

Dysfunction of Family Legacy

by

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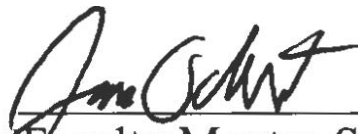
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Abstract:

Dealing with themes of mental health, self-harm, grief, and addiction, *The Dysfunction of Family Legacy* is a contemporary, three-part, multi-generational tale that's set in the small island neighborhood of City Island in the Bronx, NY. The Adams family has been rocked by the sudden death of Tomas Adams, the twin brother of the protagonist, Kim. A year after his death, Kim has stepped into his shadow running the family boxing gym, Rumble City, which used to be a staple in the City Island community. Floundering under grief and pressure, Kim's anger bubbles under the surface as she finds her escape in bottles and bruised fists. When a letter about the gym's unpaid property taxes arrives in the mail, she has to decide what her legacy really is and if it can be confined to a building.

Part I

“Family is supposed to be our safe haven. Very often, it’s the place where we find the deepest heartache.” –Iyanla Vanzant

Chapter 1

Facing her family's boxing gym, Kim Adams inhaled the thick, salty island air and braced herself. The windows reflected the soft dawn sunlight. She shouldered her duffle bag and crossed City Island Avenue. She'd debated stopping for coffee at the island's sole gas station but decided against it. Now, standing in front of Rumble City, its brick face cracked and chipped, she regretted the decision. The weight of another sleepless night wore at her shoulders and she shifted her back searching for something to readjust.

The building's once clean and sparkling surface now bordered on decrepit. The old white paint on the first-floor bricks was peeling and stained gray. Bird shit covered the once-charming window keystones, and the vinyl letters on the picture windows were peeling and flaking off, leaving behind "umble C Box lub." The red vinyl chips that had collected on the sidewalk beneath the window were swept away by the strong wind gusts from Lagoonia's plane departures and arrivals—the deafening roar of the airport of the City Island soundtrack along with the squawking seagulls and far-off gunshots of the NYPD range across the bay.

Biting her lip, Kim fished around in her purse for the teal carabiner she used for her work keys. She unlocked the gym, the deadbolt clicking softly. As she swung open the front door, shabby aluminum blinds clacked against the plate-glass and drowned out the tinkling of the brass bells. Warm, sweat scented air wafted toward her and she crinkled her nose, smelling a high

school's boys locker room instead of a quiet gym with a couple loyal middle-aged men who came in for personal training.

She searched the wall next to her in the dark, and finding the switch, flicked on the harsh fluorescent lights.

Kim shut the door and squared her shoulders. She plugged her phone into the speaker behind the front desk and played her Girl Power playlist. Soon Alanis Morissette's "You Oughta Know" filled the space. She opened a couple of windows and turned on an ancient box fan, hoping the cool air might wake her up. She shook her head and let the music wash over her.

After half an hour, she grew accustomed to tangy scent of lemon, lavender, and sweat mingling together.

One by one, Kim rolled open mats, kneeling on her hands and knees—the raised coins of the rubber tile flooring biting into knees and palms—sprayed her homemade multi-purpose cleaner, and wiped them down. After finishing each mat, she used a hand weights to hold them open and let them air out and dry.

She repeated her meticulous cleaning as she filled a small bucket with soapy water for the ring floor. Kim slid the navy plastic bucket under the red and black leather, steel sheathed ropes and arched her back to climb between them. started scrubbing the ring floor. Though it wasn't used anymore, Kim hated the idea of not cleaning everything, of leaving something unfinished. Unable to do things half-assed, she scrubbed vigorously, convinced there was still blood staining some of a couple of Rumble's corners.

Yesterday, after close, she'd made a fresh batch of cleaner and left to her second job. She didn't have time to clean or peruse the growing pile of bills on her desk. God forbid her little brother, Danny, get up early and pick up sponge.

Kim worked in Rumble in some role or another for as long as she could remember. She used to sit behind the front desk and sell water for a seventy-five cents out of a red Igloo cooler. During college, she'd forgotten how much work went into keeping the place sanitary.

Finished, Kim dropped the dirty rags from the ring and mats in an overflowing wicker basket behind the desk. She clenched her teeth. Danny was supposed to do the laundry this week and take out the trash. Considering this and the capsized can in her office, he hadn't done either.

Jackass. She was going to kill him. She didn't ask for much. It was like he enjoyed making her life harder.

Kim shook her head and grabbed a new cloth. She sat in front of a couple of racks of free weights and got to work, spray bottle and towel in hand. Her mind emptied as she wiped down each one, from the little two-pounder hand weights to the thirty-pound kettle bells.

The bell above the door chimed as someone pushed open the front door she'd forgotten to lock.

"Sorry, we're closed," Her back straightened and tensed, but she kept it to the door as she reorganized the weights by size. She gripped the ten-pounder, ready to use it as weapon if it wasn't who she thought behind her.

"I know," a familiar, gruff Scottish voice replied. Harp was Rumble's top trainer. He'd been working there for a couple of years and he'd trained there for four years before that, under Kim's father, JJ.

An involuntary smile touched her lips.

“Harp, what are you doing here so early?” Kim turned to look at him, weight still in hand. The lights glinted off his wavy strawberry blond hair, but her focus was on his scruffy five o’clock shadow. She just wanted to rub her hands over it as she once did, letting the rough stubble scratch her sensitive skin.

Harp chuckled and held his hands up in surrender. At the confusion stamped on her face, he pointed at the weight she forgot she was holding, his own still raised. “Wanna put that down?”

Mumbling her apologies, Kim replaced the free weight on its stand.

“No biggie, it’s just that if I’d known that being ten minutes early got my ass kicked, I’d have stopped for coffee first.”

“Ha. Ha.” Kim said, wiping her sweaty palms on her yoga pants. She’d spent an hour on the floor lost in her task, and she hadn’t even noticed. She pushed herself off the floor with a groan, her knees protesting the whole way, and winced. She never thought at twenty-five, she’d feel so fucking old, her joints creaking like an old house settling against high winds.

Harp looked her over, lips pursed. He paid close attention to her eyes. “Get any sleep?”

“That obvious?”

“You look like shit,” Harp replied with a cheeky smile, his dimples pronounced. She ached to dip her fingers in the small depressions.

A small laugh bubbled out of Kim. “So fucking sweet,” she said, chucking her rag at him.

Unflinching, he caught it easily, the rag hanging limply from his hand. Shaking his head, he leaned forward, reaching for the multi-surface cleaner, and then pelted the rag at her stomach. It fell to her sneakered feet, leaving behind a damp spot on her tank top. Harp looked up at her, mischief dancing in his crystalline blue eyes.

“You trying to start a war before we open? I can grab the ten-pounder again.” Kim drawled. It was a rare moment where she felt alive. No sinking sadness. No paralyzing numbness. Harp always annoyed her and she couldn’t help being drawn in, ready to bicker, even when she knew he was antagonizing her on purpose, trying to draw her old self out. Somehow, he turned from the boy she loved to hate into the man she relied on and trusted most—even if she still struggled to crack the steel shield and barbed wire she’d erected around her emotions to let him in. Even if some days she wished she hated him again because it would be easier than this dance.

Kim forced herself to withdraw from his clear depthless gaze.

She couldn’t go there. Not again. He was Tommy’s best friend—almost ten years and they were inseparable, something Harp made abundantly clear.

Straightening, he asked, “Ya want some of this?” Flexing, he wiggled his eyebrows.

She rolled her eyes, “If I recall, I used to be pretty good at kicking your ass.” Unlike Tommy and Harp, Kim expanded her fighting knowledge. While she was at Fordham, she took Muay Thai and Krav Maga self-defense classes at the fitness and rec-center with her roommate, Scilla, sophomore and junior years. They insisted it was because it was free, but really it was because Markus their instructor, with his reddish bark colored skin and sleeve tattoos, was the stuff of wet dreams.

“We both know I let you win,” he said.

Raising her eyebrows, Kim met Harp’s gaze, an unspoken challenge in her eyes. “Is that so?” she asked, smirking. She glanced at the fraying rag on the floor and then back at Harp who was staring at her, amused. The challenge rolled off her tongue before she could stop it, “Don’t start something you don’t intend to finish. Or, I could always flip—”

The bells rang again, and Danny slammed the door behind him, the blinds crashing against the glass. The noise grated on her frayed nerves. Startled, she jumped back from Harp and her head swiveled toward the sound. It left her feeling like her body was at war.

What was she doing? She could kick herself. She needed to keep her distance, not get closer.

Thank God for small, inconvenient, miracles. Suddenly on edge and angry with herself, Kim was determined to capitalize on the distraction.

She bemoaned, “What the hell, Danny?” Her heart beat reverberated in her ears. “Scared the shit out of me.” She rubbed the space under her collarbone. Her skin was flushed and she was burning up.

“Show up after nine, you jump down my throat. Show up at nine, you say I’m cutting it close. Show up early, and you’re still not happy,” Danny said. His hazel eyes hardened and he crossed his arms with a huff.

Kim rolled her eyes. “I might be happier if did the laundry or had taken out the trash.”

“Do I look like a cleaning service?” She loved her brother—even if she needed to remind herself of that fact sometimes—but he knew exactly how to trigger Kim’s temper and dig under her skin. Asking him to do the job he was paid for was asking too much. God forbid he pick up a sponge.

“You look like someone who wants a paycheck.” She was losing the energy to argue, to keep having the same arguments repeatedly. It was draining.

“Whatever.” He yawned, rubbing his red eyes.

“Need to go home and wake up again, D?” Kim asked. “You’re not the only one who’s tired.” She sighed. She couldn’t remember the last time she woke up feeling rested. It was why she intended on going to her friend Tyler’s tonight. He knew just how to distract her.

Instead of responding, Danny dropped his duffle on the front desk in frustration, It hit the plastic brochure and business card stand on the desk, which tumbled forward, flyers scattering everywhere, caught on the breeze from high-powered fan.

“Fucking kidding me,” Danny grumbled, slamming the stand back in place.

Kim touched her temples and took a deep breath. Another great start to the day. She shook her head and looked at the gym’s dirty floor. The fallen brochures were the least of her problems.

“Pick these up?” She asked, trying to stay calm.

It wasn’t a big deal, she reminded herself. Accidents happened.

“Yeah, okay. Sure.” He motioned to the papers on the floor around him. “I guess I’ve got this.”

“Thanks,” she said, choosing to ignore the word ‘guess.’ She gave her brother a strained smile.

“Why’re you thanking him? He’s the one who dropped them,” Harp interrupted, moving to stand in front of Kim.

“C’mon man, can’t you ever mind your business?” Danny huffed, hints of a whine tinging his voice. He shuffled forward, puffing up his chest.

Before things escalated, Kim pushed past him and in between them.

“Fucking dumbasses, both of you. Put your dicks away. I don’t need this shit right now,” she snapped. She pointed at Danny and then at the floor. “Just pick ’em up.” Sighing, she glared

at Harp when Danny wasn't looking at them. Harp needed to learn to keep his mouth shut sometimes. He wasn't as helpful as he thought he was.

He started mumbling under his breath.

Kim sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Without the attitude." Catching her harsh tone, she corrected herself, "Please."

The six-year age difference between them seemed much greater most days. She and her twin, Tommy, raised him after their mom left and their dad burrowed further into himself. The twins were fifteen and Danny was nine. Ten years later and she sometimes forgot he was her brother and not her son.

He rolled his eyes, bent down, and started shuffling the papers together.

Satisfied and back on her cleaning mission, Kim strode through the gym to the supply closet next to the bathroom.

As she reached for the knob, Harp startled her by laying a gentle hand on her shoulder. Soft, but urgent, he said, "Slow down." He was surprisingly close, and the timbre of his voice tickled her ear. "Breathe."

"No time—I've got some stuff to finish." Shrugging his hand off, Kim opened the closet and grabbed the broom and dustpan. Putting them to the side, she said, "After close yesterday, I took down a couple of bags that were starting to rip and taped them up. Nothing too big, but I didn't want them to become a problem, especially not during a class."

"If I'd known, I would've stayed behind to help."

Slamming the door shut, Kim ran her tongue over her teeth—each of the white bones a tingling bundle of nerves—and took both cleaning tools in hand. "It wasn't hard," she said. Not hard after she wrestled them to the ground and cleaned up the sand she spilled. There had to be

some she missed, hiding in the creaks, cracks, and crevices of Rumble's worn-down rubber tiles.

"Anyway, I'm asking for help now," she said, exasperated.

"Are you?" Harp challenged. His voice remained level, but Kim saw the annoyance that flashed in his eyes.

Cocking her head to the side Kim asked, "Should I spell it out? It's your job," she said simply, throwing his own words back at him. She shouldn't have to ask for his help. She rolled her eyes and put her hands on her hips. She was too tired for this overbearing bullshit, but she wasn't going to back down.

Changing the subject, he asked, "What time is our first session?"

Kim eyed him. "Not 'til quarter to."

"So, there's time?" Harp asked.

She reluctantly nodded. "Nothing on the schedule, but, then, nothing ever happens when it's supposed to." There was a ringing in her ears and a buzzing in her veins.

"Right then," he said, pulling the dustpan and broom out of her hands, "Danny and I can handle this. He could use a few more menial tasks to do." Kim snorted. Her brother would not agree.

Harp turned to leave, but before he could walk away, Kim reached her hand out and stopped him. "Speaking of Danny—"

"Kimmy, he needs a swift kick in the ass."

It's not that she didn't agree with him, but— "Be that as it may," she said, "he's my brother and I'm handling it. I don't need you to jump in." Danny used to love Harp, considered him a brother, but the past year threw all their relationships off balance.

"Handling it? Is that what you call what you're doing?"

“Excuse me?” Kim scoffed. She didn’t ask for his opinion and didn’t need his judgment. She did things her own way and Danny was her brother, her responsibility, not his. “What would you call it then?” she asked, eyebrow quirked, and arms crossed, daring him to continue.

Danny was a pain in the ass, but he was her pain in the ass. It didn’t matter if Harp was right, his condescension infuriated her. He could’ve said whatever he wanted about Kim, but not her brother. Only she could do that.

“You’re coddling him.”

She inhaled sharply. “Oh, fuck off,” she muttered. “It’s *not* coddling; it’s just not your way.”

“Any other time, when you’re pissed, you’re ready to fight everyone. Yet, when it comes to Danny, you turn into a doting gran, tiptoeing ‘round his feelings.” Kim was sure Danny didn’t feel that way.

“I’m not trying to waste my energy on bullshit arguments; I’m picking my battles carefully.” Kim looked at her hands, they were dry and cracked from cleaning. Her knuckles were warm and glowed a faint pink from working the bag yesterday. She picked at her cuticles and sighed. “Would it be so bad if I wanted to protect him a bit? He’s had a rough year.” Her voice cracked and she swallowed.

“I get it. I do, but we’ve all had a shit year,” he said, his voice softer. “You’re not helping him.”

“I disagree,” she replied. She looked up at Harp, his face somber. “It’ll be fine.”

Harp sighed. “If you say so.”

Straightening her back, Kim look Harp in the eyes and said, “I do, and I’m your boss.” She gave him a quick smile that didn’t meet her eyes.

“Well, boss, why don’t you go to your office while D and I handle these last chores. Relax a little. Maybe even take a nap.”

“A *nap*? What’s that?”

Harp let out a raspy chuckle and nudged her toward her office.

Chapter 2

Kim turned on her heel and left, chewing her bottom lip as she stalked through the gym toward the hallway leading to Tommy's office. She felt Harp's unmoving body behind her and fought the urge to look back, knowing that if she did, he'd have that stupid pitying look painted on his face.

He meant well, yet she couldn't help being annoyed.

She didn't need coddling. Didn't need pity. She was fine.

Besides, that was Tommy's schtick. The last thing Kim wanted was Harp acting the role of over-protective big brother, especially not when her mind kept flashing to the way his strong hands gripped that broom and the way they once gripped her thighs, digging into the soft flesh with just the right amount of pressure as she wrapped her legs around him.

Kim shook the image from her head.

Annoyed. She was supposed to be annoyed, not thinking of sinking into Harp's embrace.

A locker room sat on either side of the back hallway.

She wrinkled her nose, assaulted by mustiness. While the damp air from the showers and lack of proper ventilation didn't help, the smell didn't set in until Hurricane Sandy when the first floor flooded. They'd ripped up the hall and office carpets, replaced moldy sheetrock, and changed the drop ceiling, but the scent persisted. She tried every air freshener and cleaning

product she found, but with no change she gave up on getting rid of it and focused her attention on masking it the best she could with timed air fresheners and open windows.

Kim stepped in front of Tommy's—*her* office door and brushed her hand against the bronze knob. A year later, and it was still hard to wrap her head around taking his place. He'd taken the responsibility of boss from their father, who was quickly drinking Rumble's way to the bottom. JJ had insisted on keeping the bigger office for himself though, becoming the gym's figurehead, but much like the British monarchy, it was in title only. He stopped boxing when Michelle left and stopped training altogether six years ago.

After Tommy's death, Rumble was forced into Kim's unwilling and trembling hands. She wasn't ready to run a business and never had the interest. She appreciated that boxing and Rumble paid for her life—the roof over her head, the car, half her college tuition—but she preferred painting over wiping up blood and sweat.

Even before Pops retired, JJ was the best trainer in Rumble—skilled, strict, and encouraging. She used to love watching him work, he always wore a white ribbed tank top with basketball shorts that accentuated his agile and lithe frame. Whenever he was free, he'd swing her giggling form around while he waited for another boxer. She hadn't seen that version of her father in a long time. Now, his rotund body was glued to the sofa bemoaning his existence while she busted her ass in his place.

What she wouldn't give to any job instead of the one that had been hefted on her. Unfortunately for her, she was stuck in a never-ending project rather than putting her Psych and Fine Arts degrees to use. Instead of going to school to become an art therapist, her life was invested in figuring out each month's budget and income, which were painted red.

Kim's ears rang from the sharp creak the door's rusty hinges let out.

Her office was cramped. The small L-shaped desk was cluttered with envelopes, sticky notes, and an excess of membership applications. A few of weeks ago, she'd made the mistake of giving Danny the responsibility of printing some new ones when they ran out—he over-printed, emptying a brand-new ink cartridge. The ancient Dell desktop and phone were boxed into the corner and often went unused, and with a surplus of freshly printed applications, Kim had even less need to use it.

There used to be an ergonomic desk chair—one she'd gifted Tommy five years ago when he took on the title of boss, along with “Boss Man” name plate—but the pleather fabric was ripped, shredded really, and she'd had to replace it with a small black rolling chair from Ikea that she'd found in Danny's old bedroom after he moved into the basement. She avoided sitting there as much as possible, knowing that she was as out of place as the child-sized chair. Sitting behind that desk, she felt like the little girl who once sat on her grandfather's lap while he worked, pretending she understood the numbers as he perused the books and the statistics as he reviewed boxers.

Tommy begged her to redecorate his office, erasing any sign it used to be JJ's. She took her task seriously, thrilled to have something to do besides answering Rumble's phone and sitting on a barstool waiting for her best friend, Rey, to get off work. Kim hunted down the comfortable worn leather sofa which was now squished between the desk and the wall. There was less than a foot of floor space between the desk and the couch. It had quickly become her favorite spot to nap when she grew tired of answering the phone and could pawn the menial task off on Danny.

Every day for the past year, she'd been lost, her eyes watering as she tried to shove the contents of contracts, letters, and bills into her brain only for it all to seep out again, and today was no different.

She laid her hand atop one of the paper mounds on her desk, careful not to jostle anything in the semi-organized chaos. The piles were lopsided and looked as though they would topple if Kim walked past them too quickly. She sorted through a pile yesterday, sorting through the loan offers—just in case—new bills, and final notices, with their loud bright red and orange envelopes.

Inspired by her love of Jenga, Kim grabbed a stack of ten envelopes one-handed and held her breath. The top of the stack wobbled and then toppled over. Exasperated, she groaned, but left them there

Kim dropped herself onto the sofa's waiting cushions and folded her legs beneath her so she sat cross-legged. She fanned out the envelopes and noticed a couple emblazoned with "URGENT" and "Return Service Requested." Her gaze flicked to the other unopened bills on her desk. Though she promised Harp she'd come back here and relax, she couldn't do it. Not while lying next to a pile of her shortcomings. She was determined to face their financials. She just wanted to get it over with, or else her ulcers would continue to gnaw at her frayed stomach lining. This wasn't something she could put off; she'd just have to make some payment arrangements and she'd find the money somewhere. She had to.

People counted on her.

In its prime, there was a waiting list to join Rumble. They rarely needed to advertise, but their reputation wove its way through the other boroughs—a boxing gym run by Olympic gold

medal winner, James Adams—but no one took Rumble, or Kim, seriously. Not after Pops retired to Puerto Rico—the way he and Grandma always dreamed—and JJ faded into the background. People used to come around for Tommy, but Kim was different story. She knew how to fight but she wasn't the prodigy her twin was. He was a fierce and quick south paw, trained to box since age nine. Business had been steadily declining before she took over, but after—after the place evolved into an off-brand YMCA, where most of the clients were children, the elderly, and the occasional stay at home mom trying to escape her kids. On occasion, Kim got lucky and an adult who wasn't a parent of one of their after-school students signed up for a membership or some self-defense classes, maybe out of convenience since they were the oldest, and only, gym on the island, or because they—for some reason—believed that Rumble was the gym for them.

Kim dropped the stack on the cushion next to her and leaned forward to fish out a pen and legal pad from her desk's top drawer. Kim flipped past a few pages of doodles and calculations and the past eleven months of bills and expenses. She glanced at last month's unpaid—\$460—amount and jotted it down on the top of a fresh page. She pulled out her phone, logged into her mobile banking app, and wrote down her available balance—\$3,755.16.

She readied her pen, plucked her first envelope, and tore it open. Junk mail offering new insurance. She crumpled it up and tossed it toward the near-full garbage bin on the other side of her desk. She missed and the paper ball rolled behind her desktop's outdated tower—it still took floppy disks.

The second envelope held a water bill from the DEP—the New York Department of Environmental Protection. It was cheaper than usual—but still hefty—\$254 with a past due—stupid late fees—of \$178.

She drew columns on her note pad. One for who she owed, another for how much, and the last two for late fees and past due amounts, respectively. Later, she'd add the ones from yesterday. She jotted down the first bill. The third came from the plumber she hired when the water heater broke. The next was a letter from the sporting equipment company Rumble used informing of their ending contract. She put that aside for later.

A small glance at the fifth one told Kim the bill came from ConEdison, the company's blue logo, layered Cs, was a fixture around the city and her house—she had a large teddy bear with an orange vest and ConEd hardhat sitting in the corner of her room growing. The envelope's face was emblazoned with an angry, red “Final Warning,” and she knew she was in trouble. Biting the corner of her lip, she tentatively ripped open the thin white sleeve. Had it been a bandage, she'd have felt as each hair was ripped out by the adhesive.

What was she doing? She shook her head.

Screw it.

She had to deal with it regardless of whether they could afford it. Summer was coming and she couldn't bring in new business—or keep tenants—without electricity. She tore the last couple of inches and yanked out the dreaded bill.

Kim's hands trembled as she unfolded the pages and when she saw the amount, her eyes widened in shock. Fuck. According to the good people of Consolidated Edison, the proprietor of Rumble City owed nearly a thousand dollars between their current bill of \$610, two late fees, and a past due amount of \$340.

She'd been expecting it to come, knew that she couldn't keep putting it off, but that didn't make it any easier. Instead of jotting down the enormous bill, Kim dropped everything on the couch next to her. She pushed herself up and cleared a space on her cluttered desk. She

opened the top drawer of her desk again, pulled out the check binder, and rifled past the duplicates until she found the new checks.

Her desk chair let out a creak as she flopped onto it. She leaned forward and grabbed pad, pen, and bill. After placing them in the empty space in front of her, Kim pulled the phone to her. Finding ConEd's customer service number, Kim took a deep breath and dialed, steeling herself while the phone rang. Every possible conversation ran through her mind as she vaguely listened to the automated system, pressing the corresponding numbers when prompted and jiggling a pen between her thumb and forefinger. She hated this part of the job, amongst others. Her previous bill paying experience came in the form of three small-balance credit cards which she paid off with the quinceañera money she had stashed under her bed in a dingy Payless box with dreams of a great escape; she never expected to be in City Island eleven years later. It was a box of hope, still, though, and she dreaded the thought of having to dip into it again.

"Representative," she said, and repeated when the system didn't understand her.

After a couple of minutes of elevator music, a flat, no-nonsense voice said, "Hello, this is ConEdison customer service. This is Brianna. Can I please have your name to verify your account?"

"Yes. Hello, Brianna. I'm Kimberly Adams calling on behalf of James Adams Jr. and Rumble City Boxing Club. I believe my name is on the account," she said, already knowing it was.

"Yes, I see you on my screen here. How can I help you Ms. Adams?"

Every month since she started this job, Kim had been able to convince a couple of bill collectors to let her make a budget plan and pay in installments. She wasn't that charming, her

half-assed acting skills would only work for improv, and sympathy was only going to get her so far and she wasn't so sure Brianna was in a lenient mood, but she sure as hell had to try.

With bats crashing against her stomach, Kim crossed her fingers, opened her mouth and began, "Well..."

