

SONG OF THE NIGHT: THE LASTING EFFECTS OF TRAUMA

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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I, Aarushi Mudavangatil, certify that all research compliance requirements related to this Undergraduate Research Scholars thesis have been addressed with my Research Faculty Advisor prior to the collection of any data used in this final thesis submission.

This project did not require approval from the Texas A&M University Research Compliance & Biosafety office.

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ABSTRACT

Song of the Night

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Song of the Night is a creative piece that delves into the themes of child abuse and trauma and its lasting effects in adulthood. This work talks about the onset of mental illnesses as well the stigma it carries in today's world. The main focus of this topic is given to Dissociative Identity Disorder, especially in the developmental stages. The concept of social status in society and the covering up of crimes with respect to status is also a key factor in this novel. The difference between a serial killer and an assassin is established in detail. The main idea of how emotional trauma and abuse affect decision making as an adult is explored in this novel.

Jackson Liu is an infamous, self-employed assassin in the city of Plano, Texas. A tattoo artist by day, he has created a name for himself amongst the general public as a vigilante who only targets the corrupt upper-class. He is aided by his girlfriend Zoe Powers, a powerful criminal lawyer who represents these people in court—and also gives Jackson his targets. Zoe is the youngest in a family of well-known doctors in the city and is under the pressure of gaining her family's approval. Nisha Mehta is the fourteen-year-old daughter of a renowned business tycoon, Vikas Mehta, and a victim of her parents' abuse. The abuse escalates to the point where

Nisha develops another identity to protect herself, and in the process learns about Jackson. She employs him to get rid of her family. Jackson and Zoe take Nisha in, not wanting her to be put into the system and Nisha's alter identity trains under Jackson to follow in his footsteps. Jackson does not kill her family and leaves that opportunity to her if she chooses to kill them.

DEDICATION

To Ma,

I promise to write a happier book next so that you can finally read something I write.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Contributors

I would like to thank my faculty advisor, Dr. Lowell White, for his guidance and encouragement. His regular reminders to keep working and constant enthusiasm were some of my favorite moments during this period.

Thank you to the Texas A&M University Libraries, for going above and beyond with giving me content for my research and the librarians for being so sweet and enthusiastic about my novel.

To my teammates in the Aggie Creative Collective—Abby Forrest, Meredith White, Gabriel Zolton—thank you for being patient with me during Dungeons & Dragons. I'm still nowhere good but those nights were amazing. Being in a cohort with you has been a great joy.

Finally, thanks to my parents for their encouragement and to my friends for their patience and love. Kirby Baber, thank you so much for being a ray of sunshine and my constant hype-woman, no matter how stressed I got.

The references used for Song of the Night were provided by Dr. White, my research faculty advisor, as well as the library database of Texas A&M.

All other work conducted for the thesis was completed by the student independently.

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NOMENCLATURE

DID Dissociative Identity Disorder

ACC Aggie Creative Collective

1. AESTHETIC MOTIVATION AND RESEARCH QUESTION

Song of the Night researches the themes of child abuse, mental illness, and criminal psychology and how they are all connected. This is a novel that tells the story of a group of people from different walks of life who have suffered from trauma of varying kinds and how it affects their lives. This work also brings more light to the concept of “nature vs nurture” in a child’s cognitive growth, and how a person’s environment plays a part in shaping their personality.

Song of the Night is driven by my desire to address important topics that tend to be overlooked. Abuse—physical, sexual, and emotional—is an issue that is widely stigmatized and when untreated can lead to a very nuanced emotional development within the survivor. I was raised in a conservative family in India, where topics like these were forbidden to discuss. To cope with my own trauma, I turned to movies and shows to help me understand my feelings and my situation. However, the portrayal of trauma in popular media was very biased and romanticized, which led me to look for creative media that accurately portrayed the struggles that I had to face. The more I delved into this topic, the more questions I had unanswered.

The main question *Song of the Night* aims to answer is the question of “what happens after?” My biggest question growing up was what happened after the survivor was no longer in their abusive environment. I wanted to know how they carried on with life—which was something the media I had consumed did not address—and whether they were able to put their traumatic event behind them, how long it took and how it affected them in the process. This thought process also led me to want to know more about survivors who were not able to seek

help or treatment for their trauma. This dilemma became the starting point and the main theme for my research.

In addition to abuse, it is known that traumatic events tend to breed mental illnesses. In the introduction to *Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse : Tackling the Health and Mental Health Effects*, Catherine Itzin writes, “Child physical, emotional or sexual abuse...factors in the mental and physical ill-health of children, adolescents, and adults” (Itzin, et al 9). As someone who suffers from severe depression and anxiety stemming from my emotional trauma, this was something I was very passionate about portraying. I knew that I couldn’t accurately research every illness I wished to include, so I decided to narrow my search and focus on the mental disorders that stemmed specifically from child abuse, which would be consistent with the story that I wanted to tell (McLean Hospital, 2020). In countries like India, mental health is so widely discredited, it is believed to be a hoax. The idea of therapy was and still is looked down upon. It did not help that in western media, mental health is dangerously glamorized which has led to widespread and deep-rooted misconceptions about various illnesses. This is quite harmful not only to the individuals struggling with their mental health but also to future individuals who may end up in the same scenarios. With *Song of the Night*, I want to portray the harsh realities of dealing with a mental illness, both for the person and their family, and the consequences arising from the different ways of handling it. At the same time, I want to show that people struggling with their mental health are just victims of their circumstances and should not be treated any differently than anyone else.

My interest in abuse and topics that were drearier than usual led me to discovering true crime. I became fascinated with the psychology behind criminals and their motivation to pursue a life of crime. The more I looked into it, the more I streamlined my searches to serial killers and

assassins. I learned about the difference between them and how their childhood and their past shape them into who they are today. I began to tie these three themes together and I realized that they fit cohesively with one another, which led me to begin my brainstorming for the creative side of my work.

Song of the Night invites readers to think of the hypothetical—yet real—question of how child abuse and trauma affects life as an adult. I aim to this question through all the main characters in the story who, having suffered different kinds of trauma, navigate through life very differently despite their lives being woven together. I believe my artifact is important to the field of behavioral psychology, especially during the stages of an individual's cognitive growth.

I want to target the environmental aspect of human growth and development. Psychology tells us that a child's surrounding plays an important role in their cognitive development—nature vs nurture. It has been shown that both nature and nurture are essential in human development, but their interactions throughout development are also to be considered (Keating, 2012). With *Song of the Night*, I aim to address that specific part and show insight as to how a child's upbringing changes their outlook on life. This is a recurring theme amongst all the characters in my work. I also hope to shed some light on the struggles that individuals such as myself had to deal with under the very traditional environment we were raised in. I want to show how in some cases, for a culture to progress, they need to break away from some traditions that do more harm than good. I believe that viewing and understanding this topic from a creative, imaginary lens may provide a new perspective to the readers and would be a welcome change of pace from formal, factual works.

Song of the Night was created and written with these motivations in mind. It follows the story of fourteen-year-old Nisha Mehta, who suffers physical and mental abuse at the hands of

her parents and Jackson Liu, a twenty-eight-year-old tattoo artist who is also a vigilante killer. In the story, Nisha tries to find a way to safely remove herself from her parents control and employs Jackson's help in the process. On top of this, both of them will have to deal with the onset of an alter identity in Nisha, who begins to show an alarming interest in Jackson's killings. I chose to incorporate my research and my literary analysis into my novel to ensure that I was depicting the delicate issue of mental health and abuse realistically and accurately, without falling into former stereotypes.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT, DISCIPLINARY PARADIGMS, AND AESTHETIC STANDARDS

2.1 Mental Illnesses, Antisocial Behavior, and Child Abuse

It is common knowledge that society has not treated the topic of mental illness well. In the past, people suffering from depression, autism, and schizophrenia to name a few were treated almost similarly to slaves and criminals. It was believed to be a punishment from God in the Middle Ages and individuals who unfortunately suffered were claimed to have been possessed by the devil (Rossler, 2016). While society has progressed since then and mental health has become less of a forbidden topic, it is still something that people are discriminated against in most walks of life.

Song of the Night focuses mainly on mental illnesses that stem from trauma, physical as well as psychological. It has been shown that traumatic events occurring in childhood can lead to long-term physical and mental health struggles (Isobel et al.). The same study mentions that experiences of trauma have led to the development of illnesses like depression, anxiety disorders as well as personality disorders. In *The Long-term Health Outcomes of Childhood Abuse*, general medical literature fails to acknowledge the association between adult mental health outcomes and childhood abuse. An issue that arises is depicted in Wulf Rossler's *The Stigma of Mental Disorders* where he talks about how stigmatization of mentally ill people by society hindered their ability to have normal, functioning lives. Humans inherently have the ability to be sympathetic and if they were made aware of the roots of an individual's mental struggle, it would be very easy to sympathize with them. I aim to bring this issue to light. My creative artifact hopes to establish sympathy for my characters struggling to cope with their trauma, as well as

create an understanding of their illnesses. My main attention will be given to the topics of depression, anxiety as well as dissociative identity disorder (DID). Nin, the creator of the YouTube channel *DissociaDID*, suffers from DID. She is a system with more than twenty-one alters and is my main source to portray this disorder accurately. *When Rabbit Howls*, by Truddi Chase is another source for my research about DID from a creative standpoint. To subvert general stereotypes and misconceptions about the topics portrayed, various sources have been researched. (Beddows, 2019, Itzin, 2010, McLean Hospital, 2020, Shoos, 2019).

It has been proven that there is a significant relationship between exposure to trauma and violence as a child and committing crimes later on in life (Herrenkohl et al., 2016). Another recurring instance found amongst all survivors of abuse was that they suffered from different kinds of mental illnesses. My creative artifact will tie this in with my other research in the field of mental illnesses and will portray the correlation in a creative and accurate manner. The main sources of reference are *Zombie*, by Joyce Carol Oates, which details the life and the psychology of a serial killer as well as Robert Baer's *The Perfect Kill: 21 Laws for Assassins* which shows a stark difference in the mindset of an assassin.

2.2 Why Thriller?

The chosen genre and medium for my creative artifact are a thriller novel, which I believe is fitting for the topics I want to portray in my story. My creative work revolves around the themes of abuse, murder, and crime which are all components of a thriller. The setup of a thriller is often villain-driven, and the protagonist has to overcome the obstacles they are presented with.

