

Before

## Veronica - Freshman Year

The hallway smells like industrial cleaner and cardboard boxes. To my left there's someone arguing with their mother on speaker phone, while a group of girls run past me, giggling about something on one of their phones. I turn the corner and spot Room 214 with its door wide open. I peer inside to find a girl, long black wavy hair that unfairly curls on its own accord. Olive complexion, average build, and cupid bow lips. She's sitting on the floor, cross-legged, surrounded by an array of boxes, clothes, and plants - lots of plants. She looks up when my shadow casts above her, and squints. "Are you my roommate, or just someone in need of directions?" I tighten my grip on my bag, "That depends, are you planning on kicking me out if it's the former?" Her shoulders drop in relief and a smile plays on her lips, "Oh thank god, someone with a sense of humor." She pushes off the floor and comes to stand in front of me, hand out-stretched, "I'm Sonja." I take her offered hand in mine, "Veronica."

She spots my sketchbook tucked under my arm, Art major?" "Graphic Design," I correct automatically. Her grin widens. "Fantastic; Visual Comm here. I was terrified I'd end up rooming with someone who thought Comic Sans is acceptable." I laugh at that one, "God no, that's just a tragedy for fonts in general." She gestures around the room and I follow her gaze as she explains, "Ignore the mess. I unpack sporadically before I get organized." Glancing around the room I gesture, "Well, that explains... all of this." She follows my gaze and shrugs, "Creative chaos." I smile and set my bag down near the empty bed. The room is small - cinder-block walls, one narrow window between us both, and zero personality. Yet. Taking in the still-empty space, I glance at the doorway. "Ok, so, any rules?"

"Oh, absolutely," she says, straightening from the desk. "No stealing clothes without permission. My plants are my babies. If one of us cries, the other provides ice cream and moral support." I think on that a beat, "Deal."

"And," she adds, tone slightly sharper now, "If either of us starts dating someone who makes the other uneasy, we say something." I snort, "That's oddly specific."

"Very. I've had bad experiences - friends, myself - getting involved with douche-bags. It's an important and vital rule." I meet her gaze and can see she's absolutely serious. Something else flickers behind her eyes that I can't quite name. I really take her in, understanding telling me she's been through something like that before. "Okay." I say. "I think we are going to be good." Sonja smiles, wide and warm. "Oh Veronica," she says. "We're going to be *fantastic*."

We sit back and start organizing the room. Sonja starts in with giving me a run down of all her plants - names, species, and sun requirements. The woman really loves her plants. I secretly hope she never asks me to take care of them. I'm sure to kill them. Not intentionally, of course. It's just... Well, I have Lego botanicals for a reason, and even those I managed to "kill" by bumping the petals and having them clatter to the floor only to find a crucial hinge broken off from impact. Like, seriously, don't ever ask me to keep something alive for you, not even a pet rock.

Her side of the room is all rich tones - turquoise, golds, and burgundys. Family photos line her desk, and she even has those little critters pens - the ones with a furry creature at the top where normally an erasure or cap should be - yes, those. Sonja's side of the room looks already well lived in, while mine is the bare minimum. I like my blacks and whites, some deep reds to throw in some color, or even a deep plum. But other than that, I don't have much lining my walls. A few art pieces that have held their importance to me throughout the years. A few photos of me and my dad - don't really have any of my mom since she decided to leave us when I was 12. One day, I guess, she just decided she didn't want to be a wife and a mother anymore. Packed a bag and left.

*I remember I came home from school that day to find dad sitting on the sofa with her "Dear John" letter in one hand, and his head resting in the other. Even at 12, I knew that was the day my mother wasn't coming back. Dad had a rough adjustment over the first two years after. Dealing with a pre-hormonal pre-teen, it must've been an overwhelming hell for him, but he never made me feel like I wasn't important. Never made me feel like I was a burden. I loved that about him the most. He did the best with what life gave him, but always made sure I was taken care of, and that I knew I was loved.*

I sit down on my bed, holding my favorite photo of the two of us. It was winter, and dad and I headed outside to get the driveway and sidewalks cleared. Must've snowed a good foot, honestly. Dad with the snowblower while I shoveled the pathways. When all was said and done, I ran up to him and wrapped my warm arm around his shoulder, while my other hand adjusted the angle on my cell's front camera. It's the two of us, smiling ear to ear, even though our noses and toes were probably freezing over.

For 8 years I never wanted for anything, and I smiled at everything. Imagine how my whole heart shattered when I came home from a weekend away, to find him lying in a fetal position, hand still clutching his chest - he had a heart attack and passed right there. Alone. My dad, the man who always protected me, died alone, because I was away on a girls weekend. While I was having fun and laughing, my dad was what? Slowly fading away? Or was it quick? Did he scream for help? Was it so bad that he couldn't even make his way to the phone? I let my father down that night. I really don't know if I'll ever forgive myself for it.

That night changed everything in me. Broke pieces of me I didn't know existed, and shattered my heart all in one breath. I realized then how fragile life was, and I promised myself, I would never live life quietly. If something unseen was going to abruptly take me out one day, I was going to make sure that every piece of my life leading up to that point wasn't wasted. After unpacking all of our things and getting somewhat organized we decide to blow off some steam before classes start, and take advantage of the free time that night. We head to a frat party near campus that same night. Stepping inside, the house smells like heat, perfume, and bad decisions. The bass rattles my ribs and vibrates through my teeth. Bodies are pressed together, too close, and invading every inch of the living and dining rooms where strangers are already whispering in each other's ears, and letting their hands wander, claiming flesh. Sonja grins at me like she's been waiting for this all day. "Oh yea," she shouts. "This is what we needed tonight." I laugh at her enthusiasm, and loop my hand in her arm, dragging her to the kitchen, Shots first!"

"Obviously," is all she replies as she follows.

We make our way to the back of the kitchen that has essentially been transformed into a bar. One long counter-top has been cleared of the normal day's needs, and instead there are lengths of alcohols, beers, limes, and something that looks like five different saucers filled with rim toppings. *Jesus. This is completely overboard, and so fucking epic at the same time.*

Sonja and I reach for the shot glasses and start picking and sniffing at random bottles. We finally agree on one that is a clear, golden brown liquid that smells sharp and sweet. We look at each other and laugh - Sonja raises her shot to me, "To freshman year." I shake my head, "To bad decisions." We toss them back. The slow burn slides down my throat and makes me suck in a breath and laugh. "Oh that's mean," I say. Sonja coughs once, eyes watering, but grins as she says, "I love it." I feel the way my body starts to loosen. The hum, brewing under my skin. The version of me that doesn't over think, second-guess, or live small for anyone else? She's ready to play. The music swells, a remix with a filthy bass drops. I grab Sonja's hand and guide her to the make-shift "dance floor." She doesn't hesitate, and we dive into the crowd, hips swaying. I let the music take over - hair loose, arms up, body moving without apology.

Sonja whoops beside me, spinning once, arms over her head. "Yea girl!" she shouts. "I knew you were gonna be fun!" I laugh, loud and unapologetic, and spin back towards her. This is me. The girl who takes up space. The girl who'd rather be loud than let fear win. Just then, a guy tries to slide up in behind me - too close, too fast - and Sonja immediately steps in between us, eyes sharp. "He with you?" she asks me. I glance at the guy, then back at her, smirking. "Definitely not." She plants a hand on his chest and pushes him back into the crowd. "Then move," she says, staring him down. And unbelievably, he backs away with his hands raised.

I stare at her, impressed. "You always gonna be my hero?" She shrugs, dancing again, "I don't like people who assume." I lift my arms, laughing. "We're going to get along just fine." I step in closer, the crowd pressing in on all sides now, and without thinking I drape my arms over Sonja's shoulder. She doesn't stiffen. Doesn't question it. She leans into me immediately, like it's the most natural thing in the world. We dance together, not for anyone else, not for attention. Just moving in sync, hips swaying to the beat, shoulders brushing. My arm, warm and solid across her back, the noise fading into something distant. There's nothing sexual about it, just platonic comfort.

I rest my forehead briefly against her temple and laugh when she bumps her hip into mine. She smiles and squeezes my waist, grounding me in the middle of the chaos. I realize with a certain clarity that this is what it feels like to find your people. Not history, not blood. Choice. Family in the making. I pull back just enough to meet her eyes and shout, "We're going to survive this place, right?" Sonja laughs, bright and fearless. "Oh honey, we're going to *thrive*."

We don't remember deciding to leave. One minute we were alternating between shots and dancing, the next we're spilling outside onto the sidewalk. The night air is a cool contrast against our skin. Sonja immediately kicks off her heels, slinging them over her shoulders, "Oh my god," she groans, "my feet are *killing* me." I laugh for a beat but then realize my feet are killing me as well. So there I am, middle of the sidewalk, trying to balance tugging my shoes off, while at the same time using my drunk roommate as my own personal wobbling balance beam. Finally, the shoes are off and no body parts were broken. I stand there, concrete is cool and refreshingly gritty against the soles of my feet.

Campus is quiet enough that you can hear the buzzing of the streetlights as we pass them by. There's still the distant echo of laughter from the party trailing behind us and mixing with our own as we walk in a zigzag pattern back to the dorms. Sonja throws an arm around me this time. "You're fun," she declares - voice thick with certainty even though she's definitely slurring bits and pieces. I have to chuckle at her, "High praise.." I say with a pause, "..coming from someone who tried to fight a man with her eyes." With no shame whatsoever she simply replies, "He deserved it. He had "douche" written all over his forehead in invisible ink."

"I don't doubt that," I reply as we dissolve into laughter that makes our eyes water, and our stomachs ache. Halfway down the block she stops abruptly and turns to me, serious and drunk all at the same time. "You ok, though, right? Promise me you had a good night."

I think about our first night here - the noise, the bodies, and the way everything just seemed to 'click.' "Yeah, I am. Tonight was perfect." That earns me another smile from her as she drags me up the steps of our building. Inside, the hallway smells faintly like someone burned popcorn, and the TV is playing low in the common lounge down the way. I lean my shoulder against the wall, laughing to myself while

I watch as Sonja wrestles with the lock. The door finally opens and we tumble inside, shoes abandoned unceremoniously by the door.