"Let's just get this done." Danny grumbled to Harp. Kim needed to chill out and smoke more pot. She was becoming too high-strung and kept riding his ass for no reason. He trudged to the closet and yanked out the rusty red step-ladder.

"Something we can finally agree on," Harp retorted with an arrogant snort, grabbing one of the eighty-pound Everlast bags and hoisting it over his shoulder.

Danny itched to snap-back, the Adams temper nipping at his heels urging him forward, but instead he exhaled. Fighting with the asshole would only worsen his sister's mood. She already looked like shit, and he didn't need to be blamed for it. Her fuse was shorter than normal these days and Tom wasn't around to defuse that bomb and balance her out.

It made Danny feel like an outsider growing up, and he wished more than anything to be a part of that dynamic bond that could only be created when you shared a womb with someone for nine months.

Without Tommy, Kim was a different person, adrift, and it was starting to feel like Danny lost both siblings the same day.

Harp dropped the bag under the ceiling's black t-beam. Danny unfolded the ladder, rust flakes sprinkling the floor. He'd have to sweep that before she came back. He climbed up and grabbed the chain while Harp lifted, held, and steadied it from the bottom. Danny reattached the bag to the dangling swivel chain.

Danny looked over his shoulder to back as though he could see through the walls to Kim.

“I told her to take a nap,” Harp remarked, letting go of the bag. They watched as it swung back and forth, the chains squeaking.

Danny doubted that she was sleeping and said as much. “Kimmy’s too worked up.” Concern niggled at him. She was always working. If she was doing anything, it involved Rumble. “Her entire existence revolves around this place.”

She spent the night of her twenty-fifth birthday in the gym’s basement, watching DIY YouTube videos so she could get the boiler working, while the old guy who lived upstairs breathed down her neck. When that didn’t work, they called every plumber in a thirty-mile radius until they found someone who was willing to handle a late-night emergency. Danny still didn’t know where she found the money for the repair. Business had been slow for a while, even before Tommy died, and though Kim tried to hide it, Danny knew their finances were strained.

Why didn’t she let him in? It affected him too.

“You could make things easier on her,” Harp suggested. Though he said it evenly, Danny could hear the edge in his tone.

Danny huffed a sardonic laugh. “That’s ironic.” He was all too aware of how Harp took advantage of Kim’s feelings for him. Danny eavesdropped on Kim and Rey talk about Harp’s 180 after they fucked, but even if he hadn’t heard his sisters heart wrenching sobs or seen her empty and seen red rimmed eyes after, he would’ve noticed the shift between them. His bubbly and sarcastic big sister went from admitting the Scottish bastard with thinly veiled lust and hope to walking on eggshells and being covered in barbed wire. “If anyone has her on edge it’s you,” Danny continued, his voice hardened, even though he knew that wasn’t entirely true.

He used to follow his brother and Harp around like a lost puppy begging for scraps of attention. Now, the thought made his stomach turn.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re taking advantage of her grief—for forgiveness or more sex. Either way, I’m not going to let you fuck with her again.” He thought of all the times Kim stood between him and JJ, even if it meant taking a hit. There were only two Adams kids left and Danny would be damned if he didn’t have her back the way they should’ve had Tommy’s. If she wasn’t going to fight for herself, Danny would do it. He wouldn’t lose anyone else.

Harp’s face reddened all the way to his ears.

Good. He should be embarrassed.

“I don’t have to explain myself to you,” Harp grumbled.

“Maybe not, but you better stay in your lane.” Danny squared his shoulders and stood tall. It didn’t matter that he was inches shorter than Harp, if the ginger hurt his sister again he’d be out of a job with a broken nose.

Harp snorted. “Let’s finish this shit, so you can get back to slacking.”

Danny clenched and unclenched his fist, forcing himself to exhale.

Calm. He needed to calm the fuck down, because he couldn’t be as reactive as JJ.

Nodding, Danny retrieved the next bag and did his best to tune Harp out.

Kim hung up the phone and scribbled down her new payment arrangement and today’s payment on the legal pad in front of her.

The other urgent bills screamed at her, the brightness of their stark white envelopes, reflected the harsh light. If things continue as they had been, just a steady trickle of business,

they just might make it. She felt an overwhelming urge to knock the tenuously perched pile from her desk.

“Fuck me,” Kim mumbled to herself, writing down the last digits before pushing the notepad away with an exasperated sigh. She pinched the bridge of her nose and clicked her pen in agitation; each *shick* of the ballpoint’s spring mechanism reverberated off the blank walls and echoed in her ears.

Rent from the upstairs tenants wouldn’t come in until next week, and the gym was already drowning in late fees. Kim wanted to get the windows redone and the place repainted, just enliven its appearance, but she couldn’t find the funds in her strained budget for it. Hell, she barely found the funds to pay last month’s electric bill. Things would have to stay as they were for now especially if she wanted to afford using the air-conditioning during the upcoming sweltering summer months. As it was, nothing was irreparably broken and rent from the upstairs apartments kept things in working order—or, close enough. Closing her eyes, she prayed the building wouldn’t need any more emergency repairs like last month’s boiler fiasco.

She worked her twenty-fifth birthday, and she planned on ignoring the after close day altogether. Her night was supposed to be spent alone with pizza, weed, and Netflix. She couldn’t celebrate knowing Tommy would never get to turn twenty-five.

Instead, one of her tenants stormed up to her, clad in a cinched threadbare, terrycloth robe and flannel pajama pants. She was tossing her shit in the trunk of her Camry when she heard the scrape of Robert’s against the asphalt.

Red-faced and damp, he’d pronounced, “There’s no hot water.”

Kim blanched, mind scavenging for solutions. She squelched an impatient sigh and locked her car. Forcing a calm smile and demeanor, she said, “I’ll handle it.” There were tools in the basement, she just needed to call Danny for back-up.

“Maybe your father—”

She rolled her eyes and cut him off, “I said, I’d handle it.” Pulling her phone out her pocket, she added, “Call you when its done.”

Robert sputtered with indignation as she texted her brother and brushed past him and headed to the storm doors leading to the locked basement. But, instead of heading back to his apartment, Robert followed her, taking two steps at a time, and insisted on watching as she skimmed a couple of manuals for gas-powered water heaters and watched YouTube video after video. When that didn’t work, she called every local plumber until she found Theia.

“Please tell me it can be fixed,” Kim begged her. Danny stood in the corner stone-faced and bleary-eyed, unhappy to have spent most of the night in a musty basement while his sister failed, repeatedly, to ignite the pilot. Robert had left after a couple of hours, mumbling about women and feminism, which she chose to ignore though Danny griped about it enough for both of them when the old man was out of earshot.

“I’ll see what I can do. It’s an old system, so I can’t make guarantees. Could last another month, maybe even a year, but it’s on its last legs. Gonna have to replace it,” Theia said. So, with some of the money she saved and stashed under her bed, Kim paid over seven hundred dollars for an indeterminate amount of time. She didn’t know what she was going to do when the heater heaved its last breath.

Now, it looked like Harp was the only one getting paid this week. Danny was sure to throw a tantrum, though Kim never kept a full wallet. Never got a pay day from Rumble. If it

weren't for JJ's disability checks and leftover money from an old asbestos lawsuit, their electric, gas, and phone bills at home wouldn't get paid, and the darkness filling their house wouldn't be by choice.

Having only two employees was a catch-22: there were fewer people to pay, yet without more trainers, Rumble wasn't likely to expand beyond bare bones. There used to be more, trainers who breathed the sport, but they either quit when Kim first started or after things started falling apart. How could she blame them? It didn't matter that she shared blood with their Olympian founder and a couple of welterweight champions, but they never signed up to work for a freshly graduated psych major crashing her way through owning a gym. Working for Tommy after JJ was an adjustment but having to work for someone without a reputation in the boxing community was insulting. It was the same for members who showed up one day looking to train in a boxing gym with notoriety.

Though Kim could throw a punch like most of the other trainer who once walked through that front door, having been trained by Pops, she had nothing to offer. Hell, she'd only learned to box so she'd have something in common with JJ. Once she grew boobs, her father gave most of his attention to Tommy's budding career.

Little over half an hour remained until Harp's new clients came in and Kim heard the clanging of him and Danny hanging up heavy bags. The day hadn't even begun, and Kim needed something stronger than coffee to get her through the morning.

Bracing her hands on the desk, Kim pushed herself up with a small groan. Leaving the office, she paused to look over a newspaper clipping framed on the wall. The 1985 *Island Current* article about Rumble's 15th anniversary.

The photo showed off her grandfather, James Adams—whom she called Pops—his face ever stoic since he never smiled in pictures and the grainy photo couldn't project his mischievous eyes and his arms rested around a beaming Grandma Bonnie, who stood a foot and half shorter than Pops with her signature long brunette curls draped over her shoulder, and a scowling teenaged version of JJ with his tracksuit and Jheri curl. Kim bit back a grin. The photo was black and white, but she somehow knew that her dad's tracksuit was a glaring neon. He looked ridiculous.

The small family stood on the deck of Johnny's Reef, a seafood restaurant sitting at the end of the island, seagulls filling the sky around them. If she scoured the house, Kim was sure to find dozens more family photos taken in the same spot in front of the tower viewers.

Kim moved closer to the image, and eyed young JJ. Tommy and he looked remarkably alike with their icy stares, though her brother had more freckles than their father. She on the other hand, looked more like Bonnie with her toffee skin, brown eyes, untamable, curly long hair, and uncomfortably large and heavy breasts that turned running into a form of torture.

She exited her cramped office, closing her door with a soft click. She crossed the few feet between hers and her dad's office down the hall, trying to avoid looking at the water stained drop-tiled ceiling. It's not like she could afford to do anything about it.

Checking the door, she found it unlocked. It jiggled when she twisted the knob, scratching off a couple of years of caked on paint. Kim examined the screws and made a mental note to grab a Phillips head from her tool box at home and tighten the screws later.

JJ visited his office last week, unhappy and sober, claiming to check in on how Kim was running things.

His exact words to her were, “Making sure you’re competent,” while striding past her to the offices without a backward glance. As though *he* somehow was. As if he taught her a damn thing about this business, or any business. Hell, Kim couldn’t remember when her dad last took the time to teach her something, outside of how to roll a joint when she was eighteen. All Kim knew about pay roll she learned from Google, YouTube, vague memories of Pops, and what she’d picked up from working at Sailors.

It wasn’t difficult to figure out what JJ came for—he didn’t stay long and never skimmed the books, which had been locked in Kim’s desk. At the end of the day, if Kim couldn’t hack it, he’d spend what little money they did make on whiskey and weed.

He had stashes of liquor hidden all around the gym. Kim and Danny found a few already—wedged in rolled up mats in the basement and behind boxes of cleaning supplies and hidden in unused lockers. She knew there were more—there always were—and his office was her best guess.

Over in the other room, Harp cursed, and Danny laughed. Good. She didn’t have the energy for them yet. Kim flipped on the rusty light switch. The dusty ceiling fan whirred to life and the lights flickered for a moment before illuminating the messy room.

Kim appraised the dim space, taking in the must with a deep inhale. Her dad’s office was bigger than hers, but the size difference couldn’t be appreciated with its abandoned doctor’s office aesthetic. The gaudy floral vinyl wallpaper that could be found in funeral homes and hospitals around the world, peeled at the seams and the room was an even bigger mess than hers. The fraying dingy blue area rug and scuffed linoleum tiles were scattered with newspaper clippings, old candy wrappers, and receipts. With JJ’s apparent bad aim, crumpled papers surrounded the near-empty trash can, and white rings from wet cups stained the scratched up

walnut desk that was a little too large and ornate for the space. He had the taste of a middle-aged gynecologist; he was just missing a framed and matted Monet print on the wall.

The stained off-white walls were bare save for a single nail. When she was a teenager, a photo from hers and Tommy's tenth birthday taken at Great Wolf Lodge in the Poconos had hung there in a white wood "#1 Dad" frame Kim had bought JJ one Father's Day a lifetime ago.

Determined as a truffle pig, she walked through the room, papers crinkling beneath her feet, and checked the cabinets above the desk. After a few moments of rifling around and turning up empty—save for a hard stick of partially wrapped gum and the case of an acoustic Eagles CD. God knows where the disc was hidden.

Kim hummed the opening notes of Hotel California as she moved her search to the filing cabinet in the corner. She yanked open the first drawer, only to find a couple of manila folders, one filled with crooked, xeroxed membership applications from the late 90s, and an old composition book.

The notebook was nothing special, though it looked familiar to Kim. The cover with covered with several scratched-out years, starting with 1995 and ending in 2002. The others were illegible, redacted with permanent marker and white-out. The moment she flipped open to the first page, she recognized Pops' tiny chicken-scratch. Her grandfather wasn't one to "waste space" by writing on the lines, and instead he wrote as small as possible from the top to the very end, the text tight and pinched together. It was one of the few ways he was meticulous, because, like his son, Pops was a slob and only kept in check by the late Grandma Bonnie.

Squinting, Kim tried to discern some of his writing, but outside of what could be De La Hoya, she was lost. The next time she called her grandfather, she'd have to ask him. She put the note book aside, laying it on top of the cabinet, and blinked the blariness out her eyes.

Kim finally struck amber in JJ's bottom desk drawer. Inside sat a half-empty fifth of Jameson. Kneeling, she pulled the bottle out and twisted the cap off with delicate fingers but with the speed of a desperate woman stranded in a desert. She sat back on her heels and paused only briefly with the lip of the bottle to her mouth before tipping her hand and letting the whiskey burn its way down her throat. She took comfort in that slow fire.

She closed the bottle, pushed herself forward, and peered into the drawer. Atop some torn notepads lay the Great Wolf Lodge photo. There wasn't a glass, and the white frame was chipped and splintered at the corners.

She started to pick it up and it came apart in her hands.

"Dammit," she hissed, jerking her hand away. She eyed the blood pilling on her index finger and pushed her thumb under the small wound, urging more blood to the surface. She eyed the crimson spot before popping the injured fingertip into her mouth and sucking the blood off. Savoring the coppery tang, Kim reached back into the drawer careful to avoid any more sharp edges as she pulled the photograph free. With her luck, she'd end up with a splinter, too.

Her mother's face was blacked out with Sharpie. Kim traced the black hole that was Michelle's face with her thumb, ignoring the twinge of guilt and hollowness deep in her chest, right above a sudden throb of the hurt she'd blanketed with her anger. She hated letting Michelle live in her head. It was like picking at a soft scab—just the slightest touch and it would start bleeding all over again.

The last time Kim saw her mom at Tommy's funeral. She just showed up with a gaudy black hat and played the role of grieving mother as though she hadn't run off three months after the twins fifteenth birthday, not long after they started their sophomore year. Danny had been

eight. Seeing Michelle pretend to be as distraught as Kim was, killed the last bit of longing she felt for her mother.

Determined to avoid her mom and another explosive confrontation, Kim had nipped a jar of JJ's weird friend's moonshine and locked herself in her bedroom closet. In the dark with her back to the wall she'd kicked off her shoes and took long sips from the mason jar. It must've been an hour or two before Harp and Rey had showed up looking for her.

"Still alive in there?" Harp had asked with a chuckle.

"I guess," she'd mumbled back, much to Rey's chagrin.

In response, Rey had jerked the door open, snatched the jar out her hand, hauled Kim off her ass, and sat her on the bed. Rey's eyes were puffy, red, and furious, yet she'd been gentle when she got a damp washcloth from the bathroom and wiped Kim's face clean of the dried, sticky tears and running mascara that'd been staining her cheeks.

Kim shook her head, pulling herself from the past and instead tried to focus on the small versions of herself and Tommy sitting in her hands. She missed them, who they used to be.

Sixteen years ago, JJ wanted the family to get away from the city. He was a Fresh Air Fund kid, spending his summers with another family in the Pennsylvania countryside, and thought the exhaust free air would do his kids some good as it had for him.

In the image, the twins were soaked from the water slides and red imprints ran along the sides of their faces from their tight neon snorkeling goggles. Michelle sat with three-year-old Danny, clad in swim diaper and toddler lifejacket, on her lap and Grandma Bonnie's arms around her shoulders. Pops and JJ had perched Kimmy and Tommy on their shoulders, respectively.

Using the desk for balance, Kim pulled herself up. She took the bottle and photo out back to her office, leaving the broken frame behind in the drawer. Plopping herself down on her couch, she opened the bottle and took another longer swig. She endured the slow fire for a moment before bringing it to her lips again.

She picked up the picture and held it inches from her face, blocking out the light. Her mind fuzzed around the edges as the whiskey reached her empty stomach. Kim ran her gaze down each person, only pausing to focus on her grandmother's and twin's faces.

That weekend was far from perfect. JJ and Michelle were fighting again, and it'd gotten ugly. Fast. Both had been red faced with crazed eyes, having indulged in the poolside bar. Michelle had tried to keep JJ on the far side of the room while Kim cried, curled up on the bed, and Tommy was torn between calming her and shushing a screaming Danny as they watched their parents with wide eyes. He always did that. Shielded them when shit went sideways, enduring most of the toxicity and trauma of their parents fights. The house was quieter after Michelle left, but the words were sharper—poised for maximum impact.

Kim took another sip of Jameson.

She and Tommy got their own room after they'd been removed from that ugly scene by their grandparents.

“Get whatever you want from the mini bar,” Pops had whispered to them when they got to their new room. He'd put his finger to his lips. “Shh,” he said dramatically, “Don't tell your parents. What they don't know can't hurt them.”

It was the same thing he told them whenever their parents went out of town, and he gave them a day off from school or snuck them a sip or two of his beer. He'd made them pinky

promise, and they never told their parents about how they'd gorged on chocolate and soda that Saturday night while they watched *The Chronicles of Narnia* on pay-per-view.

Bonnie gave them twenty dollars each for the arcade on the last day after JJ slept through his hangover rather than taking them on River Canyon Run like he'd promised. They played Skee Ball and air hockey until they couldn't feel their arms and had loaded up on tickets. They didn't win any big prizes like the guitar or even the lava lamp, so they picked out neon Slinkys, tiny metallic aliens, smiley face erasers, rubber balls, and tons of candy—mostly Tootsie Rolls and Airheads.

Even tainted with family drama and trauma, it was still one of Kim's best birthdays. She remembered it with bitter fondness.

She closed the fifth and placed it on a patch of clutter free desk, next to the check binder. Taking one more look at the picture, she shoved it into her bottom desk drawer, face down, and slammed the drawer shut.

Glancing at the small analogue clock on her filing cabinet, Kim pushed herself off the sofa.

Listening closely, she could just make out Danny asking about music, and there was a muddle of responses from unfamiliar voices. Suddenly, Reggaeton started blasting from the surround sound speakers.

Danny had to be fucking kidding. She told him time and again: not during classes. There went that small moment of peace.

Kim stormed out her office and down the hall in search of her brother. Coming around the corner she shouted his name, but she couldn't hear herself above the music.

Danny sat behind the front desk scrolling through his phone. Next to the ring, Harp struggled to talk over the loud music as he explained his training methods to a group of handsome young guys around her age. His face was red, his brow furrowed, and the vein on the side of his head pulsed.

The new students tapped their sneaker clad feet and whispered amongst themselves, ignoring Harp. One was as short as she was and had cropped blond curls and sleepy chestnut eyes. She slowed her pace and cleared her throat. He looked her way and she sucked a sharp breath through her teeth before tucking loose tendrils of her hair behind her ears and giving him a shy smile—which he returned, exposing his dimples. Heat rushed to Kim’s cheeks. Aside from the occasional dalliance with Ty, another bartender at Sailors, she was having a dating dry spell.

Harp turned around and cleared his throat. Startled, she diverted her attention back to him. He was much closer than before. He nodded toward Danny with clenched teeth.

Kim grimaced and mouthed a quick *I’ve got this*. She didn’t know why Danny insisted on grating her nerves, but it had to stop. Determined, Kim closed the distance between them and snatched the stereo remote off the desk. She jabbed the power button with her thumb and snatched Danny’s phone out of his unsuspecting hand.

Danny looked up from his now empty hand at his sister who was glaring at him with clenched fist on her hip. In her other hand, she clutched his phone, her knuckles white from the pressure.

“You,” Kim said, pointing at him. “My office. Now.” She swung around and stalked back to her office, not checking to see if her brother followed.

Danny groaned, following his sister like a kid on his way to the principal's office. Something must've crawled up her ass and died that morning. Kim wasn't his mother, but she sure loved to act like she was, and he was tired of her patronizing, holier-than-thou attitude.

"What's your problem today?" He slammed the office door behind him.

"Me? What's your problem? I've got enough shit to worry about than your antics."

Antics? He played some fucking great music. So what? Harp's clients didn't seem to mind. "Jesus Christ. You're only mad because you're trying to appease *him*."

Kim perched herself on the far corner of her desk and pointed at the sofa. "Sit," she said, please." Danny sat on the black leather armrest; arms crossed. She continued, "Right now, I couldn't give two shits about what Harp wants." One thing they could agree on. Pinching the bridge of her nose, she looked like their mother did before she left them—exhausted and exasperated. "I'm upset because you disregard everything I say at every turn. I just want what's best for this place. We need to be able to hear ourselves think, let alone teach. You can't just start blasting music like that. If there's one thing you're not, it's stupid, so I don't know why you think this behavior is OK."

Danny took a good look at his big sister, taking in her red-rimmed eyes and dark circles, and tensed. Had she been crying? Her hard gaze kept him from expressing his concern, so he picked at the dirt under his nails with forced indifference.

"I don't know what you suddenly have against Harp, but I need you to act like the adult you claim to be and work civilly." She paused, "Please."

"How do *you* work with him?" The question was out his mouth before he could stop it.

"I don't understand," Kim said, tilting her head. "Why wouldn't I?"

Shit. He'd already opened his big mouth, so he might as well keep going. "I accidentally overheard you crying to Rey about how he blew you off after sleeping with him." Kim always looked a little sad when Harp was around, even when she laughed there was something off in her eyes. She didn't think anyone noticed, but Danny did.

"Accidentally, so you weren't spying through the grille again?" Of course, that would be the part she harped on. Ever since he was a kid, Danny had had a crush on Rey, but she never took a second look at him unless it was to say he was the little brother she never had. A couple of days before Tommy died, she'd come over and gone straight to Kim's room, so Danny listened through the vent grate connecting their two rooms.

Danny avoided her gaze. "That's not the point." His annoyance flared. She always freaked out on him for the stupidest shit, but let Dad and Harp walk all over her.

"What's the point then?" Kim asked. Of course, he'd been spying that day. She blushed at the knowledge that he witnessed her humiliating confession. Her embarrassment and frustration warred for her attention.

"We don't need him here."

Kim eyes flicked to the ceiling as she gathered her thoughts. Moments like this reminded Kim of his immaturity. Some days he acted ten instead of nineteen. He often pretended he was older than her, trying to push himself into the role of her protector, but he was just a lost boy who'd put on his best mask—it just didn't fit. "Not that it's any of your business, but Harp and I agreed last year to stay friends. It's the past. I let it go and you should too." That wasn't exactly true, but Danny didn't need to know that. It would just make things worse.

“Fuck that,” Danny pressed, raising his voice. He stood up, towering over her. “This is a family business, and last I checked Harp isn’t an Adams.”

Standing, Kim pierced him with a fiery glare. He wasn’t going to pull that machismo bullshit with her. She endured it from JJ because she had to, and she’d be damned if he turned into a miniature asshole version of their dad. “Sit your ass back down and lower your voice. We’re not done and you don’t intimidate me.” She waited until D’s ass was planted back on the leather before she continuing, “You don’t like Harp? Fine. You two can either swallow the machismo BS or work it out in the ring after hours—I don’t really care which. What you’re not gonna do is jeopardize this business over a pissing contest. I can handle Harp, you worry about yourself.” He may not be an Adams, and he drove her crazy, but Kim’s life was better with Harp around. “You want more responsibility? Prove it.”

“You always give me the shit jobs,” Danny complained.

“Yes. And when you can take out the trash every day without me having to remind you and come in when I do to set up, I can rest easy and take a day off.”

“You’ve become a real bitch, you know that? You’re not mom.”

Kim flinched as though she’d been slapped, her eyes wide and nostrils flared. Keep took a deep breath, and, trying not to raise her voice, said, “You’re right. I’m not Mom. But I’m still here.” Gesturing for him to shut up when he opened his mouth in protest, she said, “Zip it. Be quiet. Whatever. Just shut the hell up and do your job.” She jumped off her desk and her ankle almost gave out on her. She looked from her feet to Danny, hoping he didn’t notice. He was the kind of person to lord a moment of weakness, of imbalance, over you and use it in his favor.

She needn’t have worried, though. His focus was on whatever he mumbled under his breath and the peeling skin around his chewed down nails.

“Look,” she said, softening. “I know you meant well; I just don’t need the added stress right now. You and Harp need to figure your shit out and keep it away from Rumble. I’m not about to mediate another fight between you two, especially not here. It’s bad for business.”

Giving him a small smile, she rested her hand on his shoulder. “I get it. I’m a bitch. I know that. I want you to succeed and if I have to light a fire under your ass, I will.”

Chapter 3

A shit-eating grin spread across Harp's face as he watched his private training group struggle through their warm-up.