The basic conventions of a typical thriller are that the plot and stakes are often embellished, but the atmosphere and settings are realistic. There is usually a device that drives

the villain's actions (called a "MacGuffin"), and these actions contain clues about said device. The general aim of a thriller is where the protagonist investigates clues to stop the antagonist. For most thrillers to work, they need the element of excitement and surprise which is often depicted in the form of red herrings or cliffhangers. Another recurring theme that I have observed in most thrillers I have read is that the antagonist has absolute conviction in his morals and believes his methods to be right, no matter the consequence and some people respect and praise him. While the antagonist cannot be reasoned with, he can always be sympathized with because readers understand his motivations.

These basic conventions prove to be extremely suitable for my story as I can weave them together in my basic plot points. One of the major themes of my story is high-stakes murder and using devices like red herrings and cliffhangers when showing my character's story makes it more interesting but also pushes the plot forward.

Another reason why I believe a thriller is the most suitable choice for my story is the background. I can show the struggles that my characters have undergone which have shaped them into who they are. I can show my readers their motivations and mindsets cohesively within the story without making it feel like I am feeding my readers blocks of information. I can also tie in themes of child abuse and mental illness, which are the other two topics I wish to discuss. Writing my piece this way helps me flesh out my characters better and provides an insight into my research question. By developing my artifact in the form of a thriller, I aim to provide an answer for my question while addressing all the major points I wanted to touch upon, like the environment of growth.

To create my artifact, I drew inspiration from popular thriller fiction as well as psychological suspense media so that I could accurately differentiate between the two genres and

not accidentally mix them together. I also paid specific focus to fiction with themes of abuse and mental health, as well as media that depicted stories of assassinations, serial killers, and revenge murder. Three creative pieces that I drew major inspiration from were Luc Besson's *Léon*, Yasuomi Umetsu's *Kite*, and *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* by Jeff Lindsay.

3. EXPLANATION OF EXHIBIT

3.1 First Presentation

Over the course of working on my research and thesis, I have given two separate presentations of my work. The first was a public reading of an excerpt of my novel through the Aggie Creative Collective. This presentation was done virtually over Zoom and was in front of all the participants of the ACC as well as the respective faculty advisors. I gave a brief overview of my research that I had conducted so far and read out the prologue of *Song of the Night*.

3.2 Second Presentation

My second presentation was at the URS Symposium, hosted by ForagerOne. This was a virtual event that lasted from February 24th to March 3rd. The event was set up in such a way that the participants would upload a video of themselves talking about their research in various fields and the week of February to March would have the viewers watching the presentations and providing feedback on the videos. I recorded a video of myself talking about my research and my creative artifact and uploaded it to the forum under the creative works banner.

I preferred this platform for my thesis presentation because it was virtual and therefore the risk of catching the coronavirus in a public, in-person meeting was eliminated. It was also easier for me to present my work because I have high social anxiety. I felt a lot more comfortable because I did not have to speak in front of a large audience and I could tailor my presentation to how I wanted it without having to worry about messing up.

For my presentation, I created a couple of slides that showed themes of research that I decided to focus on. I chose to mention only the themes in my presentation because I didn't want

to distract my viewers from what I was saying with text on the screen. I also attached an excerpt of my creative artifact which I read out loud when I filmed myself. The whole presentation, including the reading, came to be around eight minutes. To ensure that I created a presentation to my satisfaction, I rehearsed what I would be talking about numerous times. I also practiced reading out aloud, enunciating my words so that it would be easy to follow along with what I was saying. I made sure to time myself so that I did not exceed the given limit of ten minutes.

I chose this method of presentation because it provided me with a lot of flexibility. I am someone who works on something till I am satisfied with my product. With this presentation, I had the ability to evaluate myself and go back and change things that I did not like to make the whole experience better. I was also able to view my recording and I had the freedom to rerecord myself if I did not like how it turned out, something I would not have been able to do at a public, in-person event.

One downside to this kind of presentation, however, was that I had to wait at least a week to get feedback on my presentation because of the way the system was set up. I would have preferred to receive feedback and have my Q&A session as soon as I finished my talk as it would be interactive and help correct my flaws as soon as possible.



Figure 3.1: URS Presentation Slides.



Figure 3.2: URS Symposium Event.

4. REFLECTION

In the year since I first started my research, I think that I have been able to complete a substantial amount of work. At the beginning of this project, I just had the basic plotline in my mind and I was just planning on writing whatever came to mind and then go back after I finished writing and then edit everything. However my advisor recommended creating an outline to start off my novel so that I had a better idea on how I wanted my story to progress. I was ambitious in my goals as I was hoping to finish at least half of my novel by the end of the time I was given, but I am satisfied with what I have completed so far.

My writing process began with creating an outline of the initial couple of chapters which I discussed with my faculty advisor. The outline did change slightly as I worked my way through the novel, but it was easy for me to work on switching the chapters around in the novel. It also served as a way for me to keep track of all the major plot points in my work. This was one of the most important steps in my writing process. I tried to maintain a regular writing schedule as well—I set a goal of writing 5000 words a week—but I made sure to account for other school constraints and assignments that would take up my time. This schedule helped me make a decent amount of progress without me having to rush in the end to complete my deadlines.

The research process for *Song of the Night* was very extensive as I had a lot of topics to cover. Since I had already planned the setting of my work, I needed to conduct research of the area to make sure I depicted it accurately within my story. My literary research mainly involved me reading and viewing as much literature and media relevant to my research themes as possible. In the fiction literature, I was studying the way the topics I wanted to talk about were depicted as well as the style of writing. My cultural and sociological research stemmed from me studying

sources of information like newspapers, journals as well as scholarly articles that highlighted the topics I wanted to cover. The Texas A&M Libraries databases also helped me a lot with the research I conducted on federal proceedings in the US.

Since I was conducting my research in the year that the COVID-19 pandemic hit us, I had to conduct all my research online. This limited me from actually being able to interact with people that I thought would be helpful for my story—mainly tattoo artists—but since we live in a digitized world, it was easy to read about and learn about their experiences online. Given that I started research when the pandemic hit and everything had made a transition from in-person to online, I think I managed to conduct quite a lot of research for the constraints provided.

I participated in only one public presentation which was held virtually. This was a new experience for me, but the feedback that I received on my excerpt was very helpful and is something that has helped me gauge what the general audience's reaction would be to my work.

One of the main things I was told to relate the themes of my research to the general audience as a way to get them interested in my work and that is something I have worked on since my presentation. I realized that the setting of my work is very interesting to me as the recurring themes of crime and mental health are something that I personally enjoy. I have since then worked on making my work more approachable to my audience without losing the tone of the story that I want to portray or falling into writing stereotypes of the topics in my work.

Going over the time I spent writing *Song of the Night*, I wish I had more time solely so that I could have put in a lot more of my novel that I deemed satisfactory. This artifact is not the final version and there will be more drafts to come in the future, once I finish my novel.

However, working on this on top of taking nineteen hours each semester, and working part time,

I think I have managed to utilize my time as well as possible. I am very grateful to have been given the opportunity to work on my research

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CREATIVE ARTIFACT: SONG OF THE NIGHT

Prologue

5 YEARS AGO

The punch sent Jackson reeling straight into a cabinet with a glass door.

His lips curled into a feral grin even as the glass shattered behind him, and a few shards dug into his back. He wiped off the blood oozing from his lip and rose to his feet gracefully, like a dancer with years of training.

"You son of a bitch!" The target roared, rushing at him, his lumbering footsteps echoing in the otherwise silent house.

Jackson sidestepped the man easily—and quietly—with the practiced ease of a professional, sending the other careening straight into the remnants of his own cabinet.

The screech of pain that followed was sweet, sweet music to his ears.

He would have basked in it a little more, if not for the flash of light that caught his eye. He raised an eyebrow. *Resourceful. I'll give him that*, he shrugged, jumping away to dodge the swipe of glass aimed at his abdomen.

Jackson relished the growl of frustration his victim let out when he managed to evade yet another blow—this time aimed at his face.

If anything, that seemed to infuriate the man even more. His attacks turned sloppier, his demeanor turning nastier, and sounds growing louder.

All that exertion in vain. Not only did he manage to tire himself out, but he also didn't manage to land any of his blows.

"How pathetic." Jackson's lips curled into a smirk as his eyes glittered with smug satisfaction. "I expected more of a challenge."

With those words hanging heavy in the air, he kicked the man's hand, sending the piece of glass skittering across the wooden floor. But before he could even utter a sound, he kicked him square in the jaw, sending him crashing to the ground.

He sauntered up to the man, who lay curled up on the floor clutching his jaw in pain. His face twisted into an ugly grimace and he yanked his face up by his hair.

"Not so powerful now, are you?" His eye twitched at the scared whimper that peeped into the air. "Where's that laughter now?"

"P-please... "

He backhanded the man sharply, satisfaction coiling through him when his face swung to the side. He pulled at his hair, making their eyes meet.

His voice was quiet, ominous. "Why?" Like a coiled snake ready to pounce. "Why should I listen to you? Why should I give a fuck about what comes out of that filthy mouth of yours? Did you? When they were on their knees begging for mercy, where was that consideration? Where was that humanity when she begged you to stop? Huh? Where?"

He watched him flinch at his roar of fury. He slapped him again. Rained down a few more blows.

"And most importantly," he stood up, pulling something out from his pocket. The man's eyes widened with fear and an acrid smell filled the room. But he paid no heed to his humiliation as his eyes focused on the needle glinting in the moonlight.

"And most importantly," Jackson lunged, wrapping his arm around the man's neck and tightening his grip, "why did you think you would be safe from me?"

With one swift motion, he jabbed the needle into the back of the man's head and made a point of pushing on the syringe slowly. He watched the man crumple to the floor, convulsing violently. Jackson snorted and straightened, wiping his hands on the almost dead man's clothes.

He picked up the body and dropped it beside the destroyed cabinet. He brushed out the wrinkles of his own shirt and looked around. His eyes landed on the bottle of pills laying on the bedside table. He opened it and dropped it onto the floor next to the corpse.

"Goodbye, Doctor Rogers. See you on TV soon," he whispered and glided to the window. With a quick glance around, he heaved himself up and exited the room, disappearing into the night.

What he didn't notice was the tiny pair of eyes—wide with wonder—stuck on his retreating figure.

Chapter 1

"Nisha, we're late! Get down here!"

Nisha jumped at the yell and immediately winced as the brush she'd been running through her hair caught on a knot. Cursing underneath her breath, she gathered her hair—knots and all—into a messy ponytail and bolted out of her room, stumbling when her leg caught on the carpet. She didn't let that slow her down though. Her mother sounded angry and she didn't want to make this car ride any worse than it could be.