We collapse onto our beds, staring up at the ceiling, the echo of the music still humming in my ears. Sonja exhales. "Okay, I'm officially calling it."

I turn my head to her, eyebrows tugging in confusion, "Calling what?" I ask. She's looking at me with this wicked smile on her face, one that looks like she's up to no good, but then her whole demeanor changes, "We're going to be family." That makes my chest tighten a beat, "Yea," I say smiling back. "We are."

Morning comes in, bright and violent. There's some kind of jackhammer going on outside, or perhaps it's birds. I'm not too sure. All I know is, it's loud and very unnecessary. Sunlight slices through our thin dorm curtains like it has a personal vendetta with me. I groan, rolling onto my side and immediately regret every decision I made that led to this very moment. Just then, my bladder decides now is a good time to make demands before a full blown rebellion occurs. "Unbelievable," I mutter, swinging my legs over the side of the bed. The floor is freezing, which is just completely rude.

Across the room, Sonja stirs, letting out a low groan that sounds like it came from her soul. "Please tell me it's still night," she says, voice muffled by her pillow.

"Nope," I say. "It's morning, and it's angry." She cracks one eye open, "I hate it already." I stand, swaying just a little, one hand braced on my desk. "Once my bladder's demands are met, I'll run down and grab us some coffee." She exhales like I just offered her a lifeline. "You're an angel." Over my shoulder I ask, "Do we need grease to go with it?" There's a beat, then Sonja groans again, rolling onto her back and throwing an arm over her eyes. "If I don't eat something fried in the next thirty minutes, I may simply pass away."

"Duly noted," I chuckle.

"Hash browns," she adds. "Something with cheese. Maybe eggs. Honestly, surprise me. Just...salty." I laugh quietly, heading toward the bathroom.

"Stay alive, I'll be back."

She lifts her arm weakly in salute, "Tell my plants I loved them."

The bathroom light is too bright, and the mirror is being very judgmental, but not too judgmental that I don't appreciate the image staring back. I'm not a small girl, never was. At 5'9 and 20 pounds extra on me, I've never been the Barbie Girl type. Definitely more a tomboy than anything else. My father raised me tough, but looking back now, I appreciate it. I wouldn't want to be anything different from what I am now - long, dark brown hair with a slight wave to it, hazel eyes, great lips and kick-ass long legs. I shrug, *I am who I am.*

I smile at my reflection before splashing cold water on it to wake my ass up - smudged eyeliner, messy hair, and a faint smile I can appreciate, despite the headache. When I come back out, Sonja is sitting up now, hair wild, wrapped in her blanket like a cocoon. "You still going?" she asks. "Yeah." She watches me for a second, then smiles. "Hey, Veronica?" "Yeah?" "Last night was fun." I pause, hand on the door. "It really was." She nods once and then flops back onto her bed.

## Veronica - Senior Year

Morning still comes in violently. The sunlight in our now-apartment is somehow worse, pouring across the hardwood floor like it has no shame. Somewhere outside a delivery truck is beeping while backing up. Fucking. Rude. I groan into the pillow, still questioning my life choices. From the kitchen I hear Sonja slamming a cabinet shut. "Who," she calls, voice rough, "designed mornings?" I roll onto my back, looking up at the ceiling fan. "A sadist."

My bladder is again calling the shots and forcing me to get out and do its bidding. I swing my legs over the side of the bed and shuffle toward the bathroom just as Sonja pads past in one of my old t-shirts, hair a mess, and clutching her phone like it personally wronged her. "Okay," she says, pointing at me. "I'm finding my pants and then I'm getting coffee."

"Bless you."

She pauses, then grins. "Grease?"

I smile despite myself. "Obviously."

She nods, already turning towards the door. "Same as always?"

"Dealer's choice," I say. "Just nothing that looks...healthy." She salutes me with two fingers. "I got you."

I wash my face, braid my hair loosely, and step back out into our apartment, taking everything in with a smile at the chaos surrounding me. Sketchbooks stacked on the coffee table, Sonja's plants crowding the windowsill and a few others are taking post throughout the apartment here and there, a pair of shoes kicked off by the door without apology, and last night's Chinese takeout peeking out from the garbage can. This place. Ours.

Just then, the door opens, and Sonja appears, coffee carrier in one hand, and a greasy bag swinging from her wrist. "I come bearing sustenance," She announces. I take the cups from her, "My hero." She laughs, bumping her hip into mine as we lean against the counter, steam curling between us.

Different living situation.

Same us.

We head to the club later that night and as we enter, the music consumes me instantly with a bass-heavy beat you'd willingly succumb to. Room too close, bodies packed too tight, hands skimming over heat. Sonja and I elbow our way up to the bar. I slide onto one of the stools, resting my forearms against the counter while Sonja flags down the bartender. That's when I feel it. Not a touch, but a weight. I glance up and catch a man standing across the bar, half-shadowed, drink untouched in his hand. He's watching me. Not openly, not like other guys who stare and leer. No, his gaze is steady and deliberate. I take him in the way I always take people in - instinctively cataloging variables.

Tall, broad shoulders, dirty blonde hair cut close at the sides, with full lips you'd want to sink your teeth into. Well dressed. Clean lines. Calm posture. Attractive in a composed and intentional way. The kind of man who knows *exactly* how he's coming across. Our eyes meet, and he doesn't smile. Neither do I. He holds the gaze for a second too long, then I look away, already bored and done with it. Appreciation without invitation. Nothing more. Sonja slides a drink toward me. "Vodka soda," she shouts, "because I respect tomorrow." I snort. "Weak." She grins and we clink glasses and drain them quickly. The music has shifted again, the beat pulling us toward the floor.

The crowd is thicker this time. Sonja dances with a guy, and at first he seems harmless. Tall, has a swimmer's build, black hair, caramel complexion. Confident. All smiles. His hands wander a little, but nothing alarming. I stay close, moving to the rhythm, eyes on her out of habit. Then I see it. The shift. Sonja takes a sharp breath, quick and involuntary. Her shoulders tense and her smile tightens just enough to be wrong. He's leaning in and whispering something in her ear, while his hand slides lower and lingers. That's all I need. I step in smoothly, spinning Sonja by the wrist like it's part of the dance, placing myself squarely between them. Close enough now that I can smell the alcohol on his breath. "Back off my girl," I say.

He laughs. Actually laughs - loud and dismissive, and then proceeds to shove my shoulder, trying to push past me to get back to her. Something sharp and focused snaps into place. Weeks at the campus gym. Wrists taped. Knuckles sore. The rhythm drilled into muscle memory. I don't hesitate, and I don't swing wide. I step back just enough to set my feet, and punch him clean and direct, right into his jaw. There's a crack - bone or teeth, I'm not sure - but I stand and watch as he goes down, hard. Shock freezes across his face and before he can get back up, hands grab him from behind. Bouncers appear, hauling him up and dragging him toward the exit while he shouts something incoherent. The music never stops. My knuckles sting, and the pulse in my ears is roaring to life. Sonja stares at me for half a second before she laughs, breathless and shaky, throwing her arms around my neck. "Oh my god," she says into my ear, "you're an absolute menace."

"You ok?" I ask, already scanning her face. She nods quickly. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm good." That's when I feel it again, that weight crawling over my skin. I glance back toward the bar, to where he's still standing. Half in shadow, half not. Drink still untouched. Eyes locked on me now with something new behind them. Interest? Assessment? Not judgement, nor shock. Something calculating. Our gazes meet again and this time, he smiles. Slow and measured. Like he's just watched something confirm a theory he had. And suddenly, for some reason I can't name yet, a chill runs down my spine, and my skin crawls.

I hadn't stayed long enough to see another man come up beside the former, following his line of sight to my retreating form. I hadn't bothered to turn back around and see his buddy smirk as he said something while never taking his eyes off me as we left. And I certainly never thought that the stranger studying me in a bar would end up being my greatest mistake.

Charlie.

## CHARLIE

The crack hits just enough to cut through the chaos on the dance floor, enough to turn heads nearby. I watch as the guy staggers back and falls on his ass before being hauled off by the club's bouncers. I watch her then. The way she looks over her friend. The way she doesn't cower at the crowd around her. Not ashamed. Not nervous. Just completely focused on her friend's well-being. Protective. And that's when she stills, just a fraction, and turns her focus my way. One glance in my direction and a slow smile crosses my expression in her direction before she turns back to her friend.

Devin saw the hit too and comes to stand next to me, "Did you see that? That chick just knocked that guy on his ass." Laughing as he says it too. I watch as she grabs her friend's wrist and starts walking them to the exit. "Yeah.." I mutter quietly. Devin turns from watching her making her way out with her friend in tow, and studies me instead, "Oh lord Jesus, I know that look." I look back at him, "What look?" He laughs as he says, "the look that says you're dissecting something inside that brain of yours." I turn my focus back to her as I say, "She didn't hesitate. She didn't check the room to see who's watching. She could've given two shits."

Devin's now watching her as well, "maybe she just didn't care. I think you're reading way too much into a girl decking a drunk guy." "Maybe," is all I say as I watch her guide her friend through the front door, not even glancing back. "Or maybe she knew she could handle however it might've gone down." Devin's eyebrows raise a hair, "you sound impressed." I pause at that, considering his words.

Mulling them over in my head, and shrug, "...I think I am." Devinn smirks, "so talk to her next time instead of sitting here and dissecting her like a profiler from across the room." I almost laughed at that.

Almost. "It's not about talking to her. It's just... people like that don't usually let anything bother them. They walk around already knowing they can handle whatever comes their way." Devin's brows come together in confusion, "And that bothers you?" I leaned back and finally took a sip of my now watered down Scotch, "It doesn't *bug* me, perse. I'm just curious what it would actually take to throw someone like that off." Devinn squints at me, "throw what off?" I motion to the closed door, "That. The certainty. The whole, "I'm not going to second-guess what I already know I will handle' thing." Devin studies me for a long minute, "...you mean make her question herself?" I tap my finger on the rin of the glass, thinking his question through, thoroughly, "... yeah, something like that." Devinn let's out a low breath, "you don't even know her, man." My mouth pulls into a distracted half-smile, "No. But I'm pretty sure I'm going to."

