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# Small

by jooniebjones

## Summary

I think she was right.

I am a whore.

Maybe it's the way I can't but soak up the endless applause the audience gives every time I dance. How I went to great lengths to show the first person I ever loved just how much I cared for her. Or maybe it's the fact that I can't help but be attracted to a man, who is way too beautiful to be real, who I know will only be mine in my fantasies. And yet I know I will take any crumb of affection he is willing to give me. So yeah, maybe the term "whore" was made just for me.

## Notes

OK....

I am fanfic virgin writer. I have never done anything like this. All I know is that I'm a black girl that loves writing and BTS. I also wanted to have a story that involves a black girl such
as myself since I've rarely come across any that left me satisfied.

Warning: I have no end game for the story right now and the parts with Namjoon and the rest of BTS are not going to show up for a little while so bare with me for now. The main character in this book is ... okay she's got a lot of issues! But hopefully, y'all can somewhat like what I write. Constructive criticism is welcome but please be gentle. Once again I'm a newbie at this stuff.

Thanks!
Chapter 1

I guess I could say it started with my parents.

My father's name was William Spencer. Born and raised in Melrose, Scotland.

His mum, my grandmother came all the way from Wales by herself pregnant with my father. She did it to escape her ex who made it clear that he didn't want a baby. She would later tell me that it was one of the scariest and best things she ever did. Thankfully, she was able to get a job at a local masquerade shop for a living where she worked with people who valued their employees.

When she went into her third trimester, they gave her maternity leave and just said come back when you're ready.

A few months later, my father came along.

My Grammy will always say he came out into this world fighting and screaming all the way.

That's usually the part where she turns to me and says with that warm, familiar twinkle in her brown eyes, "One look at that wrinkly, screaming, slimy mess and I looked at the kind doctor and asked, 'Is it too late to put it up for adoption?'"

She tells that same line every time she tells the story. I frankly stopped finding it funny by age ten. But as usual, I always find myself smiling anyways because she usually starts laughing in that throaty way of hers that makes it impossible to not smile along with her.

She then recounts, "But all it took was for me to hold him once in my arms and I knew I was hooked."

Yes, Delphinium Spencer loved her son greatly. It was that same love that shaped my father into what he was. Brave, smart, kind, respectable could've been my father's middle name. And when he got out of high school, it was those qualities that probably helped him (along with endless studying as he never fails to tell me) get into the Royal Marines at the age of 18. He quickly rose in the ranks. Went from being a Officer Cadet to being a Second Lieutenant in the span of two years.
The way my father celebrated this promotion was to head to his hometown and tell his mother and his old friends the great news.

It was around that time that he bumped into an exchange student who just got into Melrose herself.

My mother.
My mother’s name was Eleanor Murphy. Born and raised in New Orleans, Louisiana. She was the daughter of Marie Dupre and Ian Murphy. My grand-mère and my grand-père had been childhood friends and it grew into a relationship when they got into their teens and eventually, marriage.

There were not enough words to describe my mother’s otherworldly beauty. Of course, when your parents are also beautiful, it’s not hard to believe that this trait won’t be passed onto you. Marie was an Afro-Italian goddess while her father's Native American features made him look like he walked off the cover of a historical romance book cover. The end results was that Eleanor inherited Marie’s golden brown skin, full heart-shaped lips, lime green eyes while she also received Ian’s sharp cheekbones and slanted eye shape.

Eleanor grew up in a household filled with warmth and affection. Her parents were both professors who made enough to live comfortably in a restored Victorian mansion.

Eleanor should’ve been happy. She should’ve been close with her family.

And yet...

She didn't hesitate to run to the first University that offered her a scholarship. She quickly signed up for the exchange program to see what lay beyond America. She ended up relocating at a sister college in Melrose, Scotland.

As soon as she got off her plane, she was so busy looking at the new sights surrounding her, she didn't even notice the firm back she was running into until she landed flat on her ass and the man stumbled forward.

Although she knew she was at fault, she was already planning a spew of choice words to take the blame off herself when she looked up at the man. If there was anything Eleanor hated more, it was being in the wrong.

But she instantly found the acid words dying off her tongue when she saw the gorgeous dark-skinned male who was at least 6”3 tall.
She only vaguely noticed when the man crouched down and looked straight at her in eyes, concern filling his dark brown ones.

"I'm sorry ma'am. Are you alright?" asked William Spencer in a worried tone.
Chapter 3

My parents rather tumultuous meeting resulted in my father asking my mother to grab a cup of coffee to apologize, and my mother accepting.

They sat for hours upon hours just talking about everything and nothing at the same. When my mother had to leave to find her new dorm a few hours, numbers were exchanged with the promise of getting in touch soon.

That was how their whirlwind romance began. Three weeks together had my father convinced that he was in love with my mother and wanting to have a future with her.

As for my mother, well, she was only 18.

She wasn’t ready to get into a relationship right now. The last thing she needed was to be worrying about some man. She had school to think about. She hadn’t told William about her intentions, but she was planning to before he left Melrose again.

Although she was happy about her eventual freedom, she was going to miss William. Actually, she was going to miss all of the inventive sex they had and the constant affection he never seemed to run out of.

But Eleanor already knew from a young age that she was attractive. She wasn’t blind to the constant stares men, and a few women, gave her. She knew that she could get another William without even lifting a finger.

There were millions of Williams just dying to get a taste of her.

It was just a week before William had to leave again that my mother started having massive headaches and stomach pains. She initially thought nothing of it. But they constantly kept occurring, she decided to visit the local clinic for some answers.

After the doctor did some preliminary tests and asked my mother some questions, she then suggested they do an ultrasound. Eleanor felt the first bit of unease since she got there.
A question had begun to grow in the back of her mind, but she chose to ignore it for now. She reminded herself that ultrasounds were not just for... that.

The doctor had my mother lay down on the examination and lift up her shirt. She placed the cold jelly on her stomach and put the tool to her stomach to see inside. Eleanor tried to read the doctor's face, but she remained stoic.

Once the doctor was finished, she took one look at my mother and asked, "Were you aware that you are pregnant, Miss Murphy?"
Chapter 4

The first thought that went through Eleanor's head was abortion.

She was only 18 and she didn't have the faintest clue on how to raise a baby. She didn't even want a baby for god's sake!

The second thought that went through her head was William.

How in the holy hell was she going tell a man that she wasn't even in love with that she was having his baby? Although she wasn't going to let him leave with telling the news, she just decided she wasn't going to tell him right away.

She wanted some sense of normalcy before her world changed forever.

But William did notice something was wrong. It was in the way she shrugged him of when he tried to touch her, whether they be innocent or not. The way she snapped at him for the tiniest things and then would burst into tears right after. How she was always quick to pick a fight no matter the reason. William was smart enough to know that all of the little spats they were having was her way of hiding something.

It was a habit that he had been quick to pick up on when they first started sleeping together. She only did whenever she was experiencing negative emotions.

So two days before he was scheduled to go back to leave out, he sat Eleanor down to talk. They were spending the day at his apartment like they always did and William thought it was good a time as ever to talk. They were sitting on the couch watching reruns of *A Different World* when William spoke.

"Ellie sweetheart," he started. "I feel something is bothering you. And please don't try to deny it. All I ask is that you tell me the truth. I think we're at point in our relationship that we can talk if something is bothering one of us."

Eleanor scoffed and ignored the way her heart started pounding. She leaned away from his touch and sat back on the couch, crossing her arms smirking.
"Okay, first off," she drawled in that sugary sweet southern accent of her's, "I don't know how you got off thinking this is some type of relationship when the majority of the time we spent in your apartment fucking. We never even go out aside from going to the convenience to get some snacks or condoms. That doesn't sound like a relationship to me now does it?"