She skidded to a halt right in front of her mother, who was standing at the door with her arms crossed and a frown on her face. She met her eyes for a moment before looking away and quickly pulling out her shoes. Her eyes flew to her mother's tapping feet and she grimaced.

Great. She's mad.

Her mother shot her one more glare as she straightened before storming out, leaving her to close and lock the door behind her. Nisha finished up as fast as she could and got into the car, but it wasn't fast enough.

"I told you we were going to HEB, the time as well. And you still couldn't help but be late, could you? Useless."

Nisha just exhaled heavily as she looked down, twisting her hands in her lap. She could feel the familiar tingle in her nose, and she screwed her eyes shut as tight as she could. *Don't cry, don't cry. It will only be worse if you do.*

The car ride to the grocery store was a quiet, uncomfortable one. Nisha could feel the tension suspended in the air and it was making her antsy. However, she knew better than to fidget or dispel some of the discomforts she was feeling. She had the bruises on her thighs to remind her.

Her mother had barely even put the car in park when she was already unbuckling her seatbelt and opening the door. But before she could get out, a hand circled her wrist and yanked her back. She turned to look into her mother's dark eyes. It was like a storm brewing in there and she was almost afraid she'd be struck by lightning.

"Remember who we are," she hissed, her hand tightening. Nisha fought back a wince as pain shot up her arm. "Don't humiliate me inside there. Understand?"

Nisha nodded.

"Use your words!"

"Yes! I understand. I'll be on my best behavior. I promise." She pulled back her hand, rubbing at the sore spot, and got out of the car.

The two walked to the entrance and Nisha glanced at her mother's stony face before deciding to get the big cart. She knew she made the right choice when her mother just walked straight into the store. With a huff of relief, she entered, gawking at the number of people milling about.

Nisha spotted her mother near the tomatoes and made a beeline for her, so focused on her task that she nearly missed the little kid running past her. Her eyes nearly popped out of her head as she pulled to an abrupt stop. She stared at the kid with wide eyes, her heart slamming against her chest. When she'd gained enough control over herself, she glanced up to see her mother gone. With a curse, she looked around and spotted her walking towards the cheese.

With an awkward smile at the kid and his incredibly apologetic parents, she maneuvered her way around the other customers and stopped right behind her mother, clipping her ankles in the process. Nisha knew exactly what she had done when she saw her mother flinch and nearly drop the box she was looking at. *Fuck.*

She shrunk backward, waiting to be hit with that thunderstorm again, but all she got was a glare. Nisha frowned in confusion. She was expecting a lot worse than just a mild glare. She gazed at her mother, her mind racing a mile a minute when a voice brought her to the present.

“Priya?”

“Emily! Hi, how have you been?”

Ah, that's why. Priya Mehta everyone. Ever the poised businesswoman and loving mother.

“Oh hi, Nisha! I didn't see you there. How are you?”

Nisha wasn't sure how she was supposed to answer, and she glanced at her mother—more out of habit than anything—but the darkening of her already black eyes was answer

enough. She immediately turned back to the older woman and smiled sweetly. “I’m doing good. How are you?”

The woman smiled and answered but Nisha was already tuning her out. She wasn’t Eileen’s focus. That was her mother. She was just here for the ride. A fake, overtly friendly, and sweet ride. It almost made her want to throw up. Or leave.

“Nisha *beta*, why don’t you go and get the stuff on my list? It’s been a while since I have talked to Emily.” The smile she shot her was sweet as candy, but her eyes told a different story. With a nod, she took the list and walked away but not before making sure she greeted Emily. She didn’t want another strike against her.

She stopped the minute she was out of her mother’s eyesight and slumped over the cart, heaving out a long sigh of relief. She looked back to see her mother still yapping away with the woman and let a small smile appear on her face. *Finally some peace and freedom.*

She looked down at the list and blinked at the number of items on it. “Why does she need all this? We literally make a run to the store every week.”

Nisha decided to start at the first aisle and snake her way around the store slowly. Some items made her double back and she nearly ran into a few people in the entire process, but she was finally done. She looked at her organized cart with something akin to pride and decided to go back and check on her mom.

Nisha’s excitement dwindled and slowly turned into dread as she came closer to the cheese aisle. Her mother was nowhere to be seen. Her mouth suddenly went dry. She looked around frantically but there was no sign of her or the woman she was with.

Panic was beginning to bubble within her, and she ran to the fresh produce to see if her mother had gone back there, but she wasn't there. Now she was feeling the pressure. She had lost her. One of the many things she knew would anger her mother.

She needed to find her. *Fast.*

Or else the consequences she'd face would be awful.

*

Lucy cooed at the disgruntled kitten settling into her arms. "It's okay Momo. I'm pretty sure Bri didn't mean to bite your tail." All she got in reply was another baleful mewl which made her chuckle. She looked down when another cat started rubbing against her leg.

The minute she bent down to pet that cat, Momo hissed and curled into a ball. Lucy laughed as the other cat purred, unbothered. "Now now, Bri. Make nice. You know Momo is new here, you have to make her feel welcome. Especially since you're my cat."

Bri's only response was to bat at Momo's dangling tail before flouncing away. Lucy shook her head as she watched her cat walk away before going to place Momo in her bed. "You stay here okay, I'll tend to a few more customers and then I'll come back."

Lucy had just straightened, groaning as her joints cracked when a yell sounded from the kitchen. "We're out of milk! And sugar! And flour!"

Lucy frowned at the words, immediately walking into the kitchen. "Jenna, how is that possible? I just bought that stuff two days ago!"

"Correction," her young employee raised her finger. "You bought that two *weeks* ago and now we're out. You're getting old so I'll help you out. *That's* what happens when your store

makes business. Really sad, I know.” She was shaking her head when Lucy whacked her with her towel, making her yelp.

“Shut it, smartass. For that, you’re the one going to get everything we’re out of.” Lucy tried whacking her again, but the girl jumped out of the way with a grin.

“Sorry, no can do. Me and my bike, remember? Unless... you’re willing to let me drive *your* car. Then of course! I’d love to go help the Boss lady out.” She bowed before Lucy, one hand outstretched above her. Lucy rolled her eyes and placed her towel on the open palm.

“Don’t bother. I’ll go myself. I’d rather not have my car totaled on the sidewalk somewhere.”

“Hey!”

“Of course I’ll need someone to see to the customers and cats while I’m gone. Shit, I already sent Ruby back to the studio.” She smacked her forehead as the door chime rang out. Jenna leaned over to peer around Lucy.

“Or...” she drawled, pointing at the newest person to enter the store, “you could have *him* look over the place.”

Lucy turned around and immediately brightened. “Jackson! It’s been a while!” She bounded out of the kitchen, straight into the tall man’s arms. She laughed as he picked her up and twirled her around.

“How’s my favorite woman on the planet doing today?” He released her and stooped to pet Bri, who had come bounding at the sound of his laugh.

“I don’t know, how is Zoe?”

Jackson shot her a look. “Very funny. I’m serious here!”

Lucy patted his head and gave him Bri to hold, as she walked back to her post. "I'm fine, boy. Just me and my cats all day long. What do you think is gonna happen to me?"

At the considering look he shot her, she winked.

Jackson sighed and shook his head. "One would think you're thirty and not sixty by the way you act," he muttered, placing Bri on the floor.

"I heard that! And I'm fifty-four! *Fifty-four!*"

"It's the same thing, you old bat!"

"I second that!" Jenna called out from the kitchen, immediately swooping back in when Lucy whirled to glare at her.

"Brat," she muttered before turning to the man. "You are too! Anyways, I need you to do me a favor."

"Jesus Christ I literally just came in. How do you already have something for me to do? What is it?"

"I need to go get some stuff. *Someone* over there didn't think of telling me till *after* we were out. Can you watch the place till I get back?"

She watched Jackson purse his lips. "I haven't been here in over a month and you're already giving me work. You're cold. But *fine*, I'll do it. Ruby can hold down the fort for a while. You sure you don't want me to go? I can get it done faster. Not to mention, it'll be a lot easier for me to carry everything around."

Lucy scowled at his teasing smirk and huffed. "Just for that, I'm going to go myself. You can park your wise-cracking butt on that chair." She pushed him behind the counter, grumbling at his laughter.

“I shouldn’t be long. Plus you’ve done this before. I’m trusting my baby in your hands young man. And make sure Jenna doesn’t sneak any cats into the kitchen!” She called out, heading for the door. Satisfied at Jackson’s nod, Lucy got into her car and headed to HEB.

Her nose wrinkled at the number of cars in the parking lot, but she grinned when she managed to spot an empty space incredibly close to the entrance. Lucy got out and headed for the store, a woman on a mission. She pulled her cart and made her way straight to the aisle where the drinks were kept.

She had just found what she was looking for and had placed the drink in her cart when something collided with her. She coughed as she held onto the shelf for balance, the wind knocked right out of her. She heard a low groan coming from the ground. Lucy turned and paused.

A small girl was sitting on the floor, rubbing her head as her face was scrunched up in pain. She couldn’t be more than twelve years old, even though she looked much younger. *What is a small child doing running around alone in this crowded place?*

“Are you okay?” She bent down and offered the girl a hand. She watched as the girl paused and looked at her hand, then up at her, and back again before slowly placing her own in it to pull herself up.

“I’m sorry.” Her voice was low, and her eyes were downcast, but Lucy noticed the way she snatched her hand away as soon as she straightened and twisted them into her shirt. She didn’t miss the way her eyes darted around every other second.

“It’s okay. Are you hurt anywhere? Seemed like a bad fall,” she said, eyeing the spot on her head that the girl had been rubbing. Her eyes traveled down to meet hers and she slightly drew back in surprise. Lucy wasn’t sure what she said to warrant the fear flashing in the girl’s

eyes, but it was a little concerning. She looked around to see if there was any adult near her, but no one seemed to stand out. She frowned.

“Honey, where are your parents?”

Chapter 2

Lucy watched the girl flinch at her question, her eyes darting around yet again. It was almost like she was trying to find an escape route. Or trying to gauge her surroundings. One of the two, neither breeding a lot of confidence within her.

She crouched down slowly, trying not to spook her. “It’s okay,” she spoke quietly, slow enough for the girl to take her eyes off a person passing by and lock onto her own. “I don’t mean any harm. I promise. Can you tell me where your parents are?”

A mumble. Lucy blinked, not registering a single word. The girl had now broken eye contact and was staring down at her feet, her fingers twisting into the hem of her shirt, crumpling the fabric awfully. It took everything Lucy had not to grimace at the girl’s fidgeting. “I’m sorry, I didn’t catch what you were saying. Can you repeat that for me?”

