerked my eyes away from him and his almost-naked body and sucked in a breath. I'd broken his mirror and woken him up again.

"I'm so sorry. I'll pay you back for the mirror. I know it probably costs a lot, but you don't have to pay me until it's covered. I'll even come in more than once a week for free."

He frowned, and my stomach dropped. He wasn't happy. "Are you bleeding? Shit, give me your hand."

He dropped to his knees and took my left hand in his. Sure enough, there was a piece of glass in it, and blood was slowly trickling out around the shard.

"You're gonna need stitches. Let me put on some clothes, and I'll take you to the hospital," he said, standing back up and heading for the door.

I stared down at the glass and back up at the door. He was taking me to get stitches. For this? If my cleaning agency found out, they would fire me themselves. I couldn't let him make a big deal out of it. I just needed some peroxide and something to wrap it up. Then I would clean up the mess I'd made.

I stood up and winced from the pain in my backside. I was going to have a bruise for sure. I dusted off the few slivers of glass still clinging to my clothes, but they opened up tiny cuts in my fingers. The blood that smeared down my legs only made things look worse than they were.

I eased out of the wreckage I had created. Once I was sure I wasn't trailing any pieces of glass after me, I found a clean cloth in my basket, then went to the nearest bathroom to the right of the game room, wet the cloth, and cleaned up my legs.

"What are you doing?" His voice sounded mad.

I jerked my head up and backed away as he filled the doorway of the bathroom. My foot was up on the closed toilet seat lid, and I immediately dropped it back to the floor. "I'm sorry I'm barefoot. I was going to clean the toilet lid once I was done."



His frown grew. Crap. I wasn't making this better.

"I don't care about the fucking toilet. Why didn't you wait for me to help you up? You could have stepped in more glass."

What? This time I frowned. I wasn't understanding him. "I was careful," I replied, still not sure what had him upset.

"Come on. I'm going to pull that glass out and clean the wound and wrap it before we leave. You can't keep it in there. It could get infected."

"OK," I replied, afraid to tell him no. He was obviously intent on helping me.

He turned and started walking out, so I followed him. I only glanced down once at his bottom, and that was only because I was curious about what his backside looked like in those jeans he was wearing. It was just as impressive as his front. Those jeans fit nicely.

I sent my gaze up his back and noticed for the first time that he had a ponytail. His hair wasn't that long, but it seemed at least to hit his shoulders. I hadn't allowed myself to look at him enough to notice. His eyes and strong jawline had taken all my attention before.

We reached his bedroom door, and he stood back and waved me inside. "I have no idea where Nan keeps her first-aid supplies, but I've got some in my duffel. I'm doctoring a fall from a horse I'm breaking, so I came prepared."

Nan? Who was Nan? "Do you not live here?" I asked.

He pulled out a small blue pouch from his camouflage duffel bag and turned to look back at me. A grin lifted the corners of his mouth, and his eyes danced with amusement. "Hell, no." He chuckled. "Have you met Nannette? No one willingly lives with her. But since our father owns this house, I can stay here whenever I choose. I just choose to do so when Nan is gone."

"Oh. I've never seen anyone here until you," I said.

"That explains a lot," he mumbled, then chuckled as if he knew a joke I didn't. He held out his hand. "Here, give me your hand. I will be as gentle as I can, but this is gonna sting."

I didn't let men touch me. But something about the concerned way he was studying my palm made me trust him. He was a nice guy, or he seemed to be a nice guy. He wasn't looking at me in ways that made me nervous.

I placed my hand palm up in his, and he glanced up at me apologetically, as if it was his fault. I watched as he slowly slid the glass out of my palm and then began dotting it with a cotton ball he'd coated in peroxide. Yes, it stung, but I'd been through much worse.

He bent his head and started gently blowing on my wound as he cleaned it. The cool feel of his breath on my skin eased the sting, and I became fascinated with the way his lips looked puckered up. Was he for real? Had I hit my head when I fell? Was this some strange dream?

He held the cotton ball tightly against the wound, pressing it down with his thumb while he reached for a new cotton ball and medical tape. "I wish I had some salve for it, but I rarely use it, so I didn't bring any. I've got some Tylenol you can take to ease the pain until we can get you to the hospital."

I just nodded. I didn't know what else to do. No one had ever cared that I had an injury. And I'd had many.

"My name is Mase, by the way," he said, as he glanced up at me while wrapping my hand.

"I like that name. I've never heard it before." He chuckled. "Thanks. Do you have a name?" Oh. He was asking what my name was. No one I had worked for had asked me my name except for one client. But she was different from the clients at the other places I worked. "Yes, I do. It's Reese."