"73. 74. 75," he said as the foursome struggled through their last set of 25 squats. Kim's quads burned sympathetically. When they'd come in the previous week to book a session clad in Vineyard Vine's best pastels and flip-flops, they'd been convinced they didn't need the basics, as though they were impressive professionals instead of the rich white boys who barely ventured beyond Fordham's rod iron gates into the bordering neighborhoods, and pissed off Harp. He insisted on being assigned as their trainer. Always the goody-shoes, Harp rarely got that evil twinkle in his eye. When he did, there was no stopping him.

Eager to see how it played out, Kim sat behind the reception desk and pretended to scroll through her phone. Something to break up the monotony of bickering and silence.

"Time for planks. One minute. Go."

Kim's core muscles burned just thinking about it.

The cute guy from earlier smiled tightly at her as he planked. Knowing how hard Harp was going to be on them, Kim grimaced in return. Their workout was grueling as the no-nonsense Scot kept at them with non-stop push-ups, squats, and planking.

"Boxing," Harp started, "any fighting really, isn't just about brute force and strength. They're helpful, sure, but anyone can be jacked. What you really need is willpower and

endurance.” He crossed his arms. “Can’t catch your breath or think on your feet, then big muscles won’t matter. You’ll be dropped like a fly.”

Kim rolled her eyes. He had that speech memorized.

“We just wanted to punch some shit,” one of them said, sniffing as his biceps trembled. His freckled face was flushed, his damp hanging limply.

“Then you picked the wrong gym,” Kim interjected before Harp could clapback. It didn’t matter that she wasn’t a boxer like the rest of her family, she believed in what her grandfather created. She stood up and strode around the desk.

Dropping from his plank, one of the two brunettes looked from Harp to Kim and took his sweet time appraising her. Pinpricks of disgust trailed down her spine as his leering gaze crawled over her and winked. Not taking his eyes off her, he asked Harp, “Why couldn’t she train us?”

Taken aback, Kim blinked. She got enough of that shit bartending at Sailors.

Kim opened her mouth to respond, but before she could inform him where to stick his boat shoes, Harp beat her to it.

“You lot were about to quit on me after some squats and push-ups. If that’s hard for you, you can’t handle a session with her.”

She swallowed the urge to huff in annoyance. She didn’t need a mouthpiece; she was more than capable of speaking for herself.

“Don’t be so sure about that,” the ginger said, winking.

“What he said,” Kim said with a small laugh, even though she itched to show him what she was made of—let them see how quickly she could take him. If she didn’t need the business, she probably would’ve.

Inhaling deeply, Kim turned to walk away, but paused to ask, “Aren’t you supposed to be planking?”

Groaning, the guy got back into position.

As soon as he did, Harp said, “Alright! Time for some jump rope. Let’s see how long you go.” Chuckling, he added, “Last longer than me, and we’ll move on to the bags.”

A smile stayed plastered on Kim’s face until the douche troupe turned their attention to the black polyvinyl ropes hanging on the wall. There were not enough cuteness and dimples in the world.

Before Harp could follow them and start barking instructions, Kim pulled him aside and said, “I’m going to work that bag until my class comes in.” She pointed to an old leather punching bag in the back that was more duct tape than anything.

“A’ight,” he responded.

She scrunched her eyebrows. Even after ten years and a softened brogue, the word still sounded weird coming out of his mouth.

He held up his finger. “Don’t you dare say anything.”

She sucked in her teeth and held back a smile. “Wasn’t going to.”

“Go punch some shit,” he joked, walking back to his group.

Kim laughed, but she needed to punch some shit and work out the stress and frustration pushing on her shoulders. She was in a rut, a deep pit of memories and anger, and the Jameson had hardly helped her shake off a quarter of her funky mood. All it served to do was help her withdraw further into herself, though her trip down memory lane surely hadn’t helped.

Laughing with Harp felt good, but it was just a brief glimpse of euphoria. It never lasted.

She needed to decompress and prepare for her Tasmanian devil students, and boxing was the only way outside of a long hot bath that she knew would keep her afloat for the day.

Kim may have kept her cool with the douche troupe, but she was bound to explode. She wasn't built for customer service.

She needed to hit something, to shake herself out of her detached state. Deciding to surpass her wraps and gloves altogether, Kim squared up with the deteriorating heavy bag. The pain of her fists striking the bag's duct-taped surface radiated through her wrists and into her elbows.

Her knuckles reddened and ached with each jab and cross. Clearing her head, Kim focused on her breathing and embraced the bite as her fist crashed against the tough surface with each exhale. She kept at it, throwing jab after jab until she couldn't feel her hands anymore, except for some slight throbbing.

It wasn't until her knuckles were red, and the skin on her middle knuckles broke with blood dotting the surface that she stopped.

She'd pay for this session the rest of today and tomorrow with knuckle discomfort and swelling, but she didn't mind the pain. She relished it. It reminded her that she was alive.

She leaned her head against the bag, the surface cool against her hot forehead, and took a deep breath. Tears sprung in her eyes, and she tried to force them back, conscious of Harp's panting students and Danny watching himself shadowbox in the mirror.

Kim hadn't allowed herself to cry in public since Tommy's funeral, nearly a year before, and she wouldn't let herself start again.

She held onto the bag for support and continued taking deep breaths—in through the nose, and out through the mouth. Her breathing exercises persisted until she composed herself.

She blinked back the moisture in her eyes and rubbed at the face with the hem of her tank top clearing the evidence of her weakness as though wiping away sweat.

After she calmed down enough, at least by her standards, Kim threw a hard cross, relishing in the sound of her fist striking the bag, the sharp pinch, and the dull ache that followed. She still wasn't ready for plastering on a fake smile, using a cheery and encouraging voice, or the minutes it would take to wrangle together her students after their parents left. It was T-minus thirty minutes until the urge to yank out her hair hit her, so she went back in on the bag, praying she wouldn't go insane.

As the last of their students left, Kim wiped down mats and putting away the free weights. Sometimes, she enjoyed the mind-numbing task—the cool dampness of the rag sliding against her palm and the soothing *sklishh* of the spray bottle.

The day was surprisingly busy after her class and, inhaling the cleaner's lavender-citrus scent, Kim tamped down the small inflation of hope in her chest. One good day was not a profit make.

Harp was finishing up with a twelve-year-old sable-skinned student named Isaac. The gangly boy's braided head stood just a few inches above Kim's own.

Ever since his dad got deployed, Isaac's mom thought he could use help with his confidence and brought him here. Her husband, Jeremiah, had suggested it, having taken the bus from Baychester to work for her grandfather at Rumble after school when he was a kid.

Kim had vague memories of Jeremiah sweeping the old tiles and cleaning the windows. She was sure there was a photo of him as a teen somewhere in Pops' stuff. When he took someone under his wing, they became family, coming to Fourth of July pig roasts and birthday

barbeque in Prospect park and Orchard beach. Now, Jeremiah boxed in the Army and wrote letters to Pops about his wins and losses.

Harp had taken him under his wing and was trying hard to break through Isaac's insecurities. They'd only been working together a few months, but Harp's bond with Isaac was special, that of a big brother and little brother. It reminded her of the way Tommy and Danny used to be, and whenever Harp transformed from gruff to gentle, Kim's resolve to preserve their platonic relationship melted a little.

Explaining the importance of keeping his hands up to Isaac, Harp held his own raised fists in front of his face. "You can't flinch and just wait for them to hit you," he instructed, as he grabbed Isaac's arms and moved them into the proper position. "Don't leave yourself open. You've got to be on defense. Keep yourself ready."

"I can't," he replied. "He dropped his hands to his sides with a sigh.

"You can. We'll just work on it more next time." Harp placed a hand on Isaac's shoulder. "Go on. Your mum is waitin' for ya."

Kim glanced out the corner of her eye as the young teen shuffled over to his mother—who stood by the door, arms crossed, with a concerned smile on her face—to give her a hello hug, before hustling to the locker room for his bag.

"Kim, can I talk to you for a second?" she asked, and Kim glanced at Harp. Getting the hint, he focused his attention elsewhere.

"Sure, Jackie." She walked over to the desk, dropped the rag in her hamper and turned to give the mother her full attention. Jackie's face was pinched with anxiety. "What's going on?" Kim asked, though she already had an idea where the conversation was headed.

“I know this month’s payment is due in a week, but I’m not going to be able to make it. With my RN classes at New Rochelle and Jer, y’know, away, I can’t pick up as many shifts at Monte,” Jackie rushed out, and while she spoke, she kept readjusting her purse straps, hitching them further up her shoulder though the bag hadn’t moved. “Can we work something out?”

This was why Kim stopped hoping for profits. The Army didn’t pay well, and Jackie had a lot on her plate with two kids, work, and college classes. It was why Kim created a special military discount just for them: a hundred and twenty dollars a month. Isaac came twice a week, and under-eighteen one-on-one classes were supposed to be \$40 an hour.

She knew they needed the money if they wanted the slightest chance to keep Rumble open, but Kim remembered that Pops never turned any one away, especially not kids, letting people pay what they could and work off what they couldn’t.

It was the only reason why Kim swallowed her capitalist instinct, and after a deep breath said, “Don’t worry about it.” Money wasn’t everything, and Isaac was happier and more comfortable than she’d ever seen him. He was still nervous and unsure of himself, but he was strides ahead of the near-mute boy who walked through the door in January. Blood or not, he was family and she watched out for her family. It was something Pops and Bonnie ingrained into their grandkids; they were a business, sure, but they were a family and family always came first.

“Really?”

Forcing an optimistic tone, Kim replied, “Absolutely. We love Isaac here.” She nodded and added, “Just pay me what you can, when you can.” Kim would just have to make do.

With white teeth gleaming in a bright smile and watery eyes, Jackie gave her a quick, tight hug. “Thank you! You don’t understand how much this means. Now I get why my husband loved this place so much.” Jackie pulled Kim in for another hug.

Isaac emerged from the locker room fresh-faced, wearing jeans and carrying a small duffle bag.

“See ya’ Monday, bud,” Harp called out, sticking his face out of the supply closet he was pretending to rearrange.

Nosey bastard.

Before Isaac could stride past her, Kim held out her hand for a fist bump. “Don’t forget, I’m cooler than the big ginger,” she whispered to Isaac after they bumped fists and mimicked an explosion with their fingers.

“Um...” he laughed nervously and looked to his mother for help.

Kim inhaled sharply and put a mocking hand to her chest, “I’m not your favorite? How rude.” She laughed. “Don’t worry about it. Want to hear a secret?”

Holding back a grin, Isaac nodded.

Kim motioned him closer and leaned forward to whisper in his ear, “He’s my favorite, too. But,” she moved away to look at him in the eye, “He can never know. His already big head would explode.”

“You’re secret’s safe with me.” He winked conspiratorially.

God, kids are cute at that age.

It was when they became teenagers they turn into full-blown assholes like Danny. Not that Kim didn’t love her brother.

She straightened with a giggle. “See you two Monday,” she said, waving to mother and son as they left, the tinkling bells punctuating their exit.

Harp sighed as he watched them walk away.

“No matter what I do, Kim, I can’t seem to get through to him,” Harp said.

“Are you kidding? The kid just winked at me and gave me a fist bump—blew it up, and everything. He’s getting comfortable, breaking out of his shell. That’s an improvement in my book. He’s just quiet, Harp. Give him more time, he’ll get there,” Kim replied. She leaned against the desk’s front and Harp joined her, their arms just an inch from touching.

“Sure I’m not letting him down?” Harp asked, scratching the back of his neck. He ducked his head to avoid Kim’s gaze.

For a moment, she laid a reassuring hand on his elbow. “You can’t help everyone, but you *are* helping Isaac. He adores you.” This side of Harp was something she was getting more accustomed to. They never shared vulnerabilities with each other; they had other people for that.

Without Tommy, everything changed. Harp opened up and Kim shut down.

“Thank you,” Harp said. His face was still lined with worry, but the corner of his lip curled in a faint sideways grin. The Scot’s signature.

“For what? Boosting your ego?” She nudged his ribs with her elbow and chuckled.

“Sure. That and for not bein’ one of those people who put money before the kids. Isaac needs this.”

“Didn’t you just say you weren’t doing him any good?”

“That was just me being self-pitying.”

Kim knew a little something about that, and that’s why she said, “You don’t have to thank me. I’m a lot of things, but I’m not my dad. Besides, Pops would kill if I ever turned Jeremiah’s family away because of money.” If Rumble didn’t desperately need the funds and he was still in charge, James Adams Sr. wouldn’t have charged them anything. Raising her eyebrows, Kim tilted her head up and to the side and smirked at Harp. “If anything, it was an act self-preservation.” She couldn’t let Harp see all her soft-spots.

“Yeah, right,” he snorted.

Kim didn’t respond, knowing the question was written on her face.

“You may have convinced D that you’re this bitchy ice queen, but you can’t fool me. I’ve seen through that façade since the first time you checked me out.”

She remembered when she met Harp like it was yesterday. Tall as he was, he stood out most places and it was no different on his first day at Island Trinity high school—a small Catholic school that wasn’t even on the island proper. She only saw him in passing that first day, but talk of him and his accent filled the halls and reached his ears long before she got a good look at him. The next day she came home from the library after school to find the cutest guy she’d seen off screen lounging in her *sala* with Tommy with bottles of Snapple in their hands.

She’d stopped in her tracks, suddenly self-conscious of her fly-aways and French braids, and the wrinkled blue tartan skirt that brushed against her ashy knees. Even then, his handsomeness was unfair. The way the sleeves of his rugby cut into his burgeoning muscles and his rough brogue sent shivers down her spine ignited years of her fantasies.

But, no matter how much she might have wanted to, that was a pool she could never swim in again.

Kim made a promise.

It was Kim’s turn to snort. “I didn’t realize I was in the presence of a mind reader. Should we start offering Tarot readings?” Kim asked, her eyes sparkling with the challenge.

Harp forced a chuckle. “Ha! Very funny.” He scratched his chin. “Maybe we should. I predict you coming out with me to Sailor’s tonight and buying me a drink.”

“I’m glad I didn’t invest in that idea. There’re two problems with your prophecy Mr. MacTavish. One: With what money? Two: I’m working tonight.”

“Even better. That means I won’t have to peel your drunk ass off the floor, and I get to drink for free.”

“I’m pretty sure I told you that this morning.”

“You did?”

Kim nodded. “Mhmm. Definitely.”

“Huh. Must’ve tuned you out.”

Asshole. Kim slapped his arm.

“Woah. I’m just kidding. I blacked out everything that happened before those numpties left the gym.”

“Lucky bastard. I can still feel their eyes.”

“Bawbags for sure, but you can’t fault their taste.”

Kim laughed and flipped him off, trying to ignore the sudden burn in her cheeks. She was paler this time of year—her usual bronzed caramel turned beige—and prayed Harp couldn’t see her blush.

“I’m not even going to touch that,” she said, rolling her eyes.

Kim’s best friend, Rey, managed her parent’s bar, Sailors. Knowing how little Kim wanted to be in Rumble and around her father, JJ, Rey hired Kim when she was a sophomore at Fordham.

“Remind me. What time are you on tonight?”

“Nine ‘til close.”

“*Ooof*. So, like, two or three?”

“Probably. Every day’s a little different, and today’s Saturday. Double the drunks for me.” It’s not like she didn’t have expert experience with the over-imbibed. “Ty’s working

tonight, too,” she warned. Harp didn’t keep his disdain for her arrangement with Ty secret, though she didn’t understand why he cared.

“You still sleeping with that twat?”

Kin rolled her eyes. “Not that it’s any of your business.”

Harp shrugged. “I just don’t get what you could possibly see in him. What could you even talk about? Pretentious music opinions?”

She choked back a laugh. He wasn’t entirely wrong. “Nothing important. That’s the point.”

“Sounds cold,” he remarked.

“Not if you’re doing it right,” Kim quipped with a wicked grin.

It was Harp’s turn to choke. He cleared his throat. “So,” he started, changing the subject. “About that free beer?”

She chuckled. “One.” She held up a finger. “And only if you don’t annoy the shit out of me.”

“Fair enough.”

Chapter 4

Abrasive knocking had cut through the darkness behind Kim's eyes. She was reluctant to wake and snuggled deeper into the warmth surrounding her.

The knocks on her door turned more frantic.

"Hmph?" Kim murmured, her eyelids fluttering open for a moment before drifting shut again.

"Kimmy? You in there?" Pounding again.

"Go away, D," Kim mumbled, pushing her face deeper into her pillow as though it would drown out her annoying brother.

"Sis, it's Tommy," he said, the first two words slurring together. "I need to talk to you." More knocking." More knocking.

Shit.

Though she wanted nothing more than to sink into Harp's warmth, Kim's eyes sprung open. She was not in the mood to deal with Tommy drunk or sober—not in the position she was in. She was hyper-aware of the naked body curled around hers. Harp's bare chest pressed against her back, his arm thrown over her, their legs entangled.

He stirred next to her but didn't wake. The man slept like a bear.

Kim clutched her quilt close to her chest and sat up, letting Harp's arm slide to her waist. "Can't we talk in the morning? I'm tired," she called out softly. Even if she hadn't just spent her

evening with Harp, she wouldn't have been in the mood for another insomnia and anxiety filled twilight tete-a-tete with her twin.

Why couldn't he have this drunken break-down any other night? Hell, she'd even take the ass crack of dawn, just so long as it wasn't right now.

Instead of answering, Tommy tested the knob, and finding it unlocked, shoved open Kim's bedroom door. When they fell asleep, no one was home and she wasn't expecting anyone so she hadn't thought to lock it. She was so stupid.

"What the fuck is going on here?" he yelled, taking in the sight of his sister and best friend pressed together in the dark.

Kim's stomach sank. Tommy hadn't made an appearance at home in over a week. The older they got, the more he did that—ignored her for days then showed up regardless of the hour for some crisis or conversation. He never said where he slept, but he seemed lighter—if a little tired—dark circles staining the skin under his eyes. Yet, whoever had been keeping that smile plastered on his face didn't cross his mind as he glared at his sister, the hallway light shadowing his expression.

Face hot, Kim clutched her quilt tighter and leaned over to flick on her bedside lamp. As her sight adjusted to the dimly lit room, she noticed her brother's bloodshot blue eyes and the way he leaned against her doorframe for support. He looked so much like her father in that moment it hurt. His tight dark halo of curls clung to his flushed freckled face, softening the hardness in his eyes.

"What the hell is wrong with you? Just barreling in here? What time even is it?" Kim's embarrassment started to morph into anger and she leaned into it as the questions rushed out, but she still pushed Harp's arm off her waist. She couldn't take the weight of it on her as well as her

brother's disgust. When considering the worst possible reaction Tommy could have to her and Harp, she never imagined this.

"*Me?* You're the one who fucked my best friend," Tommy ground out, his words slurring.

Kim refused to flinch and met Tommy's angry stare. "What I do with my vagina is my business."

"Gross," Tommy mumbled.

"What's that?" Harp asked his voice low as he looked up at Kim with bleary eyes. Under the covers, he moved his hand to rest on her thigh.

"Nothing. Go back to sleep. Tommy was just leaving." Even though frustration boiled in her chest, Kim's eyes softened as she looked down at Harp's sleepy face. She'd never thought they'd share that kind of moment.

Then her brother had to ruin it.

"What?" Harp's eyes shot open and he sat up. He looked at his buddy of nine years.

"Tom, I can explain."

"I don't wanna hear it. I told you I'd kill you if you crossed this line. Get the fuck out my little sister's bed!"

"We're the same age."

Harp moved to get off the bed, and Kim clamped her hand around his forearm, unable to voice her plea. He couldn't just leave her like this.

He gave her an imperceptible nod. He wasn't abandoning her.

Kim loosed a breath.

“Eleven minutes,” Tommy replied, with an even intonation as though they’d aged backward fifteen years.

“How drunk are you? I am not having this argument again,” Kim replied. Why couldn’t he just get out of her room? “You know you’re not supposed to be drinking.” He’d started seeing a psychiatrist. After a particularly rough and bloody underground fight Tommy had to have rotator cuff surgery, which put him out of commission. With JJ riding his ass about missed opportunities and laziness, Tommy started spiraling.

Tommy waved her off. “It’s my life.”

“And this is mine.” Kim motioned to herself and Harp.

“Tom, bud, why don’t we talk about this tomorrow. Let you both cool down.”

“I don’t need to do a damn thing. My anger is pretty damn justifiable.” She huffed.

“I didn’t say it wasn’t. But now isn’t the time,” Harp said, then he whispered, “In case you forgot, we’re naked.” He slid the hand resting on her thigh a bit higher.

Kim didn’t forget, no matter how hard she was trying to. “Get the fuck out, Tommy,” Kim said, angry but resigned. “Harp’s right. I’ll kick your ass in the morning.”

“I’m not going anywhere until he leaves. Tommy pushed off the frame, wobbled for a moment and then walked closer. He looked at Harp, head on and said, “I’m done with you.” He took a deep breath.

“You don’t mean that,” Harp said.

“I do. As a matter of fact, you’re fired.”

“Enough, Donald,” Kim said, sighing. Where the hell was this coming from? If she’d known he’d go nuclear, she wouldn’t have kissed Harp the night of her graduation and she certainly wouldn’t have led him to her room when he showed up, wet from the rain, looking

distressed and confused about his parents' divorce. She rubbed at her temple. Tommy didn't even care when his ex, Eva, asked Kim on a date—he'd encouraged it, even. "Dial back the psycho."

"Maybe I should leave," Harp said, looking at Kim, and her heart dropped.

"What? No," Kim said, at the same time Tommy said, "Yes. You should."

Kim glared at her brother. "The only person who needs to leave is you."

"I'm going to leave," Harp decided.

"Please, don't," Kim pleaded

"It's better this way." Harp took his hand off her thigh.

It was like someone punched her in the chest. He was going to push her aside, just like that?

"Hey," Harp whispered, using his finger to tilt her chin. "I'll see you tomorrow. I still owe you breakfast." He looked at Tommy, who still had a smug grin on his face that Kim itched to punch off. Tommy swayed where he stood. It was a miracle he hadn't face planted yet. "You think you can manage leaving the room so I can change?"

"No funny business."

"Fuck off," Kim groaned, rolling her eyes. Not caring if her brother was out of earshot, when Harp got out of the bed, she said, "This is fucking stupid." She stood and picked up her shirt and underwear from the floor and slipped them on quickly.

"I know."

Glaring at the closed door, she huffed. She shook her head, adamant and seethed, "No way. If I stay, I'm going to put him through the wall—drunk or not. I'm going with you." She turned to Harp.

“Tom—”

“Is going to have to get over it,” she finished for him. Kim pulled on her bottom lip with her teeth. “Unless, you don’t want me coming over.” Realization dawned on her. She should’ve thought of that sooner. She shouldn’t just invite herself over. Words started tumbling out before she could stop them, “If that’s it, just tell me. I can just sleep in the basement or I can call Rey...” she trailed off. Either way, she knew she couldn’t stay in this house for a second longer. The walls were closing in on her, leaving her feeling claustrophobic.

Harp grumbled something unintelligible and crawled over the bed to her side, clad only in his tight navy boxer briefs with his white t-shirt clutched in hand. He tucked the index finger of his freehand under Kim’s chin and nudged until her deep brown eyes, darkened with worry, met his own. “The problem isn’t not wanting you in my bed, the problem is that I shouldn’t—not with your brother out there ready to castrate me.” His thumb grazed her full bottom lip.

Losing a breath of relief, Kim leaned into his touch, eyes fluttering closed at his gentleness and lips parting with quickened breaths. Just as he leaned forward to press his lips to her, Tommy pounded on the door and shouted, “Tick-tock.”

Kim groaned and her eyes shot open. She was so fucking tired of being pushed around by the men in her family—treating her like daughter, mother, and wife. Graduating from Fordham was her first step in escaping. Her next—the final crack in her crystal cage, was her move to Berkley for graduate school. She had it all planned out and couldn’t wait to leave the toxicity. She loved her brother’s more than anything, but they so often took her for granted, expecting her to clean up after them and cook their meals. Kim blamed Michelle—her selfish bitch of a mother—for leaving Kim behind to pick up the pieces while Michelle left for an audition in Manhattan and never came back.

She missed Kim's first art show that first night and Danny found the note the next day, tucked under Michelle's memory foam pillow, while napping there because he missed Mommy. She said she had dreams to achieve, but Kim knew that even if it were the truth, Michelle was escaping this repressive house, her drunk and sometimes abusive husband. Nine years and no-postcard later, Kim finally understood—but it didn't make her hate her mother any less. It was bad enough for her to leave, but not to take her kids with her. They'd just been baggage weighing her down.

"Fuck off," Harp growled back, glaring at the door. Even when he was annoyed, Harp appeared unbothered. It was a rare sight when Kim saw him so worked up. Was it because of her? Or, was it Tommy's ridiculous demands? Harp looked back down at Kim and dropped his hand. "You're right, Kimmy," he said with a crooked, wry grin. "Get dressed and let's get out of here." He spun Kim and pushed her toward her dresser with a playful slap on her ass. The shift in their dynamic from the day before was foreign and jarring. It was something she'd never dared to dream of as they each moved through relationships with different people

Kim found a pair of fraying black sweatpants with paint splatters on the legs and shoved them over her thick hips. The drawstring was knotted and impossible to get out, but she wouldn't let that stop her from wearing them until they fell apart. It was chilly out, and they were the warmest and most comfortable pair she had. She grabbed her acid-wash Pink Floyd shirt and a black zip-up hoodie. Her gray crossbody purse lay atop the white wicker chair in the corner of her room. Kim slung the small bag around her shoulders and said, "*Vamos.*"

Chapter 5

“Want something to eat, Tio?” Kim asked leaning over the sticky bar counter, careful not to let the beading moisture wet her black shirt. Her uncle was already half-way through his third beer and had been at the bar for little more than an hour and a half.