Is a child her age supposed to be so uncomfortable with this simple a question? Lucy prided herself on having a welcoming and kind demeanor. The only other time that she could remember a small kid being this uncomfortable with her was Jackson when she’d discovered him in her café. And she knew the reason for that.

Wait. So did that mean...?

No. She was not going to entertain that train of thought.

Strike one.

“I’m here by myself.”

And now wasn't that a bald-faced lie if any? Lucy could feel her eyebrow climbing up her forehead even as she fought to keep her face impassive. Some habits were hard to break. She had opened her mouth, about to say something when she froze.

The girl had looked up at her and *recoiled*. She nearly threw herself backward. Lucy didn't even *say* anything, let alone move. That action started ringing some very troubling bells inside of her. Bells that hadn't been rung since she took Jackson in.

Strike two.

She wanted to envelop the girl in a hug immediately and protect her from whatever was the cause of such an extreme reaction. The caretaker in her wanted to comfort the child so much. But Lucy realized she was dealing with someone akin to a wild cat.

Equipping herself with every weapon in her arsenal, Lucy extended her hand. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. But I don't believe you are alone. I promise I just want to help you find whoever you came with. That's all I want to do. I promise."

And now the ball was in the little girl's court.

She stared at Lucy's outstretched hand and then back up at her. Lucy fought the urge to keep her face straight and hoped that the girl could see that she was serious. She watched the girl glance around, chewing her lower lip. Her fingers had given pause, tangled in between cloth.

"You'll help me find my mom?" The question was so soft, if Lucy hadn't been waiting for a reply, she would've missed it altogether. She nodded firmly.

"I will. Plus if that makes you more comfortable, I won't talk to her," she offered, even though she wanted to give the mother a piece of her mind for leaving her young child all alone in such a crowded place. *What if someone had decided to pick her up? Who would be so careless?*

“...Okay.” She placed her hand in Lucy’s. Try as she might, Lucy couldn’t stop the beam that split her face and she saw the near-immediate effect it had on the little girl. This was the first time anyone looked stunned at her smile. Lucy didn’t like the directions her thoughts were taking so she just shook her head. She could deal with the implications of this stranger later. Right now, she had a neglectful mother to find.

“Okay. Let’s retrace your steps. Where did you last see her?” Lucy grabbed her cart and gestured for the girl to lead the way.

“I already did *that*.” Was that... was that *attitude* Lucy was hearing? It was barely there, but she had handled moody teens and bratty cats most of her life. She could sense an attitude, no matter how toned down. By god did it make her heart happy.

“I’m sorry,” she conceded easily, smiling at the confused glance the girl shot her. “I’m sure you would have. My old age must be catching up with me. Anyways, I’m Lucy. What’s your name?”

“...Nisha. I’m Nisha Mehta.”

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, Nisha. Where do you want to try looking for your mother first?” She needed to keep up the friendly atmosphere. Lucy didn’t want Nisha bolting at the first sign of discomfort, and she knew the girl would if given the chance.

“...She was where the cheese is kept, but I checked there twice. She wasn’t anywhere nearby either.”

“You’re very smart. You knew the right way to look for her. But did you try asking someone? Maybe someone must’ve seen her. Do you have a photo of her on your phone?” Lucy was hoping that she sounded encouraging but the blank look on Nisha’s face didn’t seem like her intentions were getting across.

If Lucy could describe it, Nisha looked... perplexed.

"I... I don't have a phone."

It was a herculean task for Lucy to keep her jaw firmly in place. What kid doesn't have a phone at this age?

"Oh. Oh, um okay, that definitely makes things a lot harder. I'm assuming she's Indian?"

At Nisha's nod, Lucy carried on with her musing. "Well, that does narrow it down a little bit, but we're in Plano. We're gonna need more than that. Did she say if she was going to get something else other than just cheese?"

Another mumble. She bent closer. "I'm sorry what did you say?"

"I buy the stuff."

Lucy's brows furrowed. "So she doesn't do the shopping?" A shake of the head. "And she doesn't help you either?" Another shake.

Screw the promise. She was going to give this woman a piece of her mind when she saw her. *What kind of parent is this?*

"Oh."

Lucy looked down to see Nisha staring at the entrance. More like at the people *outside* the store. And luckily for Lucy, there was only one Indian woman there. One Indian woman chattering away happily with her companion. Her protective maternal instincts flared immediately.

"Is that her? Is that woman your mom?" A nod.

If Lucy was in front of Nisha, she would've had to turn around to see the answer. If she had, she would've seen the ashy pallor her face had taken. But as circumstances stood, Nisha was leading the way. So Lucy missed an obvious sign.

“Come on.” She started marching towards the exit, the cart and its contents forgotten. She was a woman on a warpath and the enemy was right in front of her. However, just at that moment, the woman glanced inside, and her eyes landed on them.

It all happened so fast that Lucy didn’t understand, but something flashed in the woman’s eyes before her face morphed into one of seeming relief. She slowed down as the woman ran towards them, her surprise growing with every step they came closer.

“There you are! I was so worried! Don’t ever walk away from me like that again!” The woman cried out, kneeling to wrap Nisha in her arms. Lucy frowned. Something wasn’t right. She could’ve sworn the woman didn’t look worried at all outside with her friend, but she did sound sincere right now.

Maybe I’m just reading a little too much into this.

The woman looked up at her with a smile. “Thank you for helping my daughter. I was so worried that she’d gone outside. I hope she didn’t give you any trouble.”

Lucy just smiled. “Oh no, it was no trouble at all. I’m glad I could help. Your daughter is a very sweet child.”

The woman pressed a card into her hand. “I’m very grateful. If there’s anything I can help you with, please let me know. Nisha say bye to her now.”

Lucy blinked at the business card in her hand. *Who even gives these out anymore?* Distracted by that, Lucy bade a half-hearted farewell to Nisha. And in the process missed the wince the girl gave when her mother held her hand and started pulling her away.

Strike three. She’s out.

*

“Go on. *Tell him.* Tell him what you did today!”

Nisha sobbed loudly, her eyes trained on the floor. She knew this would happen. She knew it the minute her mother saw Lucy with her. She’d hoped that she’d be able to shake the woman off before reuniting with her mother but that definitely didn’t happen.

“Nisha I am not going to repeat myself again. Answer me!”

She swallowed down another sob threatening to escape. “I... I was t-trying to, to look for you when... when I ran in-into the... lady.”

Another pair of feet entered her line of sight. Much bigger and sturdier than her mother’s. She couldn’t hold back the whimper that escaped her.

“And?”

That single word cut her to her core. She shivered, curling in on herself. She wasn’t allowed to move but she wanted to get away. She shook her head as a hiccup escaped her.

“Don’t make me ask again. And then what happened?”

“She offered to, to help me find Mummy. I-I told her that I was fine! I told her I didn’t need her help! But she insisted!” Nisha didn’t realize that her voice had been increasing in volume till it was a near screech. She was more focused on trying to get them to understand that *she had followed their rules. She had tried to stay away!*

“*Chup!*”

The roar immediately shut her up. She could feel her hands shaking and twisted it in her shirt, hoping it would stop. The fear welling up inside her was threatening to spill and she was having a hard time holding it in. But she had to. The consequences would be much worse if she let it show.

A rough hand clutched her chin and pulled her face up. She flinched the minute she met her father's gaze. She knew her mother's glare was scary, but it had nothing on his. She could feel herself shaking in his hold.

"Pehli baat. Don't ever raise your voice at me. Understood?"

Nisha nodded as fast as she could. Her mouth was dry, and she knew that if she tried to speak, no words would come out of her mouth. Her floundering would only make him angrier. *That* was something she wanted to avoid at all costs.

"Second. How are you still creating trouble for your mother? You're fourteen and you can't get groceries without needing someone to help you? Is this how we raised you to be?"

Nisha's eyes widened. *No! That's not true!* "No! That's not what happened! She came to me!"

Her father's raised eyebrow sent a cold shudder down her spine. "Really? Because that's not what your mother told me. Are you saying she's lying?"

Yes! She's lying! She wasn't even there! How would she know? Nisha wanted to scream, but she could feel her mother's eyes boring two holes into her. She knew that they would never believe her and instead twist it to make her punishment even worse. So she kept quiet and shook her head instead.

A loud crack immediately filled the air. Nisha's eyes opened wide as her head swung to the side, her hand instinctively rising to her cheek. It took a few moments for her to register what had just happened, but the stinging pain was hard to miss. Her father had slapped her.

"Don't ever try to lie to us again. Do you understand?"

A fresh batch of tears welled up in her eyes and she nodded, her lower lip trembling to hold her pained whimper in. Before she could manage to get some semblance of control over her emotions, her face was swung around yet again to meet her parents’.

“Tumne usko kya bataya?”

She instantly knew what they were asking about. Shame and anger pooled in her gut and she wished she had the guts to just stand up to them for once. But that wasn’t her. She shook her head. *“Nothing,”* she muttered. “I didn’t tell her anything.”

Nisha stumbled back the minute her father let go of her. “You better not have said anything. If I find out that you did, I promise you’ll get it worse than this.”

She kept her head bowed. Worse? She was already in hell. How much worse could it get?

More importantly, how long was this going to last?

Chapter 3

Contrary to what others thought, Jackson Liu didn’t like running. Zoe would always beg for the two of them to run together but he never budged. Even after ten years of being together, she still hadn’t stopped. Honestly, sometimes, he cursed the fact that his girlfriend was so stubborn.

Not that he could blame her, of course. He knew why she couldn’t understand him. While his mind wasn’t thankful in the slightest, his body definitely was and so was his girlfriend. But the woman was biased so her opinion didn’t count.

Whatever. The point was that Jackson hated running. He hated dragging himself out of his warm, comfortable bed only to get tired and sweaty and dirty and nearly close to death. He

wished he could go back to the days when the only times he would run was when he was being chased.

It was pretty ironic given what he did during his downtime. *But it's not like only running will keep me in shape. I have other ways that don't require me gasping on the side of the road every time.*

He came to a stop near the bridge on the trail he frequented every morning, grimacing at his soaked tee. Hell, he even had sweat dripping down his legs, this was disgusting.

“I’m never coming out here again,” he muttered, drinking up the last of his water. His heart was slamming against his chest and he knew he should keep going, he was almost home but fuck that. He earned this.

He bent over, heaving loudly, shaking off his hair. He probably looked like a dog that just got out of the shower and if he was being honest, he kind of felt like one. He looked straight ahead, frowning when he realized his view was choppy because of his hair.