---

# Mase

She smelled like a fucking cinnamon bun. That sweet cream icing and cinnamon smell that made your mouth water. Not taking deep whiffs as her scent wafted over me was hard. But I managed not to act like a psycho and pull her up against me so I could bury my face in her neck and just breathe. I'd never known a woman to smell like a cinnamon bun, but damn, it was a turn-on.

I got her hand wrapped up and then led her down the stairs. She seemed confused about something but she didn't say much. I asked her if she had a purse, and she nodded and went to get it from the table beside the door. It wasn't what most women would call a purse; it was a faded blue backpack. She slung it over her shoulder and looked back at the house with a worried expression.

"I'm not done cleaning," she said, then looked back at me.

"You can't clean with your hand torn open," I pointed out, unable to suppress a grin.

Her brow puckered into a frown. "It isn't that bad. I can work like this," she said, holding up her bandaged hand.

I shook my head and opened the door. "No, you can't."

We stepped outside and saw that my truck had arrived. I had been waiting for someone to drop it off. Good, I could drive it instead of her car.

"Where's your car?" I asked her.

"I don't have one."

"Did someone bring you?" I asked, already knowing her answer would be that her boyfriend had brought her. Fuck.

"I have a neighbor who works at the Kerrington Country Club. I ride with him, and then I walk her from there."

A neighbor. "He doesn't bring you here?"

She shook her head and looked at me like I was crazy. "No. It's like a mile away. I enjoy the walk."

"Who's your neighbor?" I ask.

"His name is Jimmy."

I was going to have a talk with Jimmy. It wasn't safe for someone who looked like her to be walking around by herself. Rosemary Beach was a safe place, but there were people who drove through going from one town to the next. "Does Jimmy take you home?"

She glanced at me with uncertainty. Like she wasn't sure she should answer me. "Sometimes—yes most of the time."

Why didn't she have a car? She had to be twenty-one or twenty-two. She wasn't a kid. She had a job and an apartment, I would assume. "How do you get home when Jimmy doesn't give you a ride?" I asked, holding the truck door open for her. I held out my hand for her to take with her good one and

helped her into the truck cab.

“I walk,” she replied, not looking at me.

Fucking hell.

Glancing down at her cheap flip-flops, I noticed that she had perfect little pink-tipped toes. Even her feet had to be sexy? Damn.

She tucked her feet back, and I knew she had seen me looking at them. I closed the truck door and took my time walking around to the driver’s side. This girl needed help, but I couldn’t save her. I was here for a week, maybe two, before I headed back to Texas. Getting worked up over this girl’s problems wasn’t smart.

My cell phone started ringing in my pocket before I could start the engine, and I knew it was Harlow. She was expecting me at around two. Glancing at the clock, I saw it was almost two now.

“Hey,” I said into the phone, as I cranked up the truck and headed toward the main road.

“Did you get some sleep?” she asked. I could hear Lila Kate, her baby girl, fussing in the background.

“Uh, yeah,” I replied. I couldn’t tell her how little sleep I’d gotten, since the reason was sitting beside me.

“You still coming at two? Grant said he’d give us an hour and then he’ll be here by three.”

I glanced over at Reese’s injured hand. That was going to take a while. An ER waiting room was never fast. “There was an accident this morning. The girl who cleans Nan’s house fell and sliced her hand open. I’m taking her to get stitches. Could be a while before I get there.”

“Oh, no!” Harlow said, her voice filled with concern. One of the many reasons I preferred Harlow Nan. “Is she OK?”

She hadn’t even winced when I cleaned her with peroxide. Hell, I even winced when I had a cut like that. “Seems to be. Just a nasty cut. She doesn’t have a car, and I’ll need to take her home afterward. Might be later on tonight before I get there. But you’ve got me the rest of the week. You’ll be sick of my face before Sunday,” I assured her.

Harlow laughed. “Doubt it, but that’s fine. Take your time. Get her fixed up and safely home. I’ll take a nap with Lila Kate. She was up a lot last night. She’s teething.”

“Get some sleep, then, sweetheart. I’ll see you tonight,” I replied, before ending the call.

“You don’t have to stay with me. I’ll get a cab to take me home,” Reese said.

I wasn’t leaving her to get stitches and take a cab home. Did I look like the kind of jackass who would do that? “I’ll stay with you,” I said firmly.

“Really, it’s very nice of you to take me. But I’ve had cuts worse than this before. I don’t even need stitches. I can just finish up cleaning and head home.”