## Chapter 1

# Veronica

Before, if you would've told me that one day I'd meet a guy, and he'd change me so completely that I wouldn't recognize myself in the end, I would've laughed in your face. I would've said that there'd be no way I'd let someone dismantle me, change me, make me question my very thinking. Unfortunately for me, that's exactly what happened...

You ever meet someone and immediately *don't* want to like them? They're self absorbed, borderline narcissistic, and painfully in need of being humbled? But eventually their charm wins you over and before you know it, you're second-guessing your own instincts? Turns out, Mr. Voyeur from the bar was none other than Charlie, and he was definitely one of those people. You know the kind - came from old money, charmer, handsome, occasionally funny. He was so sure of himself. So smooth and controlled. I didn't think to look underneath the guise before it was too late. Looking back, that was my first mistake - not to recognize the wolf in sheep's clothing.

It started two weeks after our little "bar incident." I was leaving one of Sonja and mine's favorite cafes in town and nearly collided with someone pulling the door open to enter as I was starting to exit. He stepped back onto the sidewalk quickly, and outstretched his hand in a make-shift bow, directing me out. "Sorry," I gasped in apology. He just smirked, he looked familiar, but I couldn't place him at this point, I wasn't sure where I had seen him before. He was tall, early thirties maybe, dirty blonde hair cut neatly in that corporate way, and chestnut brown eyes. He was well dressed in a way that doesn't

scream he's a pompous ass with money, but just sophisticated enough for you to know he actually was. He chuckled as I walked by and apologized as well, "Forgive me," he said.

I turned to him, stunned, "What do you have to apologize for? I'm the one that nearly barreled into you." He just studied me with that smirk still stuck in place, "Well, no harm no foul," he said as I watched him bend down and pick up something near the cafe entrance, "Veronica," he finished as he extended his hand to pass my sketchbook that I apparently dropped during our run-in. "How do you know my name?" Still, with that smirk in tack, he reached out to tap a spot on my sketchbook. A spot that I did, in fact, doodle out my name one day in a moment of boredom. Completely embarrassed now, I just stared up at the sky, as if begging the universe to show me some mercy. And after face-palming myself, hoping it might grant me reprieve, I peaked my eyes back open at this handsome stranger, and sighed, "Yes, well, thank you, again."

As I turned to start walking away, he called out, "You throw a mean right hook for someone who still doodles her name on her notebooks." That got my attention, and immediately froze me on the spot. I turned to him slowly, hackles up, "*Do* I know you?" He simply raised his hands in defense, "Technically no, you don't, but I just happened to be at the Monarch two weeks ago, and I never forget a beautiful woman, especially not one who can throw a solid right hook." And here we go. *Jesus, how many people saw that? I'm never living this down.* "You saw that?" And that's when it hit me, "You were at the bar that night, weren't you?" Sliding his hands in his pants pockets, while attempting to look sheepish as well, "I did, and I was" All I can do is groan. Since that night I've had a few of my friends and even some random students, just ribbing me. "Great, I'm never getting away from that night." He laughs lightly, "You shouldn't be embarrassed." I stare at this complete stranger in shock, "So now you're advocating violence? I punched someone in a crowded bar."

"You defended your friend." I have to say, that sentence alone gave me comfort. Instead of thinking I was some crazed woman going half-cocked, like the rest of campus assumed, here was someone willing to see the bigger picture. "So what, you're stalking bars near campus now?" That gets a full laugh out of him, "God no." And with that he offers me his hand, "Charles Whitmore." I take it automatically, "Veronica... but, you already know that."

"I do," he nods to the street, "You headed somewhere?" I followed his gaze, "Yea, I'm heading back to my apartment." He hums to himself, "You room with Sonja?" I spin and turn to him, one hand on my hip, "Alright, fucker, *are* you stalking me?" He lets his upper body curve in on him once then breathes in as his chest expands straight again, "I remember names, and impressive moments." I completely roll my eyes at this guy, but cannot help the smile that's reluctantly trying to break through my lips.

He steps back from me then, "I'll let you get home." I study him for a beat longer before nodding my head. Holding up my sketchbook, "Well, thanks for saving my sketchbook." With that I turned to make my way home. I didn't realize the man behind me was still watching my retreating form. Expression shifting from one of warmth to something calculating, all in a matter of seconds.

Over the next month I'd notice how Charlie started showing up more often, and very casually. In the produce aisle at the grocery store. Two rows over at a bookstore. In line at the cafe. All random.. Or so I thought. One afternoon, Sonja and I were sitting outside the cafe, and Charlie came by, asking if he could join us. Sonja and I both shared a look and I gestured to him to pull up a seat. Small talk ensued, and we came to find that Charlie was a third-year associate at a fancy law firm down the block. He had his own condo close to the marina, and he at least could agree that while luxury cars were mainly for show, the Cybertruck was the exception.

It seemed many of the nights Sonja and I were relaxing at the cafe, Charlie would happen to drop by - it became the norm. Sonja was already half-way through her rant, when Charlie showed up and sat down with us, "I'm telling you if this professor decides to assign me one more 'conceptual exploration' project, I'm going to conceptualize throwing myself down the stairs." Even though he only caught the end of her rant, Charlie still laughed at her dramatics. "That's a pretty vivid protest." I had to clarify for him, before he thought my best friend was truly unhinged, "She says this every semester. It's become tradition at this point."

Charlie just raised an eyebrow at that, "Seems a dramatic tradition to uphold." With that, Sonja pointed her straw at him, "You laugh, but you're not the one paying full tuition for this." Charlie just took a sip of his coffee, and nonchalantly agreed, "True. I paid mine a long time ago." I remember how Sonja tilted her head at that and squinted her eyes at him, like she was trying to see him better, "How old are you?" I had to groan. *Dear lord, this woman. Some days.* "Jesus, Sonja." But Charlie just took it all in stride, smiling as he let it slip, "Twenty-eight." Sonja just whistled, "Damn, that's practically ancient." Charlie just shook his head before he retorted, "I'll try not to crumble to dust at the table."

After that our conversation became about Charlie. How many hours does a third year really put in - turns out, quite a bit. What law he practiced? What was the worst client like? What was he like as a child growing up? Did he enjoy sports, or was he more of a book-nerd? Did he have to take dancing lessons like all the movies depicted rich snobs supposedly did? That one had Charlie laughing full-bodied. "Jesus. You do realize that just because I come from old money doesn't mean my entire life has been mapped out since birth." That gave me pause, "Are you sure? Isn't it something along the lines of, your dad and someone's dad think you'd be a good match for his daughter, and the union benefiting the families?"

I caught it, just before he answered, there was a pause and something flashed across his eyes I couldn't quite name then. Not irritation exactly, but definitely not calm. "No, my life is nothing like that." The way he said it, final and flat, had Sonja and myself looking at each other knowing we should change the subject. And so she did, "So, I'm over this coffee. Why don't we ditch this place and get some ice cream?" I just looked at her, "Seriously? Your brain and taste buds went from, 'Hey, some java and muffins sound good,' to, 'Oh my god, I need something cold and sweet?'" Sonja just looks at me like I grew an extra head, "Duh," was all she replied. With that Charlie laughed and brought our attention back to the table and him still sitting there. "Wanna join us?" I asked. He looked at his coffee cup, and with a quirk of his lips and a resigned chuckle he replied, "Sure, why not."

We left the cafe and walked a few blocks to our favorite ice cream pit. We all sat at one of the outside tables and talked for about another hour before Charlie looked at his watch to check the time and decided he needed to head out, "It's getting close to that time for me. Veronica, mind if I get your number? Maybe take you out to dinner sometime?" Sonja gave me a conspiratorial smile before I turned back to Charlie and asked for his phone. I put my number in, and text myself quickly from it so I had his info as well. Charlie smiled at that, "Clever girl." I just laughed as I handed his phone back. Charlie took his phone, said his goodbyes, and headed off - probably to his car or the office, I wasn't sure.

About a week later, Charlie called, "Hey, what are you doing right now?" he asked. "Now? Charlie, it's eight in the morning on a weekend - I'm sleeping. Why are you awake? Go back to bed like a normal person." He just laughed at that. "No sleeping. Sleeping is for the weak. Get up, we have exploring to do." It annoyed me, but at the same time, he made it sound like an adventure. We did, in fact, have an amazing day. Charlie ended up taking me on a nature trail at the *Solstice Canyon*. The trails were actually easy and very beautiful. There were mansion ruins, along with some creek crossings and thankfully, the place had some shaded paths on it as well. I was thanking every deity I could think of because I do not do well in the heat. Know how people get hangry? Yea, that's me, only I'm not hungry, I'm melting from the inside out.

The best part of the trail though was the waterfall. Set against massive stones, and not overly dramatic, just something quiet and beautiful you could relax by. After the trail we drove up the coast to this restaurant he said his mother always loves to come to when she is in the area. He ordered some fancy-ass champagne for us, and for himself he ordered liver with steamed veggies. Thankfully, he didn't try to pull that dominating bullshit by ordering for me. So, instead I ordered a steak, med-well, with veggies on the side. The portions were enough to fill us and have left overs, but we talked so much that we ended up finishing everything. Before we knew it, the day got away from us. So, Charlie ended up taking us to some fancy hotel to crash for the night. We sat up into the late night talking about our lives.

His smile went from inquisitive to thoughtful when he watched me talk about my father. And that's when the shift happened. He leaned in to kiss me, and I let him. It started off slow and exploratory until it deepened into something more. I moaned into his kiss and ran my hands through his hair pulling him in closer to my body, wanting every piece of him on me. Charlie responded in kind and gripped my waist, pulling me over to straddle his lap. Not caring about decency, I started grinding on his lap right there. I could feel him getting harder by the minute as he growled into my kiss. His hands grabbed my sides and he ground his hard cock against me. His hardness pushing into me became my single focus right then and there. But dry-humping him wasn't cutting it for Charlie. In a matter of minutes he had our clothes off and was scooping me up and carrying me to the bedroom.