Jackson gathered up the black strands flopping around and pressed them against his forehead, his frown deepening when he watched his vision go from choppy to pretty much black and nonexistent.

“When the fuck did it get so long? Damn, I’m gonna have to cut it.” He balled his fist, a huff of a laugh escaping him when water ran down his wrist. Disgusting as it was, it was also kind of funny.

A shout broke him out of his world and into the real one. He pushed his back and spotted a group of kids squatting on the ground near the trees on the other side of the bridge.

He watched them laugh loudly and he noticed one of them holding a stick. Curious, Jackson moved closer. He was halfway across the bridge—*damn why was this so long*—when he

heard another sound. It was so faint it was nearly drowned out by the boys' laughter, but he'd recognize that sound anywhere.

He'd only been hearing it since he was sixteen after all.

Face morphing into a frown, he rushed over, his eyes widening at the sight of a little black kitten hunched in on itself, mewling and hissing away for all it's worth as the boys continued poking at it.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing?"

His angry bark startled them all. He watched as they dropped their sticks and ran, leaving the poor little thing behind.

Jackson instantly cleared his frown, crouching down slowly. The kitten glared up at him with a hiss, its bright yellow eyes glinting in the light. For how messy and roughed up the thing looked, it sure wasn't hesitating to attack him if needed.

"Aww aren't you a fighter? Where was all this fire when those boys were troubling you?" He chuckled when it tried to bat his hand. "Hey, I'm not gonna hurt you, I just wanna see if you're hurt anywhere."

The cat hissed again and managed to scratch his palm this time. "Goddamn, you little shit. That hurt!"

Okay, time to just go for it. Jackson swooped it up into his arms, ignoring the stabbing pain of claws digging into his arms. "This is to help you, you dumb cat."

Said cat was struggling to fight its way out of his arms. Jackson was really grateful for all the work he'd put into his body. It was the only thing that stopped him from just dropping the kitten.

“Lucy’s gonna have a wonderful time with you,” he muttered, straightening up. “I’d love to see you do this to Bri, she’ll wipe the floor with you.”

The cat just hissed again and tried to bat at his face. Jackson dodged—more out of reflex than attention—and eyed the little fur ball in alarm. *Damn, this one is fast. I can’t believe it nearly got me.*

He started making his way to Lucy’s, it was a good thing her café was so near the park he ran in. The sooner he got to hers, the faster he could drop this cat off and tend to his wounds.

“Stop struggling, trust me I’m taking you to a place that you’ll love. You’ll be around others like you and you’ll be able to make a lot of friends too, doesn’t that sound nice?” The response he got was a hiss and another scratch to his bicep. “Fucking hell. Well, it’s a good thing we’re already here.”

Jackson pushed open the door, the familiar chime instantly pouring a wave of calm over him. As if on cue, three cats bounded up to him, with Bri leading the charge. *I knew I loved her for a reason.*

“Hey guys, how’re you doing? Not used to seeing me this early huh?” He knelt down so that they could come closer, Bri sniffing at the kitten inquisitively. “Oh yeah, what do you think about this one? I got you a new friend.”

Said ‘friend’ had curled into a ball, making itself as small as possible, trying to get away from three interested noses. “C’mon now, they’re nice. They just want to get to know you.”

He placed the little kitten down, prying desperate claws off his sleeves. There were gonna be some pretty distinct holes in them.

“Jackson! You’re here early! What are you—is that a kitten?”

“Surprise,” he grinned up at Lucy’s surprised face.

“Oh my god, it is *tiny*. Where did you find it? Damn Bri, move! Don’t you see you’re scaring the poor thing?” Bri gave a disgruntled meow and climbed into Jackson’s lap as Lucy gathered the kitten into her arms.

He watched as she cooed at it, rubbing its head and neck. His jaw dropped when it immediately purred and settled into her arms, licking her chin.

What the actual fuck? That little shit.

Jackson had a few choice words he wanted to say but Jenna burst through the door that very moment, distracting him.

“Hello, hello! I have arrived to—Jackson? What are you doing here? Whoa wait, Lucy did you get another cat?”

That was three subject changes in one breath. He was very impressed.

“Jackson brought it in right now, actually.” Lucy glanced up at her worker. “Glad to see you’re on time. The kitchen is calling you.”

“Oh ho nope. You can’t just shoo me away when there’s literally a new cat in here. It looks like a Momo. Can we call it Momo? Like that lemur from Avatar?” Jenna was on a roll. The only reason Jackson knew what she was talking about was because Ruby’s sister kept yammering about the show whenever she came over to his studio.

“Will you quiet down?” Lucy hissed, shooting the girl a glare similar to the one the cat in her arms was shooting her. “I still haven’t decided if I’m gonna keep it!”

Jackson blinked.

“Wait you’re not?” He shot her his personal version of puppy eyes. While the kitten had been an utter pain in the ass for the short time he knew it, he didn’t want it going anywhere else.

Especially when Lucy could look after it. “Please don’t give it away, life on the streets is very rough.”

“Jackson stop looking at me like that. And save me the sob story. I never said I was going to let it back onto the streets!”

Jenna piped up too. “So that means we’re keeping Momo? Please? Please, please, please Lucy?”

He grinned. That girl could be very whiny and annoying when she wanted to be. If that’s what it would take to keep Momo, that’s what he would do. “Yeah Lucy, please? Please?”

They shot each other a look and started a chorus of pleading till Lucy had enough.

“Okay! Okay fine! Will y’all shut up? I’ll keep it! Holy shit y’all are irritating,” she huffed, still stroking the cat though. Jenna let out a squeal and pumped her fists in the air. Jackson’s response wasn’t as loud as hers, but he was just as pleased.

“Welcome to the family, Momo.”

*

If you asked Zoe Powers to talk about a talent she possessed, you would not be ready for the answer. When the woman did not consider her photographic memory, or her innate ability to draw the truth out of someone—both of which helped her become the celebrated lawyer that she was today—her biggest talent, one was left wondering what she actually thought her biggest talent was.

For Zoe, it was her ability to get so focused in whatever task she was doing, however mundane, that she lost track of her time and surroundings. She prided herself in being able to just block out any distractions and bulldoze through what she needed to do.

Well today, she was cursing herself for that.

“Shit, shit, shit,” she muttered, her hands tightening around her steering wheel. Her phone, tossed into the passenger seat, buzzed with the alert of a notification, a notification that Zoe knew was yet another text from her mother. “Goddamnit, why do we have to meet today of all days?”

She pressed her foot harder on the accelerator. “C’mon you little shit, I spent so much money on you, can’t you go any faster?” She was late to her weekly family lunch. So very late.

Her phone buzzed again. *Fuck, Mother must be pissed.*

Zoe didn’t mean to run late. She knew how seriously her family took their lunch gatherings. She still remembered the icy atmosphere she had to deal with when she missed the lunches the first couple of times when she was at college. She had to work her ass off and become president of BLSA as a junior to get back into their good graces.

Not to mention the time she was late because Jackson had come home injured and she was patching him up. Well, Jackson was a sore subject for her and her family to begin with, so she couldn’t exactly have hoped for that explanation to go well.

“God, I’m so screwed.” She pulled into the driveway and parked her car, haphazard parking be damned. That wasn’t her priority right now. She grabbed her phone and the bouquet of flowers she bought and dashed up the steps.

Good thing she had her own key. Zoe didn’t want to wait for five feet worth of disappointment to greet her. Plus, this gave her time to calm down and figure out the best way to

frame her apology. She pushed open the front door and peeked inside. She heard faint sounds were coming from the back. She breathed out a sigh of relief and stepped inside. They were having lunch in the backyard today so less chances of her running into anyone.

“Zoe. Powers.”

Or so she thought. *Dammit.*

She turned to the source of the voice and cringed. Standing at the doorway to the kitchen was her mother, arms crossed and face pulled into a frown. Zoe knew she was in big trouble when she met those stony eyes.

“Hello Mother,” she smiled gingerly, stepping up to give the shorter woman a hug. A hug that was not reciprocated. Shit. “Here, these flowers are for you.”

“You’re late. By an hour.” She made no move to take the flowers. “I know you know better than to miss it.”

The woman winced. It wasn’t her mother’s words as much as the lack of emotion or movement that was getting at her. She had worked so hard to make sure that the times she would get this reaction from her mom would be few and far between—and she had been successful to an extent—because she *hated* it. She hated the way her mother could just reduce her to that scared sixteen-year-old with just a look.

“I know. I’m really sorry,” her voice was quiet. “I was going over the details of a new case and I lost track of time.”

“That is not an excuse and you know it. Don’t you dare try to pull that on me when all of your brothers managed to come. Do you think they’re not busy? I can guarantee that they’re busier than you.”

And there it was. Reason number two why she hated their family lunches. Zoe swallowed audibly, her lips curling as her mother went on about faux pas. The gathering always, always, boiled down to a celebration of their accomplishments. Her brothers: the perfect sons, the best doctors, the golden humans. And Zoe? Oh, she was barely anything in comparison. She clenched her fist to quiet down the resentment bubbling within her.

“I’m sorry.” What else could she say? By now she knew her mother wouldn’t accept anything that came out of her mouth. “I will do better next time.”

“That pitiful apology will not cut it and you know that. Seriously Zoe, why are you like this? Why couldn’t you have been like your brothers? Why do you always have to-”

She wanted to scoff so bad. She looked down at the floor so that her mother wouldn’t see the expression her face took on at that statement. She didn’t want to give the woman some more ammo to use against her. Her brothers. *What a joke.* Those men were nothing but hurdles in her life.

“Can we go eat?” Zoe knew by cutting her mother off, she was pushing her limits and she was fairly certain that the look on her face was not saying “I’m sorry”, but she was past the point of caring. Jackson was right. If she wanted to move forward, she needed to cut out the things holding her back. The biggest being the person standing in front of her.

Zoe saw from the way her mother’s face darkened that she had done it. She had just made the woman snap. But fate was kind in this moment, the opening of the backdoor and the voices streaming into the kitchen drew her attention.

“Zoe! There you are!”

She smiled as their family help approached her with his arms outstretched. The minute she settled into his hug, her mind quieted. This man was why she hadn't cut them out yet. Not being able to see him anymore would crush her. "Hey Paddy. I'm sorry I'm late."

"Oh that's all right *beti*, I'm sure you had a reason." The side eye he gave her mother warmed Zoe's heart. She knew her mother knew that he didn't like her—especially the way she treated Zoe—but the only reason why Paddy was still with them was because the rest of her family loved him, including her brothers.

"Padmakant, did you come here for something?"