What? Was she serious? “You’re getting stitches, and I’m taking you home.” I was frustrated and getting pissed. Not at her. God, who the hell could get pissed at someone who looked like her? But I was pissed that she seemed to think it was OK not to get stitches.

She didn’t argue this time. I glanced over at her, and she was sitting straighter, and her body was leaning toward the door as if she was trying to get away from me. Had I scared her?

“Look, Reese, you were cleaning my sister’s house, and you got hurt. It’s our responsibility to make sure you are properly taken care of. I’m not going to let you finish cleaning the house today or even tomorrow. You can come back once your hand is better and it doesn’t hurt. I’ll be here all week, and clean up after myself, unlike my sister. I don’t need a housecleaner.”

She didn’t look at me, but she nodded.

It looked like that was the only response I was going to get. Fine. She could pout about this, but seriously, all I’d done was demand that she let me take care of her. What was her deal?

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# Reese

This day could not get any more humiliating. Mase had turned up the radio for the rest of the ride to the hospital. He hadn't said another word. I knew he was either angry or frustrated. I was keeping him from a woman, but I'd tried to let him go. He just wouldn't listen to me.

Once we were at the ER, he got me a soda while we waited, even though I told him I didn't need one. By the time they took me back for stitches, we had said all of five words to each other. I wanted to tell him to leave again and that I'd get a cab, but I was afraid he'd snap at me. I didn't know this man. I had no clue what he was capable of.

When they had given me a shot, Mase had held my other hand and told me to squeeze if I needed it. What did that even mean? Was he trying to ease the pain? It was just a shot. When they had stitched up my gash, which needed five stitches, he had continued to hold my hand.

He had told me jokes. They were corny, but I'd laughed. I didn't think anyone had ever tried to make me laugh before. I knew it was the first time I'd ever been told a joke that wasn't about me. In school, I had heard enough jokes, but I had been the butt of them all.

Now he was pulling up in front of my apartment. He hadn't spoken to me during the entire drive. He'd looked like he was going to say something more than once, but he'd stopped himself. Eventually he'd turned up the radio again, and I knew that meant he was done talking to me.

I couldn't be hurt over his silence. He had put off his date or girlfriend to take me to the hospital and get stitches. During the whole thing, he had been so nice—more than that, actually, he had been kind. But now his mind was on his sweetheart, the girl who was waiting for him.

I had been called "babe," "sugar," and "hot momma" in the past, which still made me cringe. I had also been called other less desirable names, but never "sweetheart." I wondered what that must feel like. To have someone speak to you that way and mean it. To know he wasn't going to hurt you.

When he parked the truck, I knew I had to thank him again and send him on his way.

"Thanks again for taking me, and for the soda, and for . . . for, um, holding my hand. I really appreciate it. I'm sorry I ruined your day. And I'll be back to clean up on Sunday. I don't have another house booked for that day. And you're leaving then . . . right?"

Mase sighed and looked at me. "Yeah, I'm heading home Sunday. At least, that's the plan right now. But don't worry about the house until your hand is better. Nan won't be back for another month. She's in Paris."

Paris. Wow. I couldn't imagine going somewhere like Paris. I wondered what this Nan looked like. If she was his sister, I imagined she was beautiful.

"OK, thanks," I said again, unable to stop thanking him. I grabbed my backpack and opened the truck door.

“Wait. Let me help you down,” Mase said, stopping me. He had done this every time I got into or out of the truck. It was as if he didn’t think I could just hop down on my own without hurting myself. But then again, after what he had witnessed today, he probably thought I was a klutz.

He was in front of me, holding out his hand again for me to take. I let him help me, because I was sure it was the last time I’d see this man. He didn’t realize it, but he’d given me hope. And he’d show me that not all men were evil.

I bit my tongue to keep from thanking him again. Instead, I just nodded and headed for apartment 1C.

“Reese,” Mase called out, stopping me in my tracks.

I turned to look back at him. The sun was setting behind him, and I was sure nothing had ever been quite that perfect in all of history.

“You didn’t ruin my day,” was all he said before opening his truck door and climbing back up.

I wanted to watch him drive away. But I didn’t.



The next morning, my hand was throbbing. But I took the antibiotic and pain medicine the doctor had given me and got ready for work. I had another house to clean that day in Rosemary Beach. Jimmy had gotten me this one, because he was friends with the owners. I wasn’t about to let him down and call in sick.

Jimmy was standing outside my door with two to-go cups of cappuccino, smiling. He wasn’t just nice, he was gorgeous. And he knew it. It was odd that I didn’t think of him as a regular guy, though. He was more like my very first girlfriend. I’d told him that once, and he’d cackled with laughter.