He laid me down in the middle of the bed and wasted no time going down on me. Hands underneath my thighs, lifting my body and angling my pussy right in his line of sight. He looked at my pussy like it was a feast he couldn't wait to devour. His tongue took one long and slow swipe up my slit, just to tease me, and when I whimpered his name he relented with a chuckle and started working wonders on my clit. His tongue was utter perfection with a perfect combination of circling and sucking. But that wasn't enough for him, no. He slid his two fingers into my dipping cunt then, while still sucking on my clit and began to finger-fuck my pussy. I reached down and ran my fingers into his hair, grinding down into his face, and in mere minutes I was a shaking and panting mess as my orgasm crashed over me.

Charlie sat up, wiping his mouth clean with the back of his hand with a satisfied smirk pulling at his lips. He looked up at me like he was going to continue leading this scenario, but I wasn't having it. I pushed him away from me and told him to lie down. He looked like he was going to lunge for me, but I put up a hand to halt him, "Stop. Be a good boy and lie down," is all I said to him, and shockingly he obeyed. His face was torn between being irritated and yet amused. But that all faded the moment my lips wrapped around the head of his cock and began to take him deep into my mouth. I heard him hiss when he hit the back of my throat, and smiled to myself, triumphantly. He was slightly thicker than what I was used to, *thank god*, and he definitely had some length to him. I did have to take my time and remember to relax my jaw, 'cause he was pushing the limits of my gag reflex.

Of course, the minute he gripped my hair and started fucking my face, that hope died and he had my gagging on his cock. Though, I know he liked it 'cause each time a panicked sound would escape me, he just chuckled, picked up the pace and called me his 'good girl.' He looked down at me and abruptly pulled my mouth away from his cock while laying me back down on the bed, "Are you on the pill?" No sooner had I answered him, and we both confirmed we were clean to each other, then he was slamming his hard cock deep inside me. My back arched up off the bed and my legs wrapped around his waist, pulling him further into me. Nothing about Charlie was gentle. For all the teasing and smirking I had witnessed over the last few weeks, this was a different side of him.

And it was especially a different side of Charlie when the dirty words started tumbling from his lips, "That's it V, take my cock like the good girl you are." He angled my body so that my hips were tilted up and into him as he was pounding down into me - the new angle had me feeling like he was rearranging my organs. He was that deep in me. Fuck, I could feel it, I was close to another fucking orgasm. I reached down and started rubbing my clit. "That's it, V. Play with your cunt like a good little slut and cum for me." I had never, in all my life, thought that I would allow anyone to talk to me like that, let alone talk to me like that in the middle of sex. But fuck me, I loved it. I kept working my clit, alternating between soft and fast. I could see Charlie was getting close too, the veins in his neck straining.

And his groans, fuck me, his groans nearly tipped me over the edge. But it was his words that did me in, "Fuck, V," he said in a low-guttering groan, "I'm so fucking close, V. Come on baby, be a good fucking slut and cum all over my cock. Give me everything, V." That was it, that last sentence leaving his mouth left me a squirting mess. But Charlie didn't care, "Christ, you just fucking soaked me, didn't you baby? Fuck yes." That seemed to spur him on even further. His thrusts became brutal and unrelenting, but it wasn't long until he was cumming inside me, groaning my name. We passed out and when morning came, he gripped my hips and pulled me into his body. I could feel his already hard cock poking at my ass.

He started kissing my shoulder, working his way to my neck while his hand moved to stroke my clit. He turned me onto my back and slowly positioned himself on top of me - hands on either side of my face. His hand smoothed over my body and down farther, reaching down to stroke his cock from the base to tip, before he lined himself with my entrance, and thrust inside of me like his life depended on it. This time around there were no words. Nothing but the sounds of our bodies slapping together in heat and sweat. Nothing about this morning would be gentle as his hands gripped me tightly enough to bruise. My fingernails ran down his back, deep enough to scar. We were nothing but two people chasing each other to the end we both wanted. Our bodies both moving in sync - my hips lifting to meet each of his thrusts that began to hasten.

He flipped us around so that now I controlled the pace. Riding him, I braced my hands behind my back on his thighs, giving me leverage to rise and fall effortlessly onto his thick cock. His hands skimmed every part of my body - thighs, hips, ribs, breasts, neck. He came back to my breasts and pinched my nipples before kneading them. I whimpered at the contrast in sensation, but it only fueled my need to cum all over him again. Finally, he broke the silence - sitting up he wrapped his hand around the back of my neck and forced me to look at him, "Cum for me, V.

Be a good fucking girl, and cum for me. Now." I grabbed the back of his head and crashed my lips onto his. The kiss was raw, nothing but force and my teeth biting into his bottom lip. Not enough to cut, but enough to bring out the roughness in him. He growled into my mouth and took my hips with both hands - I might have been on top, but Charlie was in control now. Guiding my body at a pace he deemed. "Fuck, Veronica, I'm not gonna last much longer if you keep that up."

So, I leaned in and bit his lip again, pulling away with a smirk of my own gracing my lips. His eyes shuttered just once before he pulled out and had me on all fours. He gripped my hair and pulled me up flush with his chest as he proceeded to pound into me. Reaching around my front with his other hand, he started playing with my clit - alternating between circling and pinching.

The whimper that came out of me had Charlie chuckling as he leaned near the sweet spot in the crook of my neck, and bit just enough that I knew there was going to be a mark later. He didn't let go, he bit harder, thrust harder, and played with my clit like he was a god-damned maestro. And that's when I came so hard, I fucking squirt all over the hotel sheets, yet again. *Fuck me.* Charlie just chuckled, "Fuckin' good girl," he whispered near my ear, right before I felt his warmth filling me up - his hips stuttering out three more thrusts before we both passed out.

## Chapter 2

# Veronica

And that's how it started. Over the next few months, Charlie and I started going out almost every weekend. He'd take me to places out of the city with something new to see or do each and every time. I never put two and two together at that point. Not when I was enjoying seeing a different part of California each time. Not when we were laughing and smiling at each other, in our own little world. Initially, Sonja didn't have an opinion on our antics, but after the fifth date out of town, Sonja decided she needed to have a conversation.

*"Don't you think it's weird you two never go anywhere in town, like, ever?" she asked me one night while she was leaning against our kitchen counter as I cooked pasta for dinner. The question took me off guard a bit, I hadn't thought of it like that, "No, he likes showing me new places; he's being adventurous. There's nothing weird about it, Sonjz." She just crossed her arms and let out a low huff, "If you say so, but I find it very odd he's always got you miles away from reality every single time." I just gave her a little chuckle, "Not everything is suspicious, Sonjz." She just muttered under her breath, "It is when rich guys are involved."*

About six months in, even though he *seemed* to like Sonja, he still had something to say either about her or about how much time we spent together. I could never really figure it out - she's my roommate, and my best friend for Christ's sake. Why wouldn't I be around her often? But, that didn't matter to him. To him it was me "talking too much with her," or "why are you two always going out to the club? You do realize you have a boyfriend?" That one always got me. Like somehow having a boyfriend meant I couldn't have fun anymore. I mean, it's not like I was looking to hook up with anyone. I just wanted out of the house, out of the stress of finishing school and finding a job. Why couldn't he understand that? But to Charlie, it was just one more thing he felt like he had to compete with when it came to me.

That was the downfall with dating a lawyer - even though you knew you had valid points to make, somehow they would always be five steps ahead of you. Charlie always had a way of making me see his side of the story, and even though I knew, full well that my side of the story was also valid, somehow Charlie just had that ability to turn it around and make me question why I thought I had a point to begin with. Sonja wasn't the only "problem" Charlie had with how I lived my life, apparently either. One night he was picking me up from the campus gym, and Jarred was outside waiting with me until Charlie came. He knew I had a boyfriend, it was nothing. But to Charlie it was everything,

*"That guy wants you," he said as we pulled away from the gym. Looking back at Jarred in confusion, I asked Charlie, "You mean Jarred? No way, Jarred's like a brother, Charlie. There's nothing going on." "Maybe not for you, but guys don't spot girls like that if they just view them as a sister. That confused me even more, because Jarred was like a brother - he always protected me, always kept the gym rats away from me. There was nothing romantic between us. "Charlie, I'm with you, no one else." His grip on the steering wheel tightened, but all he gave away was a clipped, "Good."*

After that night, I avoided Jarred as much as I could. I didn't want to be rude, but I also didn't want another night with Charlie where I had to defend the logistics of being in a committed relationship while also being able to have a male friend. I thought I was being clever about it, but not clever enough, because even Sonja noticed the distance I was putting between Jarred and myself,

*"You barely spoke to Jarred today, is something wrong, did you two have a fight or something,?" she asked. Damn it, this is exactly what I was trying to avoid, so I just shrugged, "I didn't feel like sparring today." Sonja paused for a moment on the sidewalk, forcing me to turn and face her, "You didn't feel like - you love sparring. What happened?" Sonja looked at me another moment, eyes narrowing, brain engaging, and I saw it, the moment the thought crossed her mind, "Did Charlie say something?" Exhaling and praying to whatever god existed for some semblance of patience before I simply said to her,*

*"No, Charlie didn't say anything, now can we please drop this?" I started to turn around, continuing to walk, but Sonja caught up to me and grabbed my arm, effectively stopping me and turning me her way again, "He did, didn't he?" I can't lie to her, so I reluctantly told her, "He thinks Jarred was flirting with me." And with that Sonja just laughed, "Oh my god, Roni, Jarred flirts with everybody." I sighed and said, "I know, but Charlie didn't like it, and I'm just respecting that." Sonja blinked at me a few times - I think her brain was buffering at that point.*

*"You're changing how you live now because some guy feels insecure??"*

*My tone sharpened a bit, "It's called respecting your partner, Sonjz." She just shook her head at me, "No, Roni, it's control." That pissed me off, "You don't even know him." But she just crossed her arms and simply said, "I know guys like him. Rich. Charming. Easily sweep a girl off their feet only to disappoint them one day." I just shook my head, "You're wrong about Charlie - Stop projecting." Sonja just froze, "I'm not projecting." "Yes, you are, you haven't liked him from the start." "That's because something is off about him!" She actually yelled at me this time, "Well, I don't feel that," I told her matter-of-factly. She just sighed - the resigned kind of sigh you give when you know you're not going to be heard, "Yeah, that's what worries me," she muttered.*

But, in my eyes, things were fine, nothing too dramatic that screamed “red flag.” Right? I mean, everything seemed to be easily dismissed. Everything had a valid explanation. And so, when Charlie first asked me to stay the night - I was hesitant, but not unsure. That's not to say that I didn't try to relent, but Charlie was very compelling. So, even though his place was a good half hour from campus, I started spending more nights over with him. And they were great nights - we'd go out to eat, laugh, talk, and the sex was always amazing. Little did I realize, staying at his place effectively kept me away from Sonja more often than not.