"Yes. Mr. Powers was wondering what was holding you up." Zoe avoided the glare that her mother shot her. She was definitely deep in the doghouse, but Paddy holding her made it slightly better.

"I guess we should go then. Don't want to keep the men waiting any longer than they have to." If her voice was dripping with disdain, that was something only she would know. Or maybe Paddy too, from the knowing look he shot her, but that was okay. It was okay if it was him.

Now to figure out a way to get the two of them out of there.

Chapter 4

Jackson was not having a good day.

He rubbed his temple as he hunched over his desk, finishing a couple of strokes to a design that he had spent way too much time—in his opinion—haggling with his client over.

He walked out to the waiting room. Ruby was on their phone, which was a little surprising, but he was pretty sure it had something to do with their sister. Only Rachel could get his technology-hating apprentice to be glued to their screen.

“I’m done.”

His client jumped up and rubbed his hands on his jeans, swaggering over to Jackson.

He held up the sketch. “What do you think? If there’s something you want to be changed, I can make that work.”

“Oh wow, these are awesome man! You’re really good!”

Not that he needed the validation, but Jackson preened, nonetheless. *Who didn’t like being praised for their talent?*

“I’m happy to hear that. So let’s talk prices and get started. Usually, if my client has made an appointment, we discuss prices before they come in for their tattoo. For walk-ins, I charge by the hour. With a tattoo of this size and detail, it will probably take me around two hours so that would be around a hundred dollars.”

The man choked. Jackson grew concerned, but he waited for the man to say something.

“Did you say a *hundred dollars*? Come on man, this can’t be that expensive! It’s worth fifty at most!”

That made Jackson raise his eyebrows. *Fifty? What rock is this person living under?* He glanced at Ruby to see them trying—and failing—to hold back a laugh.

“Man, is this your first tattoo?”

The man looked surprised. “Yeah. How’d you know?”

“Your lack of research,” Jackson deadpanned. “No tattoo artist will charge only fifty, especially for one as big as this. If you’re want something cheaper, you should change the

design. Or go to some up-and-coming artist... but even they would probably charge you more than that.”

He didn't give him any time to finish his indignant sputtering and raised his hand. “Look. I accept walk-ins but I expect y'all to show me some basic courtesy and do some research before coming in here. I made sure that my website is easy to navigate man. Didn't you look me up before coming in here?”

The customer had the grace to look a little sheepish. “...No.”

Jackson sighed. *Of course.* “If you had, you would have seen my policy on prices. Whatever. I can still do this tattoo for you, but my price is final. I'm not changing it.”

“C'mon man! I don't have a hundred bucks on me! I have bills to pay!”

“So am I, but this is my job. I can't reduce the price. I got bills to pay too, man.” Jackson bristled at the quick side-eye Ruby shot him.

“Can't you give me like a first-tattoo discount or something? Reduce it a little? How about eighty?”

Jackson couldn't believe this. He might have considered it—it wouldn't have been the first time he gave a client a discount—but the man had been rude from the get-go. He would not compromise on the design he wanted or the style. But more importantly, he had treated Ruby like they were beneath him and that was something Jackson could not condone. “Why would I offer something like that? Man I'm not doing this with you. Hundred or nothing. If you don't accept, you're more than welcome to find some other place.”

“But... but...”

“But nothing. I'm not changing my mind so there's no point trying to bargain with me. Now I have other stuff to do so what's your decision?”

Jackson had to admit he felt a little bad, but he didn't get to where he was by compromising. He clapped the dejected man's back as they shook their head. "It's okay. There might be other places that charge lower than I do. You can always check them out."

He gestured for Ruby to lead the man out. As soon as the two were out of the room, he crouched down. His head was beginning to throb—this entire exchange had sapped out a lot more energy than he expected.

Jackson took a couple of deep breaths, trying to calm himself down. When that didn't work, he straightened and walked out, intent on talking to Ruby about clients like these. But when he walked out, they were on their phone, a frown on their face. He paused.

"Is everything okay?"

Ruby looked up at them, confusion written all over their face. "Huh? Oh yeah, no, everything is okay. It's just something Rachel sent me." They turned their phone so that Jackson could see what they were reading.

He felt his body shut down. "Oh."

"Yeah. I mean, I know he died like five years ago, but didn't he overdose? They found the drugs in his system. Why are they calling it a murder now?" Ruby turned back to the phone, scrolling through the article.

Abort. Abort. Abort.

"I don't know but I really don't care." Jackson could feel himself dissociating. It was like one minute he was present, talking to Ruby and the next, he was watching himself talk to them. He barely registered what he said, but judging by the expression on their face, he knew it had probably come off harsher than he had expected.

He didn't mean it that way at all, but he felt like the walls were closing in on him. He was beginning to feel light-headed and a familiar ringing started up in his head, growing louder with each passing second. This time, however, the ringing was taking on a very familiar voice glaring at him with accusatory eyes.

Realistically, Jackson knew it wasn't true, but he needed to get out of there—especially away from Ruby—immediately. “I'm going to the café. I feel like I'm getting a headache.”

He didn't wait for their response as he bolted out of the studio, but he could feel Ruby's gaze on him.

Fuck, I need to talk to Zoe.

*

Ruby didn't see their parent's car come up the driveway and that was their mistake. Because if they had, they would not have opened the door shirtless.

But they couldn't deny the rush of satisfaction that their mother's scandalized gasp gave them. It almost made up for what she said next.

“Ray go put on some clothes! Nobody wants to see that!”

Keyword: *almost*.

Ruby was used to their parents using their dead name but a little part inside of them died every time they heard that.

“Whatever,” they drawled, leaving the door open as they walked back to the couch and pulled on a discarded shirt sitting there. “Happy?”

Their mother clearly wasn't. The displeasure was evident on her face, but Rachel had bounded in at that very moment, so she wisely chose to keep her mouth shut.

Good to know she cares about one of us.

"Hey Rach."

"Hi!"

Ruby glanced back to see Rachel disappearing into her room which was a good thing given that their mom was about to lay into them.

"If I hear that my baby girl was around *your kind*, you better know that I'm gonna bring her right back and you will never see her again."

They scoffed. "Good luck with that, *Mom*. You wouldn't deprive your darling baby girl of her *sister* who she loves so much, now would you? We wouldn't want her hating you as well."

The funny thing was that Ruby knew it wasn't true in the slightest. Rachel was the sweetest human on the planet without a single bad bone in her body. If their mother disowning their favorite sister wasn't enough to make her hate the woman, they doubted anything could.

They had made peace with that fact ages ago. It was like trying to stifle sunlight. Nearly impossible. But it seemed that their birth giver still didn't know that yet and they weren't going to hold that over her head and milk it for all it's worth.

"Whatever. I have nothing more to say to you. Rachel! I'm leaving!"

Rachel popped out of her room to hug her mother. Ruby definitely didn't miss their mother's snide whisper. "Call me the *minute* you feel even a little uncomfortable. I will come to get you in a heartbeat."

They rolled their eyes as their sister chuckled. "I'll be fine Ma, don't worry. Have a safe drive."

“Bye Rachel, I love you, sweetie. Goodbye, *Ray*.”

“Goodbye... hag,” Ruby muttered as they shut the door.

They clapped their hands, turning around. “O-okay. So what do you want to do today?”

Wrong question.

Rachel squealed and lunged at Ruby, arms winding around their waist, nearly sending them both to the ground.

“Whoa Rach. Okay! I didn’t know you were that excited to come here.”

“Are you kidding?” Rachel looked up at them with wide, shining eyes and a very unsettling grin on their face. “You know that Ma doesn’t let me look at all my articles and stuff while I’m back there. Claims it’ll ‘ruin my nature’”

Ruby had to scoff at that one, but they didn’t particularly disagree with their mother on that topic. Rachel’s obsession with true crime and everything death-related was very unsettling for the sweet, seventeen-year-old that she was.

“You have to admit that some of the stuff you talk about is really fucked up. Fuck knows I would be better off without knowing about that Japanese murder case.”

“Oh shut up. Junko Furuta deserves to live, even if that’s in other people’s memories.”

Now isn’t that morbid, Ruby thought, eyeing Rachel as she moved to the couch and pulled out her iPad.

“Anyways, come here! I want to show you something.” She started patting the cushion loudly, glancing back at Ruby’s unimpressed expression every few moments. “Come *here*. I promise this is so cool you *really* wanna see this!”

“Fine.” Ruby dragged themselves over, peering over their sister’s shoulder at the article on the screen. “Rach, how many times have I told you-“

“Shh, I know! Trust me, this is worth it!”

Ruby looked at the title. “‘Famed Doctor – Murder or Suicide?’ Jesus Christ, are you still on that? Rogers died five years ago, Rach! Who cares?”

“I do! I am 95% confident it was a murder and *now*, I think I also know why.”

They narrowed their eyes at her, settling down on the couch. Leaning over her was beginning to hurt their back. “Why?”

“Hear me out! Everyone said it was a suicide, that he was depressed or whatever and he offed himself.” They could only sputter at the dismissive wave she gave that statement. “Before you start, *yes* I know it is possible, and *yes* I don’t know what people go through. But what I do know is that *he* wasn’t. He’d just been promoted in his hospital, *and* he won that sexual assault case against him. He was proven innocent. Why would you take your life over something like that?” She gazed up at Ruby with wild eyes. “Unless... you knew it was wrong and were consumed with extreme amounts of guilt that you couldn’t bear it anymore. Or you were murdered.”

They stared at their sister for a couple of seconds, their mind completely blank. God, she needed to stop watching so much true crime shows, she was reaching too far. “I love you, you dumbass, but you have a problem. He’s dead. All this speculation isn’t going to change that.”

“I know that. Hear me out though, I’ve been following this group online and they look into weird cases like these. Remember my theory about his murder?”

Ruby rolled their eyes. “Oh that stupid Tumblr “air bubble between the toes” thing but in his head instead, yeah you mentioned that shit.”

Rachel beamed. “See, you’re beginning to catch up. So these people think that it had something to do with that assault case he was involved with. They think it was a lie. They

think—and I agree too—that he wasn’t innocent. He was just rich enough to sway the case in his favor.”

Ruby looked at her satisfied face, their mind whirling. One, they didn’t really believe her, but the conviction was kind of impressive. Two, they were starting to get a little concerned about the kinds of stuff their sister looked up online. Three, if what she said ended up being true, they weren’t sure how they would react.

Ruby had followed that case like it was their favorite TV show. While they had been disappointed that he won—they believed in the ‘guilty until proven innocent’ theory—they’d accepted the results. But if this was true... then what else was?