William grit his teeth and tried to clamp down on the anger that was starting to rise. This is a defense mechanism, he reminded himself, she lashed out if she was hiding something.

Before he could continue she hissed, "Second of all, what makes you think just because I let you put your dick in me that I'm supposed to start revealing all of my secrets to you?"

Viper green eyes glaring into somber brown ones.

"Newsflash nigga, your game," She glances at his crotch with a nonchalant air, "Ain't all that special."

Forgetting that he was supposed to be calm, William rolled his eyes and growled, "You see? This is how I know you're hiding something because you because now you're purposefully trying to get me angry so we'll get off the subject."

William knew he hit the nail on the head when he saw a flash of panic in Eleanor's eyes before she masked it again.

He took a deep breath to regain his composure and asked, "Is it something I did? Something I said? Because I honestly can't think of any I di-"

"You see that's your problem. You always thinking that involves you. Well guess what big man?" Her voice was starting to get louder. "Not everything is about you and that-"

"Oh my God, woman. If it's not me then would please just tell me what is and stop with the mind games!" William yelled. His usually friendly, handsome face screwed up in frustration.

"I'M PREGNANT!"
At first, William didn't understand what had just been said. When his brain made sense of what was said, shock painting his face.

"You happy now?!" Eleanor screeched. She stood up, suddenly needing to move. Her eyes filling with angry tears. William, still on autopilot, felt the need to comfort the girl, but decided against with the venomous glare she was shooting him in spite of the tears.

"I found out five days ago when I started having stomach aches. The doctor says I'm a week along. She congratulated me as if I was going to keep it."

"You're not?"

It had slipped out before William could stop himself. Eleanor's eyebrows went up in pure disbelief.

"Why should I? How am I supposed to take care of it? I'm here on scholarship so I don't have a job. You're going to be leaving soon so I'm not expecting you to help out."

William didn't know why he was so hesitant. Eleanor clearly was willing to get an abortion, so it should've been a clean break. But while William's head was in shambles, his heart started doing the thinking. He knew deep down even if Eleanor went through the abortion, he would always think about the baby and what could've been because that was just who he was. Also, William was in love with the fickle girl.

He couldn't but imagine a little girl or boy that Eleanor's big green eyes and had the same dimple William had on his left cheek.

He could already see the potential for a beautiful family.

Which is why he boldly stated, "Marry me."

Eleanor had pressed her hands to her face in order to hide her tears, but removed them she heard his words. Her mascara was smudged with the crying she had. She honestly thought the man had lost his goddamn mind as she stared into his determined face. They didn't know anything about each other except for their explosive sexual chemistry. Eleanor was about to argue this point before William beat her to it.
"Hear me out" he implored with his hands. "You could still go to college and I could find us a bigger place for us and the baby that is close to your campus. Anything I make while I'm away will be sent to you and anything the baby will need. I just got promoted so that means I'll get a bigger paycheck. Baby, I think we can do this. Just picture..."

Eleanor looked searchingly at his face. Maybe it was the way he was talking so excitedly about their future together.

Maybe it was the way that instead he hadn't gotten mad at her and just started blaming her for everything.

Or maybe it how he had this hopeful expression on his face that made something close to affection sprout in her chest.

But she stopped his rambling with a simple, "Okay."

William had felt like all the air left his lungs when he heard her quiet acceptance. She was going to through with it. They were going to have a baby.

Next thing Eleanor knew, William was sweeping her off her feet and spun her around while laughing with absolute joy. Eleanor felt a small, reluctant smile tug on her lips.

Maybe this could work.
First off, thx to the 10 hits I got! And for those who actually didn't just take a peek and leave, I am warning you now that is story is going to be very slow and BTS won't show up for a while. When will they? That's for me to know! Anyways, thx again!

"Porco cane! What the hell were you thinking?!!"

In retrospect, Eleanor should've known she was going to hear it the moment she told her mother the news. But knew she couldn't put it off since William had informed her right before he left that he had already told his mother. She knew him well enough to know he would question why she hadn't told her own family yet. So she just decided to bite the bullet and take the rant she was getting now. She decided to call them the next day on the phone in her dorm's hallway.

"Marie..." Ian's ever quiet voice came through the receiver. "Give Norie a chance to explain." The childhood nickname lifted some of the anxiety weighing on Eleanor's chest. Just hearing her daddy's soothing voice allowed to relax a little.

"Explain? She acted like an immature teenager what else is there to explain?" Eleanor had decided that she was going to ignore that.

Eleanor and her mother had never truly gotten along. She had always been more of daddy's girl. Her father would just that they that both share the same fiery, independent souls. Eleanor couldn't possibly imagine having anything in common with her uptight, prudish mother.

It just wasn't possible.

"I told you," her mother's voice eerily calm. "If you were not willing to wait till you get married, at least, at least, be careful and use protection."

Eleanor rolled her eyes in irritation. This was the same, tired debate that she and Marie had been having for years. It had started when she was sixteen and had started to notice boys. The "talk" that every parent has with their children had ended with Eleanor and Marie screaming back and forth between each other while Ian couldn't do anything except hide in the kitchen.
"Mother, we did use protection." Eleanor stated in quiet indignation. It was true, they had used it... in the first few days. After that, you could say that they got caught up in the moment and William telling her to "trust me".

Marie snorted in pure derision. "Principessa, it's obvious that you and whoever that knobby-kneed-

Whatever biting thing Marie had planned was quickly cut off when the line suddenly went quiet. Eleanor frowned in confusion until she heard her parents' muffled voices in the background. When Marie finally came back on the line, she heaved a deep sigh.

"Does the father know?" she asked in an obviously faux-calm voice.

"Yes, he knows," Eleanor replied, parroting her mother. "He actually suggested we get married and that I move in with him."

Silence.

Eleanor couldn't help but smirk. In 18 years, she had never left her parents, let alone her mother, speechless. It was nice to know even she could get her nosy mother to shut up.

The silence didn't last for long. Surprisingly, it was Ian who took the reins this time.

"When is the ceremony?" he asked.

Eleanor had honestly excepted more words of outrage, but she wasn't going to question it.

"Actually, we're just going to the courthouse tomorrow to do it."

Once again, silence.

Until a heavy sigh broke through and Ian just said, "All I'll say is that I hope you kids know what
you're doing."

Eleanor would've replied but Marie was already put back on the line.

"I-" Before Marie could say anything, Eleanor had already risen up in defense. She was tired of holding back.

"Mother, I may just be 18, but I am still a legal adult and this is my decision. William and I are going to get married and we are going have this baby. Frankly, I only called as a courtesy because you guys are my parents. But you will not influence my decisi-"

"You're right."

Eleanor stopped in mid-rant. The words had been said so quietly, she almost questioned if they had been if it had not been for her mother's next words.

"It is your decision at the end of the day. I just worry for you tesoro. But it sounds like you and this William boy have it figured out."

Marie then let out a choked laugh.

"But it is a shame."

"What?" Eleanor asked despite herself.

"I had always envisioned that your wedding day would be in a grand church with me helping you with wedding dress and your father walking you down the aisle."

Eleanor's eyes burned a little as the scenario played out in her head.

"I had it all planned out in the back of my mind." Marie whispered.
Eleanor knew that when her mother's voice got quiet like that, it was either because she was enraged or very sad.

She heard faint sniffling before her mother asked her daughter one defining question.

"Do you love him?"

Eleanor didn't hesitate.

"Of course I do mother," she lied.