“Let me get a menu?” Rafael Lozada responded, even though he only ever ordered extra crispy chicken wings. As her godfather, Tio Raf had been a fixture in Kim’s life since the day she was born. He was Grandma Bonnie’s twin and the the closest thing Pops had to a brother after his own died in Vietnam.

Darker-skinned than Bonnie and Kim, Rafael once had rich brown skin, but with his vitiligo lost most of his pigmentation on his arms, neck, and legs. As a little girl, Kim had always had a tempestuous relationship with her body; she loved that she looked like her grandmother but didn’t understand why she didn’t look like anyone else she loved. But, Raf once told her about being ostracized by most of his family for his darker skin—getting cheaper and used toys, or nothing at all—and how it made him hate the skin he’d been born with. “People pay to have tans that look like ours,” he’d said, with his arm around her bony, seven-year-old shoulder. Rubbing his wrinkled hands up his arm, over the discolored patches, he added, “Love who you are and what you look like—there’ll always be people wanting you to be more or less than who you are.”

Ever since Tommy died, Raf made it a point to grab a drink during Kim’s shifts, and not just to take advantage of the buybacks. At first, it felt like everyone was breathing down her

neck, she couldn't pour a pint without sympathetic gazes roving over her as she worked. Now, it gave Kim a chance to make sure her godfather ate something heartier than a bologna sandwich smothered in mustard.

"Sure thing." Kim blindly reached under the counter until her hand brushed against the smooth skin of the laminated menus. She pulled one out and slid it across the counter to Tio Raf. Attempting to cool herself down, Kim used the back of her hand to flick her loose Dutch braid over her shoulder, loose tendrils sticking to the back of her neck. She grabbed a clean pint glass, printed with a flaking Bud Light logo, and filled it half way with crushed ice from the cooler. She placed a fresh black coaster in front of Raf and, with the unmounted soda gun, filled the glass with water. If she didn't put water in front of him, he wouldn't hydrate.

"*Yo no pregunté por eso,*" Raf said in Spanish, pushing the glass to the side a bit.

"*Si, Padrino,* but you're gonna drink it," Kim said, sliding the glass back so that it sat next to his half-empty pint of Budweiser, their lips touching. Though she took six years of Spanish in middle and high school—plus a couple at Fordham—Kim could never bring herself to have a full conversation in the language outside of class. It never sounded right coming from her mouth, not the melodic comfort she'd gotten listening to Grandma Bonnie speak. "For me," she added, using her best puppy dog eyes. though she knew they lost their effectiveness around the time she hit puberty.

Raf chuckles, "Whatever you say, *Chula*. I'm at your mercy."

"Don't I know it," Kim said with a cheeky grin. "Let me know when you're ready." She motioned to the menu.

He opened and perused the long, never-changing menu as though it were the first time, with his bushy eyebrows scrunched together in focus and his lips pursed.

While he decided whether he would again get wings, Kim shifted her focus to the empty seat Harp usually sat when he came in, the barstool next to the counter flap. She tried to smother her disappointment that he hadn't shown up. Not that he needed to show up.

Suggestions aren't promises, and she always had a way of getting her hopes up with him.

Kim made her way down the bar, absently filling orders and making sure to flirt with the patrons she knew tipped better when their shots were served with a wink and smile, even though it made her skin crawl. She was thankful for the barrier between them and that she didn't have to wait tables. She drew the line at people touching her, and sometimes the crowd at Sailors loved to push her boundaries.

"Dirty old men," Raf grumbled just loud enough for Kimmy to hear as she brought soiled glasses to the industrial sink sitting around the corner of the bar behind a beer cooler. She just hoped his complaints stayed that volume for the rest of the night, or else she'd have to stop him from getting in a belligerent argument with some guy who was at least probably thirty his junior and old enough to be Kim's dad.

Yes, they were dirty old men, in their fifties and sixties, but despite her body's natural repulsion Kim was happy to take advantage of their manther personalities. Besides, they were mostly harmless. Ever since Rey had goaded her into accepting her place spot UC Berkley's for graduate Psych program—after having deferred last fall—Kim had been squirrelling away half of her tips into an old jewelry box hidden in the back of her closet next to the craft box that held all her abandoned paints and brushes.

"Ready, Tio?" Kim asked over her shoulder as she washed her hands.

“If you are.” He propped his elbows on the raised edge of the counter and held the menu up with his pinky fingers out. Even though she couldn’t see them through the bar, she knew his legs dangled, too short to reach the footrest.

God, she loved that short old man, no matter how prickly he could be.

“Lay it on me,” she said, sliding her red and black plaid flannel off her shoulders, and tying it around her waist. Leaning against the counter behind her, she rested her hands on her hips and crossed her ankles, careful to not to let her untied black Timberlands scuff each other. They were her favorite shoes next to her trusty black Chuck Taylors.

“Aren’t you going to write it down?” Kim resisted the urge to roll her eyes at her uncle.

Kim doubted she’d have trouble recalling what never changed—not that she could blame her uncle, the food at Sailors was good so long as you stuck with the classics. She tapped the side of her head with her finger and just said, “steel trap.”

“Ha. Don’t I know it. You remember everything just like your abuela.”

Everything. Even the memories she wished could be washed away.

Kim scanned the bar quickly to make sure no one needed anything and Rey was pouring shots and laughing on the other side. Kim tried to focus on her uncle as he continued, “If she were here right now, she’d be nagging me about something I did to her when we were kids—one of the times I snuck out using the fire escape and she had to cover for me with Mami and Papi. On my life.” He glanced up and when he looked back at Kim, his eyes were moist from unshed tears.

“Am I interrupting?” Harp asked, clapping his hand on the back of an empty barstool.

Tio Raf cleared his throat. “Not at all,” he said, blinking away the moisture in his eyes. “I was just about to order some food.”

“How’s it going, Tio?” Harp asked, leaning down to give Raf a hug, dwarfing his 5’3” frame.

“Not bad, baby,” Raf answered, his voice a little too high pitched and gaze glassy. “You hungry?”

“Pretty dead for a Friday,” Harp said, perusing the half-empty bar. He glanced in Kim’s direction.

“Don’t jinx it.” The last thing Kim wanted was to mop piss off the bathroom floors at 3AM. She was exhausted. Her feet and knees ached. Her head throbbed with the beat of the jukebox.

“Why ya got a hot date?” He said it jokingly, and maybe it was her imagination, but he didn’t seem thrilled by the idea.

“Yes,” Kim said, savoring the look of shock on his face. “With my bed.”

“I thought a told ya’ to take a nap.”

Kim rolled her eyes and shook her head. “Too much shit to do,” she said, shrugging.

“You can’t keep doing this,” Harp said.

Kim rolled her eyes. As if she had a choice—rest didn’t come easy for her; she was too often plagued by her discordant thoughts. “Sleep’s overrated.”

Tio Raf cut in, frowning, and asked “Why aren’t you sleeping?”

“It’s nothing, Tio. Just a lot on my mind and a lot to get done,” she said, smiling—though it didn’t reach her dark eyes. Harp needed to keep his big mouth shut.

“I didn’t want to say anything, but you look like shit,” Raf said. He pointed to her face, “You’re too young for bags like that.”

Kim raised her eyebrows as she and Harp chuckled. “Thanks, Tio. You’re too kind. Matter of fact, it’s not the first time someone’s mentioned that today—something about looking like shit.” She cut a sharp look at her Scottish friend for emphasis. “You two spend far too much time together,” she said, mentioning the Sundays they spent together watching the Giants play. Harp didn’t like American football, but he kept up a tradition that started when he and Tommy turned eighteen—a guy’s night of beer, football, and, on occasion, Game of Thrones.

“I’m just worried about you, baby.”

“Don’t be, Tio. I’m off tomorrow, so I’ll be able to sleep in.”

“I’m always hungry,” he said. Kim chuckled. Turning his attention toward her and cocking his head to the side with a smirk, Harp asked, “What’d I say?”

“Nothing. Just seems like an understatement,” Kim said, biting back a grin.

Harp barked a laugh. “Ya trying to say I eat too much?”

Kim quirked her eyebrow in amusement. “You tore through a hubcap sized pancake in less than twenty minutes.” It’d been both glorious and horrifying to watch.

“That’s just because I don’t back down from a challenge,” he quipped. She knew that all too well, thinking back at how quickly their sleeping together went from the start of some grand intimate relationship to a mistake fueled by ego.

Before Kim could fire back about where Harp could stick his challenges, Tio Raf cleared his throat. “When you’re done flirting, I want some chicken wings. Extra crispy and sauce on the side.” He was scowling, but there was no real anger behind it, just a little bit of delight. He loved watching their back and forth; he found it amusing. As a man who spent his retirement watching Hallmark movies, Tio loved drama. Raf glanced at Harp who decided to sit down next him, on

his right. “Order something if you’re hungry. On me.” Harp started to protest, but Raf cut him off, saying, “You’re keeping this ol’ man company while his gorgeous niece works.”

Kim rolled her eyes and shifted her attention to the beer fridge under the counter behind her, pulled out a Modelo, and opened it with the opener she hung off a red carbineer on her beltloop. She placed the bottle in front of Harp without a word and he tilted his head toward her in thanks.

“I’ll take the Anchor, but I’m buying a round,” he said. The Anchor was a half-pound angus beef burger topped with bacon, a fried egg, and curly fries. Kim couldn’t bring herself to try it, but it was the only burger Harp ever ordered.

“Medium well?” He nodded. “Alright, I’ll tell Ty.” Before leaving, Kim glanced at Rey whose back was turned as she mixed a drink and skimmed the bar for anyone who need her attention. Satisfied she wasn’t needed, Kim strode to the back, stopping for a minute to type the orders into the POS.

Kim pushed through the double impact door and found the kitchen empty, the burners and grill off. The air smelled of fryer grease and charred beef.

She called out, “Ty?”

“Back here.” Kim followed his smoky voice to the open back door leading to the dumpsters. Ty, his thick brown hair tamed by a backwards black baseball cap and a grease stained apron covered his black t-shirt, sat on the small weather-worn patio table. The motion sensor light above him highlighted his silhouette and shadowed his honey brown eyes. Unlike Harp, who only had an anchor tattoo on his ribcage for his mom, Ty’s arms, hands, and most of his torso were covered in tattoos.

Kim always admired them, both from afar and when she and Ty were in bed together. She had four tattoos, herself; a grayscale paintbrush on her forearm, the Taino symbol for the Coqui frog on her ankle, the Deathly Hallows symbol behind her ear, and greyscale boxing gloves on her thigh. Her thigh tattoo was her biggest and favorite by far; she had it done as a tribute to Tommy and Bonnie—two shaded gloves surrounded by vibrant purple hyacinths. Every year before Easter when they were kids, she and Tommy would plant hyacinth's in big pots with soil-blackened hands for the patio in the backyard with Grandma Bonnie; Tommy picked up her green-thumb while everything Kim

“What’re you doing back here?” she asked, stepping outside. She wrinkled her nose at the smell of garbage with hints of piss, animal and human.

He held up his cigarette to show her, “Smoke break,” he said, lifting the stick to his mouth, lighting it, and inhaling slowly. He blew the smoke out his nose and held the cigarette out to her, “Drag?”

She shook her head and walked over to him. “I’ve got a couple of orders for you.”

“I’ll get on that, just give me a sec.” Ty took another drag, this one longer. Exhaling, he hopped off the table and stomped the cigarette with his boot. He walked to Kim and threw his arm around her shoulder, the heavy tang of tobacco enveloping her. She was comfortable in his embrace, but it didn’t give her chills, not even when he leaned in to her ear and whispered, “Coming to my place tonight?”

Kim looked up at Ty. They’d become friends during Fordham freshman orientation but didn’t start sleeping with each other until sophomore year after a late-night pizza run. Grandma Bonnie had just died a couple of weeks before and Kim had been devastated and Ty had been there comforting her and trying to cheer her up since she couldn’t bring herself to be around her

family after the funeral. Ever since anytime they were both single and needed a distraction from the world, they fell into bed with each other.

Being with him was easy. Safe. Transactional.

When she was with him, she didn't have to think, to worry about her feelings, or lack thereof.

It was the one easy and uncomplicated relationship in Kim's life. They liked the same things, alternative rock and folksy music, weed, books, and sex. The only arguments they had involved pizza toppings, their Netflix and chill movie picks, and which flirty opener he should use on Tinder.

Needing a night free of worry and the potential for restful sleep, she said, "Sounds like a plan." She motioned him inside. "Now, we've got some hungry patrons, so get going."

"Ugh, you're so bossy. But that's okay. I like it," he said, his face serious before breaking out into a huge grin, accentuating the scar he got from a motorcycle accident—it ran down from the corner of his bottom lip in a jagged diagonal line.

"Don't I know it," she said, laughing, nudging him with her elbow.

Ty tucked stray strands from Kim's braid behind her ear and leaned forward. She accepted the chaste kiss he planted on her lips with open eyes and furrowed brow. The kiss was unexpected. It was short, sweet, gentle, and so unlike the rough and demanding way they normally made-out. Their unofficial agreement stated that kissing outside of sex was a no-no, but Kim didn't hate it. He released his hold on her shoulder and walked ahead of her inside.

Kim called out after him, "Extra crispy buffalo wings, sauce on the side and an Anchor medium-well."

"Got it."

When Ty disappeared around the corner, she brushed her lips with her fingertips.

“Extra crispy wings for the handsome gentleman with the thick mustache and silky hair,” Kim said, laying down Raf’s dinner in front of him. “And here’s an Anchor burger, medium-well, for you,” Kim said, dropping Harp’s with less flourish in front of him.

“Why didn’t I get a snazzy introduction with my food?” Harp asked, whining. He reached for her hand and grabbed hold of it before she could pull away. He started running his thumb across her knuckles—they were still sore and a little inflamed from punching the heavy bag earlier.

“He’s my favorite customer,” Kim said, trying to free her hand from his grip. She didn’t like the way her hair stood on end with his touch. She wanted to hate the way his thumb glancing past her split middle knuckle made shivers run down her spine; it was confusing and pissed her off. What the hell got into him? Into her? “Earth to Harp,” she said and, trying to keep some composure and dignity, snatched her hand away.

“What happened to your hand?” Harp asked, brows knit together, his eyes intent on hers.

“It’s nothing,” Kim said, wishing more than anything for a patron to call for her attention, but they were all too occupied watching the big flat-screen TVs that were mounted above the bar and in the corners.

Rey was no help either, having stopped wiping the bar and zeroed in on their interaction with amusement. She considered Kim and Harp’s will-they-won’t they dance more entertaining than the telenovelas she loved watching.

“Doesn’t look like nothing. Get into a fight?” Harp asked, scratching at the stumble on his chin.

“No,” she huffed. “What’s with the third-degree? I said I’m fine—drop it.” She glared at Harp and glanced at her uncle with fire in her eyes. Raf kept his head down and stayed hyper-focused on his chicken.

Good. She didn’t need crap from him too. Rey knew better than to fuss at her in public, and not while she was working; acting like a functioning human being was exhausting and wore at her already thin temper and nerves. With a bit of prodding she teetered on the edge of shutting down or exploding.

Harp shrugged in acknowledgement. “Sorry. I was just concerned,” he said, not sounding sorry at all. He picked at his fries.

Rey slid into the spot next to her and nudged Kim under the bar with her foot.

Fine. Kim sighed. “Thanks. I’m sorry, but I’m good.” She would just have to be more careful about wearing hand wraps and gloves around Harp in the future.

Kim knew it wasn’t smart or even healthy for her use the bags without wraps and gloves, but that initial bit of her fist against duct-taped leather and the dull, aching throb that followed her for the rest of the day, made her feel alive—it pulled her from the turmoil in her head.

Just like her interludes with Ty, that sting distracted her. For however brief the moment, that pain keeps the grief and anger at bay.

Pasting on her best smile, Kim grabbed another Modelo for Harp and cracked it open. Sliding the cold beer in front of him, she looked at Harp and said, “Your burger’s gonna get cold.” Then she strode through the kitchen, past Ty, and out the back door; she stood there, letting the brisk spring air redden her cheeks and nose—it doing nothing to cool her overheated body—wishing, not for the first time, that she was someone somewhere—anywhere—else.

Chapter 6

Tio Raf finished his wings and walked the couple of blocks to his apartment. Before he left, he'd hugged Kim and whispered, "You're gonna be a'ight, baby."

Harp stayed until close, offering Kim a ride home when the last customer stumbled out the door and Kim flicked off the neon Open sign hanging in the floor to ceiling window.

She brushed him off with a curt head shake and quickly said, "I'm heading to Ty's tonight." She regretted her brusqueness enough to spare a glance at him before finishing her nightly ritual of table cleaning and chair stacking.

"Oh," he said, and rubbed at the back of his stubbly head.

"Thanks though," Kim added, trying to soothe the sting of disappointment. She'd spent too much of the day thinking about him and bills, and tonight she needed effortless bliss not another torturous conversation about the switch that'd been flipped in her. She remembered her uninhibited laughter—the sound, the jiggle of her belly fat, her warm cheeks and bright eyes—but she couldn't remember what it felt like to be so light and free. "See you Monday," she added, dismissing him with a brief look over her shoulder.

Harp scratched the back of his neck and nodded, looking anywhere but Kimmy. "Sure. Monday," he huffed. He turned around and stalked out Sailors' front door without so much as a backward glance, and it bothered Kim more than it should've; it was what she wanted.

"Harsh," Rey said from behind her.

Shit.

Kim groaned, swinging her head around, and arched her eyebrow at her friend. She wagged her index finger at Rey in mock warning, using the same hand that clutched the rag she used to clean. “Don’t start.” She raised the spray bottle she held in her other hand and finger on the trigger, Kim aimed the nozzle at Rey, threatening, “I’ll shoot.”

Tucking a chunky tendril of her curly, blonde ombre hair behind her ear, Rey laughed, her bright hazel eyes crinkling in the corners and her cheeks reddening. “Start what, my love?” she asked, wagging her brows. “You’re the one that keeps blowing off a taste of that Grade A Highland beef.”

Kim choked back a startled laugh. Annoyed as she wanted to be, that was a new one for her sarcastic bestie. Kim dropped her squirt bottle of cleaning liquid on the table in front of her and wrung the towel between her hands, tugging at its frayed and torn edges. “One, I’m not blowing him off. He’d have to be interested in more than grating my nerves and getting in my pants, for him to be considered ‘blown off.’ Besides, as my best friend, aren’t you contractually obligated to tell me that if he can’t see how great I am, he doesn’t deserve me?”

Kim thought back to the night Tommy barged into her room and caught her and Harp in bed together. She’d left her home with Harp, and they’d gone to his place. Harp held her for what felt like hours as she cried, her body wracked with sobs of guilt and frustration. Eventually, she stopped crying and straddled him and the next morning she’d woken up with Harp’s head between her legs, but the next day he’d asked her to lunch and told her, “I don’t know what I was thinking—I’d had an argument with my mum about her new boyfriend, I was pissed, and you were there. It was a mistake.”

A mistake. While Kim thought he finally saw her the way she'd seen him for years, she'd just been a warm hole to sink into on a dark, lonely night.

Kim didn't say that to Rey though, wanting her friend to believe she wasn't still hung up on the impossible. Instead, she swallowed back resurging disappointment and continued, "Two, even if I was blowing him off, you know why."

"I don't actually, and I'm not saying what Harp did wasn't fucked up—I just can't believe that he meant it, or that Tommy expected you to swear off whatever's between you and Harp forever. I've always thought you two were endgame."

Ignoring Rey's obvious Pro-Harp bias, Kim said, "This isn't a CW show or Tumblr, and Tommy was pretty damn adamant. After all the trouble he went to—including calling me a slut—so I'd agree Harp was off limits, I'd have expected the same from him." Kim had been ready to fight her twin for her happiness, and fight they did, at the risk of their dynamic, but after Harp blew her off it was just easier to cede and pretend she agreed. Harp didn't want her so what did it matter if she played along?

"That's kinda' fucked up," Rey responded, her Bordeaux-painted, plump lips pinched, accentuating the sweat beaded on her upper lip. They were both sticky from the humid but cool air and the collection pressing bodies that crowded into the bar not long after Harp and Raf finished eating.

"Never said it wasn't," Kim said, shrugging.

"What if it was me?" Rey asked.

Kim tilted her head. "If what was you?"

"Sleeping with your brother. You'd still feel that way?"

“Tommy?” Kim asked, though she knew the answer. If Rey meant Danny, Kim didn’t know how she’d react other than to call a priest to make sure Rey hadn’t been possessed. With the maturity of a middle schooler, Danny was a menace. He was also very much gay, though he’d only come out to Kim while they smoked together for the first time. As far as everyone else knew, he was always going home with some woman or another.

Rey nodded.

Rey and Tommy? Kim would sooner grow horns.

Tommy rubbed their old pit bull’s, shit on Rey’s arm during a birthday sleepover when they were twelve, the two repelled each other like magnets; being in a room with the two of them felt like standing in the path of a tornado and praying not to get swept up and blown away.

The two of them bickered constantly. They were the Latino Statler and Waldorf. It drove Kim crazy until she started to think her twin had a crush on her bestie. Even if it meant becoming a third-wheel, she encouraged it, hating the feeling that she always had to choose between her best friends.

But, Tommy never admitted to his crime and Rey wasn’t known for easy forgiveness. Able could hold a grudge for years—she still didn’t speak to her big sister after some forgettable argument—Rey made people work for it. She needed people to prove themselves to her, that their relationship wasn’t fleeting and meaningless, before letting them get close. She and Kim were similar in that way; it’s why they remained inseparable after twenty years of friendship when most people would’ve grown apart. They had loyalty that couldn’t be broken.

Kim snorted. “You two hated each other.”

Rey glanced away and said, “It’s not like we were always at each other’s throats. You don’t know everything.”

“Okay,” Kim said, stretching out the word. “Never said I did, but I’ve always known you and Tommy better than I know myself.” They went to kindergarten together, bathed together, got their periods weeks apart from each other when they were eleven. She looked at her bestie with a joking twinkle in her eye. “You’re not saying that *you* fucked Tommy?” she asked, half-joking.

“No.” Rey looked away, shaking her head, and bit her bottom lip. “Of course not. Never,” she added and, trying to suppress a giggle, she snorted, a smirk twitching at the corners of her mouth.

“Mhmm.” Kim wanted to agree with Rey and laugh along at the absurdity of the idea, but she hesitated; there was something about the way Rey avoided her eyes when she said ‘never.’ Giggling and snorting is what Rey did when she was nervous. The same thing happened when Rey made it to the third round of the ninth-grade spelling bee and again when she asked Marc Rodriguez to homecoming sophomore year. Maybe Rey was right. Maybe Kim didn’t know as much as she thought she did.

Still dubious, Kim said, “It’s OK if you did. I won’t be mad.” She was angry about a lot of things, but she’d never begrudge Rey anything, especially not something that made her happy. She just wanted straightforward honesty, not tip-toeing and pussyfooting. That wasn’t what they did.

Rey seemed to Kim’s reluctance. “Kimmy,” she said, swallowing hard, “I swear.”

Kim wanted to believe Rey. Finally, she nodded. “Alright.” Hoping Rey wasn’t lying to her, Kim shook that niggling bug of distrust from her head and said, “What am I thinking—of course you didn’t have sex with my brother.”

“Who fucked your brother?” Ty asked, popping his head out the swinging doors leading to the kitchen.

Thank God for Ty's impeccable timing. "Why do you only show up the conversation turns to sex or drugs?" Kim asked, picking her rag back up and chucked it at his face. It landed with an audible *plop*.

"It's my spidey-sense," he said, a cheeky grin spread across his face. The beaming smile accentuated his slightly off-center chin, sole dimple, and crooked front incisors. He side-stepped the rag with a predatory gleam in his eyes.

Kim picked up the spray-bottle and pointed it at him. "Not another step. There's bleach in here."

"Really, guys?" Rey whined with her arms crossed, face pinched in irritation like a lunch monitor breaking up a food fight.

Kim cackled. "Relax, ReyRey—"

"Don't call me that," Rey bemoaned, cutting her off, but Kim could tell Rey really wanted to join in on the laughter.

Kim smirked. "Just trying to raise clean-up crew moral." She opened her hand and motioned for Ty to toss the rag back to her. He picked it up, but didn't throw it back, instead moving to a table Kim hadn't cleaned yet and started wiping it down. Cringing at the dirt he was smearing around on the shellacked surface, she said, "Nope. Nope. Not gonna work. Let me rinse that first." It was like he'd never cleaned a day in his life.

Ty looked down at the mess he was spreading around and grimaced. "Please." He tossed the towel back at Kim and she caught it with little effort. Ty turned his attention to Rey.

"ReyRey," he said, pausing for her groan. "Wanna' crack open some beers and play some tunes so we can get this finished up faster?"

“Not sure I agree with your logic, but why the hell not?” Rey connected her phone to the surround sound speakers. “What’re we listening too?”

“Flogging Molly? The Score?” Ty suggested.