I didn't spend much time with any of Charlie's colleagues, not really, but on the rare instances that I did, I eventually had to learn to keep my mouth shut. Apparently, something I was discussing with me of his friends, "embarrassed him,"

*"You embarrassed me last night," he said, while we were cooking in the kitchen together. I looked at him in confusion, "How did I embarrass you?" I asked. He just crossed his arms and looked at me, "the argument you started with Jordan." "You mean the discussion I had with your colleague about the homeless? Charlie, that was a conversation." He shook his head, "No, it was an argument; you were loud." My mouth just dropped open at that - the way he said it made it sound like I was a screaming banshee. "I wasn't loud, I simply didn't back down from a discussion Jordan chose to escalate."*

*"You don't even understand those topics, you " He spat, that one got me, stunned me into silence before my brain stopped briefly before it kicked back into gear. "Are you fucking kidding me - you think I'm stupid?" He just glared at me, jaw clenching, "I think you should know when to stay quiet."*

After that night with his colleagues, Charlie never invited me out with his circle again. More often than not, the traits he used to love, were now becoming something he wanted me to hide - I was, "too loud" or, "not everything has to be a debate, V." Or my favorite, "You should just smile, V. Words aren't always necessary." Smile. Like I was a prop that should just look pretty, but off to the side and by myself.

Things started shifting little by little. Sometimes they were subtle, other times they were so intense I didn't know what just happened. Life was starting to become a bipolar blur of highs and lows. One moment he was fine, he was my Charlie, the man I fell for - cracking jokes, telling me he loved my mouth, my "spark." He held me; He laughed with me. Other days he just started criticizing me, telling me what I was wearing was too loud:

*"Don't you have anything more sophisticated in your closet? You must have something that doesn't look like it came from a thrift store. I mean, look at that shirt. Why are there fifteen different colors going on in it?"*

Another promotion came for Charlie and with it came the increasing sense that my mere existence would piss him off, "You talk too much," "Jesus, V, why are you so animated over a silly design project?" or, "I don't have the time or energy for this today."

After a time it escalated from simply criticizing, to arguing, and then to grabbing my wrist, effectively holding me back from leaving the room until he was "done talking to me." Or when he felt the need to push me into a room, or block me from leaving all together. It seemed on the nights he came home drunk, which started happening more so after the promotion, those were the nights where he thought backhanding me in the face was the only way to end the night. Sometimes it wasn't even me he came after - sometimes it was a chair being kicked, or a vase being thrown against the wall to make his point that the conversation was over. And somehow after each argument, he'd blame me:

*"Look what you made me do..."*

*"If you weren't so impossible, I wouldn't lose control like this..."*

*"Maybe if you knew your place..."*

More often though, he was tense, like there was something weighing him down. Always at his computer, and always with this brow permanently etched into this scowl. I'd try to lighten the mood. Tell him to put the laptop away and come sit with me. That only seemed to enrage him, "*Stop trying to manage me, V. I have an important project I'm working on. But you wouldn't understand the concept. Not all of us can sit around all day drawing for clients and get to call it work - yes, by this time I had graduated and landed some freelancing gigs. Some of us have life or death matters that we have to fix.*"

I truly didn't know what to do. Do I say something to try and cheer him up, or do I keep my mouth shut and just follow his lead? I found myself making excuses for him more often than not.

*He didn't hit me often - it's only when he drinks. He still tells me he loves me, he's just busy, and I don't get to see him much. Maybe I am being too much. Maybe I should just dial it down some.*

I went from being someone who unapologetically took up space, lived loud, and loved life - to being someone who second-guessed every move, word, and decision she made. I twisted myself into knots trying to accommodate him. To fix things. To fix *me*. Before I knew it, I was internalizing all of it, every shift, every accusation, convincing myself that any anger Charlie directed my way was either something I caused or something I deserved. But somehow that only seemed to enrage him more and I realized he wanted more pieces of me to break. By then, the damage was done. Being with Charlie had effectively cut me down from the fiery, foul-mouthed woman I once was into this mousy and skittish woman - someone I didn't recognize when I caught my reflection. He had isolated me to the point where I felt I couldn't reach out to anyone - because let's face it, I chose him over them time and time again. I didn't dare go home, not when Sonja was there at least. She'd see, I know she would. She'd take one look at me and know, and she wouldn't stop until she got answers. The guilt kept me silent. It kept me small. I had no one left.. Not even myself.

I was so tired of it all. My work was suffering. My stomach was always in knots. My appetite was gone. I lost weight without even trying - and on the rare days I did manage to eat, Charlie always had something to say about it. Something sharp. Something meant to cut. "You know," he'd say casually, like he was offering friendly advice, "You really should cut back on your portions. You're looking a little puffy around the middle."

*Puffy.*

I had lost 15 lbs since dating him, and yet he had the nerve to call me "*puffy*." I couldn't stand it any longer. I needed to know where this was going, if anywhere. So, one night, I asked, "Charlie? Do you not want me anymore?" I hated how pathetic I sounded, but I needed to know. He looked me over, and

I could see a heat forming behind the coldness in his eyes. He started undoing his tie, while walking towards me, and came to stand in front of the sofa, looking down at me.

He reached his hand out to run his hand through my hair, and I flinched. It was involuntary, just habit at this point, but I knew Charlie caught it too by the way I saw his jaw clench. He grabbed me by the back of my neck and hauled me up off the couch. I was now standing face to face with him, “You wonder if I still want you, yet you flinch at my touch. Make it make sense, V. Which part of me do you want, V? I’m not perfect, and I realize the stress turns me into something I’m not always proud of, but I’m still a man, standing in front of a beautiful woman... Of course, I want you.”

His words had my head running in circles. *What the actual fuck is going on? Had I been reading this wrong. Is it just stress?* The next second, Charlie’s lips were crashing down on me. It had been too long that I felt his touch and I melted into him, threaded my fingers in his hair and gripped tightly. He groaned and hoisted me up, and I wrapped my legs around his waist instinctively as he walked us to the bedroom. He laid us out on the bed with me underneath him as he looked me over from above. His hands slid down my body and I arched into his touch. “Your body is so responsive, baby. Fuck, V, I’ve missed how good you feel underneath me.” I whimpered and started unbuttoning his shirt, but he stopped me. “Patience, baby. I want to do something a little different.” With that, he stood up, and undid his buckle and then removed his belt.

He crooked his finger, motioning for me to come to him. I got up off the bed and went to stand in front of him. “Charlie, what -” He put one finger to his lips, “Be a good girl, for me, V. Raise your hands above your head and turn around.” I blinked but did as he said - I turned around, my back to his front, with my hands raised above my head. He took his belt, and wrapped it around both of my wrists, and secured the leather tightly. “Charlie?” He leaned in against the crook of my neck and inhaled, “Shh, baby. I’m gonna take care of you so well. Make you cum so hard all over my cock. Do you know how long I’ve wanted to slip inside your heat? Think you’re wet for me yet, baby?” He said as he slid his hand in front of me and underneath my leggings, and beneath my panties, and yes, I was wet for him.

“Fuuuck, baby, you’re so warm and wet for me. I don’t know what I want more - to slide my tongue up your wet slit, or just thrust my cock into this pussy.” He said that last part as he slid two fingers inside me. I arched my back and pushed my ass into his front - his cock was rock hard, it had me panting like a little whore. “So eager, aren’t you baby?” Charlie said as he kept his gaze on me while he slid the two fingers in and out of my pussy before removing them and sliding them into my mouth, “Clean me up, baby.” I obeyed as I cleaned his fingers clean of my arousal. Charlie pulled his fingers from my mouth and slid his tongue in instead.

I heard the zipper of his pants being undone, and the next thing I knew Charlie was walking me to the wall, "Hands in front, lean them against the wall and don't move." I did as he said, as he began pushing my leggings down around my knees. He gripped my hair, yanking me back against his shoulder with one hand, while his other hand guided his cock to my entrance. "Spread your legs wider, baby - give me that pussy." My body bent and molded to his will, and then he was sheathed deep inside me, giving me no time to adjust to his thick cock. Charlie kept a steady and brutal pace - my hands being the only thing keeping my face from being smothered by the wall in front of me. Grunting away, he kept his pace hard and fast. Smacking my ass so hard, I yelled. "Fuck, you cry so good, baby. You make my dick harder each time." *Whack*. Slapping my ass again, he grunted, "Cry for me again baby. Fuck, give me your pain." *Whack!*

"Charlie, stop." His pace quickened, along with his breathing. *Whack!* "Ow! Charlie, stop that." Then his free hand was gripping my hip to bend me further. "Shut up, V. Be my good little girl right now. Shut the fuck up, and give me this pussy that I've been missing for months. You've been keeping her from me, you know? All I've wanted is this right here. Fuck, you grip my cock so well." He reached around and started playing with my clit. I was so confused, I didn't know what to feel. Should I be annoyed that he was essentially using my body or should I just enjoy the feel of him inside me, bringing me closer and closer to the edge.

He started to get rougher with me though. His fingers gripped my hair tighter, while his other hand wrapped around my throat, effectively keeping me at his mercy and immobile. "Charlie, you're hurting me." I tried to wiggle out of his grasp but he just grunted and continued his punishing pace. "You'll be fine, V. Take it, take all of me, baby. Please, fuuuck, baby, please." I tried again to break free of him, but he pinned me to the wall further, essentially caging me in between his body and the wall. His hand left my throat and proceeded to lift my one leg up, giving him deeper access.