She definitely loved the constant attention he showered her with. She was absolutely in love with his amazing body. As for the man himself? That was still up for debate. She decided that in time, love would surely follow. They were getting married for crying out loud. Love was sure to come out eventually.

Right?
Eleanor was miserable.

During the first few months, everything was perfect. William and she had gotten married just like he said they would. After the "wedding", which had only consisted of Eleanor's roommate and William's tearful mother, William had stayed true to his word and started apartment hunting. He had quickly found a two-bedroom that fit into his price range. He had immediately put an offer on the place.

Or has William would call, the flat.

Miraculously, William was able to stay a little longer due to some deal that he had worked out with his commanding officer. Eleanor didn't care to hear the details. William had told his commander of his situation. Thankfully, his boss had been sympathetic and just said that until the baby came, he would be transferred to a base in Melrose. That way, he could be closer to home and be there for the impending delivery.

After days of searching, William had finally found a place that would suit his future family's needs. Although the area was notorious for having less than scrupulous individuals, Eleanor's university was just a few blocks away and there was a daycare center nearby too.

Of course, there was one minor hitch when the Murphys had made it clear that they wanted to talk to William personally.

William had been anxious about talking to Mrs. Murphy seeing as Eleanor had painted her as a tight-ass bitch that would kill you with her glares. But once the Murphys talked to William on the phone, they admitted that if their daughter was going to get knocked up, they were glad it was by him.

Moving Eleanor's things to the new place proved to be a menial task since she didn't bring much with her, to begin with.

That had all happened in the span of two months.

The real problems started occurring when Eleanor was eight months pregnant.
She and William were aware of the symptoms that occurred during pregnancy because they had poured through some baby books to prepare themselves. But there's a difference between reading about it and actually experiencing it.

Eleanor was feeling more tired and agitated lately. Everything seemed to irritate her no matter how small the issue was. It didn't help when her breasts were constantly leaking milk that would come out usually when she was in public.

It happened to her biology class and it felt like everybody was staring at the two wet patches on her shirt. It had only been resolved when William had bought her nursing pads.

To sum it all up, she was tired, cranky, and eager to not be pregnant anymore.

But what bothered Eleanor the most was that she felt absolutely no connection to the baby at all.

One would think after carrying a growing person inside you for eight months, it might trigger some type of motherly shit or whatever. Although actually now that Eleanor thought about it, she did feel something about the baby.

She felt angry and resentful.

In her mind, the thing that was growing inside her was just an unwelcome visitor that she truly didn't want around but everyone was fawning over. Her parents only called to check on the baby's status and not her own. Even William, who still claimed to love her was more concerned about the baby instead of her.

"Eleanor don't do that, it'll stress the baby" or "Sweetheart I know you don't want to, but think of the baby"

In the back of her mind, she knew that he wasn't consciously trying to neglect her, but Eleanor was starting to think that he loved the baby more than her. She wished she had gone along with her first thought of having an abortion if it meant that she could've avoided all of the anger and loneliness she felt now.
The birth was just as painful as Eleanor had feared it would be. Nine hours of nonstop, painful labor. William and his mother were holding her hands through it all. Eleanor's parents were still trying to get there. Sweat was streaming down as Eleanor tried to push the seven-pound baby out of her vagina.

Eleanor honestly thought she wasn't going to make it.

Finally, Eleanor pushed out a blood-drenched, wailing baby girl. She felt detached from her body as she watched the doctors and nurses took the baby to get cleaned up.

She vaguely felt William hug her and rest his head on her shoulder and quietly tell her, "It's over, Ellie. You did it."

Her hospital gown became damp from all the tears William spilled. Eleanor's spirits lifted somewhat and a small smile graced her lips. This was the first bit of touching they had done in months.

The smile disappeared when the doctor brought the baby back for William to cut the cord. William eagerly left her to fulfill the task. She saw the reverence and pride in his stance as he looked at the infant.

It was a look he never used with her.

A look she could never hope to receive even if she tried.

No, she thought bitterly, it will never be over.

Not with her around.

So when William brought their daughter over and whispered, "Ellie, darling, come meet our new mini-us."

Eleanor just looked away and closed her eyes.
I don't think mummy likes me very much.

She always seems to be really angry with me even if I don't know what I did wrong.

I even made a list of the bad things I did at home or at school to find out what I did. I got that idea from my daddy. My daddy told me that sometimes when he forgets stuff, he writes down a list of everything he did during the day.

My daddy's really smart.

I love him so much. I wish he didn't have to leave all the time. But he got an im...im... important job. I learned that word in preschool a few days ago.

I like that word a lot. It makes me feel like a big girl even though I'm only three.

Daddy's work takes him to far off places and he doesn't come back for a long time. I miss him so much when he leaves. But when he comes back, he always has stories about the adventures he and my uncles get into. My uncles are just my Daddy's war buddies. But I like to call them my uncles anyways because Daddy says that they are like brothers to him.

He also brings home gifts for me and Mummy.

He brought dresses for Mummy, and dolls and candy for me. Mummy doesn't always like his gifts, but sometimes she smiles when he does.

I love my Mummy’s smile.

I wish she would smile for me. She's the prettiest woman in all of the world. She looks just like a princess from a fairy-tale. I would tell her that only if she would talk to me.
Another reason why I don't like it when Daddy leaves is that Mummy doesn't talk to me at all unless she's getting me ready for school. But sometimes she oversleeps and forgets to take me.

It's okay though. Daddy told me Mummy is in a big-girl school and she needs to do a lot of tough homework. So I know she must be tired.

Anyways, I know how to get to my preschool by myself now. I walked there so many times, I've memorized how to get there and back. Even when Mummy forgets to make dinner, I always make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for me and Mummy in case she gets hungry. She never eats them. I think she would like it if she tried it.

But sometimes when I get from school, she's not there. When that happens, I go visit Miss Kara who lives across the hall. She and Daddy are friends. She even does my hair because Mommy doesn't know how to do my hair. I once asked if I could go to a hair place like the other girls in my class do.

Daddy said no and when I asked why, he just said, "She's the only one I trust to do your hair because those hairdressers out there don't know have a single clue on how to handle our type of hair."

"Why wouldn't they know how to do my hair, Daddy?"

He just sighed and said I would understand when I was older. I hate when grownups say that. I think they just don't know what to say.

I have tried to wait for Mummy to come home so we could eat together, but when I checked the clock on the living room wall, I realized it was way past my bedtime and I gave up.

All my past plans to talk to her have failed. But I'm not going to stop trying.

Never ever!
It's February and my birthday is today! Daddy's home and he has gifts and a humongous cake! He also says that he's taking me and Mummy, and Grammy out. I'm dressed in my favorite blue dress that Daddy brought back from India.

"But Da!" I whined. "Where are we going?! You said that I'm queen for the day and as your queen I command you tell me where we're going!"

Grammy and Daddy just looked at each other and started laughing. But I want to stomp my foot because I'm getting mad, but Grammy says that only bad girls do that, so I don't do it.

Daddy then gets down on one knee and begs, "Forgive me, your Majesty. But I have prepared a special treat for your viewing entertainment. May I ask you be patient a little longer, my queen?"

I try to give him my best angry face, but I smile and just nod my head. Daddy always knows how to make me smile.

"Very well, peasant. But where's Mummy? She's going to miss the fun."

Daddy stopped smiling and looked over at Grammy. She was frowning too.

"William, we need to go. We wait any longer, we're going to miss the show."

Daddy sighs again. But he takes my hand in mine and says, "Come along, Willow."

It was a long drive.