Kim rolled her eyes. They listened to most of the same music, and no one else she knew listened to Lord Huron with the same rapt attention she did. Until she started spending the night at his place, she didn’t think it was possible to tire of listening to the 1975. Ty needed to expand his musical palette. His opinions were formed by reading pretentious anti-mainstream music blogs.

Rey scrunched her face. “Kim?” she asked, pretending Ty hadn’t said anything.

“Um...” Behind the bar, Kim washed out the rag, brown sudsy water running down the drain. “Throwbacks?”

Ty groaned like a kid who doesn’t want to eat the steamed vegetables on his plate.

“Just say no freestyle and disco, you big baby” Rey snapped, though she and Kim both loved ABBA and knew both *Mamma Mia* movies by heart. They saw the sequel twice in theaters, and cried both times.

“Let’s go 2000s,” Kim interjected.

“Don’t worry Ty, I’ll make sure to play The Killers and Green Day for you,” Rey quipped, scrolling through her phone.

“Deal,” Ty huffed. Soon, the strident first notes of Paramore’s “Brick by Boring Brick” filled the bar.

Kim turned off the sink and wrung out the rinsed towel. “Satisfied?” she called over the music to Ty.

“Not even close,” he responded, wetting his lips with his tongue as he stared openly at her. He held out his hands for Kim to toss the damp rag, and almost dropped it when she did. Kim grabbed another clean cloth for herself, but before she could go back to cleaning, Rey handed her a cold Killian’s—Kim’s favorite—and a corona with lime for Ty, the bottles’ slippery from condensation.

Kim handed Ty his beer, his fingers brushing hers. He nodded his thanks and lifted the bottle to his soft lips, taking a deep, slow swig—never breaking eye contact with her.

Flustered, Kim turned away and took a gulp. She refocused on her cleaning routine, singing along to the music under her breath. She needed simple, so she refocused on her tasks, and as the music segued into Bruno Mars, Kim let herself get swept up, letting the worrisome confusion of Ty’s lingering touches and glances drift away to the recesses of her mind. Ty and Rey’s faded into the background as she moved through her tasks on auto-pilot, cleaning each table and wiping down the faux-leather chair seats.

“You OK?” Rey asked, touching Kim’s elbow after she finished flipping over the last chair and putting it on the table.

Startled, Kim jerked away from her friend’s gentle touch. “Shit,” she said, placing her hand on her chest, her heart hammering in her ears. “You scared me.”

“Damn, sorry.” Laughing, Rey said, “I called your name a couple times. You OK?” she repeated.

“Sorry,” Kim blinked and rubbed at her eyes, trying to dissipate her brain-fog. “Must’ve zoned out. I’m fine.”

“Sure, you are.”

Why couldn't they just drop it? They made it so much harder cling to her façade of joking and indifference. If she kept pretending that she was fine, one day it might become true.

"I am," Kim muttered, looking down at her hand as she picked at the hangnail on her thumb. "It's nothing really."

Rey tugged on Kim's arm, turning Kim to face her, worry etched on her face. Rey didn't say anything at first, just took in her friend's dark circles and glassy eyes. "Are you sure it's worth it?"

"What's worth it?" Kim asked, playing ignorant. It wasn't the first time they had that conversation; Rey wanted her to move on, but it didn't just feel like betrayal and abandonment to Kim, it felt like giving up.

"Everything—Rumble, living with your Dad."

"I..." Kim looked around, aware that Ty might overhear them, but he was behind the bar, humming along distractedly to the music drifting through the room as he washed whatever dirty cups were left. He looked lost in the dull task. She shrugged Rey off. Her touch suddenly felt suffocating.

"Don't worry." Rey rubbed Kim's arm and called over her shoulder, "Ty you've been so helpful tonight, want to clean the bathrooms while we finish up here?"

Ty made a face and grumbled something unintelligible, but nodded, replacing the faucet's pull-out sprayer, and then trudged the back alcove where the restrooms were.

Thank God, Kim didn't have to do it. It was the one part of the job she never got used to; in general people were disgusting, but drunk people were terrible about their bodily fluids.

Once he was out of ear-shot, Kim swallowed the lump building in her throat. "What else am I supposed to do?"

“What about Berkeley?”

Living in California was a part of Kim’s dream, and getting her PhD at UC Berkeley was just the first step in what was once a 10-step plan, but she’d already had to defer once; she couldn’t do it again. “Nothing but a pipe dream,” Kim declared. There was no way she could start in the fall.

Rey smacked Kim on the arm. “Don’t say that. You’re going to be a great art therapist.”

“Everything I paint is shit.” The vibrant passion Kim had for painting dulled the moment she got the call about Tommy—her filbert brush had slipped from her limp fingers and landed with a clatter, splattering yellow paint on her bedroom floor that was still stained the wood’s crevasses. Then her fist tore through the still wet canvas and with yellow paint smeared on her hand, she’d swung the broken canvas, smashing the frame against whichever surfaces were closest—her knees, her dresser, her closet door—until sobs wracked her body so completely that she could do nothing but collapse on the floor, dry heaving. Now her paintings felt hollow, lacking, spiritless. Much like when she laughed, it felt like she was just going through the motions.

She’d said some terrible things to her brother in the days before his death, things she wished more than anything she could take back. Instead, she was just going to have to honor him the best ways she knew how.

Rey tutted. “I don’t get why you’re doing this to yourself. Raf and Harp are right; you look like shit.” As if she caught her voice raising, Rey took a deep breath. “Just think about it. Really think. If you don’t go in September, you might never do it.”

Kim considered what her friend was saying. Rey was right. If Kim stayed in City Island now, she’d never leave, forever stuck in the family quicksand. If she left, her childhood home

turned into JJ's personal junkyard, piled high with aluminum cans and whiskey bottles, and dirty dishes.

And what about, D? Tempers ran high in their Irish-Puerto Rican blood, and Danny could be just as explosive as their father when things didn't go his way—putting holes in walls and throwing things. Father and son in one room could be as deadly as a Molotov cocktail, which is why Kim insisted Danny move into the house's basement apartment. Neither of them knew how to be around each other and it was exhausting keeping them apart so they wouldn't kill each other.

"It's not that simple" Kim decided to say.

"It could be if you sold the gym," Rey muttered, grimacing at Kim's indignant glare. Rey held her hand up before Kim could argue, "Just hear me out. You'd have money for tuition and then Danny could get away from your Dad, too." It's a win-win.

"My grandparents built that place. I can't just sell it—it's my legacy." Pops worked at ConEd during the week and boxed on weekends to buy that building. Three generations of Adams' trained there. Now it was in her hands and she couldn't fuck it up.

"You and I both know it's not."

"Yeah, but he doesn't get to live it."

Rey's eyes misted up. "That doesn't mean you have to live it for him," she ground out, fire burning behind the glassiness.

Kim flashed back to her last conversation with her brother, the argument where she slammed a door in his face, telling him: "I hope you're real fucking happy—I finally found a moment of happiness, something that was just mine, and you destroyed it. I can't stand you, and

I can't wait to get the *fuck* out of here and away from you. Don't call me, don't look at me; from now on, we're two strangers who share the same birthday and address."

They'd argued plenty of times before—it was what siblings were supposed to do—but never with such venom and malice burning their tongues; she'd just been so heartbroken and exhausted of losing out to him, tired of being the mule carrying the family's baggage. He got everything he ever wanted, and even the things he didn't—their father's devotion included. She couldn't even get her dad to show up sober to her college graduation, which took place at ten in the morning.

Shirking her sisterhood cost Kim her partner in crime and now there was a gaping hole where her other half was supposed to be.

"Yes. I do."

Kim untied her flannel from around her waist and shrugged it on, wrapping herself in its comforting warmth. Standing on the bar's foot rail, she pushed up on her tip-toes, arms stretched over the bar's still-sticky surface as she felt around blindly for her phone and keys where she left deposited them when she switched out empty kegs.

"What're you doing?" Ty asked, his tall frame leaning easily over her. His warm breath tickled her ear and smelt of mint, tobacco, and beer.

Kim glanced over her shoulder, and, shit, Ty was standing close. Too close. His mouth hovered mere inches from her ear, each exhale a warm caress on her exposed neck. He rested his hand on her lower back.

Kim shivered and warmth pooled low in her stomach, even as she shrugged him off, her gaze flicking around the room. Rey's back was to the as she fished ill-aimed darts out the bright teal wall decorated with wooden anchors and nautical ropes.

Kim could kick herself for her laziness. She should've just walked around the bar for her stuff, but with every step she took her swollen feet ached. Trying her best to ignore Ty, she kept reaching until her fingers brushed against a cluster of cold metal sitting atop smooth glass.

She held up her cell and keys triumphantly, "Found 'em." She pushed back from the bar and stumbled stepping down. Ty again put his hand on her back, this time to steady her. He pulled her closer and Kim pushed her hands against his hard chest, letting the sharp edges of her keys encourage him to back up. She peeked around his body again, but Rey had yet to notice their unusual proximity. It wasn't that she didn't know Kim and Ty were fuck-buddies—that's he got the job in the first place—it was that Rey had a habit of reading into things and sticking her nose where it didn't belong, like Kim's vagina, having prized herself an expert at reading body language, dreams, auras, and tarot. "Not here," Kim whispered, and Ty released her without protest.

Ty was never into public displays of affection before, adamant that they flew in the face of a friends with benefits relationship which worked well-enough for Kim.

What got into him? One kiss was enough. She needed uncomplicated, not clingy.

She brushed past him. "*Mi reina*, need us to handle anything else before we leave?" she called out, asking Rey.

If Rey looked over her shoulder. "You tapped that keg of Stella, mama?"

Kim nodded. "*Si*." She strode to Rey and opened her arms for a hug.

Rey grinned, and threw her arms around Kim, thanking her.

“Well you do pay me,” Kim said, chuckling.

Rey nudged Kim with a bony elbow and flicked her gaze over Kim’s shoulder to the bar, where Ty still stood watching them with veiled interest, and back again. “Make sure to wrap it up; I can’t afford to give you paid maternity leave.”

Kim choked out a surprised noise that was a mix laugh and groan as she looked at Rey. “You’re an asshole. Don’t worry, I don’t to make you an aunt any time soon.” Or at all. “Make sure to lock up after we leave.”

“Yes, Mom.”

Kim snuck a quick kiss on her friend’s cheek. “Movie night tomorrow?”

“Only if I get to paint your nails. I’ve been practicing.”

“Just, no more penis nail art. Deal?” Smirking, Kim held her pinky up to Rey. Once, she’d forgotten about the sparkling silver and pink dicks Rey had painted on her middle finger nails, and she stumbled hungover and half-asleep to Rumble. Half the day she spent hiding her hands, and then at lunch, she’d run home and scrubbed furiously at her nails with acetone-soaked cotton balls.

Rey giggled. “Fair enough,” she replied, entwining her pinky with Kim’s.

The bus stopped hours ago, so Kim drove the twenty minutes to Ty’s Parkchester apartment. Pulling up on his block, they found side-street parking. Ty’s studio was a fourth-floor walk-up and, deciding to forego fishing for clean panties and leggings out of her bag, Kim decided to bring her her duffle upstairs to Ty’s fourth-floor walk-up studio, and Ty insisted on lugging it up the stairs.

It wasn't heavy, but the gesture was unexpected. He was a generous friend, but Tyler Reyes wasn't known for his chivalry. It was starting to get weird.

Upstairs, swung open his heavy front door, letting it slam into the wall with a boom.

Kim cringed away from the noise and rolled her eyes. She was surprised the sheetrock wasn't cracked yet.

"Make yourself at home," Ty said over his shoulder, walking in and stopped in front of his mauve damask sofa, which was stuffed under the kitchen's shallow bar counter; it was ancient and stained with a scroll back and Kim was not entirely convinced that he hadn't found it deposited in a trash pile on the sidewalk. If you weren't careful, you'd crack your head on the tiled counter when standing up or sitting back too quickly, which Kim had done far more times than she cared to admit while they watched movies on Ty's laptop and ate cereal out of plastic bowls.

He beckoned Kim inside with one hand and dropped her duffle on the floor with a muffled thud. There wasn't much to his space, it only being around 500 square-feet. His sparse bed, a lumpy mattress and box spring tucked into the far corner, sat flush against the wall with three bare pillows, black jersey sheets, and the cerulean chenille throw she'd given him—for her sanity and warmth during their sleepovers—as a birthday gift. Next to his bed were carefully arranged and stacked multi-purpose, black milk crates being used as nightstand, record crates, and bookshelves. A small, round pine coffee table sat between the bed and sofa.

Soaking in the aromatic spice of Kush in the air, Kim spotted a half-smoked blunt resting in the ashtray on the coffee table and smiled. The apprehension she felt earlier started to melt away a bit. "Like I haven't already," she shot back. She strode to the table, picked up the blunt and slipped it between her lips. "Light?" she asked, the word muffled by the clip.

“Ha. You sure have.” Ty chuckled and shook his head, his thick shaggy hair flopping wildly. “Hold up. I got you.” He felt around in his front and back pockets until he held up a disposable lighter emblazoned with the words “Get Lit.”

Kim closed the distance between them and looked up at Ty through her long, thick lashes. She tilted her chin expectantly, the joint dangling from her pursed lips, but Ty just gazed down at her without moving. She tugged the blunt from her dry lips and arched her brow.

“Gonna’ flick your Bic?

Instead of responding, Ty lifted his calloused hand to her face and cupped her cheek. “You have such pretty eyes.”

“Thanks?” Kim said, confusion turning her sentence into a question. She tilted her head. “Did you get started at Sailors without me? Sharing is caring, ya know,” she joked, unsure about the sudden electric change in the atmosphere.

With a half-smile, Ty said, “I just never really appreciated it before.”

“Glad to know bar grime and sweat is your jam.”

“You’re my jam.”

Kim groaned. “Ew. Please, no,” she said, laughing, her face scrunched in mock-disgust.

Ty chuckled, a faint blush tinting his tan cheeks, and leaned forward, placing a chaste kiss on Kim’s lips.

“Besides,” he said, recovering, “You know how I like to get dirty.” He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively

Kim simpered, her apprehension disappeared as she inhaled deeply, breathing in the heady scent of Newport menthols, sweat, and fabric softener. Using her free hand, she grabbed

him by his already stretched out shirt collar before he could pull away and pulled him in closer for another, deeper kiss.

Ty quickly responded, joint and lighter forgotten in the space between them. He wrapped his arms around her, his hands resting low on her back, just above her ass.

Kim needed this.

She pressed herself tighter against Ty's firm chest, loving how the rough scruff of his 5 o'clock shadow scratched at her skin. He dropped a hand and squeeze her toned ass. He gently tugged on her bottom lip and then pulled away. At her confused look, he pulled the forgotten blunt from her fingers and put it to his mouth, and never breaking eye contact, he flicked his lighter, the small flame sparking to life. He inspired the heady smoke deep into his lungs and then released it with a steady and slow exhale. The cloud of smoke wafted over Kim.

"Remember, sharing is caring, my friend," she chirped, holding her hand out.

Instead of handing over the bone, Ty sucked more smoke into his mouth but didn't inhale. He pulled Kim close and pressed his lips to hers. She opened her mouth and shot-gunned the weed, sucking in the smoke.

"That works too," she said, after exhaling with a jagged cough. Just as Ty was about to take another though, she pried the blunt from his lips with a giggle and put it to her own. Smoking freely, Kim released her hair from the confines of her braid and slipped her flannel from her shoulders, suddenly hot. She scooped the ashtray off the coffee table and crooked her finger at Ty, walking backwards until the back of her knees hit the bed. Leaning back against her elbows on the pilling black sheets, Kim flicked the ashes off the blunt and patted the spot on the bed next to her. "You coming?" she asked, biting her lip.

"Hell yeah," Ty replied, smirking as he stripped off his hoodie and strode toward Kim.

Pulling her hair to one side, she kicked off her boots and let the marijuana smoke sink into her lungs with each inhale. She held each breath and watched the slow release of the earthy vapors with each exhale. She leaned back, resting on one elbow, and let the beginning of euphoria wash over her. That initial moment of elevation, when her tense sober consciousness shifted into nebulous relaxation, was the sudden cool breeze on a boiling day; it was the first unrestrained breath of cool fresh air that she'd needed, and now she wanted to gulp it down and bask.

Ty bent down, snatched the joint from her hand, and put it out in the ashtray. He sat on the edge of the bed, his long legs spread out. He kicked off his scuffed black leather boots and crossed his ankles.

Careful not to knock over the tray, Kim nudged it to the side and swung a leg over his lap until she straddled him. He gripped her thigh, urging her closer to his growing hard-on; it strained against his zipper of tight skinny jeans.

She was hit by an overwhelming moment of *déjà vu*. She was back in her room, the roach of a freshly smoke joint in the glass ashtray on her nightstand, sitting astride Harp, only with far fewer clothes. She shivered as she thought of firm hands gripping her ass cheeks and as she pressed herself onto his boxer-brief covered erection and moaned into Ty's mouth.

Craving the sensual touches of her memory, Kim ground down on Ty's erection, seeking the friction she desperately needed. She hungered for his hands to glide over her heated skin and nudged him to lean back before grabbing the hem of her shirt and yanking it over her head. She tossed the tee behind her and her nipples hardened in anticipation, brushing against the soft lace of her bra. The cool air caressed her skin giving her gooseflesh that ran up her arms and down her neck.

Grabbing her by the back of the neck, he took a swift hit and pressed his lips to hers once again, breathing the smoke into her. Releasing the stream of smoke through her nose, Kim deepened the kiss, and started slipping the thick straps of her unlined black bra down her arms. Ty reached behind her and released the clasps, freeing her bosom. The bra dropped to her lap and Kim arched her back as he sank his face in the soft swell of her D-cups.

He traced delicate kisses down her sternum and used his rough fingers to tweak the stiff peaks of her nipples, before flipping them over until he rested over her and captured her lips with his. She reached down to unbutton her pants, but he wrapped his hand around her wrist, stopping her.

“Let me.”

Kim leaned up on her elbows as he worked her tight jeans down her legs, peeling them off slowly with her panties. Her skin heated as Ty fixed his gaze on her bare legs and let it roam up their length up until his eyes reached her damp and swollen sex.

Kim scooted back on the bed and motioned for Ty to take off his pants. She didn't like being the only naked one in the room. It wasn't the first time he'd seen her naked, yet his hooded eyes and shallow breaths left her flushed and self-conscious. She wanted to cover herself with the blanket and hide her stretchmarks and little scars.

Ty slipped his jeans and boxers down his hairy legs, freeing his erection. He crawled over her, letting his hardness rest on her waist as he spit on his hand and brought it between her legs. He trailed his fingers along her inner thighs and nudged them further apart.

She reached up and grabbed Ty by the back of the neck, crashing their lips together. She moaned into his mouth as his thumb circled her clit. He plunged first one, then two, fingers into her slick warmth.

Breaking the kiss, Kim whimpered, “Oh, God.” She screwed her eyes shut and kicked her head to the side, exposing her neck.

Ty sighed into her ear as she grasped his dick and started working her hand up and down his length, the movements staggered as nibbled on the sensitive skin below her ear. He nuzzled her neck and swirled his fingers inside her, before curling them inward.

Her legs stiffened and Kim ground herself harder onto Ty’s hand—his palm pressing into her throbbing, sensitive flesh—and willed him to move faster, to get her to the brink.

“That’s it,” Ty whispered in her ear, and with a pinch to her clit and a scrape of his teeth against her neck, Kim came undone.

Early the next morning, the sun just peaking over the horizon, Kim slipped silently from Ty’s suffocating embrace, not that he was likely to notice. Ty snorted and rolled over, tucking his arms in close like a child. If his snoring and the patch of drool was any indication, he was going to be in bed until noon—if not longer. She was kind of jealous of him.

Kim longed to be able to sink into the soft embrace of her sheets for at least a day, and maybe once she got home, she’d finally get the chance. She’d slept well enough in his bed, no nightmares, but she’d awoken at six in the morning as usual; her body wasn’t used to sleeping in anymore and Ty’s bed was far from comfortable.

Digging through her bag, Kim found a pair of black leggings that had at least one more wear in them, a Malbec colored sports bra, and another pair of black underwear. Having become an expert at leaving Ty’s undetected, Kim changed in silence, quick and efficient, even when she tripped over Ty’s discarded jeans.

Finished, and a bit out of breath, Kim found her scattered clothes from the night before and shoved them in the duffle before forcing the jammed zipper to close. She grabbed her phone and keys off the coffee table and slipped her Timberlands and flannel back on. Sparing a brief glance at Ty's sleeping form—clad only in black boxer briefs, he slept on his front, palm squished to his face with wild hair sticking up in every which direction and the thin jersey top sheet tangled up in his legs—Kim sauntered out the dark apartment, careful to close the door closed with a gentle click, and descended the dimly lit brick and tile stairwell as quick as she could without touching the blue painted handrail.

Outside the dewy morning air was crisp, tickling Kim's nose, and the dawn sky still coral and powder blue. Kim ambled down the sidewalk taking in the fresh air, bag hiked over her shoulder, until she came across her Camry. Unlocking her car, she tossed her duffle in the back.

Sitting in the driver's side, Kim locked her doors and plugged her very-dead phone into its charger. As she waited for it to power up and her engine to warm, Kim sang along to her The Wombats *Glitterbug* CD. Since it was stuck in the player, the CD kept Kim from ever having to listen to tinny radio stations, but it also meant Kim knew which song would play next before even the last note ended and the first one started.

Hearing her phone chime and vibrate back to back, Kim picked it up and groaned. JJ called and texted her throughout the night. Kim ejected her CD, shuffled her girl power playlist and shifted her car into drive, pulling out the parallel spot, as the first notes of Aisha Badru's *Mind on Fire*.

An inky chill settled into her bones as she drove back to the island, debating if she was ready to face her dad. She could say that she left her charger in the care, since it wouldn't be a lie.

She sighed. It wouldn't matter. He was going to be in a bad mood anyway. JJ didn't want anything to do with Kim most days, or at least that's how his permanent frown and crotchety attitude whenever they did speak made it appear, but, for some reason, it irked him when Kim wasn't at home and under his thumb to be a verbal punching bag.

Kim looked at her dash's clock and nibbled worriedly at the corner of her bottom lip. JJ would be asleep for a few hours yet, since it was a quarter to seven. If Kim knew her dad as well as she thought she did, JJ drank himself to sleep and would stay that way be until right before lunch.

That bought her a few hours of peace, she hoped.

Chapter 7

Kim's singing died on her lips as she pulled into her crumbling asphalt driveway. She'd decided to go to Rumble for a work-out and then went grocery shopping off the island, just so she could push off this moment. The old-two story clapboard colonial loomed in front of her, its steel blue-gray paint worn and peeling from the abrasive salt-water breeze. Deserted, mossy flower boxes lined the driveway, dead flower stalks, leaves, and twigs piled high. Kim was sure there was a chipmunk burrowing in one of them—it always ran off the porch when she ambled outside in the morning. Neither Kim nor JJ cared enough about appearances to replant or repaint before summer.

At first, she tried—mowing the lawn, pruning hedges, planting chrysanthemums for Autumn on her days off—trying with everything she had to bring back a sense of normalcy in her cold, dead and haunted home, but her dad never seemed to notice, or care. When Kim had first dug the push mower out the shed, JJ had come outside with Coors in hand to instruct and criticize her progress from the deck.

After his fourth, “Not like that” and “You missed a spot,” neither complaint of which got him out of his pollen-covered and cushioned deck chair to cross the twenty feet it would've taken to help her, a seething Kim snapped. “Do it yourself,” she hurled back at him as stalked past him and into the house. Flustered and frantic, she marched to the unused dining room between the living room and the kitchen and yanked a dusty bottle of wine from the catty-corner wine rack

that held of JJ's desperation stash. Twist-off bottle of Moscato in hand, Kim locked herself in her room.

It was the first time she'd done that—run toward alcohol like it was her rescue inhaler.

Now, other than when Kim nagged Danny to mow the tall grass, she didn't try, letting her childhood home's exterior be a measure for the state of the family inside: falling apart.

Exiting her car, Kim felt a trail of sweat slide down her spine, and shivered. She took a deep breath, ignoring the distant sound of gunshots coming from the police shooting range across the bay, and pulled her flannel tighter, relishing in its secure, comforting warmth. She jogged up the front steps and unlocked the door.

"Dad," she called out into the dark. "I'm home." The sky's vibrant coral of dawn was long gone and the sun sat just above the horizon, but JJ still had the curtains drawn shut. Pulling her phone out her pocket, Kim noted that it was ten to ten. Slamming the door behind her, she dropped her duffle on the bottom step of the stairway to the left of the door but held onto her two canvas bags of groceries.

A creak and groan came from the living room, so Kim walked down the hall toward it with grim determination. Time to rip the bandage off. Running a finger along the wainscoting, Kim glanced at the family pictures lining the hall as she passed. Stopping short of the archway to the sala, she took in the photo hanging in front of her: Tommy and Kim at Rumble, no older than nine or ten, wore boxing gloves that were too big for Kim's slight frame and stood in front of Pops and JJ. Both kids had their hands up in position, but Tommy wore a toothy grin, while Kim looked determined, a fire burning in her eyes.

According to her grandfather, JJ had never been dedicated or disciplined enough to go pro, though he claimed to want to, so he poured those dreams into Tommy who soaked them up.

Kim was left as an afterthought, invisible as she waited for lessons that never came until she caved and complained to her grandmother. Bonnie forced James to train their granddaughter the same way he would if she'd been a boy, and though he was reluctant, Kim's eager attitude and quick skill wore him down.