His thrusts were rough and fast and I knew he was close. He leaned in and bit my ear before panting, "V, cum with me, baby." And within seconds he was emptying himself deep inside me, not even waiting for me to cum with him like he said. I didn't move. Initially, I just stood there - collecting my thoughts, attempting to figure out what the hell just happened. As my breathing settled, I felt Charlie undoing his belt from around my wrists. As the last inch of his belt slid from my wrists and onto the floor, he wrapped his arm around my waist and nuzzled his face into the side of my neck. "See?" He said it as he grabbed the back of my neck and hauled me to him for a devastatingly brutal kiss. "You never have to question whether I want you or not. I'll never deny that fucking pussy" - he said while he started circling my clit with his finger. I smacked his hand away, and all he did was chuckle. "I'm going to shower. Want to join me?" The smirk on his face made me feel like a piece of shit. "No," was all I

managed. He just shrugged and turned, leaving me there with my own confused thoughts. “Suit yourself.” And then the door to the bathroom closed.

↔

## CHARLIE

“*Do you not want me anymore?*” I hear her words replay in my mind as I sit in the living room while she pretends to sleep. It’s not the question that bothers me. People ask for reassurance all the time. What bothers me is the way she asked it - hesitant and careful, like she was trying to avoid a reaction from me. That’s what’s changed now, that’s what irritates me. She never tip-toed around words before. She never would’ve needed to adjust. Fuck, it’s what drew me to her in the first place. I drag my hands over my jaw, replaying her words. “*Do you not want me anymore?*” The question puts me in a position where I’d have to respond to something that shouldn’t even be a question if everything were functioning the way it should. Fuck. I exhale slowly, forcing myself to think this through. When I laid eyes on her, the certainty of her wasn’t loud, it wasn’t attention-seeking. She made decisions and never second-guessed. That’s what made her worth my time. But now... Now she pauses. She asks for clarity.

There’s a dependence that’s grown in her now and I don’t know how I feel about it. I’d love to say that the past year and a half has been fun, but Jesus, how much fun can you have when you’re nothing but disappointed. The night I saw V punch that guy at the bar, I knew I had to have her. Her strength was intoxicating. I needed it, it was the drug I craved as my world spiraled around me. Do you have any idea what it’s like to go through life and have everything mapped out for you? Where you’ll go to college, what major you’ll study, what law firm you’ll work for, who you’ll marry? Everything. It’s suffocating. Veronica was supposed to be the fresh air that blew new life into my veins. And now, she’s become something I don’t understand anymore. Questioning me, questioning us. She’s becoming yet another thing I have to answer to. It’s suffocating. And now, the contract my father made with my soon-to-be father-in-law, was coming to its apex soon. The proverbial noose around my neck was getting tighter. My future fiancée was demanding more of my time. Everything was starting to close in around me, and it didn’t help that V was starting to question me and pull away. She was supposed to be my escape. I can’t let her go. I just need to remind her that she belongs with me, by any means necessary.

## Chapter 3

# Veronica

After that night, the changes I'd come to notice in Charlie seemed to take root and become more prominent. His phone now had a lock screen on it. He started taking calls outside. And every time I asked him about it he'd snap at me, "It's just work. Stop trying to manage me, V." I wasn't trying to manage him - I was trying to understand why this knot in the pit of my stomach kept growing. I was trying to understand why our relationship was shifting into something I didn't understand anymore. He was texting late at night. He had more dinners to attend that were always after work hours.

Everything had me feeling like he was pulling away from me, which only made me seem more needy each and every time I would ask him where he was going. Every night I wondered when he'd be back. Did he not want me anymore? Did I do something wrong? I had to know, I had to understand. So, finally I just asked, "Is there someone else?" Charlie just laughed. But it wasn't his usual carefree laugh - the kind he used to give me when he thought something I had said was cute or witty. No, this laugh was cold, distant, and dismissive. "Stop making everything about you, V," he said as he went back to his phone.

"Who are you texting, Charlie? If there's someone else, I deserve to know." He put his phone down and just stared at me, "You deserve to know? Who exactly do you think you are? You really think you're important, don't you?" I just blinked at that. "What are you saying, Charlie? What's going on with us?" With a deep sigh, he sat up straight and rubbed his hands down his face, "God, you can be so infuriating sometimes. Where is this coming from anyway?" I could tell I was starting to test his patience - his jaw was ticking away the more he looked at me, but still, I kept going. "Charlie, you're barely home anymore.

You're constantly on the phone - either talking or texting. You're out late more often. I mean what the hell, Charlie, do you even want to be with me anymore?" With that he threw his phone across the room, and stood up, "You're unbelievable! Everything I've done for you and this is what you think?" I had to brace myself, but I also had to have this conversation. "I don't know what to believe anymore, Charlie. You barely tell me you love me anymore. You hardly touch me. You're just not here - this doesn't feel like a relationship anymore." That made him snap - in three strides he was in front of me, shoving me back against the bathroom door.

We both froze, and for a brief moment I thought I saw something flash behind his eyes - something faintly close to fear or maybe regret, but then he recovered and his scowl was back in place, "You

always bring out the worst in me, V." I was shocked at that statement. Was he actually trying to blame me for his actions? "If I bring out the worst in you, then why are you still with me??" I almost screamed it at him, almost. But still, it didn't matter. Clam voice or not, he still slapped me across the face. "Stop being ridiculous. Just learn your place and things will work themselves out." And with that, he grabbed his phone and his coat, and left for the night. Leaving me standing there with my hand cradling my face, yet again.

He didn't come home until early in the morning. I know because I spent the night sleeping on the couch, hoping he'd come home soon and he never did. When he came in and saw me on the couch, his first words to me were, "Don't start, V." Did I listen? Nope. "Charlie, where were you?" He threw his coat down, "What the fuck did I just say, V? What the actual fuck is wrong with you?" I looked down at the floor as I sat there on the couch, and just stared off while my mind thought of what to say. What should I do; did I really want this anymore? "Do you not want me anymore?" He just stared at me before turning to walk to the bedroom, completely dismissing my question. So I called out, "I think we need to call this quits, Charlie. This isn't working out anymore." That stopped him dead in his tracks toward the bedroom. He turned slowly and looked at me. "We're not calling it quits, V."

"Charlie, you're not happy anymore. You're barely ever here. Let's just cut our losses and go our separate ways." Charlie just laughed, a laugh that bordered on manic. "You're not going anywhere. You're mine - so we're done when I say we're done." "Charlie, what the hell has gotten into you? I'm not staying with you just because you say so." He came up to me and grabbed my wrist. Tight. "Yes you are. You'll do as I say, when I say. And I say we're not over." I tried to pull my wrist free from him, but his grip tightened. "Charlie, you're hurting me." "Suck it up, V. A woman who can punch a guy in the jaw at a bar should be able to take a little pressure."

I tried to pull away again, and this time he let me go, and I ended up falling on my ass. "You're insane. We're not doing this anymore." I got up to leave but he grabbed me and shook me, "You're not leaving me, V. We'll work through this and everything will be fine. You'll see - we're just in a bit of a rough patch, but we can push through it" The look in his eyes almost had me questioning myself because he looked so sincere, so hurt. But then the next words out of his mouth were nothing but an ice cold bucket of water drenching every single bone in my body. "Besides, if you even think of leaving me, just make sure you realize how connected I am. I can either help your career, or I can ruin you and your reputation - make sure your clients know how *unstable* you are." He let me go and stepped away from me, and all I could do was just stare at him with my mouth agape. "How can you claim to love me, and not want me to leave, all while threatening my livelihood to make me stay?" He just looked at me like I'd spoken another language. "Don't think of it as a threat, V. Think of it as insurance. I don't want you leaving me, and so, I will do everything I can to make you stay. It's very simple." I talk one cautious

step towards him and in a lower tone I asked, "Have you ever considered not hitting me? Maybe not talking to whoever the fuck you're talking to? Have you ever considered just, I don't know, treating me like you used to. Loving me like you used to. Maybe then I'd actually want to stay, instead of being terrified to leave."

He tsked at me before speaking, *tsk-tsk*, "Veronica, I thought you were smarter than this. I only hit you because you haven't learned your lesson yet. You're constantly testing me. It truly is your own fault. If you would just realize that your job is to just sit back and let me handle my world, then I could gladly give you everything you could possibly want. But you keep trying to push my limits. You keep trying to box me in and make me something I am not. I can only give you myself, if you learn to understand where your role in my life will be, and you *still* question that."

He started walking back to the bedroom now, but before he went in, he stopped at the doorway, turned to me and smirked, "Think about it, V, and be smart. I could make your life so easy... Or I could make your life a living hell. Your choice." He closed the bedroom door, and left me there in the middle of the quiet living room, by myself. Alone. I'd love to say that night was the last straw - that I'd seen the light, but unfortunately, it wasn't. I was too far gone from who I was. Too hollowed out. Too scared. And honestly, too fucking confused. What the hell happened? This man I fell in love with, he just threatened my livelihood, my reputation. How was I supposed to get away from this without destroying myself? Did he even love me anymore - how could he when he was the one destroying me?

Then it happened, the one singular moment I had to walk away from. It was an ordinary Thursday. I had left the office for my lunch break and had just ordered from my favorite food truck nearby. As I waited for my order, I ventured to the nearby newsstand - something I always did, as I loved looking through new layouts, fonts, and spreads for inspiration. One headline caught my eye immediately - the typography was stunning: modern, bold, clean.

It was some high-end California lifestyle magazine, the type that features the elite, "up-and-coming" faces of wealth. I flipped through, admiring the design work, until Page 44 nearly stopped my heart:

*"West Coast's Charity Gala Couple to Watch"*

And there stood Charlie. Arm wrapped around the waist of a beautiful blonde. In the photo they're both looking at each other. Their smiles, identical, poised, confident, and so utterly in love. The caption told me everything.

*Callie*. That was her name, and she was his fiancée. *Fi-an-cee*.