I fell asleep through most of it. When I woke up, Daddy is there by my side opening up the car door and unbuckling me from my car-seat. When I'm outside, I grab Daddy's and Grammy's hand.

"Can you guys finally tell me what we're doing now?" I ask.
Daddy smiles at me and says, "We're going to see a ballet performance, sweets."

I frown. "What's Ballet?"

"Ballet is a dance that a lot of women and men dance on their tippy-toes. But sweetie, I think the only way for you to understand is to watch for yourself."

I frown, "Dance on their tippy toes? Doesn't that hurt?"

Daddy laughs. "No LoLo, it doesn't hurt. Now come on. The show's going to start soon."

I don't want to be late so I ran inside the big building with Daddy and Grammy right behind me. It was AMAZING!

The show was called Swan Lake. All of the dancers (Grammy told me later that they're called Ballerinas) were so beautiful and their dancing was nice too! Daddy was right about them dancing on their tippy toes!

Grammy told me that the dancers were telling a story. I thought that they were going to talk, like in a play. But Grammy told me that they were telling a story with their dancing and the music that was playing. I tried to understand it, but I still was confused about what was going on.

But it doesn't matter. I just liked watching them move. The lady in white was moving so gracefully. But my mouth dropped open when I saw the lady in black. I was sad when she went away. It was like watching the magic shows I sometimes see on TV. And like those magic shows, I was sad when it ended. But I made sure to cheer really loudly when it was over. I must've been really loud because the lady in white looked right up at me and winked at me.

When me and Daddy were in the car after dropping Grammy back at her house, I made a big decision. "Daddy, I'm going to be a Ballerina too." He looked back at me and frowned.
"Now Willow Jane, if I allow you to do this, you have to promise me that you willing to stick with this, you understand?"

I nodded my head back and forth. "I am serious, Daddy. Cross my heart and hope to die, stick a needle in my eye serious!"

His eyes widened and then he let a big laugh. I smile. I love making my Daddy laugh.

"Alright LoLo, I'll see about getting you signed up for ballet lessons at the local community center in the morning, okay?"

I throw a fist in the air and say, "YES!"

When we got home, I was so excited to eat my birthday cake. After Daddy said yes to ballet lessons, I started wanting my cake. It's from the local bakery from across town. It's a buttercream cake with chocolate frosting.

When we got to our floor, I ran down the hall to our door trying to get the door open. Daddy comes behind me and opens the door with a key. I knew was probably going to get in trouble for running but I couldn't wait.

When we got inside, I ran to the kitchen not caring if I was still wearing one of my best dresses. But when I got there, my happiness went away.

Mummy was sitting at the table. What was left of my birthday cake was sitting right in front of her. She was picking at it with a fork. Half of the cake was gone. I bunch my fists up.

"Mummy, that was my cake you can't do that!" I screamed. I felt Daddy come up behind and put his hands on my shoulders. I look up at him. He looks pretty angry right now. He starts talking to Mummy in what I think is English. My English is not that good and I also think that is why Mummy is always mad at me.

I only speak Gaelic and only my daddy, Grammy, my teacher, and sometimes Miss Kara can
understand me.

But I'm getting better every day at English. Although Mummy and Daddy are talking too fast for me, I can tell how angry daddy is and mummy gets up from the table and is now starting to hit daddy on the chest and arms.

It isn't long before they're both screaming at each other. I'm scared. I don't like it when they fight even though they do it all the time. To stop it, I get in the middle, smile really big, and say, "I'm queen today and as your queen, I command you to not allowed to be angry on my birthday!"

Mummy just stares at me in a way I don't understand but daddy laugh does his big laugh even though I think it's kind of fake. He goes to the freezer, picks out some strawberry ice cream and hands it to me.

"Sweetheart, why don't you turn on the VCR and put in Bear in the Big Blue House? I know that's your favorite." I smile right away.

"Okay!" I take it and run straight to mummy and daddy's room because that's where the VCR is. I know how to get it working so I don't wait for daddy. As I'm waiting for the tape to be ready, I hear mummy and daddy yelling again and I want to go out there again and tell them to stop it.

But the video comes on and I instantly forget about it and watch my favorite show.

Chapter End Notes

Just so y'all know, bear in the big blue house is the shit....

fight me
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

TW/ Sexual abuse

Okay, I've seen this done a few times and I know I need to do it for anyone that is actually paying attention to my story. If don't if there will be anyone that will triggered by this but please don't if you know you will.

Also once again, if you like what you see comment or a leave a kudos!

It's September.

My teacher says that when fall is coming, the leaves turn from green to red and orange. I always feel better when I look up at the trees. They make me feel happy. I also like looking at them on my way to ballet lessons.

I love love love ballet!

I have lessons on Thursdays and Saturdays. My teacher, Miss Violet, always teaches us something new. I don't really like the plies she has us do before class starts but they don't last long. I really want to be a ballerina so I always make sure to do everything the teacher tells us to do. I like it when she tells me I do a good job and she always gives me the most candy because I listen the best. The other girls don't like me very much. They say I'm a goody two shoes. But I don't want to get into trouble because we always get candy we're good.

I tried to tell them but they didn't want to listen.

It's okay.

I just love dancing and I also love watching Miss Violet dance too. She is so graceful when she shows us how to do a move. I sometimes get a little angry because I can't do it as well as Miss Violet. But Miss Violet always tells us it's okay not to get a move right away. She says we're still learning. Miss Violet is always so nice to me and she's really pretty too! She has long red hair, freckles on her nose, and big grey eyes.
She's not as pretty as my Mummy, but she's a lot nicer than mummy is.

Sometimes I want to stay with Miss Violet and never go back home again.

When daddy left two days after my birthday, mummy ignored me again. But she usually just stays in her room or goes out and doesn't come back for a long time. Now when she comes back, she brings a man I've never met before. One time I came home from ballet practice, mummy and the man were kissing on the living room couch.

I couldn't believe it. Mummy was cheating on daddy. I dropped my bag and ran over to them because I wanted them to stop.

"Get off my mummy!" I made sure to scream it in English this time. When I tried pushed the man away, he shoved me and I bumped into the coffee table when I stumbled. I fell hard on my behind and I cried. My knee hurt and I wanted my mummy to hug me.

All mummy did was yell at me.

"Go to your room and don't come back out. I don't want to see your face for the rest of the night!"

I picked my bag off the floor and did as I was told because I was frightened by the man who was staring at me.

Since then I have been scared to go home. When he's there, I go straight to my room and don't come out again until he leaves. I sometimes forget to eat because I'm scared that he'll be out there. Mummy and the man spend most of their time in mummy's room.

I once put my ear to the door to hear what they're doing in there. All I heard was the sound of the bed creaking.

I wish daddy was home.

The scary man wouldn't be here if daddy was home. He doesn't bother me, but he still stares at me out.
When I do see him, he just looks at me for a very long time with his small, blue eyes. I wish I had the power of being invisible. Maybe that way, he wouldn't be able to see me. He's like the big, ugly monster under the bed that will eat you. I guess he's handsome, but my daddy is more handsome. I turn it into a game of how many times I can avoid the man without him seeing me. I counted 10 I've escaped the monster. Making it a game makes me feel better.

But one day, I lose the game.

I just got home from school and I'm excited to get started on my homework. My teacher is going to take us to the aquarium and she said we wanted us to draw a picture of a fish. I already knew what fish I'm going to draw.

I think about my homework, as I open and close the door to my flat. I'm about to race to my room to get started when I hear, "Willow." I stop and turn around because I don't recognize the person calling my name.

It's him. The man. He's sitting on the couch and staring at me again. I want to run to my room and lock the door but I can't move.