Kim brushed her thumb across her twin's smiling face, the ghost of a grin gracing her own, before she forced herself to face whatever disaster was in the sala.

She bit back a groan of annoyance. She shouldn't be surprised that the remnants of a 24-pack littered the room, Budweiser cans and tossed haphazardly on the rustic coffee table and scattered on the carpet. Kim would never have to wonder what living in a frat house smelled like—skunked beer and B.O.

Kim backed out the living room and brought the groceries back to the kitchen. She'd deal with him and his mess after she put away the food. Kim got to work, trying to let the mind-numbing task dissipate her anger, but it only grew.

Coming home always felt like a punishment. JJ was either pushing her away, the way he did Tommy after he quit fighting, or he was penalizing her for not being home when he expected. Either way, her dad was being childish, but the not knowing gnawed at Kim. Insecurity she'd locked away behind a door in mind, raged at the cracks in its seal.

Shutting the fridge a final time, Kim fortified herself, letting her anger burn away snaking insecurity. She grabbed a trash bag out the pantry next to the fridge and headed back to the war-zone.

Clad only in his unfortunately loose boxer briefs, JJ was a shirtless snoring lump on the sofa, his drool staining one of the handcrafted floral throw pillows Kim and Michelle picked out during a mother-daughter date at the Palisades the summer before she left; they saw Night at the

Museum 2 in IMAX and got their nails painted. It'd been the first time Kim was allowed to get acrylic tips, and she'd left the nail salon with a gigantic grin plastered on her face, feeling grown up and eager to share the news with Rey.

Up close, she noticed the ungroomed mess that was her father. Bedraggled, JJ's thick, unkempt hair stuck flat against his oily forehead in front and stuck up in different directions in the back. Pillow imprints ran down the length of his unshaven face. Kim couldn't remember the last time she saw her dad sleep in his bedroom—it'd been a couple of years. One day, he made the sofa up, claiming his mattress was lumpy, and that was the end of it; the sala was his new room.

"Fucking kidding me," Kim mumbled, yanking the pillow out from under his fat face, with unfounded hopes that he'd wake up and offer to clean his own mess. He didn't move so, Kim chucked the pillow back at his face. Kim held her breath, sliding on a sweet, innocent smile, as JJ snorted and rolled over. He buried his face into the crease between the cushions and sofa-arm. A tornado could rip through the house and JJ wouldn't budge aside from double sneeze, smoker's cough, or noxious fart.

Hopeless. He was fucking hopeless.

He was sure to do make another mess when he woke up, but Kim wasn't inclined to live in an Anheuser-Busch brewery.

She cleaned without much notice to the noise she made. The cans clinked and clanged together as she crushed them and tossed them in the bag.

If her dad couldn't consider her, Kim didn't see why she needed to consider him, though she could hear her grandmother lecturing her, "He's still your father—no matter what." From where she stood, it seemed like bad advice but she couldn't shake Bonnie's voice, the words echoing in her ears.

Kim tossed the last can in the bag and went back to the kitchen pantry so she could empty the overflowing makeshift recycling bin, which was just a regular kitchen trash can she'd painted. The lid was decorated with a green ombre recycling symbol and delicate monarch butterflies, while the body had various flowers—mostly sunflowers, which were Kim's favorite—and painstakingly detailed Earth complete with vibrant blues, textured landmasses, and whorls of clouds. When she'd started the project, Kim intended to paint a basic recycling symbol, but once she began she couldn't stop until every inch of the plastic can was primed and painted perfection. Kim didn't like doing things in half-measures.

Kim noted the empty wine bottles and vodka handle next to it and tossed them in too, before hurrying outside. She tossed the bag of alcoholism into the wheeled bin with a bang and wobbled with the impact. She watched the dance for balance but didn't move to steady the bin.

Behind Kim, a door opened with screech. She turned, expecting to see Danny leaving for his morning run, but instead JJ stood there, leaning against the porch railing.

Fuck.

"When'd you get home?" he asked, his voice thick with sleep and saliva.

"Little while ago," she said simply.

"I tried calling you." When he drank, he called her and Danny twenty times a day just to 'check in.' He'd say it was because he loved his kids, and that was probably true, but she knew he also felt guilty, just like she did. He didn't want to be responsible, even partly, for the loss of another child.

So it began. Kim clenched her fist. She didn't like talking to him when she didn't have control over her emotions; it made it that much easier for him to get under her skin and for her to say something she couldn't take back. Kim exhaled and gave her father a sheepish, apologetic

smile. “Yep. Sorry, Dad,” she started. “I had a crazy day yesterday. My shift ended late, and not wanting to wake you in the middle of the night, I stayed at Rey’s and forgot my charger in my car.”

“Rey didn’t have a charger you could use?”

She probably did--one that Kim left behind during one of their many sleepovers--but Kim shook her head. “She has a different type of phone.” Which wasn’t a lie. Rey was an adamant Android user. Even if her phone hadn’t died, JJ would’ve sent her dad’s calls to voicemail. When he drank, his calls were incessant, coming in twenty-minute intervals to either complain about the fact that she didn’t answer or to ask when she was coming home. Yet, when she was home he hardly spoke to her. “Did you need me to pick something up?”

JJ pursed his lip and crossed his arms, his bare gut pressed against the railing. “What’s the point of a phone if you aren’t going to use it?”

Kim bit back the curse at the tip of her tongue. It’s not like he paid her bills. He’d have to know what day of the week it was to do that. She wanted to ask, *What’s the point of having kids if you aren’t going to take care of them?* But, she couldn’t say any of that. Instead, biting her tongue, she conceded and mumbled an apology, “Sorry, Dad. Won’t happen again.”

It would happen again. She hated talking on the phone, let alone answering his calls.

“I hope not.” He made his way toward her, tripping over his slippers on the last porch step. At her side, he laid a gentle hand on her shoulder, his rheumy blue eyes fixed on hers. She couldn’t break away from his gaze as he gave her a wobbly smile, his crooked teeth stained yellow from years of smoking. “Thanks for cleaning. I’ll try to make sure it’s done before you get home next time.”

Yeah, right. Just like he promised to stop drinking. He made it three months; his chip was still somewhere in her room. At least he gave up on that lie. It was a matter of time before he gave up on this one, too.

“You making dinner tonight?” he asked.

“I’m a bit out of it, so I wasn’t planning on cooking. How about we order pizza tonight?” She put her hand and ushered him back into the house. “Didn’t want to put on a shirt or some pants, Dad?”

He grunted. “I’m a grown man. I can dress how I want.”

Kim rolled her eyes. “Yes, sir.”

“I’ll go find the menu, but I want chili tomorrow.” He stalked up the front steps. “Aren’t you coming?”

“Of course, Dad. Be right there.” She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and gave him the brightest, most reassuring smile she had, not unlike the one she gave her students except that this one was fake and forced.

“I’ll see you in there. Mushrooms and pepperoni, right?”

That was Tommy’s favorite but, “Sure, why not? You head on in and I’ll finish up out here.”

Once the door closed behind him, Kim kicked the recycling bin and knocked it over.

“Fucking great,” she said to herself. She took a deep breath, and righted the bin, listening to the clang of all the bottles and cans inside. It was the soundtrack of her life, alcohol and garbage clashing against each other.

She marched herself back inside. Two fingers of whiskey sounded like bliss at this moment. She needed to wait until JJ drank himself into another stupor before she slid a bottle out

the liquor cabinet, so he believed he was the only fuck-up in the Adams family. He was an asshole most days, but her living family was dwindling, and she couldn't lose him too.

Pasting another smile on her face, Kim headed back inside.

Chapter 10

Sharp clanging jolted Kim awake, her vision bleary, she flinched at the sudden light piercing her retinas.

Christ. She wasn't even facing the window.

She didn't remember leaving her blinds open, but she sure as hell regretted it. Her head throbbed, her brain pulsing against her eyes like a speaker blasting at full volume. Kim swiped her dry tongue over her gritty teeth.

She needed grease and lots of it. Why wasn't there a McDonald's on the island? Hell, she'd even take Burger King's soggy fries.

As the familiar signs of her hangover hitting her, Kim became hyperaware of her sticky body, drenched in sweat. Her soaked shirt stuck to her every curve and roll. Uncomfortable, she sat up conscious of the room's cool air chilling her damp skin and the blood rushing in her head. She took stock of her surroundings: the gray walls adorned with black and white photographs—portraits and cityscapes that she couldn't fully make out—and, the source of the searing sunlight, two blind-less windows. She'd slept on a king-sized bed and the other furniture was mismatched.

Wherever the hell Kim was, it wasn't her room.

She kicked off the stark-white sheet, exposing her bare legs.

Oh, Kimberley Camila Adams, what the fuck have you done and where the hell are your pants?

Kim lifted the hem of the unfamiliar tee she wore and saw hints of her black granny panties. Relief started to balloon in her chest; she couldn't have gotten too carried away, outside of those double rum and cokes. She looked around the bed searching for her bra. It wasn't on any visible surface. None of her clothes were. She groaned in frustration and searched her memory. She went to Sailors with Harp after closing—that much she remembered, but everything after her fourth drink was spotty.

She recalled someone rubbing her feet. She wiggled her toes; she'd shoved them in someone's face and demanded they give her a foot massage.

A loud bang echoed from down the hall. Kim's heart raced. Fuck. Who was that?

She glanced down and really looked at the worn and baggy gray Smiths tee. Not so unfamiliar then.

No. No way. It couldn't be.

Lifting the neck of the shirt to her nose and inhaled; under the scent of her own sweat, was the heady smell of leather and Old Spice. Knowing she was alone, Kim closed her eyes and let it wash over her and her breath catches in her throat.

She shouldn't be doing this. Exasperated with herself, Kim flopped back on to the pillows. How could she let this happen again? Sometime after locking up Rumble and her fourth double, she returned to her role as the world's worst sister.

Moments ticked by as she by as she stared at the ceiling fan—focusing on the rotating blades instead of the curses and uncertainty circling her brain.

The banging around in the other room stopped. Harp padded down the hall toward the room Kim had slept in, the creaking floorboards a death march. Kim bit her full bottom lip in

nervous anticipation, her stomach fluttering. She sat up and shifted her body toward the edge of the mattress, back to the door as she tried to avoid looking at the beaming sunlight.

The door opened behind her and Harp cleared his throat. Kim kept her back to Harp until she was sure could speak. “Good, you’re up,” he said.

“Unfortunately,” Kim muttered, groaning as she pushed herself off the bed. Resisting the urge to stretch she tugged the at the tee’s hem, conscious of her near-nakedness and hideous underwear. She turned to face Harp, tilting her chin up to feign confidence despite her unexpected vulnerability, and the little voice in her head screaming at her to run and hide.

He leaned against the unfinished wood doorframe with one plate in one hand and a fork in the other. Kim’s stomach growled when the aroma of butter and cinnamon coming off the plate hit here. At the sound, he chuckled, holding the dish up, and said, “Made you some breakfast.”

Kim came around the corner of the bed, edging closer to him like he was a feral animal protecting a rare treasure, already salivating. Yet, a looming anchor of dread sunk low in her belly, immobilizing her before she got too close. This morning-after breakfast couldn’t lead anywhere good.

Harp furrowed his eyebrows and asked, “What’s wrong?”

Going back to normal after their last tryst sucked all the air out of Kim’s world. Then Tommy died, and she’d felt like she was tip-toeing on cracking glass shelf seconds away from shattering beneath her. She couldn’t go through that again—successive devastation and heartbreak.

“For fuck’s sake, Kimmy,” Harp said, his husky voice gentle and even. “Talk to me.” Tentative, he shuffled toward her, stopping to place dish on top of his dresser. When she was

sure Harp wasn't looking at her, Kim spared a glance at the breakfast he made for her, French toast—her favorite. Closing the last couple of feet between them, he said, “You’ve never been one to bite your tongue before.”

“Before, I didn’t black out and wake up with a raging hangover,” Kim snapped, balling and unballing her fist. She wasn’t sure what upset her more; drinking too much, sleeping with Harp, or his cavalier attitude about the whole situation.

“So, she speaks,” he joked.

Kim rolled her eyes. She wanted to hit something and feel the sting on her knuckles, but she took a deep breath. She knew she needed to calm down; if her heart beat any faster, it would pop out her chest and flop on to Harp’s socked feet. Gazing up into his sincere blue eyes, she steeled herself for the truth. “What the hell...” she trailed off and tried again, “How far did we...” She felt like a teenager again, flustered and stumbling through a conversation about sex. Even if they did fuck, one slip-up didn’t mean anything. At Harp’s confused scrunched expression, she clamped her mouth shut. She could hear his brain working.

“What do you think we did?” he decided to ask.

Kim motioned to the rumpled bed, her face flushed. Even though she couldn’t remember the night before, she still felt the echoes of Harp’s touch.

“Christ, no!” Harp’s eyes widened. “I’d never.”

“Like you haven’t before?”

Lowering his voice, he replied, “Y’know what I mean.”

“Clearly, I don’t.” Why was she so bothered? She should be relieved that they hadn’t crossed that line again, but the way he said it, like it was an outrageous suggestion, stung more than she cared to admit. That wasn’t how this conversation was supposed to go.

“I just meant...,” He stopped and rubbed the back of his neck. “Did ya really think I’d take advantage of ya like that?”

No. He may have bruised her heart and her ego last year, but he’d never cross that line; he wasn’t that type of man. She knew that and shook her.

How did she explain to him that he wasn’t the problem, that she feared herself—the person she was morphing into. Saying out loud, even just to herself, felt impossible. It reminded her that she teetered on the edge of her control.

“Of course not.” Kim hadn’t thought of it that way. “I’m sorry.” She paused. “Wait, then where are my clothes?” Her leg hair stubble stood on end and she crossed her ankles as though it would provide her with more modesty.

“In the wash. You puked on yourself on the way here.”

Kim wrinkled her nose.

“I guess it was just one of those nights,” she said with false surety. Compounding her embarrassment, she gave him a cringey buddy punch to the arm. She had no clue what she was doing anymore. “So how about that French toast?” she asked, trying to divert the conversation.

Harp opened his mouth to respond, but Kim cut him off saying, “Smells delicious.” She walked around him, making sure to give him wide berth.

Giving a resigned sigh, Harp’s shoulders deflated in her periphery. He came up quickly behind her and snatched the French toast away before Kim could claim to it. “Probably needs to be reheated.” He moved away from her, keeping the plate out of reach, which was easy since he had a foot of height on her. “I’ll take care of this and you can go clean up.” Harp pinched his nose with his free hand. “Ya reek,” he said, laughing.

Kim flipped him off, but her mouth tasted terrible. She resisted the urge to sniff her arm pits.

Before leaving the room, Harp said, “I put a clean towel and a pair of basketball shorts in the bathroom for you. There should be a spare toothbrush under the sink. I forgot to look. If not, just use mine.”

“Thank you,” Kim muttered. “Do you have another shirt I can wear?” she asked, pulling at the damp tee. “I seem to have sweat through this one.”

“Were you hot last night?” he asked, moving back to the dresser and replacing the dish. He pointed to the fan and said, “Since it hasn’t been that warm yet, I didn’t think to switch on the AC.”

As he opened the top drawer and fished around for a moment, Kim said, “It was fine.”

Harp pulled out an acid-wash Slytherin t-shirt she knew well and tossed it at her. “Here ya go.”

Kim caught the shirt just before it hit her face and clutched it to her chest. “Tommy’s?”

He nodded but his gaze was trained at the window her back and his Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed. Kim pretended she didn’t notice. Harp was kind and warm, but he wasn’t emotional. Seeing him that way chiseled away at Kim’s resolve to keep their relationship platonic and professional.

“Did you know I gave this to him as a Christmas gift? I think you were visiting your Mom in Edinburgh. Freshman year during fall break, a couple of friends from school and I took a road trip to Orlando. It was a hellish drive and we stayed at sketchy-ass motels. It was worth it though, to see that magic come to life and to drink Butterbeer.” Kim sniffed. “He would’ve loved

it.” They were supposed to go together—all five of them, Tommy, Kim, Harp, Rey, and Danny. Tommy had finally finished reading the books after years of pestering from Kim and Danny.

“Yeah? He let me borrow it. I’ve just kinda held on to it,” Harp said, his voice thick.

“I’ll make sure to give it back.” Kim looked up from the shirt to Harp, who was watching her with intent eyes.

“Ya’ don’t have to do that.”

“Yeah, I do,” she said, determined. “He was your best friend. No matter what.”

Harp grinned. “You’re different,” he said, picking up the plate again and striding back toward the door.

“What’d you mean? Different how?”

“I just didn’t know you were a morning person.”

“Yeah, right,” Kim scoffed. “You’re the only morning person I know.”

“Well, it’s something because you’re a helluva lot nicer now than you were last night.”

Shit. “Must still be a little drunk,” Kim said, only half-joking. Whatever rum and adrenaline still sang in her blood woke her up and dulled her sharp tongue. And here she thought the worrisome part of her morning was over. “What’d I do this time?”

“Attacked a guy. Had an ugly argument with Rey.”

Before she could let her imagination run wild with all the ways she could destroy a lifelong friendship, Kim asked, “Provocation?” She dreaded his answer.

“For which one?”

Kim bit the side of her lip, no matter what Harp said, she knew fucked everything up. It was what she did. “Both.”

“The guy grabbed your ass, and I wanted to hit him too—though maybe not as aggressively.” Kim groaned. “He was a douche, sure, but you looked like you were out for blood. As for Rey, you may owe her an apology or two.”

“Fuck.” Kim ran her hands down her face. Rey was her best friend; she couldn’t lose her, too. “Overreaction seems to be my middle name lately.”

Harp arched his eyebrow. “Acknowledging that you—”

Kim raised her hand and cut him off, “Don’t you dare finish that sentence. My fuse may be short, but I don’t have a problem.” She didn’t need AA literature thrown in her face. She wasn’t her father. “It’s called grief.”

“And the drinking?”

Kim’s face flamed as she met Harp’s judgmental gaze with a glare. She fiddled with the hair-tie on her wrist, running her nail along the indent in left in her skin while she slept, and cleared her throat. “It’s a bit early for this conversation, yeah?” she asked, her voice raspy. “I mean, especially since you made breakfast.”

Harp stared at her for a beat longer than necessary before replying, “Alright, sure.” He nodded as if reassuring himself. “You shower, we eat, then we talk.”

“Sure,” Kim mustered, deflated. She wasn’t getting out of it. “Where’s the bathroom again?” Kim hadn’t been to Harp’s apartment in over a year since the morning after Tommy found them in bed together, and all the times before that were brief—Kim picking up her brother and Harp for one reason or another.

“Next door on your left.”

“Thanks,” Kim muttered as Harp tapped the doorframe and pushed off into the hall, heading toward what she assumed was the kitchen, plate in hand.

Listening to the beeps of the microwave buttons, Kim shuffled out the room, down the hall, and into the safety of the bathroom. Shutting the door behind her, she took a deep breath through her nose, pulling it deep behind her belly button. Even as some tension released from her shoulders with the click of the lock, her head raged.

Bitter nausea crawled up the back of her throat and, unable to force the bile back down, Kim ran to the open toilet and retched, spewing whatever chunks of beef, bread, and potatoes left from her dinner of a burger and curly fries remained in her stomach into the porcelain bowl. She gagged and hacked until nothing, but yellowish-green bile came out.

Though the waterfall of bile felt endless, the gagging calmed and then stopped, leaving Kim with a sour taste in her mouth and a pungent aroma in the air. She used the back of her hand to wipe her mouth and chin.

Groaning, Kim flushed the toilet, slammed the lid closed and sat on the toilet, her knees tucked up against her chest. Throat burning, she rested her forehead against her knees and closed her eyes, until her throbbing headache dulled. An episode like this a couple of years earlier, and she might've sworn off drinking for a few months.

She hoisted herself off the toilet and moved to turn on the sink. She let the water rinse the vomit and spit from the back of her hand and then, cupping her hands, let the cool liquid fill her palms and used it to rinse her mouth. Satisfied that she'd washed away the acidity in her mouth, Kim gulped fresh water from her hands greedily, before turning off the sink and peeling the damp Smith's shirt from her overheated body.

Gooseflesh ran up her arms as the cool air from the bathroom's rattling vents whispered against her skin. Raising an arm, Kim sniffed her pit. Harp was right—she stunk, and puking didn't help matters.

Kim dropped her arm and bent down, picking up Tommy's shirt which she'd abandoned on the white and black penny-round tile floor.

Picturing her twin, she brought the shirt to her nose and inhaled. Long-gone were the traces of his signature AXE body spray. Whatever faint hints of it she thought she could pick up where gone as soon as they arrived.

When she'd given it to him that Christmas morning, it was like he was a ten-year-old ripping away her precise wrapping in seconds. He wore the shirt the rest of day with his ratty sweatpants and a massive grin that accentuated the dark freckles on the apple of his cheeks.

A person's bathroom said a lot about them. Kim must've been used to living with people who despised housework, because the sight of Harp's spotless bathroom was as refreshing as it was surprising, with its spit spatter-less mirror and hairless floor, especially since she wasn't responsible for cleaning it. It was so unlike his horror-story of a locker at Rumble with its aromatic dirty socks that could ward off thieves, vampires, and fans of small-talk alike.

The only thing out of place were the folded basketball shorts and bath towel on the counter. Kim touched the shorts with a small smile tugging at the corners of her lips. She glanced up at her reflection in the mirror and her barely-there smile faded. Grimacing, she took in her knotted and greasy hair, and her smudged mascara. She slipped the hair-tie off her wrist and wrestled her dirty tangled mane into a tight top-knot, too tired to brush, wash, and wrangle it. Plus, her hair was going to need a lot more help than Harp's three-in-one shampoo-bodywash provided.

Using the sink, Kim wet her hands again trying to clear some of the black mascara smudges off her cheeks before her shower. With each pass of her fingers, the rougher she gets, her wipes turning into rubs as the black seems to spread.

Kim looked like she was getting ready to either spend her day in a hunting blind or playing in the Super Bowl. She gave up on that approach and hoped that some hot running water and soap would do the trick. She slid open the frosted glass shower door and started fiddling with the knobs, adjusting the water's temperature.

Waiting for the water to heat up, Kim peeled the damp Smiths tee off her sticky body and slid her black panties down her smooth, tan legs. Even with the steam pouring out of the shower, the bathroom air is shockingly cool against her freshly exposed skin. She stepped into the water's spray and it's near-scalding, leaving her skin red where the droplets pound against her.

Kim let out a content sigh as the high water pressure kneads her tired trapezius muscles. There was just something so peaceful about bathing; even though it's a brief period, the reprieve offered by the shower's white-noise and water sluicing over her skin was blissful.

Chapter 11

Freshly showered and donning clean clothes, Kim felt refreshed, even though the shirt hung to mid-thigh and the shorts were too big to be helped by a tightly pulled drawstring. She rolled the waist up a little to bring the hem above her knees.

Her headache had all but disappeared, and her breath improved after brushing her teeth—twice. The overwhelming minty taste in Kim’s mouth was nauseating, but it was worth it to get that grit off her teeth. Plus, it was the least she could do for Harp to not suffocate him with her stale vomit morning breath.

Kim walked toward the sound of oil popping in a pan. The smoky aroma of bacon filled the air.

Standing in front of the gas-range stove with a spatula in hand, Harp’s back is to the Kim. Kim tilted her head, watching his sinewy arms flex as he flipped the French toast in one pan and the bacon in the other. His herculean frame looked out of place in his too-small kitchen, especially in his tight grey shorts and black tank top, with an apron tied around his waist.

Yet, as odd as Harp looked in his outdated kitchen, Kim had never seen him look more at ease, like there was nothing else he’d rather be doing, no place he’d rather be. Before she knew what she was doing, she was admiring the view, her gaze running up from his well-defined calves to his tight ass and toned back. His hair had started growing out from the stubble, thick, disheveled, red waves sticking up in opposite directions—she was too worked up to notice

before and had been trying to make a point of avoiding looking in his direction, determined to stick to her guns and damn her fluttering heart.

What did it hurt to admire something beautiful God crafted? No one would notice this moment of weakness.

Kim shifted her weight, her feet aching, and the old wood floor creaked with the movement beneath her feet. She winced at the sound.

Harp's head swiveled in her direction. He didn't say anything, just looked at the corner of wall I'd pressed myself against, just out of sight.

"I can see ya. Ya gonna come out, or keep bein' a creeper?"

Kim didn't respond, but internally she groaned and flipped off the universe. She pushed herself off the wall and into the open space of the living room, kitchen, and dining room.

"Why're ya hiding?" he asked, perplexity written on his face.

"I wasn't hiding," Kim said, hating how obvious the lie was as it slipped from her lips.

"Look," He said, brows scrunched. "If ya need to leave, fine. I'm not gonna force it, force you."

"What makes you think I'm leaving?" She asked.

"You were literally hidin' in the shadows like you were gonna book."

"Well," Kim started, steeling herself for where ever the morning brought her, "I wasn't going to do that." She pointed at her bare feet. "I mean look at me. I'm missing my shoes, bra, the clothes I came in, and—apparently—my phone and keys," she said, pausing. Worry was still etched on Harp's face. "Plus, that heavy ass door doesn't look like it lends to quiet, discrete, and tactful escapes.

"True enough."