“Okay... why do you think that?” *Please be wrong. Fucking hell, please be wrong.* It wasn’t that Ruby wanted that doctor to be innocent. They could care less about him. It was more a matter of their personal principles, they just wanted to be content knowing that they *didn’t* support a sex offender.

“Take a look at the timeline.” Ruby looked down at the screen, at the very detailed graphic pulled up. “He won the case two months before he died. Long enough to be considered a suicide... if it was a standalone case.”

A what now? They let out an exasperated sigh. “What are you getting at?”

Ruby wasn’t sure what to make of the creepy laugh that their sister let out, especially when they started pulling up some other stuff. “Check this out. All here in Texas but look at what’s common.”

They had to give it to Rachel. For what seemed like a weird conspiracy theory site, it was very detailed and organized. They looked at the list for a couple of seconds and frowned.

“Do you see it? Do you see it?”

Ruby... did, actually. All rich people, deaths ruled a suicide and the one thing they had in common was... *abuse cases?*

“What the hell?” They muttered to themselves, but Rachel was close enough to catch it.

“I know right? It can’t be a coincidence that they died within months of having their cases settled. Do you wanna know what I think?”

Ruby wasn’t sure they wanted to. “Go ahead.”

“I think we have a vigilante killer.”

Chapter 5

Zoe flung her phone onto the bed with disgust. She ran her fingers through her hair and let out a scream through her gritted teeth. “Fuck!” She yelled. “Fuck this shit!”

Her phone buzzed again, and she scowled at it, picking it up to look at the newest message. It was from her mom congratulating her on her win. Just like the twenty other messages below them.

“It’s not a good thing!” She screamed at the screen. She knew it was futile, but she had been holding this in ever since the ruling. She had to suppress her rage and disappointment the entire day, as well as play happy at the celebratory dinner her client threw her.

A dinner celebrating a rapist getting away with ruining a minor’s life forever. God, she hated herself.

She was so ashamed but there was nothing she could do anymore. She hated that she had such a major role to play in this event and she felt so sorry for the young girl.

Everybody around her was on cloud nine but she felt like she’d just fallen into a deeper pit of hell. *Fuck this shit, I need something to drink.*

Zoe stormed into the kitchen and opened the liquor cabinet, pulling out the bottle of vodka she kept at the back. She had just popped the top off and was about to drink straight from the bottle when two hands wrapped around hers.

“Whoa whoa whoa, Zo. Are you trying to kill yourself?”

She groaned as he pulled the bottle out of her hands and placed it on the counter. “Let me drink Jackson, I deserve this.”

He pulled her around to face him. “As I’m sure you do, but there are other things that are just as effective without killing you. There’s a reason the vodka’s at the back.”

Zoe just looked up at her boyfriend, at his earnest expression, and something inside her just snapped. She started sobbing.

“Shh, shh. It’s okay. I’m here. Let it all out, come on.” He cooed as he pulled her into his arms. She went willingly, burying her face in his chest. “It’s over now. It’s over now. I’ve got you.”

“They... they settled. They agreed to the settlement, Jackson! I fucking won the case. Why? Why couldn’t I have just not offered that option? That poor girl. You should’ve seen the look on her face when we were leaving. That is going to haunt me for a while. To make it worse, everybody keeps congratulating me.” She felt him stiffen before deflating with a sigh. Which pretty much summed it up.

“You know why you had to do this. I know it’s awful. But you had no choice.” He started running his hand through her hair and it was slowly calming her down.

“I hate this.” She felt so small, so helpless. “This isn’t what I wanted to do when I decided to become a lawyer. I wanted to help people. The right people. God, I can’t get hers or her mother’s face out of my head.”

This was a cycle they went through every time Zoe felt this way. One would think that after all this time she'd get used to it, but she'd always been the sensitive one in her family.

"I know. I'm sorry. I-"

"Sorry isn't going to change what I did to that girl! I'm a horrible person."

"Hey! Look at me." Jackson pulled her away from his chest. "Look at me. We both know the only one who is horrible is the monster who did that to her. It's not your fault you're good at what you do."

"I wish I could just quit." Even as the words left her mouth, Zoe knew that was impossible. She was too involved with her family to cut off all ties yet. Not to mention, she was too scared of the repercussions she would face. She didn't have the courage, not yet.

"You could. I'll be here to support you no matter what happens. But you know you won't. So till you can, we just have to deal some other way. Plus, you know I can always just take care of it for you." Jackson shrugged, a hint of a smile on his lips.

That managed to get Zoe out of her head. She hit his arm. "You literally did a month ago! You can't do it again so soon. There's a reason nobody has suspected anything."

"About that..."

Zoe's heart ran cold. "What? What happened?"

Jackson sighed. "Rachel found a news article saying that it's possible John Rogers was murdered instead of committing suicide."

She frowned. That name sounded familiar. "Was he one of your-?"

"Yeah. Five years ago."

Her eyes widened. *This was bad. Very bad.* "Do you have the article?"

"No." Her boyfriend looked sheepish. "I kinda bolted as soon as Ruby showed it to me."

Zoe couldn't even be mad. She knew how skittish he became when there was even the tiniest hint of people finding out about what he did. That's why she made him leave the damage control to her.

"It's okay," it was her turn to comfort him. "I'll ask Ruby for the link. I'll fix this, don't worry."

"I'm sorry. I'll be more careful next time."

She nodded. They'd been doing this for too long to stop now. Jackson just had to be discreet and make sure no one saw him or could trace the murders back to him. Zoe would take care of everything else.

Jackson was the one good thing in her life right now and she would be damned before anything happened to him.

She wasn't going to let anybody take Jackson away from her. She'd make sure of that.

*

Nisha wished she could've just stayed in the car, but it was hot as hell, and her mother had no intentions of leaving the AC running or being quick.

You left me no option! She wanted to scream at the woman when she shot her a look before sniffing and turning away. *Pretty sure if anything ended up happening to me, you'd find a way to blame me for that as well.*

She ran after her mother, into the little café that she had wanted to try on her way back. Nisha barely caught the name of the place, her attention drawn by the draft of cold air that came from the open door. She hurried inside, not wanting to stay in the heat any longer.

The minute she stepped in, it was like she had taken a step back in her own body and someone else had taken control. She registered the sound of a bell chiming faintly but there were bigger things she was looking at. One of which strutted up to her, sniffing her feet before pressing against her legs.

Nisha finally pushed to regain control, her brain finally catching up with her eyes. Cats! A whole lot of them! One of them was actually purring next to her!

She looked around the place, eyes wide with awe. There were cats *everywhere*. Some curled up in the laps of people sitting at the tables, others playing around with each other.

A small mew pulled her attention to the one that was at her feet, looking up at her with big blue eyes. Nisha glanced at her mother who was on the phone in line, seemingly unaware of her daughter's whereabouts. A few minutes wouldn't hurt.

She squatted down and gingerly rubbed her fingers against the cat's head. She wanted to be careful to not scare it away, but it seemed like the cat liked her because it sniffed her fingers and immediately pushed its head against her.

The little girl couldn't help it. She let out a little giggle as she settled onto the floor, eyes opening wide when the cat immediately climbed into her lap. She could feel it purring and she let out another laugh, stroking its fur happily.

She was so immersed in the cat—she loved the way its tail kept hitting her arm—that she hadn't realized that she was sitting right at the entrance. So she didn't register that the bell chime was the sign of someone entering the place. Someone who, not expecting a small girl to be parked on the floor right in front of them, nearly tripped over them.

“*Holy shit*. Oh my god, I almost missed you. Kid, are you okay?”

Nisha blinked. That voice was familiar. She looked back and paused, her lips parting in recognition. “Oh.”

It was the woman from the store. Lucy.

“Ah. Wait, you’re the girl from HEB. Umm... Nisha, right? How are you?” Nisha watched as she looked around, frowned, and then looked back at her. “Are you alone again? I don’t see your mother.”

Oh shit, Mom. Panic crashed over her like a massive wave. She immediately whipped around to look for her mother—ignoring the startled sound the cat made—and relaxed as soon as she saw her at the counter, talking to the girl.

She closed her eyes with a sigh. That was a close one. She couldn’t afford to make a mistake like that again. As if on cue, her side started throbbing, a reminder of the last time she lost her mother.

“She’s there,” she said, pointing to her. Nisha controlled the urge to look up at Lucy. She pulled her hand back the minute it started trembling. She was no longer content, no longer happy. She wanted to leave, right now, but the cat was still in her lap. She didn’t risk looking up at her because the last thing she wanted was for her mother to come find her talking to this woman.

She didn’t want to give her mother another reason to hit her.

She looked down at the cat and stroked its head once more. One last time. Feelings of disappointment and fear were swimming inside her as she picked it up and put it on the floor, standing up right after.

One tiny solace the little girl had was that the cat did not walk away as she had expected. It stuck to her leg, twining its tail around her.

Nisha's fear built up the minute she caught her mother's eye. Lucy had still been standing next to her and now it was too late to move away. She was caught. The cat was the only thing stopping her knees from buckling. She balled her hands into fists, digging her fingers into her palms hoping that the minute pain would stop her heart from climbing up into her throat.

With each step her mother came closer, the faster her heart beat, the harder her nails marked her palms. She couldn't read the expression on her face and that was beginning to make her panic. She couldn't tell what her mother was thinking! She couldn't figure out how mad she was!

Breathe, Nishu. Breathe. It will be okay.

Nisha froze. What was that? She'd never had that kind of a thought before, especially not in a time like this. But she couldn't question it further because her mother had joined them.

"Hello! I can't believe I ran into you again!" Her mother was the perfect picture of pleasant surprise, down to the wide eyes and the sweet smile.

Nisha couldn't focus. Her mother's eyes were giving nothing away, the cat was still walking around her feet and Lucy was standing too close. She wanted to run away and hide, she needed to leave but she was boxed in. She had nowhere to go.

Why don't you hide in here? Nobody will find you. I will keep you safe.

And now these thoughts. This wasn't the first time the thoughts had popped up in her head but they were becoming more frequent and she was beginning to get worried. This wasn't her! She would never think this! But even she knew how stupid that sounded. They were literally spoken in her mind. If it wasn't her then who else would it be?

The cat meowed loudly, drawing all of their attention. Nisha paused as it pressed harder against her leg, looking up at her. She didn't know what to do. She didn't know what it wanted.

“Is that Momo? Oh wow, I think she wants your attention,” Lucy laughed. “We got her only a couple of weeks ago. I can’t believe this, she’s really taken to you. The only other person she clings to like that is me.”