"Y-yes?"

"C'mere."

He smiles. I don't like his smile at all. But I don't want to get him angry so I go to the couch and sit down with him.

"Where's my mummy?" I need to know that she is somewhere close. He smiles again. "She's in her room, sweets." He called me sweets and he's not being mean to me like he did when we first met.

I smile a little. Maybe he's not so bad after all.
"How do you know my name?" I ask.

"Your mama told me. I'm Bruce, by the way." He holds out his hand for me to shake. I giggle and I shake it. He grabs my hand pulls me closer. His other hand goes to my hair.

"You have pretty hair, you know that?" He's petting my hair and it makes me smile. I always got compliments for my hair from adults.

"Thank you, Mr. Bruce."

He laughs. "Now what's with the mister, sweets? You can just call me Bruce. We're friends now, aren't we?" The hand that had been petting my hair was now on my shoulder. I started to feel nervous again but I didn't know why.

"Yeah. We're friends." He finally lets go of my hand and puts his own hand on his chest. I laugh. He's really funny. I like him.

"Phew! Thank god for that. I wouldn't know what I would've done if you didn't want to be my friend. I really want to get to know you, Willow." He whispers the last part like it's a secret.

I'm going to say something else when the hand that was on my shoulder slides under my shirt and starts touching my chest.

I don't move for a moment. I don't really understand what is happening. He's squeezing my chest and has put his head close to my neck. His breath smells terrible. I'm scared and want him to stop, but I'm afraid of what he might do.

It's then that I remember daddy telling me when someone is touching me in a way I don't like, I scream and run.

So I do just that.

I scream as loud as I can. Bruce is surprised and stops what he is doing. I run to my room and lock the door before he can get me. I hide under my bed and hope nothing else happens. I don't want to,
but I start crying. I hear another door opening and then there's a lot of yelling.

It's Mummy. She's yelling at Bruce but I don't know what they're saying. I'm happy. The more they fight, maybe they'll forget about me. Next thing I know, there's a knock on the door.

I'm scared that it's Bruce again but then I hear, "Willow? I know you can hear me. Come on, Baby, open the door for mama, okay?" She's never talked to me in that tone before and I unlock the door.

She's wearing a baggy white shirt and short pants. She's sweating and her hair looks messy. She still looks pretty to me though. She smiles at me and takes my hand leads me to the bed. Once we sit down, she hugs me.

My mummy has never hugged me before. She's also never smiled at me before. I'm so happy, I hug her back as tightly as I could.

I knew it. I knew she loved me.

All those times when the kids in school made fun of me and called my mummy nasty names I've never heard of, I knew deep down she loved about me. She just didn't know how to show it, that's all.

She lets go too fast. She puts her hand on my cheek and wipes my tears away.

"Will, do you love your mother?"

I nod my head. "Yes, mummy, I love you more than ballet!"

She laughs. "Well, I'm going to tell you a little secret then. A secret you can't tell daddy. You understand?"

I pause. I've never kept anything from daddy before. He says secrets can hurt people. But mummy is finally talking to me and she wants to share a secret with me. So I nod again. She looks sad now.
"Baby, mommy is sick. I'm really sick." My mouth drops open and I feel like crying again.

No, mummy can't be sick. What if she's dying?

I'm about to ask, but she starts talking again. "That man out there?" She points to the door. I feel sick again. I know she's talking about Bruce. "He has the medicine I need to get better."

I feel happy now. All mummy needs to do is take the medicine and she'll feel better in no time.

"That's great, Mummy. Did you take it already?" She still looks sad. "Mr. Bruce wants a lot of money for it. Money that I don't have." I start to feel scared. What happens if she doesn't take it? Will she get even worse than she already is? I drop my head and try not to cry.

"But there is something else that we can do. That is, you can do." I lift my head up. "What, mummy? What do I have to do?"

She doesn't talk for a long time.

"Will, you know what Mr. Bruce was doing earlier?"

I nod my head. "Mummy, I didn't like what he was doing. It made me feel weird." She looks mad for a minute but she smiles again so I think that it was my imagination. She wraps her arms around me and hugs me again. She smells like sweat, lavender, and something else I don't know the name of. "I know, baby. But what Bruce was doing wasn't anything bad. It's just a... a game that he really wanted to share with you. He said if you played with him, he would give me what I need."

My eyes widen. "He did?" Mummy nods her head. I don't know what to say. I really didn't want to do it again, but mummy is sick and Mr. Bruce has the medicine she needs. Besides, mummy says that what he did wasn't wrong and mummy would never let anyone hurt me.

She loves me. And I love her too.

So I take deep breath and whisper, "Okay." I remember why I always thought mummy was from a fairy-tale. The smile she gives me reminds of a beautiful princess.
"Thank you, baby. Thank you so much! Now, there is one more thing I need you to do."

"What's that?" She stops smiling.

"We can't tell your father."

I frown. I don't get it. If mummy is sick, why wouldn't she tell daddy? She talks again before I could ask. "Daddy is away all the time. He's got an important job. We wouldn't want to worry him while he's so far away, would we?"

I hadn't thought about it like that. I didn't want daddy to worry about us if since he's got a big job.

"Besides, I'm not severely sick. I'll be better before you know it," she tells me. "So do you swear not to tell daddy?" She holds out her pinky finger. I take it with my pinky. Mummy was sick and she's asked for my help. I need to show her that I can do it. She smiles at me and leans in and kisses my head. "I knew I could count on you."

Before I could say anything else, she's leading me back to the living room where Mr. Bruce is waiting. At first, he looks angry enough to spit, but he smiles when he sees us.

"So..."

"It's alright, Bruce. Willow here has decided to help me get my medicine."

"What? The hell yo... Oh. Right. Your medicine." He smiles again and holds out his hand to me. "Come here sweets." I don't want to do it anymore. I'm scared. But when I look up at mummy, she gives me two thumbs up. She looks so proud of me.

I can't let her down. I promised her I would do it. So I sit next to Mr. Bruce.

I look at mummy when he pushes down onto the couch. I look at her when I feel his big hands pull my pants down. Mummy's not smiling anymore. She leaves when she sees what Mr. Bruce is doing.
He's got my pants and underwear down now. My heart is beating so fast.

I feel his fingers on my...

My...

My homework. The aquarium. I have to draw something. Fish. The fish I'm going to draw is going to be an angelfish. They have really pretty colors. They come in blue, pink...

When he finishes, it hurts so bad. I can't move from the couch. Mummy comes back out again when he calls her. He gets gives her a brown paper bag. She takes it. Her hands are shaking.

Mr. Bruce looks at her, "We should do this again sometime soon, yeah?" Mummy nods her head up and down. I hear the door close as he leaves. Mummy is about to go back to her room.

"Mummy," I call out. "Did I do good?"

She doesn't answer back. I hear her bedroom door slam shut.

She just didn't hear me. That's all. Once she's done taking her medicine, she'll come back out and tell me I did good.

She'll finally tell me she loves me.

She has to know now right?
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

TW/ Rape (I'm not trying to say that sexual abuse and rape are different, but to show what kind of abuse is going to happen now)

Once going to leave this here and story does progress a little more here. Also let me hear you thoughts so far. Do you want me to improve something or someone? Leave a comment!

Also thank you to whoever left a kudos. I know it shouldn't matter how many kudos or comments I get, but it is encouraging since this is my first fic

Mummy has been sick for so long.

I wonder if the medicine is really good as Mr. Bruce said it was.

If I count on my fingers, it would've been two years since she's told me she needed a special kind of medicine. But if anything, she just looks worse. Her pretty brown skin now looks kinda yellow. Her curly black hair always has dandruff in it now.