The word rooted with a sudden shock that morphed into anger all at once. Suddenly, it all made sense now. His late-night office stays. The meetings that turned into dinners. Going to the gym more. Not inviting me out with his friends anymore. The phone that was always face down now, and buzzing at all hours of the day, and night. I bought the magazine, grabbed my lunch, and walked back to the office. For the next four hours I planned my next move - the most reckless and freeing decision I would ever make for myself. That evening, I called Charlie and asked if he would be home in time for dinner. Told him I was planning a nice meal for us. He softened immediately and told me he'd be home around seven. I made his favorite: steak, medium rare; mashed potatoes and roasted vegetables. I set the table with candles, our best silverware... and the magazine, opened to page 44 and set it atop his place setting.

My nerves were vibrating under my skin. My breathing was uneven, no matter how many deep breaths I forced. Charlie came in smiling, hung up his coat and came behind me to kiss my shoulder. I tensed, I remember that, and then everything unraveled. He turned to sit himself down at the table and saw the magazine. Instantly the air in the room shifted, and his voice came out low and controlled, "V, what is this?"

It took everything in me not to cower, to lift my chin and straighten my back, "Funny, I was going to ask you the same thing." He turned to me and the look he gave me told me exactly the type of night I was in for, but I was willing to endure it if it meant I wouldn't have to see this piece of shit ever again. I just hoped I'd survive, but if this is what it took, I was going to go through it, because Fuck. This. Bullshit. "What the fuck is this shit, Charlie?! Who is she?!"

It wasn't his fists, honestly, I had been hit before in my lifetime so on some level this wasn't something I was surprised by. Hell, it wasn't even him back-handing my face, that hurt the most. No, what hurt the most was the kick to the ribs, not the physical pain of it. I mean, don't get me wrong, it fucking hurt like a mother, but it was the emotional pain of it all. Like I was nothing but trash that he needed to get as far away from him as possible. In the middle of it all he started yelling at me, "What I do with my time is none of your fucking business!"

And then he switched tactics, softer now but still with that lethal edge, "You don't know the pressure I'm under from my father. You don't know the circles I run in - the people I know." And then sharper, "You could never be the one on my arm, you wouldn't last. But it doesn't mean we can't still be together - we just have to be quiet, you see?" He was insane. By the time he was done working his anger out on me, my eye was already swelling, and it hurt to breathe. He crouched down at me, grabbed me by my jaw and squeezed, "Don't ever question what I do on my time, ever again. Are we clear, V? Now clean

this mess you made up. I want the house spotless by the time I come home." As if him throwing me across the dinner table and having everything land all over the floor was somehow my fault. Like he didn't cause all of the mess laying at his feet.

With what breath I could manage in my lungs, I looked him straight in the eyes, "We're done." He laughed, actually laughed in my face. "We'll never be done. You're nothing without me. Did you forget what I told you before? You don't know who you're truly dealing with, V, the resources I have at my disposal. There's no where you can run to, and no one would believe you anyway. You're mine, V. You always will be mine," he said it all so eerily calm, and with a smile on his face, but I think it was the smile that unnerved me the most. Like he was smiling at an inside joke I wasn't privy too.

He left - slamming the door so hard the picture frames rattled against the walls. I dragged myself onto my hands and knees and made my way to our bedroom. Everything hurt. Every breath burned. There was only one person I could trust right now, and I just prayed she had enough compassion left in her that she'd answer my call.

Sonja.

She picked up on the third ring. Her voice was defensive and icy, and she had every right to, but the moment she heard how labored my breathing was, how rough and low my voice was, every bitter word she wanted to spew, all her anger, evaporated. "What happened?" was all she said. I told her what I could. What my tired body would allow to come out. Then I asked her for help. I told her I needed a place to hide, time to heal, and then a plan to get out. She came immediately.

One look at me, and the string of curses that flew out of her mouth that night were shockingly impressive. She took me to her brother Dylan's place. I knew him from the campus gym - always friendly, always offering to spot me when Jarred wasn't around. When she told him what happened, he didn't hesitate. He'd agreed to help however he could. They drove me to an ER three towns over. I mumbled something about being mugged. Didn't see who. Didn't file a report. I just wanted to go home. I stayed at Dylan's place in the weeks that followed, in an attempt to keep myself hidden for Charlie. That didn't stop his calls though. He called my cell, multiple times and at all hours of the night. Each and every voicemail he left somehow became increasingly worse. First, they started out apologetic. Next they escalated to bargaining - I think he went through all the stages of grief right there on my phone.

The only issue was, the majority of them ended on the stage of anger, with nothing but pure venom spewing from his lips. So, I turned my phone off - not wanting to deal with his issues any longer. Sonja helped me look for places to live, but I told her I needed more than a new apartment. With the threats

Charlie slung my way regarding my career, I couldn't risk it. I knew he'd escalate and make good on each and every threat he made if I came home again. I needed a new life somewhere that wasn't California. Somewhere away from *him* and his reach. She hated the idea, but she understood.

Chicago was my final choice. Far enough to breathe. Far enough to feel unreachable. And honestly, the designer in me couldn't resist. Chicago's architecture had always fascinated me - sharp lines, brick, steel, the kind of city that knew how to rebuild itself, how to get back up. Something I needed desperately. We found a local woman's shelter that worked with abuse survivors, and we compiled a list of design firms with openings that I could apply to when I was settled in. Within a few weeks my bruises faded, and I was ready to get out of the city that now held all of my worst memories. Sonja didn't say anything at first. She just hugged me. That hug cracked something open inside me. All the tension, all the fear, all the sadness - came out in tears. The kind that wreck your whole body, but she just held me tighter.

Sonja drove me to the train station in the next town over. I purchased a one-way ticket with what little money I had saved - because yeah, Charlie also monitored how much money I made and decided I needed to hand over half towards our "future." I can't help but roll my eyes hard at that now. She hugged me like she never wanted to let me go, but reluctantly did. "Call me the moment you get to the shelter. Don't disappear on me again" she said. I promised I wouldn't. When I finally sat down in my roomette, everything hit all at once. Everything within the last year and a half replaying in brutal detail. All the signs I ignored, all the words I believed, all the times I let him decide who I was. I felt sick with shame. Angry at myself. Like I'd betrayed the woman I used to be. And even with all that pain simmering under my skin, I found myself thinking of Callie - his fiancée. I wondered what version of Charlie she was familiar with. Was she familiar with his darkness? Or was it just me that caught his wrath? Was I really that pathetic? Unworthy of any basic decency? Or was this a "him" thing?

Fueled by a mixture of regret and anger, I did one last thing before the train left the station. I made an anonymous email account, found Callie's information, and emailed her a warning. Complete with photos of my latest bruises and injuries. The only thing I wrote was to warn her that Charlie wasn't who he claimed to be. Told her she didn't need to know who I was - only listen to what I have to say, and protect herself.

I attached the ER photos.

The x-rays.

Everything.

And I hit send.

The next day, I saw the "read" receipt. I deleted the account, took out the battery, and pulled the SIM. When I got to Chicago, I'd get a new prepaid phone - start clean.

I'd rebuild myself brick by brick. I'd rebuild a life he tried his hardest to erase.

## Chapter 4

# Veronica

I'm sitting here with my head resting against the window as the rumble and hiss of the train pulling into the station wakes me from what little sleep I was able to catch. A long sigh escapes my lips, reflecting how I feel all over - empty, wrung out, and barely hanging on.

Chicago's Fall weather hits me and clears the half-awake haze from my head the moment the doors opened. The city feels bigger than what the pictures could convey. Somehow taller, louder, hungrier. Thankfully it didn't remind me of California. It didn't feel like *him* - that alone made the oxygen flow easier to my lungs. The prospect of starting new was trying to work its way into my system. I could feel it, the excitement that wanted to turn to full-on joy, but I was still processing life as it was at this moment. I could feel it all seep deep into my bones as I tightened the grip on my suitcase and stepped off the platform, heading to my destination.

Sara's Haven - a woman's shelter in the city. I had arranged a bed days ago when Sonja and I were looking over places to stay. Loraine, the shelter's manager, told me they had space, told me to come straight there, told me not to worry about anything else until I was safely inside. I followed the directions she emailed me, and made my way there. The building was simple, old brick with a blue awning - no sign, no obvious markers to alert you of what secrets the building is hiding. All intentional. Pressing the call button, the front door buzzed open, and a woman with warm, brown eyes, and a plush cardigan stood on the other side.

"Veronica?" I nodded. "Good. You made it." She looked me over, taking me in but not judging me. "Come inside. Let's get you settled." The lobby was soft and open, warm lighting and a hint of lavender and laundry soap was in the air. There was a community bulletin board, full of job fair pamphlets, community programs, art classes, and more. Everything you could want or need if you were working your way back to starting anew. Loraine led me down a hallway and directed me to the door on the

right, "Your bed's ready. Towels are in the basket. Breakfast is at seven, but for tonight? Just rest." *Rest.* Like that was simple, like my insides weren't still a live wire, vibrating and on edge.

When she left me in the small, shared room, I sat on the edge of the cot, and set my suitcase down on the floor. I was here. I'd made it. I wasn't out of the woods yet, not fully, but at least I was somewhere I could breathe without listening for footsteps or anticipating someone's mood swings. I sent Sonja one quick text from the new phone I purchased at the gas station I had passed on the walk over. I let her know I made it, that I was at the shelter and was going to attempt to sleep. I let her know that I loved her, and that I'd be in touch. I laid down, and pulled the thin blanket to my chin. Sleep didn't come easily, and when it did come, I wasn't alone. It started with a door slamming somewhere down the hall, distant, but sharp enough that I jerked awake. For a moment I couldn't remember where I was. The darkness of the room, no windows, the smell in the air. It was all different. It took me a few forced breaths to calm myself, and remind myself where I was. That *he* wasn't here and I was safe. Once I laid back down, the dream sucked me under before I knew what was happening:

*I was there, back in California, back in the pristine white apartment with its perfect angles - everything that he had said we needed to look "put together." I'm sitting on the sofa sketching and Charlie comes in, slamming the door, and going straight to pour himself a drink. I'm asking him if everything is okay, when the dream spans forward, and I notice the way the sofa dips with a new weight.*

*Charlie is there now, fingertips digging into my jaw hard enough that I know they'll bruise. I could still feel the heat of his skin against me, the breath fanning uncomfortably against my ear. "How can someone so smart, ask such stupid questions?" The image spun into a new direction with memories of my head cracking against the kitchen cabinet so fast my vision splattered into white sparks. I remember the taste of blood in my mouth. The way the room spun out of control. The moment his face came into startling view, up close and way too personal..."*

I woke up gasping for air. My palms were damp, along with the hair on the nape of my neck and my shirt stuck to my skin. I sat up in the cot, curling into myself and swallowing back the rise in bile. The other woman in the room stirred awake and looked at me, "You okay?" I swallowed once more and caught my breath, "Yeah. Sorry, just a bad dream." She didn't push, just nodded her head, whispering, "We all have those." I sat there until my breathing evened out and exhaustion started to claim me.