“How’d you see me? You have x-ray vision I don’t know about?”

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me.”

“I’ve been hearing that quite a bit lately,” Kim said, thinking back to her conversation with Rey about Tommy from a couple of weeks earlier. Something still didn’t sit right in her gut.

Harp quirked his eyebrow in question, but Kim just shook her head. He motioned to Kim’s legs and said, “I saw the shorts.” Rolling up the waist made the corners of shorts’ hem poke outward.

“Ah,” Kim said, pursing her lips.

“Why’re ya hiding anyway?”

“I don’t know,” Kim said, only half-lying and hoping that her cheeks didn’t heat up and give her away. “It’s just, I’ve never seen you in a kitchen before. Not to cook, anyway,” she added, thinking of all the times he decided to be a taste-tester when she cooked for the holidays—she still didn’t like the way her *arroz con gondules* came out.

At the sound of Harp’s rumbling chuckle, Kim smiled.

“Fair enough,” he said. “Now, how about some breakfast?” Kim’s stomach growled, answering for her. Harp let out a heartier laugh. “Should I take that as a ‘yes?’”

“Sure,” Kim replied, giggling. She lifted the dirty Smiths tee in her hand and asked, “First, though, where should I put this?”

“Oh, yeah.” He pointed back down the hall. “The closet next to my room door has a hamper in it.”

“Cool. Be right back.” She turned around and walked to the closet. Inside, there’s a stacked laundry center, a folded wooden drying rack, and a bursting black wire hamper. Kim tossed the shirt atop the laundry pile and closed the door with a harsh, rusty click.

Back in the kitchen, Harp is plating hot, fresh French toast next to crispy bacon, “I ate the last one while you were in the shower, and then I figured best add grease into the mix.”

Despite the hungry nausea settled in her stomach, she replied, “You didn’t have to make me breakfast.”

Harp snorted. “You would’ve gone most of the day without eating if I hadn’t, Kimmy.”

Though he hadn’t said it with malice, Kim protested, “I’m a grown woman; I know how to feed myself.”

“Based on the four massive slices of pepperoni you scarfed down before we went to the bar, I’d say it’s safe to bet that you didn’t eat most of the day.”

Kim’s back straightened at his patronizing tone and she ignored her growling stomach. Unable to lie, she went with sugar-dusted honesty: “I appreciate you looking out for me—the food, the ride, letting me crash here—but you’re not my brother or my father. I’ve been looking after myself since long before JJ checked out and Tommy died.”

“I know damn well I’m not your brother,” Harp said, his voice low and rumbling. He plopped the ceramic plate onto the faux granite counter with a sharp, grating clang. He gripped the counter’s edge, bearing his weight onto the heel of his palm, and regarded her with a hard expression. “I’m not trying to be.”

Resisting the instinct to raise her voice, Kim clenched her fists, nails biting into her palm, and said, “Whatever you *are* trying to do—don’t. Just stop.” She swallowed the lump threatening to form in her throat.

Vexed, Harp threw his hands up and groaned. “Why are you so fucking difficult?” he bit out.

Kim sucked in a deep, shaky breath and shut her eyes. It was self-preservation. She didn't want to get swept up in her own anger and irritability, but it was hard to endure the current sometimes. Harp was her friend and he kept looking out for her the way Rey did. She should be content with that, yet she couldn't stand it, resented the stupid way her pulse raced and breathing hitched when he stood near, despite knowing that she'll never be more than a mistake he'd made and that he'll never be more than the brother's best friend that she always pined for.

Words warred with each other at the tip of Kim's tongue. "I'm not trying to be difficult," she decided to say—too hungover, hungry, and resigned to argue. She exhaled sharply through her nose. "Please, can we just do this after I have some caffeine?"

Harp released his hold on the counter and pinched the bridge of his freckled nose. "Yeah. Sure," he started his voice clipped, "Whatever you want."

Kim mustered up a small contrite smile, and said, "You did go to all the trouble of whipping up my second-favorite breakfast food."

He motioned toward the dinette and picked up the plate of food. Voice softer he said, "You're right. We wouldn't want to deprive you the chance to eat my mouthwatering breakfast."

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

Shooing her away, Harp said, "I got it." He pointed to his minimalist industrial dinette, nestled in the back corner of the kitchen, and requested that she sit. "Please," he added.

Something about the way he said 'please,' that pleading near-whisper combined with his softening eyes, got Kim to squeeze past him in the cramped kitchen sit down without fuss. Any other time, she would've insisted he let her help, assuaging her guilt for imposing on his life and snapping at him, but instead she went along with his requests guilt be damned.

Kim settles into the dinette's surprisingly comfortable metal seats. Her calves brushed against the startling cold of the steel leg chairs and her prickly leg hair stood on end.

"Juice?" Harp asked, his head and shoulders hidden behind the stainless-steel fridge door.

"Orange?"

"Yeah—Sunny D," Harp answered, leaning back to see Kim sitting on the other side of the door.

"Please," Kim said, resting her head on her hand, cheek pressed to palm. "I'd love some."

"Mhmm." He slammed the fridge closed with his foot, holding two-percent milk and the jug of Sunny D in each hand, and a small tub of butter wedged in the crook of his arm, which started to slip.

Before it could fall to the floor with a messy clatter, Kim sprung from her seat and grabbed the tub midair. As she straightened, her head and stomach rioted. Closing her eyes and taking shallow breaths through her nose, she swallowed back the bile slithering up her throat.

Without her noticing, Harp had put the jugs on the counter, and placed a free hand on her back. Kim startled at the sudden contact, but instead of taking his hand away, Harp rubbed small soothing circles on her back while she composed herself.

Noticing how she started to lean into his touch, Kim's eyes sprung open and she pulled away.

"You good?" Harp asked, dropping his hand.

"Um, yeah. Thanks," she said, picking at her shirt's collar. She needed to get her shit together.

“Good,” he said, nodding. His attention was fixed on the stove as he turned his back to her and moved to pile another plate with food. “Sit. Let’s get some food into you.”

Kim sat back down, watching from her periphery as Harp pulled glasses and mugs from the cabinets. He poured a glass of orange juice for each of them and brought them to the table, handing her hers.

She mumbled her thanks and took a sip. “God,” she said, licking her lips. “I haven’t had that in forever.”

Harp grabbed the plates off the counter and placed one in front of Kim.

“You really didn’t have to do this,” she said, picking up and ate a piece of bacon. She bit into it and savored the salty crunch.

“I like cooking and I don’t do it as often as I’d like.”

Kim filed that information away for later. After grabbing the rest of the stuff for breakfast—light and sweet Café Bustelo, utensils, and organic maple syrup. He sat across the table from her, his long legs grazing hers as he settled.

Kim suppressed a chill and bit down on her tongue. She focused on the plate in front of her.

“Why aren’t ya eating?”

“Just waiting for you,” Kim said, slathering her slices of French toast with salted butter and glazing them with syrup.

Harp grabbed his fork. “Let’s dig in.”

“Mm,” Kim moaned after a couple of bites, “this is so good.” An earthy sweet flavor touches her taste buds. “Is that hazelnut?”

Harp peered up at her, impressed. “You picked that up?”

Kim nodded, a smug smile hinting at her lips. “I have a *very* sophisticated palette,” she said, though her palette was more sensitive than anything. Unable to keep a straight face, she snorted. “To quote you my dear Scot, ‘There’s a lot you don’t know about me.’”

“My ma used to make this for me as a kid.” With a fond chuckle he added, “At one point, it’s all I’d eat, so she taught me how to make it.”

“Do you still have this obsession?”

“Ha. I wouldn’t call it an obsession.” At Kim’s arched eyebrow, Harp amended, “So, maybe it was a slight obsession. But, either way, no. I got tired of it after a while, but it’s still a classic. It was also the only thing I had ingredients for.”

“What about plain bacon and eggs?” Kim asked.

“Where’s the fun in that?”

Kim shoveled a few more bites into her mouth. “It’s better than anything I’ve ever made. Maybe you can teach me some time,” she suggested before she could stop herself. She scooped up her hot coffee and brought it to her lips without blowing on it. Though not hot enough to scald her, the café con leche stung her tongue.

“I’d like that.” Harp smiled and lifted his juice to his mouth. He gulped down half the glass like they were racing, then said, “We need to talk about last night.”

“About?” Kim said, confused expression painted on her face though her stomach dropped.

“You know what.”

“It can’t wait?” Her hand paused in stabbing a piece of toast with her fork.

“It’s the elephant in the room.”

They were having such a peaceful conversation. Why'd he have to ruin it? Kim groaned, rolling her eyes. "While I'm sure whatever I said to Rey was fucked up, it doesn't concern you." She dropped her fork on the plate and ignored the drop of syrup on her hand no matter how much she wanted to wipe away its stickiness. She leaned back and glared at Harp, brows raised in challenge.

"Is that the same look your father gives you when he drinks too much? The one he gave you after the BBQ last week?"

Kim flinched, flashing back to getting in between JJ and Danny as their argument escalated. Her father shoved her away and she'd landed on her tailbone. Though she hadn't expected one, she'd been hurt when he didn't apologize. He never apologized, just acted like nothing happened.

For once, Kim had nothing to say, no retort budding on her sharp tongue. She didn't want to be her father, turning on the people stupid enough to love him. She put her coffee down and stared at the milky brown whorls that danced around the drink's surface.

Kim glanced up at Harp then back down again as she felt moisture beading on her lash line. She blinked, trying to stop tears from growing and falling. With a brittle, cracking voice, she inhaled and asked, "Why are you trying to save me? What'd you get out of it?" She peered up at him through her wet lashes and picked up her fork again, trailing the hunk of French toast on its tines through a puddle of syrup. "You don't owe me anything. We're not together—in any capacity—and I'm a headache. Just ask Rey."

"Rey loves you," Harp said, pausing to clear his throat, "and so do I."

Kim almost choked on a sip of juice and then released a humorless laugh. She looked at Harp in suspicion, the word mistake echoing in her head. It may have hurt to hear, but he was right; it was a mistake, one she couldn't make again.

He watched out for her out of guilt and loyalty to Tommy, anyway.

Holding on to that thought, Kim snapped, "Well, I don't love you." A lie, yes, but one she'd gladly hold on to.

For a moment, and she was certain it was her eyes tricking her, hurt flashed in Harp's eyes, but as soon as the emotion appeared in his steady gaze, it was gone and replaced with jaded indifference.

Kim picked up her fork and pointed it at Harp, sticky syrup dripping off the end. "And, don't you *ever, ever* compare me to my father again. I love my family."

"You think he doesn't?" Harp asked, leaning back in his chair. There was no judgement in his voice, only curiosity.

"I think Dad is only as much of a father as he wants to be. At the end of the day, though, he'll pick a bottle before his kids."

"But do you think he loves you?"

"Does it really matter?"

"Yes, it matters. Of course it matters." When Kim rolled her eyes Harp said, "Kimmy, please. You have to talk to someone, so talk to me."

He was right, and she knew it, but she fought back anyway. It was so much better than crying—easier—and she would cry if she let the words out and that felt too much like admitting she was weak. She could already feel the tale-tell pinpricks of tears in the corner of her eyes.

Kim cleared her throat. “It’s really none of your business,” she snapped, hating herself more with every word.

“Tommy suffered in silence and look what happened.” He wavered. “I’m not going to lose you the same way. I can’t—so, please just stop arguing and let me in.” Harp wiped at his eyes with the back of his hand.

“That’s what got us here in the first place,” Kim joked to distract herself from the cavernous ache in her chest.

Harp choked. Do you blame me?” he asked, bracing his hands on the table. His eyes were red and his long lashes were damp. “Is that why you’ve been pushing me away? We used to be close before—” He looked down and didn’t finish his sentence.

She knew what he meant, and she missed those days with easy conversation when they’d go to the beach or Coney Island and he’d sling his arms around her and Rey’s shoulders as they laughed, walking the boardwalk. Seeing him get emotional was like a lead hook to the kidney. Kim shook her head, fighting back the tears that threatened to break free.

“Fine,” she conceded, unable to stare at his reddened eyes any longer. Still, she didn’t waver as she faced Harp, eyes glossy. “Truth is, I can never really tell if he loves me—some days JJ’s more of a father than others.” Kim replied. Pausing, she wiped her mouth with a napkin as she gathered her conflicted thoughts. She suddenly felt ridiculous and her cheeks heated in embarrassment. She hated admitting her lifelong insecurity, one she’d just mentioned once before to Rey years earlier. How could she not know if her father loved her? How could she not know why he didn’t love her, at least not as much as Tommy?

She looked back at Harp’s still distressed face. What did she say now?

“You didn’t answer my question. I’ve been waiting for you to talk about it in your own time, but I can’t ignore what’s going on with you. I won’t.”

“Waiting? Is that what you call your constant needling and pestering?” Kim joked. She sniffled and bit the inside of her cheek. “No. I don’t blame you.” Her voice sounded small, even to her own ears as she admitted, “Most days, I alternate between hating Tommy and myself, but never you.”

Other than a sharp exhale, Harp remained silent, waiting for her to keep going. Now that she’d started talking, he didn’t press her, letting her find her words.

“He and I hardly argued when we were kids—Pops always called us the Wonder Twins.” Which the twins hated. Who’d want to be compared to the lamest DC heroes? “You remember. And, I mean, no offence to you and Rey, but no one really knew us the way we knew each other.” Kim took a deep, shaky breath. Tears slid down her wet, red cheeks. “He’d gotten more distant when I moved out senior year, but those last couple of months something changed, and I didn’t notice until it was too late. Some days he was desperate to spend time together and others it was like he couldn’t stand me. If I wasn’t so wrapped up in myself, in school, in us, I might’ve noticed something was wrong.”

“Feeling guilt is normal, Kimmy, but it’s not your fault.”

“That night he walked in on us, I can’t help but feel like he wanted to talk about it, but I was just so blinded by anger that I missed my one chance to make a—” Kim’s tears flowed freely as her voice broke. She swallowed. Now that she’d started, she needed to get it out. “I had one,” she held up a finger, “one chance to help him. Instead, I told him he wasn’t my brother anymore.”

“How could it not be my fault?” Kim fisted her hands on the table, her nails digging into her palms.

“You weren’t the only one who let that night end the way it did, so why are you only to blame? All three of us said things we shouldn’t have. I’ve felt plenty of guilt, and it still eats away at me that I didn’t see the signs, but we aren’t mind readers. Did Tommy know everything you were going through last year?” Kim bristled at that. Harp knew she only mentioned Berkeley to her twin once and that was when she was yelling at him to go to hell. “You can’t shoulder the responsibility for this and everything else. It’s not going to change anything. You’re just hurting yourself.” He laid gentle hands on her fists and prized them apart, spreading out her fingers before entwining them with his own. “Look at me.”

She looked up from their joined hands.

“Why can’t you let me help you?”

“I don’t really do help.” She’d always been a caretaker. It was why she majored in psychology and wanted to become an art therapist. She loved helping people and she knew that if she couldn’t make money painting, she could do it that way.

As if he read her mind, Harp said, “If you’re busy taking care of everyone else, who’s taking care of you?”

Kim took a ragged breath, tears now spilling freely down her face.

Damn it.

She blinked but before she could make a move to wipe her face, Harp reached across the table and brushed his thumb across her cheeks. He tugged on her fingers and forced her to meet his stare. “Please let me take care of you.”

Part II

Chapter 18

From the moment he could support his own head, James Adams spent his Fridays perched on his father's lap while the three generations of Adams men watched round after round of boxing as they lounged around on the cigarette-burnt green velvet couches and high-back armchairs. There was nothing better.

The hoots and hollers of his grandfather, Joseph, and his father, Declan, couldn't make him flinch or fuss, as his wide grey-blue shone and followed each contender as they circled one another, ballooned fists clashing against bare flesh.

For generations, the Adams family's favorite pastime was boxing—even before the first member stepped foot on Ellis Island. Between inheriting a deep love of the sport and being raised during the golden era, James knew from age five that professional boxing was his future, though his boxing role models changed throughout his childhood.

That year, in 1950 on September eighth, James, his older brother, father, and grandfather sat in a tight circle around the walnut console TV-radio, the young boys on squat stools at the older men's feet to watch the third rematch between featherweights Willie Pep and Sandy Saddler. It was the championship rematch the older Adams' had been waiting for since last February. After three years of the rivalry, they'd finally see who would prevail.

The seven-round bout was one of James' first memories: the way Saddler in his white trunks out-boxed Pep, herding him against the ropes. Even through a grainy picture, James saw

the determination on Saddler's face as he reclaimed his championship title and drove himself forward through his fatigue.

He wanted to do that, to face down another man in Yankee Stadium and the like while people around the world watched and waited with bated breath. He wanted to feel the heat of the spotlights while the audience cheered on every hook and jab he threw. He could do it—one day, after he managed to not get his ass kicked daily by his big brother, Collin.

“What a fight!” Declan said. He lifted his bottle of Budweiser to his lips, taking a long swig, slurping as he neared the end.

“Ya’ call that a fight?” Joseph retorted, his Irish accent thick and potato chip crumbs stuck in his graying beard.

Declan nodded, a smirk touching his thin, chapped lips. “About time he gets his title back.” Eager to be like his Dad, James nodded enthusiastically, even though he’d only been three the first time Saddler and Pep fought for the featherweight championship. Declan chuckled and tousled his youngest son’s silver blond hair. “See Pops, even Jay here agrees with me,” he said, patting his son on the back.

Satisfied, James grinned, highlighting his missing front teeth.

Joseph scoffed and rolled his eyes which he kept fixed on the TV; his eyes zeroed in on each man’s body language. Collin was otherwise occupied, focused on the Gillette commercial on the screen. Neither men raised their voice, but their cheeks were ruddy, and their glassy eyes were narrowed. Joseph’s hand tightened around the edge of the arm rest; his fingers turned white with the effort. Declan tapped his right foot slowly and flicked his cigarette butt into the full ashtray sitting on the end table next to him.

“Bah!” Joseph exclaimed before leaning forward and whispering into Collin’s ear. The young boy, tore his gaze from the television screen, jumped to his feet, out the front door and into Joseph’s apartment next door. They lived in the Weehawken suburbs in the squat two-story two-family home he and Alice owned. Their place was identical to their son’s—except for the vinyl slip covers on every seat in the living room and missing haze of cigarette and refer smoke.

Sitting back, he continued, “Saddler’s a slugger and if it weren’t for his shoulder, Pep would have kicked his ass, just like he did last year.”

At that moment, James’ mother, Kimberley, and grandmother, Alice, walked into the living room, freshly opened beers in their hands. Kim cleared her throat, drawing the men’s attention. “You boys, alright in here?” She asked, her brows knitted together with worry. Moments ticked by without a response and she cleared her throat again.

“Kay,” Declan started, tearing his attention away from his father’s intense gaze to wiggle his empty beer bottle in his wife’s direction, “we need more.” He made eye contact only to see her worried expression had morphed into one of annoyance.

“I’m not sure that’s true,” she replied, with a raised brow and blue eyes glinting with determination. Fascinated, James watched his mother as she lifted the beer bottle to her lips and took a long sip. After the cool lager slid down her gullet, Kim sighed. She lightly wiped her finger over her lips to catch excess drops, careful to not smear her Raven Red Revlon lipstick.

A small burp bubbled up in her throat and she covered her lips with her delicate fingers. The action looked out of place with her petite frame, floral apron, brown pin curled hair, and knee-length dress. Where his grandma shrunk into herself, meek and quiet, Kim was fiery and contrary.

Alice sucked in a breath, moving from behind her daughter-in-law to Joseph's side. She switched out his empty bottle with the new one and grabbed his ashtray. She shuffled back to the kitchen, brown eyes downcast. She wasn't gone long and skirted past Kim with little acknowledgement and a blank face.

James tore his gaze from his parents' stalemate and zeroed in on his grandparents.

Handing her husband a fresh beer, Grandma leaned forward and whispered in Pops' ear. He nodded lazily, his eyes red and glossed over, as he tipped the glass lip to his mouth. Cool amber liquid dribbled down his chin, but he made no move to wipe it away before it dripped on his shirt. Instead, noticing his grandson's observance, Joseph winked, which was more like a two-eye squint.

James giggled and started fiddling with a hangnail on his thumb.

"Get me a beer, won't ya'?" Declan barked, startling James and Alice. He adjusted himself in his seat.

Joseph chuckled, but kept his mouth shut otherwise. Alice tapped her husband on the shoulder and placed a gentle hand behind his back, nudging him. He grumbled and shoved himself out of the arm chair. He swayed on his feet, so his wife wrapped her arm around him and guided him out the living room and into the kitchen.

Declan refused to look their way. Couldn't give his old man the satisfaction.

Instead, he glowered at Kim, but she didn't back down and head to the kitchen as his mother had. She wasn't moving and trained her challenging gaze on her husband. She shook her head and perched on her aproned waist. "No."

Waving a dismissive hand, Declan grunted and said, "Boy."

Confused, James looked up from his nails. “Yes?” he asked. He wanted Declan’s attention before, but after hearing his tone, he wasn’t sure that was true anymore. Where was Collin when you needed him?

“I need another beer. Get me one and I’ll give you a couple of sips.”

A smile spread across his face. He eagerly rose from his stool. Declan only ever let Collin taste his Budweiser and shut down James every time he worked up the nerve to ask. Said he was too young and had to wait until he was seven.

Maybe it was better his brother wasn’t there.

Kim cleared her throat and leaned her elbows on the top of an empty arm chair, her half-full bottle hanging loosely from her dainty fingers.

James’ expression had changed from scared to excited to nervous in seconds. His stomach started bubbling.

“James, sweetheart?” His mother’s voice was gentle.

“Mama?” He turned his head to look at her, his hopeful eyes wide.

“Why don’t you go to check on Collin? See what’s taking him so long.”

Shaking his head, he started, “But—”

“Now,” she said sharply. Tears started to well in his eyes. Kim tried again, softer, “Please.”

“OK,” he agreed, sniffing.

Wilting under Pops’ harsh gaze, James wiped at his eyes furiously. No crying. He wasn’t a baby. He wiped at his small red nose with his sleeve. James slowly made his way out the door, kicking his heels as he went. It wasn’t fair. He was supposed to be a big boy like Collin, but it seemed he’d never get that chance.

He twisted and pulled at the door knob with both tiny hands. With a grunt, he opened the door and faced the sunset and dimming sky. Shielding his eyes from the last daylight, James left and as soon as the door shut behind him, the room behind him exploded.

Chapter 19

Years later, at the ages of nine and eleven, sparring and wrestling were the Adams brothers' favorite pastime. During the Spring and Summer, the young boys circled each other around their small, brown, patchy lawn while Declan watched from a folding vinyl beach chair on the front stoop.

Joseph sat next to his son while egging on his grandsons: "You call that a punch?" he shouted, followed by a hacking laugh. He cleared his throat now and then to keep from strangling on his own phlegm. Spitting, he glanced at his son from the corner of his eye and asked, "Who're ya rooting for?"

"Neither," Declan said, his voice even. "Both," he amended, nodding, though whether to reassure his father or himself he wasn't sure.

"Col's got one hell of right hook," Joseph continued as though his son hadn't said anything, smiling while he eyed his eldest grandson's stance.

Declan had to admit, Collin was a natural and picked moves up as he saw them, but he didn't love it. He felt obligated to love what everyone else did. James, on the other hand, was eager to learn and please. Pops didn't see it, but the boy, analytical and competitive, kept forcing himself out of his comfort zone.

Both boys bounced around on their toes, jumping imaginary ropes. Collin, tall like Pops, towered over James, who's chubby ruddy cheeks and short stature made him look closer to seven than nine, by nearly a foot.

The older boy started to shadow box, each jab followed by a sharp exhale, while his baby brother watched. James tried to mimic him, but his movements were stilted, apprehensive, unsure. Seeing his brother struggle to keep up, Collin stopped and walked around him. He used his fingers to tap James' elbows up more and grabbed his hips to adjust his stance.

Joseph's grin verged on the edge from proud to predatory. "Money's on 'im," he said, nodding toward Collin. He extended his hand to Declan.

Ignoring his proffered hand, Declan sniffed. His father was like a gnat, buzzing and buzzing away at your ear, and it only got worse when you tried to swat him away. He'd just change his trajectory. "Let 'em alone, will ya?" he grumbled.

"Low stakes," Joseph continued, dropping his hand and fishing around in his sock. He pulled out a two-dollar bill and offered it to his son, brow raised.

Declan pinched the bridge of his nose and exhaled. Annoyed, he told his father, "Can it."

Having succeeded in pushing his son's buttons, Joseph chuckled and waved him off and reached for the small red aluminum cooler at his feet. He pulled out a can of Budweiser and, in a misguided attempt at peacemaking, offered it to his son.

"No, I'm done with that," Declan told his father, shaking his head.

Already buzzed, Joseph mumbled, "Suit yourself." Keeping the can for himself, he leaned back and pulled the tab. Content, he sighed at the *tsssk* of his can opening.

Instinctively, Declan's mouth rolled. Swallowing, he rolled his eyes and pulled a matchbook from his back pocket with a grunt. Working on the Manhattan gas lines for

ConEdison, whittled his body down. At the youthful age of thirty-eight, his bulging discs fought against him when he stayed in one position.