Plus she's gotten really skinny.

But Daddy still hasn't noticed anything. I guess it has to do with the fact that mummy hides really well. A day or two before daddy comes back, we clean up the flat, she goes out and buys food, and she hides her "medicine". So when daddy comes home, he thinks that everything is OK.

But it's not. I can't count how many times I've let Mr. Bruce play the game with me. I still feel like I did something wrong even though mummy is getting the help she needs.

Not just him, other men too.

Mummy said that sometimes Mr. Bruce didn't always have the stuff she needed. Most of the time, they were just like Mr. Bruce. Touch me in that place, or make me touch their... thing. Or worse, put their thing in my mouth. And some weren't just satisfied with touching me.
Sometimes they would like to...try new things. I didn't know their names so I made some up. A tall skinny man who I like to call Bones. He's not handsome like Mr. Bruce was and he smelled awful.

When he played the game with me, he wasn't nice like Mr. Bruce was. He likes smoking. He wasn't always satisfied with playing the usual games like Mr. Bruce. That's why he likes poking my back with his cigarettes. He says it's more fun that way.

The first time he did it, I screamed so loud, that Miss Kara came over to see what was wrong. Bones had hidden in the bathroom while mummy came out from her room to explain what happened. She didn't let Miss Kara into the house so she didn't see me holding my back trying to make the pain stop. She told Miss Kara that I had thought that I had seen a rat. Miss Kara believed her and went back home.

Mummy was good at lying. And maybe I was too.

When she was gone, mummy came over to me and slapped my face. It was so fast, I couldn't stop it. Mummy had never hit me before and I never thought she would. The pain on my back was fighting with the burning on my cheek.

I was just about to start crying when I heard, "Oh don't start blubbering now." I tried my best to do what she said but tears still fell down my face.

I felt so guilty for letting that happened. But I couldn't help it. It had hurt so much. "I know you're too stupid to understand this, but if that woman had found out what was going on, I wouldn't get the shit that I need. I would probably be dead by the end of the week if that didn't happen."

I had been looking down at my hands because I couldn't look at her without feeling guilty. I was horrified when she said she could die if she didn't what she needed. "I bet you would love for that happened wouldn't you?" she hissed. "You love for me to be gone so you could have your father all to yourself. Maybe then, you would stop acting as if you love me."

"But I do love you, mummy!" I yelled. I grabbed her hands but she pulled away and yanked my hair so I was close to her face. Her pretty eyes had dark circles under them. Even if the hand that was holding me in place was strong, it was still shaking.

"Not so loud, you little pig. Do you want that annoying busybody to come back over here?"
Even though my head was still in a tight grip, I tried to shake my head. She smiles. It wasn't a very nice smile. "Then prove it. When that man comes back out here, you will not make another noise."

In the end, I only let out a few noises even though I tried my best to keep quiet. Bones liked to poke me mostly on my back. He said that way, he could press my face into the couch if I got too loud. The marks he left behind would always hurt for days afterward.

He frightened me.

But he was nothing compared to the Joker.

The Joker was a short man, but he had a lot of muscles. He was what daddy would call Latino. He had light brown skin and dark brown eyes.

He started coming this year. Mummy always said to be on my best behavior when he was around. When he was here, he spent most of his time with mummy in her room. The few times I did see him, he said nothing to me. He just smiled at me. He looked just like that clown villain Batman is always fighting, which is why I named him the Joker.

Like the Joker, he freaked me out. When he started playing with me, I thought I was going to die.

He was somewhat like Bones because he liked using cigarettes on my skin but unlike Bones, he poked me on my stomach instead of my back. He also liked using knives on me. He would usually do it on my thighs because it was less noticeable. Whenever he pulled one of his knives out, I would always try to bury my head in a pillow so I could scream in it. But Joker would always want me to look at him when he did it.

He said it was more fun that way. He would always smile when he did it. I was always scared that he would accidentally stab me.

Or maybe it wouldn't be an accident. I don't know anymore.

I'm so tired.
I don't feel I'm not helping mummy because she's getting worse every day.

I'm angry at myself because the medicine that was supposed to help is only making her sicker. I'm angry at my father because he can't see through mummy at all.

He never had been. But whenever he is here, everything is okay. I don't have to worry about some man coming in my room and doing weird things to me. Or mummy ignoring me unless she needed me for her medicine.

I could smile again.

Every time it's time for daddy to leave, I always start crying because I know what's going to happen when he leaves. He always gives me a hug and tells he'll be back soon. I've come close too many times to telling him the truth. But then I remember mummy's sad eyes and the promise I made. Daddy always told me it was wrong to break a promise.

But I don't think I can handle it anymore. I ache between my legs all the time, I've been wetting the bed a lot, and Miss Violet has been noticing that something is wrong.

Not to mention the nightmares I've been having. Or the way my heart beats faster every time I hear someone outside my door thinking that another strange man was going to enter.

I decided today that when daddy gets home, I'm going to tell him the truth.

Today in class, my teacher brought in a woman. Her name was Doctor Lynn. She had long blonde hair, brown eyes, and a thin mouth. It was probably so thin because she was smiling a lot like she was right then.

My teacher told us it was important to listen to what she had to say. I always tried to be a good student so I paid extra attention. The lady doctor had a cabbage patch doll in her hands.
She traced with her finger places on the doll and told us that if a grown-up ever tried to touch us in those areas, that we should tell someone right away because those are our no-no places and no adult is ever allowed to touch us there.

She kept talking after that, but I couldn't hear her. All I could think about was all the time I allowed men to touch me in all the spots Doctor Lynn talked about. I felt so guilty and I couldn't help but feel that all the kids in the room knew and were all looking at me in disgust. I kept my head down until Doctor Lynn finished.

When school was over, I overheard some girls from my class. "I can't believe that Miss Cooper brought that woman in! Every kid knows that. My mummy already told me about it."

"Why would any kid allow an adult to touch like that? They would have to be idiots to allow that to happen!"

"Unless they secretly like being touched that way? I saw this story a long time ago about how this man was touching this boy for almost 20 years and he didn't say anything. When my mummy saw it, she said that any child that allows that to happen is either crazy or a whore just waiting to happen!" They all started laughing after that.

I could feel my legs starting to shake. I knew that they didn't know what had been happening at my home, but I wanted to go over there and scream that I'm not crazy and that I didn't know that it was bad. I don't understand what "whore" meant, but I could tell that it was a bad word. I wanted to tell them that I did it because I thought I was helping my mummy because she was sick.

I secretly hated myself for what I allowed.

But I didn't. I kept quiet and shuffled along because they weren't my friends. I didn't have friends in my class because I didn't talk to anyone and nobody talked to me. I just started walking down the street that would take me home.

Daddy was coming home in a few days and I think that will be the perfect time to do it. I had just finished getting my plan together when I realized I was home. I grabbed the key from under our mat and opened the door. The first thing I notice is that it smells awful. Like when the boys in my class decide to fart all together just to be mean.
I put my backpack down in my room and grab my phonics workbook and sit on my bed to get started. The next thing I notice is that someone is yelling.

"No! There's no way someone won't notice. Guaranteed that a doctor's checkup will show the evidence. No. It's too risky. I'm surprised no one's noticed so far." It's mummy's voice.

"Look cariña, Imma keep it real with you. I don't give a flying fuck if you get caught or not. Either you want the drugs or not. Now I laid out my terms. So unless you don't want what I'm selling, I walk and you won't get an ounce of my product."