The next few days passed in bits and pieces. Breakfast at a long cafeteria table, warm oatmeal, instant coffee, and the hum of conversations between the other women all filled the air, and gave a warmth of security I hadn't felt lately. After breakfast, Lorraine came up and introduced me to Jessica, the shelter's counselor. Jessica had me sit down with her for an hour - just asking simple questions to help her get a

feel of where I was at mentally, and what I hoped to achieve while there. She let me know that her door was always open if I needed it. I took her up on her offer. The night came again, and with it a new nightmare clawed its way in with it.

*Charlie's hands.*

*My blood on the kitchen tiles.*

*The way my body ached crawling to the bathroom after.*

By the fourth nightmare, I woke up with a soft cry lodged in my throat. This time, the woman in the cot next to me just put her hand ever so gently on my shoulder - grounding me. "Thank you," I whispered. "You're safe now," she whispered back. It didn't feel like it was true, but somewhere inside me I knew it also didn't feel like a lie. The exhaustion and worry started to lessen within the following weeks. Not all at once, not magically, but in the small ways you only notice when looking back on it all. One morning, after breakfast, I found the shelter's wreck room empty.

Most women avoided it; old desktops that were slow, books covered in dust, and the lighting that made everything look pale and sickly. But I needed something to do to keep my mind from suffocating. I opened my email first, expecting nothing, but hoping. No new messages. I searched the center for a sketchpad and pencils next. My fingers froze as my mind mulled over what to draw first. Nothing fancy came of it. At first it was just shapes. Lines. Angles. It turned into a sunrise over sharp angled mountains. Then, the next day, a simple compass design. Then a typographic poster with the words "*Keep going,*" carved through negative space. I taped that one above my cot. And for the first time since fleeing California, the nightmares didn't win *every* night.

The next day, Loraine saw my design taped above my bed. "This yours?" she asked. "Yeah. Just something I was working on." She gave me that warm, perceptive look she always reserved for moments she didn't want to push too hard. "You know," she started, "we're updating the bulletin board near the front desk. The flyers are a mess. If you want something to do with your hands... Feel free." I didn't say yes right away, but later that afternoon I found myself standing in front of the old cork-board with a stack of flyers in one hand and a handful of new pins in the other. By evening, the board was completely reorganized: clean lines, bold headers, color coordination that satisfied the dormant designer in me. A few other women stopped to look. "This is way nicer." One said. Another one added, "You did that? Nice, girl." It wasn't praise that I needed, not really, but the acknowledgement stung - in a good way.

Like a part of me that had been buried while surviving Charlie was finally waking up. Every morning after breakfast, checking my email became the routine. I'd applied to dozens of design firms, and I had

no solid plan, just a hope that my persistence might pay off. Up until now, there had been nothing. But one Tuesday, when the inbox finally loaded, there they stood, "unread." Three emails.

My hands shook with hope as I clicked through them. The first was a small branding firm thanking me for my submission and asking if I was available for a virtual interview. The second was a local print shop needing a part-time design assistant for product mock-ups. And the third was a boutique agency downtown that "loved the energy" of my portfolio and wanted to schedule an in-person interview.

I stared at the screen so long, Lorraine finally walked up to me and asked if everything was alright. I swallowed, "I... I might have some interviews." Her smile spread gently across her face. "That's wonderful, Veronica. Truly. You deserve good news." Once those emails came, momentum followed. I straightened my hair in the bathroom mirror, while Lorraine lent me a soft cream blouse that fit better than anything I owned. Interview by interview, the fear receded. I remembered how to talk about design, how to talk about solving problems visually, about layout and typography - things that made sense in a world that hadn't made sense for a long, long time.

The email came on a Thursday. My usual routine of checking my emails after breakfast paid off when I saw it there in my inbox: NCW Creative - the boutique branding agency downtown. They wanted me. Lorraine was bringing in donations for sorting into the room behind me, and heard me let out a sharp squeal. I turned to her, "I got the job!" She squeezed my hand, "See? Told you. They'd be foolish to pass up your talent." I felt it then, that spark of excitement. Something inside me yawning awake and stretching out to touch the sunlight. I stayed at the shelter for another month.

Letting myself stash my paychecks aside to gather enough of a down payment for a place of my own. Lorraine was right there to help me with my next step, "You're ready, you're stable." She said to me one night while we were talking in a meeting between me and Jessica. The shelter had a partnership with local landlords who offered reduced rent for women rebuilding their lives after crisis. Lorraine took me out the next weekend to look at some potential places. The first was a tiny studio with peeling paint and a window that didn't close properly.

The second was worse - a basement apartment that smelled of mildew and felt more like a cage than a fresh start. The last was a single-family rental. Slightly older with a decent neighborhood, and within my budget. When we pulled up to the house, the sun was on its way to setting - a small grey house, tucked behind a row of old oaks, with a well-lived front porch and windows. There was a shared driveway with the house next door - a two-story home with a wide porch, and a garage open with its lights faintly glowing at the end of said driveway.

The landlord, Sheryl, a middle-aged woman with soft eyes and long black hair, unlocked the door for us. She led us inside: a small hallway leading to an open concept living space off to the right, a small kitchen with its own island, and clean cabinets. The space had that warm glow, courtesy of a plethora of windows and enough sunlight to scatter through all of them. It gave the home its peaceful atmosphere that I was slowly falling in love with. Upstairs there was a guest bedroom to the far right, and the main bedroom was off to the left from the top of the staircase, and a half bath in the middle of the two. The main bedroom had a sloped ceiling with a wall of storage at its base. And the best part? The bedroom had its own en-suite bathroom, and it came with a claw-foot tub.

It wasn't perfect, but it was warm, and real. A place I could rebuild in. A place with enough light, with enough open space that I could see myself creating again. Where I could see myself getting back up and building a future. I ran my fingers along the window frame, imagining the nights sitting on the back porch, with a mug in my one hand, and a sketchpad on my lap. Mornings with soft light and a quiet breeze. Loraine nudged me gently, "Well?" "It feels like *home*," I whispered. Loraine smiled at me, "That's definitely a good sign."

With my offer letter from Nora, my deposit, and my history renting with Sonja, I was able to sign the lease with Sheryl two days later. She handed me the keys and for a moment I just stared at them. These were mine. This start was mine. My life was mine, and I have every intention of making it count. Loraine was there with me the day I moved in. I had nothing more than the bag on my back and the suitcase I rolled into the shelter with that first day. She smiled at me and gave me a hug. "You're going to be great - don't doubt how far you've come. Remember, I'm just a phone call away, and I'll check in from time to time." And then I watched as she pulled out of the drive and headed back to the shelter.

I stood there for a brief moment, taking everything in. The weight of the key in my hand. The comfort of the breeze dancing with my hair. I lifted my face to the sky with my eyes closed and just breathed in, while the breeze still played through my hair. I exhaled slowly, a small smile playing on my lips as I opened my eyes to take in my surroundings. And then I froze - someone was standing on the front porch next door. A man, tall, who stood eerily still and just looked at me as if he were memorizing key details. It was unnerving, and way too close to a memory I wished to forget. I ducked my head and made my way inside my new home.

↔

ERIK

I've been noticing activity at the house next door. Guess it's about time, considering that house has been vacant for the better part of six months, collecting dust. I watched as Sheryl showed the house to two

women the other day. One, older, maybe late 40's, short, brown hair, average height, and definitely giving off maternal vibes. The other was tall, compared to the other two women she was now talking with, maybe 5'8, 5'9, and young - I'd say mid-twenties? She was undeniably beautiful - long, brown, wavy hair hung past her shoulders. Didn't seem to wear much makeup, if any. Had an edgy vibe about her, probably an artist of sorts. She had a hesitant nature about her though. Seemed like she was always looking over her shoulder, or checking her surroundings every five minutes. She was cataloging her space. Interesting.

Most people I come across take every day at face value. The sun will rise in the East and then set in the West. The L will always have a temporary breakdown when it's too hot out in the beginning of the summer months. The usual. Not me though, I've found it to be more soothing to watch from a distance and map out probabilities versus outcomes. Habit of being in the cyber-security industry, but it does come in handy in my everyday life. I can usually read people right away and know when a situation warrants my attention, and when it doesn't. I'm not saying our new neighbor is going to be a potential threat, but there's definitely something I need to look out for and pay attention to.

Today, the women are back again. I quietly step out onto our front porch and stand back, looking over the unfolding scene. Seems Ms. Skittish is, in fact, about to become our newest addition to the block, that's the first thought that goes through my mind as I watch Sheryl hand her the keys to the house.

I watch as Sheryl says something to her, and then she extends her hand - clear sign that the transaction has successfully completed. Sheryl turns back to her car and leaves. Leaving the maternal woman and our new neighbor, both standing at the mouth of our shared driveway. They're talking low enough that I can't pick out any clear words to guide me through whatever they may be talking about. The older woman takes the other in an embrace that she easily accepts. The older woman pulls back, hands braced on the young woman's shoulders - she's all smiles before saying something that shifts her features into a serious tone. With that she backs away and heads to her car, yelling out that she'll be in touch, before pulling out of the drive.

I watch her then. She's standing there, looking down into her palm at the key Sheryl gave her. I watch a small smile lift her lips as she breaths in deep while angling her face to the sky. When she exhales and turns to head inside, she spots me and freezes. I can only imagine what this must look like to her - a man in a hoodie, quietly standing against his porch wall, watching. So, I don't say anything - better not to engage, just let it play out. I see her swallow and back away, head ducking down in a defensive posture before she retreats inside her new home. Interesting. What has you so skittish, little Vex?