He also had a cappuccino machine in his apartment. I was beginning to love that machine.

“Good morning, gorgeous. Here’s your wake-up juice,” he said, handing me the cup. I started to reach for it with my bad hand and stopped. I used my good hand, but Jimmy’s eyes were already locked on my bandaged one. “Girl, what the hell happened to you?”

I sighed, hating to remember the mess I’d made yesterday. “I fell while cleaning a window, broke a mirror on the way down, and sliced open my hand.” I didn’t want to give him details. I held up the bandaged hand. “Five stitches. The owner’s brother gave me a ride to the hospital.”

Jimmy winced. “Ouch. You sure you can clean a house today? That’s got to hurt.”

“I’m fine. I’ll be a little slower, but you can bet I won’t be standing on chairs anymore to clean windows,” I joked.

He didn’t grin, just shook his head. “You are one piece of work, Reese Ellis. Come on, let’s get your hot ass to the Car ters’. I also have a number for you to call. Blaire Finlay is a close friend of mine, and she’s interested in hiring a new housecleaner. The one she has now is retiring, and she wants someone young. She’s got a little tike. It was getting hard for their cleaner to handle his messes. Kid cute as a button, though.” I took the number he handed me. “Call her. She’s a doll. You’ll love her.”

Another job I was getting without using the agency. This was good. I got to keep all the income from clients I found on my own. “Thanks, Jimmy,” I said, tucking the number into my pocket. “I’ll call her once my hand is better. I don’t want to show up at her house with a bandaged hand.”

Jimmy grinned, and his angel face showed even brighter. “She’s actually Harlow Carter’s sister-in-law, for all intents and purposes.”

That didn’t really make sense. What did he mean, for all intents and purpose? I figured it didn’t matter. Besides, I really liked Mrs. Carter. She was there often when I cleaned, because she had a baby, so I had spoken to her several times. She always tried to get me to stop and have lunch with her. I was sure I’d be happy working for her sister-in-law, too.

~~“I have to work a fund-raiser benefit tonight at the club. I won’t be done until one in the morning. Wish you’d take a cab home. Especially with that bum hand of yours. After cleaning at the Carters’, you’re going to be tired. And probably hurting.”~~

We had this discussion every day when he had to work late. He always wanted me to take a cab home, but we lived only eight miles from the club, right outside Rosemary Beach and back a few roads inland. I had walked to school, the library, and the grocery store my entire life. I was used to walking to get to places. If I wanted to go somewhere, I had to walk.

I could probably afford a car now, but I couldn’t pass the written test. I had asked my mother to help me once, and it had been a terrible mistake. She’d made sure I understood that lazy, stupid people shouldn’t drive cars. It was dangerous to everyone else. I had tried twice now to read the study guide for the written test, but it was no use. The words never made sense to me.

Which was how I knew that my mother and my step father and all the kids at school had been right. I was stupid. I had to be. My brain didn’t work the way everyone else’s did. I was twenty-two, and I still went to the library and got picture books and tried to read them.

“I bet Harlow would give you a ride after work, if you’d just ask her. Hell, I’ll ask her. People don’t get any sweeter than Harlow Carter.”

I was not asking her to drive me home. “It’s OK. I’ll think about calling a cab. I promise,” I told him, knowing that I would think about it but wouldn’t do it.

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# Mase

I hadn't gone to Harlow's last night. I'd gone back to the house and cleaned up the glass, then called and explained that I was exhausted. I still had sleep to catch up on. The few hours I'd gotten that morning weren't enough.

When I'd woken up to silence this morning, I'd felt an odd sense of loss. Which was odd, considering that Reese couldn't sing for shit. I didn't plan on seeing the girl again. Even if I didn't leave on Sunday, I wouldn't be here when she got here. I had an urge to fix all her problems. Which was stupid. She was doing fine without me. But something about those big eyes . . . and hell, who was I kidding? There wasn't a part of her body that didn't scream for attention. And I wanted to give her that attention.

A woman like that should have a man. Made no sense why she didn't.

I pulled up outside Harlow's and pushed all thoughts of Reese out of my mind so I could move on from yesterday. Yes, I thought I deserved a motherfucking trophy for *not* kissing those plump lips, but that was over now.

The front door swung open, and Harlow came running out, grinning like a little girl. In my head, she'd always be my baby sister. I could still see her pigtails and the gap between her two front teeth as she smiled up at me. She'd had freckles on her nose back then, too. She'd needed me for a long time, and I'd taken care of her. But Grant Carter did that now.