"I don't understand why you can't just do it with me again. You know I'll do it..." Mummy sounds so nice now. She was just screaming a few seconds ago. The man's voice comes back. "There's no telling what diseases you have already, bitch. Besides, I want fresh meat. I've already had you too much as it is."

I frown. I don't understand what they're talking about, but maybe if I keep quiet they won't notice me. There's no sound for a long time. Finally, I hear mummy's voice again although it's quieter this time.

"If you insist on doing it, go for the ass. They won't think to look there."

"Fine. Also, make sure she won't be squirmin'. I can't stand when they squirm."

"Don't worry, I got something that'll take care of that."

What are they talking about? Their conversation is only getting more confusing by the second. But I try to focus on my short and long vowels. The short ones are always so tricky. Miss Cooper says that if I sound it out like--

Mummy opens my door. I look up and feel my heart beating fast. Usually, she cleans up when she knows that daddy will be home in a few days. But she's still wearing the same dirty gray t-shirt that she's had on since Sunday. She smiles at me. I've learned that whenever she smiles at me, she needs something.

I don't know why that makes me so sad.
"D-did you n-need something, mummy?" I play with the butterfly barrette that is at the end of one of my plat.

Mummy shakes her head. I'm surprised. Usually, she never comes to my room just to hang out.

"No, baby. Just wanted to see how you doin'. I tell you what: why don't I go to the kitchen, fix you a glass of orange juice, and you can tell me about your day? And when you're finished with your homework, we'll have some ice cream."

I gasp. "But Daddy says I'm only allowed to ice cream on Saturdays." Mummy winks at me. "Well, what daddy doesn't know won't hurt him now will it?" I giggle at that. I don't like keeping secrets from daddy, but I think that ice cream isn't too bad.

I nod my head. "Okay!" Mummy laughs. I love her laugh. She almost sounds like she's singing when she does.

I should've known that doing this for her would work out in the end. I just had to be patient.

Before is out the door I tell her, "I love you, Mummy!" She smiles at me but doesn't say it back. That's alright. She doesn't have to tell me. I can feel it without her telling me.

I'm sounding out the words on my worksheet when mummy comes back. She has a glass cup filled with orange juice and sits on my bed.

I've always loved orange juice. Daddy says I should drink more water. But I think water is icky.

"Thank you, Mummy," I say as I take the glass from her. I take a big gulp of the juice. It tastes so tangy yet sweet at the same time. I take another sip and tell mummy about my day.

"We had a spelling test today. Miss Cooper always says that I'm the best speller in the entire class. She says that I could participate in the next spelling bee if I practice!" I sip the juice again.
There's this strange taste that's mixed in with the sweetness. But I guess it's what daddy would call the aftertaste.

"We had a math test, too. I did my best, but I don't think I did too well. I did study a lot and I even got Miss Kara to help." The strange taste is starting to get stronger. I can't even taste the juice anymore. I don't like it. I try to give back to mummy. "No, ma'am. Drink it all." I do as she says.

When I finish the juice, I feel really strange. My body feels like it is going numb and I don't know how to stop it. I try to open my mouth, but it feels like somebody stuffed it with peanut butter because it feels heavy. I'm scared and I try with all my might to look to mummy for help. All she does is take the glass from my hand, get up from my bed, and head towards my door. I try to follow her but I fall back on my bed. All I can see is my unicorn-covered ceiling. I try to use them to calm me down. It doesn't work.

Although I try to focus on getting up, I stop when I hear mummy's voice again. All I hear is, "Make it quick." Then I hear footsteps again. One minute I'm looking at beautiful white unicorns flying on rainbows and the next I'm looking into the dark eyes of the Joker.

He smiles his Joker smile at me and I want to run so bad, but I can't move. The best I can do is make little noises. He slaps me and it feels like being hit by a boulder. I can't really feel my face, but I still feel a faint throbbing. He flips me over onto my stomach and pulls my pants and underwear down.

No. Not again. I just promised myself I wouldn't let this happen. I was going to tell daddy and then we would help mummy together.

I first thought he was going to touch what Doctor Lynn called my no-no area, but I feel his fingers force their way into my...

It hurts. It hurts so much and he won't stop. I silently cry, too afraid to know what he'll do if he heard me. And just when I thought it couldn't get any worse, I feel something bigger than fingers trying to force its way into that area. It keeps going further and further and if I could, I would scream. He puts his hand next to my head.

My eyes try to focus on something, anything to escape the pain I'm in. I finally focus on the picture of me, my Grammy, and my daddy. We were at the ballet. We were all so happy. I focus on his smiling face.
Daddy, I thought, help me. Please help me. Hoping that he would somehow hear me.

But no was going to save me from this.

No one.

When he was finished, I hear him zip up his pants, and leave my room. I hear the sound of him talking to mummy, and I hear her yell at him. But I don't care. All I care about is the pain I feel coming from my bottom. I still can't fully move, although I was finally able to move my fingers. It feels like hours later when I finally able to stumble from my bed.

I try to stand, but I cry out because my bottom feels like somebody ran a knife through it. I decide to crawl out.

I head to the kitchen with my head still feeling foggy. I see mummy sitting at the dining room table. A pot boiling not too far away. There are three small shots on the table.

She sees me as I crawl to her leg under the table. "Mummy," I cry. "I... I don't feel too good." I try to hold on to her leg. I hope that she'll give me a hug. But instead, she just yanks her leg and grabs me by my hair.

The happy look on her face is gone. She looks very angry and her breath smells terrible. "You couldn't even get fucked right." I don't know what that word means, but I feel my lips tremble anyway. "All that time I spent carrying you in my stomach. All the aches, pains, and times I wanted to die sometimes because of you. I ask for one thing and you can't even do that!"

I can't stop the tears that go down my face. "M-mummy, what's wrong? What did I do?"

She laughs a mean laugh. "The man that was here didn't give me enough of what I needed. He said that you were mediocre at best." She only seems to angrier. "God, I don't why your father convinced me to keep you. I mean, you're practically useless. I thought that you would just be ugly as a baby but you're still a hideous little shit. You don't know how many times the men that touched you thought you were a boy at first."
All the mean words she saying should probably make me mad. But all I feel is shame. I let her down so many times. I thought that maybe I could prove my love for her if I did what she wanted and I still failed.

"I asked God so many times if I was going to be cursed with a child, could it not look like a little monster? I don't deserve this crap."

She's right. I am a monster. She didn't deserve this. "All you've ever done is bring misery to my life! And you think I'm supposed to reward you with what? Affection? Love? You didn't do it help me. Admit it, you did it because deep down, you're just a little whore begging for it."

That word again.

But I never thought I would hear mummy would call me that. But I didn't like it, mummy. I only did it because I thought I was helping you get better. I want to tell her that, but she's too busy yelling at me. Slowly dragging me away from the table into the kitchen. Her spit falls on my face as she continues screaming.

All of a sudden, she looks to the side and she smiles an evil smile.

It was then I remembered that whenever the men that touched me left me, I would always reach under my bed for one of my story books. The fairy-tales always made me feel happy because it made me believe that I would get my happily ever after too if I just kept going. Sometimes, I would even imagine that mummy was the beautiful queen that had a curse placed on her and I was the brave princess that would help her mother break the curse. And once the queen was free, she would hug the princess and tell she was proud of her and that she loved her. That would help remind me that I was doing a good thing.

Up until now, I had thought of mummy as the beautiful queen.

But now...

She looks like the evil witch.

It happens before I realize what she's doing. She grabs the left side of my face and pushes my head down to the hot stove.
I thought that when the Joker was hurting me, that's was the worse pain I would ever feel. But nothing compares to the burning pain I feel going through my face. I scream so loud, the flat is probably shaking. I feel my left cheek starting to burn as well.