He couldn't drink it away anymore. Kim would kill him and take the kids. Again. Declan stood up, his back aching. He removed the cigarette from behind his ear and tucked it into his lips. He struck the match, touched its rapid flame to stick's end, and inhaled taking a nice, long drag. He closed his eyes against the sunlight and exhaled, marijuana smoke pouring out of his nostrils and lifting away on the breeze.

"What's taking so damn long?" Joseph shouted, though with slurring his Ts and Ss blended together.

Rolling his eyes, Collin placed a hand on his brother's slender shoulders and said, "Ignore Pops." He reached up and brushed pushed back the clumps of his brown hair glued to his forehead with sweat. "He's three sheets to the wind."

James nodded, as though he knew what that meant, and pulled at his sweat-soaked white t-shirt. The shirt's neck choked him, it's stiffness and dampness rubbed at his already red skin.

"Ready, Jamie?" Collin asked, taking in his brother's short frame. He was the only one who called James that, and even though the youngest Adams knew the older men in his family thought it was a girl's name, he reveled in it.

"Guess so," James answered, casting a thoughtful glance toward the stoop. He loved those moments in the sunshine, the shadows from their yard's sole tree blocked the light just enough that he could meet Collin's soft brown eyes, which were so much like their mother's.

Yet, he still felt uncomfortable, squirming under Pops watchful and judgmental gaze. It seemed no matter how he hard tried, his best wasn't good enough for his grandfather. He was

small and ruled by his emotions. *Sensitive* and a *crybaby*, as Joseph often called him. Collin scored his place as Pops' favorite, yet he couldn't have cared less. He didn't want it.

Collin lifted his fists and nodded reassuringly at James, his warm, toothy smile calming as the tension in his brother's bony shoulders released.

James started to get into position, shifting his legs until they were shoulder width apart and his knees were bent, but Declan interrupted him with a sharp whistle that cut clear across the lawn. It woke up Alice's overweight and lazy tabby, Hedy—named after the actress—who lounged on the sun-warmed concrete of the stoops' bottom step. She jumped up with a disgruntled yowl, stretched, and sauntered to the backyard. "Not yet!"

Confused, the Adams boys dropped their hands and stood up straight. Nothing in their dad's expression gave away what was wrong. James pushed back his sweaty hair and wiped his now wet hand on his red nylon shorts.

Declan walked down the last steps, a trail of smoke trailing behind him from his cigarette. "Boys go get some water from your mother. It's a hot one," he said, reaching them. "Don't need ya' collapsing out here. Your mother will have a conniption and my body won't be found." He said the last part with a chuckle, but a look in his eyes told James he didn't fully believe it was a joke.

Kim Adams was a petite woman who knew how to instill fear when she needed to. If you pushed her beyond the point of flared nostrils and furrowed brows, then you better get to praying. She was deadly with a wooden spoon.

Declan took another pull from his cigarette, turned on his heel, and walked back to the backyard in search of his mother's cat.

“Race you!” James exclaimed as soon after his father disappeared. Catching Collin off guard, he took off, kicking up dirt behind him as he ran.

Col laughed and followed behind, calling out, “No fair.” With his long legs, he surpassed Jamie in few steps.

Before either could race up the stairs, Pops cleared his throat. Chastened, they slowed down, and walked up the steps, brushing in between the two lawn chairs. Before opening the front door, they kicked off their dirty sneakers. Mom just cleaned, and she’d lose it if they tracked anything on her freshly vacuumed carpets.

Inside, soft jazz music played on the tinny radio of their media console and Nat King Cole’s Somebody Loves Me echoed through the space. They shuffled forward past the stairs and their grandmother knitting in the living room. James peeked in the dark kitchen. With her back to the door, Kim danced and sang along as she put a tray in the oven.

He couldn’t help but smile watching her dance. Her feet were bare, and she tapped them along as she swayed to the beat. She spun around, eyes closed and lost in the music. Opening her eyes again, she caught his gaze when the piano stopped playing and Nat King Cole’s baritone faded away.

Taking in her sons’ ragged appearances, Kim grinned, her crooked teeth white despite all the coffee and tea she drank. James fidgeted under his mother’s gaze and pulled at his t-shirt self-consciously. It hadn’t dried yet, but the fans scattered about the house cooled the damp fabric and his hairs stood up from the sudden chill.

“Having fun out there, my ducks?”

“Mhmm.” James nodded. Picking up a whiff of cinnamon, he sniffed the warm air and followed his nose to oven where the cookies she’d just put in were baking. “Snickerdoodles,” he whispered, glancing at Kim with bright eyes. They were his favorite.

Kim giggled. “After dinner,” she mother assured him. “Now,” She said, looking both her boys over, “I’ll get you some water while you get on fresh shirts.” She motioned to their torsos, “Make sure to leave those on the washing machine downstairs.”

“Why do we even have to wear these stupid shirts?” Collin asked, tugging at his damp collar. “There aren’t any in the ring.”

James closed his eyes with a sigh. Why did his brother always smart off? Just change, Fat-head. Anxious, he peeked at the door and prayed his dad was still outside searching for Hedy.

“You’ll burn,” she said simply. “Actually, while you’re upstairs changing, grab the Coppertone from the bathroom cabinet. You’re both looking a bit pink.” She dusted flour off the

Collin started to open his mouth to rebut, but she Kim shot him a warning glare and his gaping mouth quickly shut.

“Now go,” she continued, shooing her sons out the kitchen.

That was that, Mom’s mind was made and there was no eroding her resolve. Before his brother could decide to say what sat at the tip of his tongue, James stalked past his mom, grabbed hold of Collin’s arm, and tugged.

Once they were safely away from making anymore poor decisions, Collin yanked his arm out of Jamie’s grasp. Fingers stinging from the rough action, James flexed his fingers.

In the living room, they passed Alice dozing off as she sat on one of the new, burn-free, floral armchairs sitting. A ball of navy yarn sat perched atop her wicker sewing kit and she held a

wooden knitting needle loosely in each hand. It was never too early to get ready for Christmas, according to her, and she insisted on beginning her holiday preparations during the summer. Though, James wasn't sure how much preparation she needed considering every Christmas and birthday she knitted them oversized sweaters. Neither of the younger Adams' fit in theirs from the past two years, and even the ones that did fit were too long in the arms.

As soon as they were out of ear-shot, James whispered, "Why do you always do that?" They marched up the stairs, the plush orange nylon carpet muffling their heavy, synchronized steps.

"Do what?" Collin asked, playing dumb, his eyes trained on the steps before him. He chewed on his chapped full bottom lip.

"You know. Talk Back," James replied. For most parenting decisions, their parents opposed each other, but they couldn't be divided on matters of respect.

"Fair play, but she wasn't upset."

As far as they know, at least. "Sure, but if Dad hears or heard, we're both dead—you for saying it and me by association."

"You worry too much." Collin walked ahead of James, who was glaring at his back. Walking into their adjoining rooms, he yanked off his t-shirt with some minor struggling, while James ran to the Jack and Jill bathroom as the lemonade he drank earlier fought against the dam.

After the great relief of peeing, James went to his dresser and fished around for a new shirt. The one he pulled out was white and adorned with a green cowboy riding a horse and swinging a lasso. He dropped his dirty shirt on the floor and pulled on the new one. It was a year-old and a little small, but it would do.

“Jamie takes a quick jab to the chin,” Collin said, his nasal voice mimicking ringside commentator, Don Dunphy, as his left fist brushed against James’ face.

Pops hooted from his place on the stoop next to Declan. “That’s my grandson!”

James sighed and looked at the ground. He knew he wasn’t the favorite, and it shouldn’t bother him, but it did.

“Let’s go, boy,” Declan shouted from his folding vinyl lawn chair, a fresh cigarette hanging loosely from his lips. “You’ve got to block your face.” He came off the stoop and walked to his sons. He stood a few feet away, squatted to James’ eye level, and lifted his own fists in front of his face, “Like this. Keep your hands up.”

Intent, James watched his father, his focus never leaving Declan’s hands as he repositioned his own.

“There you go,” he said,

“Jay, you giving up already?” Joseph asked, his chuckling.

“He’s just getting started,” Declan called over his shoulder. He made eye contact with James and winked. The whites of his blue eyes were red, his lids were puffy and inflamed, and his pupils were dilated, but there was a spark there in their glassy depths. A challenge. “Show ‘im what you’re made of.”

Collin rested his arm on James’ shoulder and asked, “Again?”

“Again,” Declan said, nodding. He stood up, his knees protesting, walked back to his seat, and groaned as he settled in.

James kept his hands up and carefully guarded his face, conscious of Declan’s scrutinizing gaze. He stayed light on feet, prepared to dance away from Col’s next swing.

Collin pushed him back, taking on the offense. He took a few of swift swipes at James, but only one punch landed on his scrawny bicep. Aware of his brother's small size and lack of muscles, Col didn't use his full force.

James would've taken it with little complaint, a snuffle, and glossy eyes, but he'd also stop playing and give his big brother the silent treatment for the rest of the day. He hated to be embarrassed in front of Pops, who never let him forget his losses.

Though it was already humid out, the air grew thicker, sapping at their limbs and energy. Yet, James moved quickly, leaving Col winded and red-faced, and shifted back and to the side, staying out of his brother's reach and looking for an opening in his defenses.

Collin staggered and stumbled over his own long limbs and loose laces, trying to keep up with his baby brother. Trying to keep his balance, he dropped his hands and James took advantage, plowing a swift jab, followed by a hard cross—well, hard for an eight-year-old—into his brother's unprotected gut.

Surprised and winded, Collin dropped to his knees with an “oomph.”

“Whoo!” Declan hollered. He jumped up from his chair and sped over to his sons, pride was clear in his yellow smile. “Where'd that come from?” he asked, clapping James on the shoulder.

James only shrugged, walked over to Collin, and offered him help up.

Expression blank, Col stared at his brother's offered hand for a moment, as if debating whether or not he wanted help, before giving him a toothy grin and using it to pull himself up.

If it were James on the floor, he'd have gotten huffy and slapped Collin's hand in embarrassment. He needed to win. He peeked toward the stoop, but Pops wasn't watching.

Like his wife inside, the long summer afternoon wore down Joseph. His head drooped on his shoulder, and if James focused enough, he could hear his grandfather's snores. He didn't even stay long enough to see if his bet would've paid off.

Declan looked at his eldest, who rubbed pebbles and grass blades off his knees, and cleared his throat, "You did good, too."

"Thanks, Dad," Collin replied, dusting more dirt off his ass. He lost, but a grin still cracked his face in half and his eyes sparkled, the brown looking almost green in the sunlight. He told James, "Bet you can't do it again." Laughing, Collin flexed his bicep.

Giggling, James responded, "You're on."

Part III

Chapter 26

Kim decided to take advantage of her time alone and slowly wandered around the house. Her mind raced as she tried to sort out her thoughts. She couldn't believe Pops and JJ ambushed her about Berkeley and her deferment. Her dad was an asshole, but she never expected her grandfather to be a traitor. They hijacked that lunch before she could take her first bite. No wonder they asked Danny to stay behind and watch the gym with Harp.

Neither of them understood. How could she drop everything and move across the country, leaving her little brother behind to pick up the pieces? She'd never really left home before—aside from the occasional road trip to Florida—not even when she moved off campus to an apartment in Little Italy. When it came time for college, staying close to home had been important. That's why she chose Fordham over the couple of out-of-state universities she'd gotten scholarships to. When applying to graduate schools, Kim couldn't help but dream of starting a new life far away, one where she drove to San Francisco on the weekends and wasn't responsible for anyone but herself.

She stood in the front hallway, surrounded by family photos, and groaned. Tommy's face was everywhere and suddenly Kim felt his eyes on her, watching her, judging.

Even as a child, the confident face Kim wore outside her home didn't match the constant bubble of anxiety and streams of insecurities that plagued her. He was the one who pushed her out of her comfort zone. In high school, when Kim's anxiety picked at her chest and pulled at her

skin, she would lock herself in the upstairs bathroom and sit on the floor, hyperventilating while Tommy sat outside the door. He'd stay there until she let him in, and he'd hold her hand while she struggled to gain control of herself. Every attack was their secret.

Tommy would've been disappointed to see her give up this opportunity. Kim knew that more than anything, but it didn't make her decision any easier. Not when she swore to herself that she'd follow in his footsteps and take care of their family since he couldn't anymore.

"What should I do?" she asked a photo of herself, Grandma Bonnie, and Tommy from their high school graduation.

"Please," she whispered. She stood there in silence, waiting for a response but the only sounds were her quickened breaths and the creaks of the house settling in the wind.

Outside the sky opened, rain hitting the windows with a rapid pitter-patter. Though neither of chose to leave her behind, she couldn't help but feel abandoned.

If she left her family, she'd be no better than her mother, but if she stayed she might end up checking out like her father had.

Kim imagined Danny alone with their father in this big house. She was their buffer, always catching the brunt of JJ's swinging moods. Yet, as much as she resented her father, she couldn't walk away knowing she and Danny were all he had left of the life he built for himself.

She never wanted to spend her adolescence or early 20s in a fishing town off the coast of New York, but if she moved she'd miss the scent of salt water brining the air mixed with exhaust fumes—a scent she found oddly comforting—and the sound of seagulls cawing as they dove for their meals. Hell, she'd even miss Rumble and Sailors, even though they sapped away her energy daily.

She'd miss the food, especially her comfort food: a bacon, egg, and cheese on a roll. As a New Yorker, she ate her favorite breakfast sandwich from the deli at least once a week—it was her kryptonite. God, and the City Island sea food. If she left, who knew when she would be able to get a 151-proof strawberry daiquiri with fresh grilled lobster tail from Johnny's again. Her stomach grumbled and mouth watered just thinking about it.

Shaking thoughts of alcohol from head, Kim rubbed her stomach. She needed a change of scenery. With one last glance at her brother and grandmother smiling at her from their place on the wall, she trekked upstairs.

Thunder cracked, the flash of lightning briefly brightening the dim hallway. Startled, she stopped pacing and touched her chest. Her heart pounded away, pulsing against her cold palm. Darkness started to seep into the house, making it look much later than mid-afternoon.

“Jesus,” she said, brown eyes wide. She crossed the hallway in a few steps and flicked on the overhead lights.

As her eyes adjusted to the sudden brightness, Kim felt herself drawn toward the attic, toward Tommy's room. He hated sharing a room with Danny, so at sixteen, after winning a few matches, he convinced JJ any money he earned to convert the attic from a storage space into a bedroom.

When they were kids, they scouted out and memorized their house's nooks and crannies, and the attic was filled with them. The best was the old dumbwaiter which had a track that ran from the basement to the attic. It hadn't been used much since it was built in the 20s, and after some rust build up, it only went as far down as Kim's room the second floor.

She and Tommy used to use it to sneak contraband to each other, from snacks and notes to beer and the occasional joint, Kim decided to investigate her brother's old room. Tommy was

known for his weed stashes and it would be shame to let it go to waste. Whenever one of them planned on smoking, they would send each other a note through the dumbwaiter.

They could have texted each other, but this way was more exciting and made them feel connected even when they were drifting apart. Often, they were reluctant friends, but Bonnie taught them that siblings, especially twins, are built-in best friends. They're the family you have when your parents are gone. She and Tio Raf were the youngest of five and she kept their brother and two sisters from drifting apart long after their mother died, hosting holidays and reunions.

A few relics left from their childhood had to be floating around the attic somewhere, and, who knows, Kim might find her answer stashed in a cranny up there next to their old Halloween costumes and skateboards.

Her delicate finger traced the 'Do Not Enter' sign taped to the door. Tommy hung it up once he discovered girls and his left hand. It gave him a false sense of security, since he rarely locked his door. Unfortunately for him —and her—the plastic never stopped Kim from entering before, not even after she walked in on him and Eva Santos in the twelfth grade. He'd been embarrassed and furious when she, mortified, ran from his room. He hurled curses at her back as he chased her from the room and slammed the door, but he wasn't embarrassed enough. Tommy and Eva didn't leave his room until an hour later.

Tommy didn't speak to Kim for two weeks after that, but her brother always hid the best bud and booze in his room. It was worth every retina searing second.

Kim twisted the loose bronze doorknob and pulled on the sticking door, its frame swollen from the humid and thick air. It didn't budge. Placing a sneakered foot on the wall, she yanked the door open with a loud crack and screeching hinges.

She remembered how one of JJ's many failed attempts at teaching them how to rollerblade had ended with one of his skates crashing into the flimsy wooden door. It left behind a softball-sized hole. He'd sworn up and down he'd been a skating prodigy on the block, saying, "I could do this in my sleep" with indignation, puffing out his chest, strapping on the blades and taking off down the hall. At first, he wasn't bad, but after a few minutes of smooth skating he got too cocky and tried to turn around quickly. Half-way through his U-turn, he face-planted into the wall with a "fuck."

Mouths open, she and Tommy had stared at JJ and then burst out with laughter. The sight of their father lying flat on his back, his wife ribbed tank rolled up to expose his hairy belly button, was enough to bring tears to their eyes as they gasped for breath. Seeing tears roll down their cheeks, JJ started laughing too. His belly shook like Santa's after finding a plate of chocolate chunk cookies and a hearty hot cocoa as he dusted himself off, his ruddy cheeks moist with tears and sweat. That night, the three of them ordered pizza and watched a double feature: *The Goonies* and *Beetlejuice*. The shot glasses stayed in the cabinet and the one beer he opened remained half-drunk on the coffee table. It was a rare moment of bliss and one of Kim's best memories of the trio.

Somehow, they never ended up fixing or replacing the door. It became a permanent fixture in the memory museum their home had become.

Kim hiked up the unfinished wooden stairs, careful to avoid the occasional nail protruding from a step and entered the dark space. Even with the torrential downpour, there was still enough daylight pouring through the round stained-glass windows for her to find the light switch. She flipped it, and the lights blinked to life, struggling to stay lit. It flickered on and off while the other two shone bright enough to make up for the loss.

Kim took in the unchanged room. After Tommy's death, she couldn't bring herself to sift through any of his belongings. It felt wrong, and she wasn't the only one who felt that way. JJ already hated going upstairs, always blaming joint and back pain any time his kids called for him. Tommy's death only cemented his aversion to climbing those two staircases. Pops was the only one who could manage it. When it came time for the funeral, he was the one charged with finding something in Tommy's closet for him to wear, but the only suit he had was the charcoal gray one with matching suspenders and a bowtie from his prom six years before, so Pops bought a new one—simple with clean lines and no tie.

Most of the funeral was a blur, but Kim remembered how Tommy looked lying in the silver-blue casket. His brilliant crystal eyes—which she'd envied their whole lives—delicately shut, their long black lashes feathering his pale cheeks, his freckles masked by the caked on makeup they used to disguise his bruising. She would say he looked as though he were sleeping, but Tommy never looked that gentle asleep; his eyes never fully shut and continuously twitched, his mouth stayed wide open, and he was always sweaty.

Even now, Kim's breath caught and tears pricked at her eyes as she caught a glimpse of her brother's last day, and it was cleaner than she thought it'd be.

A year later, the bed still looked like it was just slept in—unmade, with half the comforter on the floor, some couple of lonely socks strewn about the room, and a—most likely dirty—pair of boxers laid atop one of the three mismatch lounge chairs.

Once Tommy claimed the attic as his domain, it became a hiding place for the twins to avoid JJ on his worst nights—the ones where glass flew, and holes were punched in walls. When they could anticipate those days, they'd escape the house and visit their grandparents, but that changed when Grandma Bonnie and Pops moved to Florida. In the attic, the pair often played

Tekken 5 on the PlayStation and had Harry Potter marathons. Sometimes, they would roll a fat one and attempt to play a riveting game of Operation or Cards Against Humanity.

Once they graduated high school, the twins preferred spending their evenings sitting on the futon, under one of the stained-glass windows smoking weed, drinking beer, and watching episodes of Supernatural with Rey and Harp.

The family that smokes together stays together. It was their motto,.

When Danny turned eighteen, Kim and Tommy did the same thing for him that Grandma Bonnie and Pops did for them by smoking his first joint with him.

Shivering, Kim shuffled over to the radiator and turned it on. Even with insulation, the attic ran cold. The windows were as old as the house and let in a draft.

Waiting for the heat to kick on, Kim walked a few steps to the small dresser. Her shorts did little to keep her warm—her leg hair stubble stood on end and goose bumps rose on her arms—so she looked for his pajama pants, the blue ones covered in little batarangs.

She opened the first drawer, and, on finding underwear and an open box of condoms, shut it just as quickly.

Kim paused and pulled the drawer open again, slower this time. Kim stuck her hand in the drawer and pulled out the open box of Trojan BareSkin condoms. Thrown off by the lightness of the box, she peered inside. There were only two rubbers left. Bile rose in her throat at the image her mind conjured.

Holding the box between two fingers, she turned the box this way and that until she found the end and manufacturing dates.

Manufactured December 2016. Expiration 2021

Kim probed her mind for who Tommy would've been sleeping with before the accident. Was it someone she knew? She couldn't remember Tommy mentioning anyone new, and no one from the funeral or wake sprang to mind—at least, not from what she remembered. It wasn't her business, yet she couldn't help her curiosity. They used to share everything.

But, then again, she didn't tell him everything either. Kimmy stuffed the condoms back into the dresser and shoved it closed.

Moving to the next door, she was hit by a sudden revelation, Kim dropped her hands. A chill sank in her bones. "Oh." She ran a hand through her hair. She shook her head. If Tommy and Rey were fucking last year, Rey would've said something. They hated each other.

Yet, thinking back to Rey's reaction to Kim's questions about their relationship a few weeks ago, she knew deep down that wasn't true.

Since there was nothing but underwear and condoms in the first drawer, Kim moved on and opened the next drawer, which was filled to the brim with pajamas. The heater had yet to really kick in and she was covered in goosebumps and her leg hair stood on end.

Kim pushed aside stained t-shirts and worn out sweats until she found his Batman pajamas squashed at the bottom. She pulled them free and, right before she closed the drawer, grabbed a grey tee covered in bleach stains.

She might as well get comfortable.

Before undressing, Kim pulled her phone out her pocket and tossed it on the bed. She pushed and wiggled her jean shorts down her hips and yanked off her tank top. Her muscles clenched as the cool air touched her bare stomach. Kim pushed her discarded clothes to the side and quickly dressed, rolling up the flannel pants until she couldn't trip on the hem.

The shirt was baggy and fell mid-thigh on her, swallowing her slight frame. Kim lifted the neckline to her nose and inhaled. It still smelled of Tommy's favorite bodywash: classic Old Spice. It'd been his favorite since Pops bought him his first bottle for Christmas ten years ago, when everyone tired of Tommy's cloud of funk. He'd wear the same jeans all week without throwing them in the wash, his socks were dirty enough to stand on their own, he needed deodorant, and he showered infrequently.

Kim picked up her clothes, folded them up and tossed them on the same chair as the dirty boxers. She needed to laundry anyway. She grabbed the regular remote and the Firestick remote off the makeshift coffee table—it was made from a nailed together wood pallets and a sheet of plywood on top.

She turned on the TV and opened Hulu. She flipped through the options until finding *Brooklyn 99*. Tommy hated the show, but it always cheered her up. On Kim's bad days, he'd put it on and stay with her while she laughed and fawned over Andy Samberg and Stephanie Beatriz.

Kim walked over to the bed and dropped the remotes on to it. Before she could snuggle in, there was something she had to do. She squatted next to Tommy's bed and shifted the nightstand a few of inches to the right. Behind it was a small panel covered with a small Slytherin print. Grabbing her phone off the bed, Kim slid open the hatch and shone her flashlight in the dumbwaiter.

Bingo. Tommy's bong was inside, as was his stash jar, — a 20 oz mason jar that was covered in random stickers, including one of stoned Mario and Luigi—a couple of lighters, a grinder in the shape of a skull, and a half-empty pack of rolling paper. Kim reached her hand inside and pulled out the jar first. Crossing her fingers, she opened it and was surprised to find it half-full, since she figured there would only be a dime in it.

She put the jar aside and stuck her hand in again to grab the grinder and paper. Kim sat down and quickly got to work. She took a couple of small nuggets from the jar, ground them, and pulled out a fresh sheet of paper from the pack. She carefully started sprinkling the weed in the center of the paper.

Finished, she admired her handiwork. It wasn't her best joint, it was a bit sloppy, but it was still smokable. She closed the jar and placed the joint atop.

Kim reached blindly into the dumbwaiter one more time for the lighters. Her hand landed on a folded piece of paper. Confused, Kim pulled it out. The delicate paper was folded into the shape of a heart.

Origami. Tommy couldn't do origami. His fingers were too broad. There was only one person Kim knew who could fold paper like that—clean lines with no mistakes.

Rey and Kim learned together, buying books and paper, and watching YouTube tutorials. Kim's always came out mangled, but Rey picked it up quickly, her small, dainty fingers danced through each fold. After every piece she finished, Kim saw the artistry of origami all over again.

Kim focused on the paper in her hand and bit down on her lip. Prying was a sister's prerogative, right?

Before she could talk herself out of it, she gently pulled the flaps loose and unfolded the red, floral heart. Inside, Kim found a note with her best friend's unmistakable swift and loopy handwriting.

I know that whatever we're doing is supposed to be casual, but that doesn't work for me. Not anymore. Somewhere along the way, my hate for you turned into something more, turned into love, and at night, when I'm apart from you, I dream of flying through the endless depths of your eyes.

If you don't want to do this anymore, I understand. I just needed you to know.

Happy Valentine's Day.

— R