"You're here!" She squealed and threw herself into my arms.

I chuckled at her enthusiasm and held her in my arms as she kissed my cheek. "Sorry I didn't make it yesterday. Long day," I said, feeling guilty for not coming by last night.

"It's OK. I have a full day planned out for us. Lila Kate is sleeping inside, and the housecleaner Grant insisted we need is cleaning upstairs. Which, by the way, don't get me started on that. He didn't like that I was cleaning while Lila Kate was sleeping; he thinks I should be sleeping with her and getting more rest. He doesn't want me cleaning the house." She rolled her eyes as if he was ridiculous. But I agreed with him. Harlow had a heart condition that had almost taken her from us. The memory of nearly losing her during childbirth was still too raw. Lila Kate had been several days old before Harlow had opened her eyes.

"He's right," I replied simply, and Harlow laughed at me.

"Come on in. I have brunch ready. I've been watching the Food Network while giving Lila Kate her bottle in the middle of the night, so I've been into cooking lately. It started an itch."

I followed Harlow inside as she chatted happily. Hearing the joy in her voice and seeing the love shining in her eyes made me really like Grant Carter. I wasn't sure at first, but the dude had won me over. He made my little sister happy. He adored her the way she needed to be adored.

"I'm back inside, Reese. You don't have to keep an eye on Lila Kate. I have the monitor with me. Thank you!" Harlow called up the stairs.

Just as the name "Reese" was sinking in, I looked upstairs to see those baby-blues staring down at me, all wide and surprised. Well, shit. So much for not seeing her again.

"Reese, this is Mase, my brother. Mase, this is Reese. She's the best housecleaner in the world. I have Jimmy to thank for pointing her my way."

I saw her cover her bandaged hand with her good one as she forced a tight, nervous smile. She was working with her hand like that. Dammit. Did she not listen to anything I had said? She was so fucking stubborn. Her stitches had to be burning like a motherfucker.

"She's pretty dedicated, too, since she's cleaning your house with five fresh stitches in her palm. Your pain tolerance is really impressive, Reese," I said.

"What?" Harlow gasped. "Oh! Reese cleans Nan's, too?" Harlow swung her gaze up to Reese. "You're cleaning after slicing your hand open yesterday? Why didn't you tell me? I would have never expected you to come in today. You need to rest your hand. You could tear it back open," Harlow scolded her.

I watched as Reese straightened her shoulders and stuck her bandaged hand behind her back, as if that would make it go away. "I'm fine. Really, I am. I woke up this morning, and it didn't hurt at all. Well, maybe a little, but I took my medicine, and it was better. I'm almost done with the upstairs. I won't be but another three hours."

Harlow shook her head. "Absolutely not. You come eat brunch with us, and then Mase can drive you home. I don't want you back here until next week at the earliest. You can't work with your hand like that."

I could see the frustration in Reese's face, but she wasn't going to argue with Harlow. "OK. Let me just put the folded towels in your bathroom, and then I'll be down."

*Damn, woman.* "The towels are fine wherever they are. Harlow can put her towels away. Come downstairs." It sounded like an order. But she was pushing my patience.

She nodded stiffly and came down the stairs slowly. She wasn't wearing shorts today. Instead, she had on leggings that ended just below her knee. They hugged her like a glove. I wished her damn shirt wasn't so big so I could see her ass in those things.

"I'm sorry he sounds so bossy. He's always been bossy. It's this alpha-male thing he has going on," Harlow said, as Reese stopped in front of us. "Come on, let's go eat. I'm serving some things I just tried for the first time. I can't wait to hear what y'all think about them."

I watched as Harlow walked to the kitchen and waited until she was far enough ahead before looking at Reese. "Let me see your hand," I said softly, trying to ease her tension. It was clear I made her nervous when I was frustrated.

She started to argue. I could see it in her eyes, but she relented and held out her hand to me. I unwrapped it gently and took in the pink, puckered skin. It wasn't infected, but it was abused from cleaning. She needed to put some ice and salve on it.

"I'm getting you some ice. Come on," I told her, holding her wrist and pulling her to walk in front of me.

"I really wish you wouldn't. Harlow will feel bad that I cleaned her house today."

She was worried about Harlow. Why did this not surprise me? "It's fine. Harlow will want you to take care of yourself."

She walked into the kitchen and over to the table, where Harlow was motioning for her to sit.

My relaxing visit with Harlow had just become something different altogether. I walked to the freezer and fixed a bag of ice. Harlow had sat down at the table across from Reese, but I could feel her eyes on me. My sister was reading more into this than there was.



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