Nisha glanced at her mother. Her face was still unreadable, but she nodded. With that, she bent down and Momo lunged for her chest. She squealed in surprise, arms moving to make sure it didn’t fall. She blinked as the cat made itself comfortable, wrapped its tail around her wrist, and started purring.

“Oh my god, this is a miracle. She’s the most antisocial cat I’ve ever had in here, I can’t believe she’s finally chosen someone.”

“Nisha does have her skills.”

She didn’t know what to make of her mother’s statement, but she couldn’t ponder over it. It was like the minute she tried to read her mother, the cat would do something to pull her attention away.

Nisha didn’t realize that the two women had finished their conversation and were looking at her until one of them spoke up.

“Would you like to take Momo with you?”

Chapter 6

Ever since she started her café, Lucy knew that there would be a chance of her tripping over someone distracted by her cats. What she was not expecting was the who.

Something about Nisha and her mother didn’t feel right but she couldn’t put her finger on it. The girl would pop up in her thoughts every once in a while since their encounter in the store.

Her instincts were telling her it was something to look into, but Lucy didn't last this long in society by bending to every whim. And because she was a white person in Texas.

Not the point, Lucy.

The point was, she was pushing sixty. She was old and she had seen stuff. She'd adopted a teenage runaway, she'd sheltered a girl kicked out by her parents, she'd helped a girl get out of her toxic and abusive relationship.

She had followed her instinct for each and every one of those situations and she felt like she had to do the same here. But what?

She didn't miss the way Nisha's mother's expression changed for a moment when she asked the little girl about Momo. Lucy wished she could've gotten a better look at that, but it was quick to leave.

Nisha, on the other hand, was looking up at the two of them completely still, eyes as wide as saucers.

"Take... Momo?"

Lucy adjusted the sack of rice to free one hand, reaching to stroke the cat's head. Momo purred and pressed up against her fingers but otherwise made no move to leave her perch.

"Oh, I'm sorry I'm so rude, I can't believe we've been standing here while you're holding that heavy thing. Here, let's take a seat." Lucy wasn't sure if she wanted to sit and chat with the woman, but if that would give Nisha more time to relax with the cats... well she's had worse afternoons.

"Of course, let me just put this away. Jenna! Could you come and take this real quick?" She was glad Jenna heard her the first time, Lucy didn't want to be screaming across the store.

Jenna bounced up to them, slowing the minute she registered who was with Lucy. She couldn't help but frown.

Lucy caught that. The girl was expressive to a fault and Lucy could read her very well. She glanced back at Nisha's mother, who was steadfastly ignoring the girl.

She watched the whole exchange closely. She observed the change in the woman when Jenna reached the table. She straightened up, sniffed... and looked anywhere but at the girl. It was obvious that she was ignoring her young worker and it seemed like she caught that too, given the roll of her eyes.

Interesting. "Here, go put this in the kitchen. Next time make a list of the things we need so that I can go get them all at once. I don't want to have to make multiple trips!"

Now Lucy rolled her eyes at the grin the girl shot her. "Sorry," she said with a bonk of her head, "I will ensure our great boss lady is not inconvenienced."

Lucy shook her head. Oh, this girl was such a pain. She wanted to say so, but Jenna had already whirled around, beginning to head back.

She turned her attention to Priya once more, opened her mouth to say something, and was interrupted by her worker's excited whoop.

"Holy shit, is that Momo? What- ouch! Fuck! Yeah, that brat is Momo. You managed to tame Momo, oh my god that is awesome! You know she is our most antisocial cat? Hates everyone except Lucy. You're a miracle worker!"

When Jenna got excited, she got louder and noisier. A combination which, while effective for a café like this, was not good for someone as skittish as Nisha. The poor girl looked terrified, glancing around—probably for an out or help—and her arms were tightening around the cat.

Lucy straightened, half-ready to pull Momo away in case she ended up hurting Nisha, but the cat swatted at Jenna instead, scratching her arm with a low hiss. Seemed like Momo had really taken to the girl.

While all of this was happening, Lucy caught two things. While Nisha was looking around, she looked everywhere—even at her—but her eyes did not land on her mother, not even *once*. The second thing she noticed was that Priya had not budged an inch. She hadn't looked at her daughter or moved to help her.

Her mind reeled at the implication. She shooed Jenna away, watching the little girl relax, and looked back at her mother. Nothing. No change in expression, no movement, nothing. It was like she didn't care.

She paused. That day in HEB, she thought she'd seen the woman chatting with her friend, but she seemed worried enough about Nisha that Lucy wrote it off as just baseless suspicion. But what if it wasn't? What if she had actually left her daughter in the giant store with no one to help her?

Lucy turned back to Priya. She didn't know what to say, whether she even could say anything without giving her suspicions away. Turns out, she didn't have to.

“I would fire her.”

She blinked. “I'm sorry?”

“Your worker. I would fire her. I would never let my subordinate do that, no matter how young or sweet they may seem.” Priya was very matter-of-fact, looking straight into her eyes.

“What are you talking about?” Lucy had a hunch, but she wanted to hear it from her mouth.

“Your barista just disrupted this entire café’s quiet along with disrespecting you in front of your customers. You should not tolerate such behavior.”

She bristled. Who was this woman coming into *her* business, telling her how to run *her* shop? This wasn’t even some misplaced concern for her daughter. She hadn’t brought that up at all. “Oh? I think it’s okay. Jenna’s always been like that, we’ve gotten used to it.”

“You shouldn’t be. That kind of behavior will make her take advantage of you. You should discipline her while he is still young enough to learn.”

Lucy was beginning to see why Nisha like that. Especially with the mother she had. *Discipline a child for being friendly and outgoing?* What does she do to Nisha?

“I would never let my daughter get away with something like this.” *And there it was.* “Her father and I make sure she is well behaved.”

Lucy glanced at Nisha. She seemed smaller, like she had curled in on herself. She kept shooting her mother fearful looks as she stroked the cat. It was like a fog cleared from her mind.

Oh, you poor child, what do they do to you?

*

Ruby knew Jackson was weird. They’d deduced that as soon as they had met the guy. Something was off about him, but he had been accepting and kind enough for them to not give any further thought to it. Besides, it wasn’t like they were getting any creepy vibes from him. They just knew in their mind, that he wasn’t a normal functioning human. They couldn’t quite place it but he wasn’t just a tattoo artist. And that was that.

That thought kept reinforcing itself once in a while, enough to make sure Ruby never forgot it, but not enough that they felt the need to act on it. In their experience, Ruby knew to always trust their gut, but so far they weren't receiving any warning signs.

Until now.

The minute Jackson walked into the studio, no, *dragged* himself in, Ruby knew something was wrong. Maybe it was the fact that their boss looked like Death himself had paid him a visit last night, or the fact that he made a beeline straight to his room without a peep towards them. Their morning back and forth was a highlight, and Jackson never missed it without reason.

Sure, Ruby knew they could be overthinking and maybe it *was* just a bad day. But warning signs were pinging left, right and center and the woman had to acknowledge it. But what did it mean? In their five years of knowing Jackson, he has been nothing but kind, respectful, and extremely helpful to them. Even if he had the interest of a cardboard in their life.

What was going on? Since he had just clocked in, they still had time to send him back home and reschedule his appointments for the day. By the sounds coming from his room, Ruby was leaning towards that decision. They contemplated calling either Lucy or Zoe when they heard a loud crash from the room. They rushed to the door only to find it locked. Ruby called out to Jackson, but there was no answer. *What the fuck?*

Cursing, they fumbled with their own set of keys and shoved the door open the minute they got it unlocked. They rushed inside only to come to a screeching halt. Sprawled on the floor, his equipment scattered around him, was Jackson breathing heavily.

“Holy shit, holy shit. Boss!” Ruby rushed to his side. They had just extended their hand to feel his skin when his own shot out and caught theirs in a bone-wrenching grip. They gasped in pain and watched in shock as Jackson’s eyes opened, glazed and wild.

“Don’t you dare,” he hissed, his grip getting tighter.

Ruby tried pulling their hand away, but the man was strong. They had never realized how much until that very moment. “Boss! Jackson! You’re hurting me, let go!”

His fingers only grew firmer, and Ruby could have sworn they felt something move inside their hand. “Don’t you touch her. Don’t even think about it.”

That made them stop in their struggle. *Her? Who’s her?* “Jackson, it’s me, Ruby. Who are you talking about?”

“Don’t fuck around with me!” His roar bounced off the walls and they were ashamed to say that a squeak left them at the sound. “You think I don’t know what you’ve done?”

Ruby resumed their struggling. “Boss! It’s Ruby! I don’t know what the fuck is going on but wake up! *Wake up!*”

“You piece of shit,” he growled, using their arm to drag them closer to his face. “You even *think* about going near Zo again, you even *look* at her and I will kill you. And trust me, I will do it with a smile on my face this time.”

Ruby froze. *Going near Zo again.* Ruby had been around her boss, his girlfriend and Lucy long enough to know that Zoe had a very sad childhood. They never pried even when provided the opportunity, mainly because they didn’t think it was their place to know. From the gist of what they knew, Zoe was a sexual assault survivor but the asshole got away scot-free.

Going near Zo again. Jackson had always been very tight-lipped about Zo's past and they had respected that. They knew what it was like to have a fucked-up life. The two of them had a mutual agreement. No questions about childhood. But this changed everything. *Didn't it?*

I will kill you. Smile on my face this time. Ruby frowned. It was clear Jackson was thinking of the scumbag who hurt Zoe. They knew how protective he was over her. But the same words kept ringing in their head. Over and over.

I will kill you. Smile on my face this time

A sharp pain up their arm broke Ruby out of their thoughts for a moment. They looked down to see Jackson still glaring up at them, his fingers crushing their own. They just registered the pain in their hand and knew that was going to hurt like a bitch later. But right now they needed to get out of there. *Smile on my face.*

Ruby looked around. There was no water nearby, but his needle was close enough. They just had to reach a little... got it! Without hesitation, they jammed the needle into Jackson's hand. *This time.* They scrambled away as he let go, wincing at the cry of pain he let out. *Smile on my face.* They stumbled to the sink and quickly filled up a cup, throwing it on his face. *I will kill you.*

They stood over and watched as he sputtered and came to, sitting up slowly. *Smile on my face.* They watched as he glanced down at his hand and pulled the needle out with no sign of pain. If anything, he just looked confused. He looked down at his clothes and then up at Ruby. *This time.*

"Sorry. You had fainted and I didn't know what else to do." And before he could reply, they rushed out of the room and into their own, making sure to lock the door behind them. With wide eyes, Ruby sagged against it, falling to the floor as a thought hit them.

Had Jackson killed someone before?