She. Won't. Let. Go.

I think she hopes that it will kill me. And though I want it to stop, I secretly hope that I will die.

I failed my mother.

I don't deserve to live after that.

Just when I started not to feel the burning anymore, she lets go and I quickly push myself away from the stove. I can't see out of my left eye and I smell something burning. I think it's my face.

Mummy storms out of the kitchen and I hear a door open and the words, "If I'm lucky, you'll be dead when I get back." The door slams.

I hope so mummy, I think as I slowly close my eyes.

I hope so too.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Okay guys, I'm going to try to talk doctor jargon for a minute. Plssssss.... I'm trying my best to sound professional!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It all comes in flashes after that.

Someone yells, I open my good eye. It looks like daddy. But that's not right. Daddy isn't supposed to be back until this Sunday.

Oh well. I close my eye again.

When I open my eye again, I see white ceilings and bright lights. I have some kind of mask on my face. I start to shift around until I feel someone hold me down.

No. Not again.

I try my best to get away from the hand but it's too strong. My right eye lands on a man wearing a blue gown and hospital mask. He lowers his mask and smiles at me. It's a kind smile.

But Mr. Bruce had a kind smile too.

That thought makes me try to get away from him. He shushes me and tells me that no one is going to hurt me again. I don't believe him. He wants something. They always want something. Before I could try to get the mask off, I'm already falling asleep again.

"Signs of severe sexual abuse..." I hear those words. I can't open my eyes, but I can hear just fine.
"What the bloody hell do you mean sexual abuse?" Although the words are angry, I'm so happy I could fly. It's my daddy. He's back! I know everything is going to be okay now.

"Well once we applied the skin grafts," the voice continued. "One of the nurses couldn't help but notice the knife marks and cigarette burns on your daughter's skin."

"K... knife marks?"

"That made me suspicious, so I decided to investigate. Her vaginal area shows signs of heavy bruising."

"No..."

"I wanted to be thorough, so I checked her anus and..."

"And what?!"

"There was heavy bleeding in that area, which makes me believe that something was forced into that area."

The next thing I hear is the sound of my daddy crying. Although I don't understand a lot of what the doctor is saying, something tells me it means that my daddy finally knows.

If I could, I would cry too. I was planning on telling daddy the truth, but not like this. I didn't want anyone else to know.

"How could I have not known?" Is the last thing I hear before I go back to sleep.

"William!"
I sort of wake up again. Again, it's the sort of wake up that allows me to hear, but not open my eyes. The voice used to be my favorite voice in the entire world.

Now it just makes me want to go hide.

"Eleanor." I've never heard daddy's voice sound like this. He sounds so angry.

"Thank god I finally found you," Mummy says. She sounds so happy. "I had to pry it out of our neighbor to find out where you guys had gone. I swear that woman is--"

"Did you know?"

There's a long silence after that. Then, "And just what the hell do you mean by that?" Her voice doesn't sound so nice now.

"I've been sitting here for five days--five days-- listening to white men explain in great detail of how badly our daughter was raped and molested. My wife, who was supposed to be here by my side, was conveniently missing for those five days doing God knows what."

"Speaking of that, where have you been? And please don't lie and say that you were back at the flat because I made several trips there and the neighbors have said they have not seen you." I don't hear mummy say anything back.

"Eleanor, did you know what was happening to our daughter?"

Mummy starts to laugh. It's a mean laugh. "You know William? One of the things I've loved about you is how you always make me laugh at the most unusual times. I mean, I just find it fucking hilarious how you are just now finding out about this. The little brat isn't that good of a liar."

"Shut up, you bitch," I hear daddy whisper.

"No!" Mummy screams. "You wanted to hear the truth, so I'm telling you. How is it that it took you two years to find out? Either you're just as stupid and naive as the day I met you, or you already knew what a major slut your precious, little gir--"
The mean words stop when she cries out. Then I hear the awful sound of her laughter.

"A slap, wow. If I had known this is what it would take for you to finally man up, I probably would've done it a long time ago!"

I hear someone crying now: it's Daddy. I've never heard daddy cry before. Grammy told me he cried when I was born, but I've never seen it. I feel so bad because I know it's my fault for him being so sad. It makes me want to cry too.

"How," he finally asks. "How did you manage to do something so evil? She's your daughter for Christ's sake!"

"No!" she screams back. "I never wanted her, you did. That... that thing will never be my daughter." I wish I could wake right now and make her stop. I love her with all my heart. Everything I did was to show her how much I was willing to do for her. To hear her say such mean words makes my body hurt even more than it already does.

"Even if you never loved her," daddy whispers. "How could you find it within yourself to let her be abused in this way. She's a child-

"I NEVER WANTED THE LITTLE SHIT!" she finally screams.

It goes quiet again until mummy starts talking again. "I never wanted to be a mother. You knew that. But I was stupid enough to let you convince me because you promised that you would take of me and the brat. And like an idiot, I believed you. But from the very start, all you cared about was the baby. It wasn't just you though. Your mother, my parents, and everyone around me suddenly decided that I didn't matter anymore. All the attention you all used to give to me, you gave it to the thing growing inside of me."

"It's like I didn't even exist in your world anymore." Mummy sounds so sad now. "I foolishly thought that after it was out of me, everything would go back to normal. But of course, it didn't. I spent hours of never-ending pain trying to push that thing out. I thought for sure that my husband, who claimed to love me so much, would finally remember that I'm here. It's no wonder that you rarely touch me anymore. I can't say that I blame you."

Daddy talks again for a moment. "Wait a minute, what does our sex life have to do with our-"
"It has everything to do with that thing!" She's screaming again and I wish that she would stop because it hurts my ears. "I used to be a size 4. But that thing stretched out my body and left these disgusting marks and a flabby stomach in its wake."

"You stuck around for the first six months of it being here and then you left me alone like you always do. But this time, you left a snot-nosed brat for me to take care of too. Did you know for months on end I had to deal with her screaming through the night? I was kicked out of my sociology and political science classes because I was showing up to class late and turning in overdue assignments. I used to cry myself to sleep for nights on end because I was afraid I would never graduate and be the failure my mother thinks I am. Of course, you never noticed anything was wrong with me. All you cared about was your spawn."

"So when I started taking meth, it felt like I had control over my life again."

"Wait a minute," daddy finally says. "You used meth? In my house and around my daughter?"

"See? There you go again. Your wife just told you she has a drug addiction and all you can care about is whether drugs were around the brat or not. Typical."

"Just so you know," she continues. "It helped me. I was actually not doing horrible in my classes, I was making time for my friends, and I didn't feel the need to strangle the brat every time I saw it. But of course, like everything else in my life, it didn't last. My supply was running out and my dealer was getting stingy. Usually, sex did the trick, but the bastard actually said 'you're too used up, I need something fresh'."

"You... you didn't. Eleanor... tell me that you didn't..."

"It didn't take much to convince your little brat to do it once I told her that I was "sick". I guess she got that gullible trait from you. Oh, you should've seen her, William. You wouldn't believe how good she is at giving hea-"

"I want a divorce." He said it so quietly that I almost didn't hear him. What's a divorce, though? I've heard some kids from my class say it, but I never knew what it meant. All I know it has something to do with a mummy and a daddy but that's it.

I don't hear any more talking for a minute, but then I hear mummy laugh. "Oh come on, William."
Really? A divorce? We both know that you don't have the balls to do it. Even if you did, cases like this usually result in the mother getting custody. I could make it so that you'll never see your daughter again.” No. No! I don't want mummy to keep me away from daddy. I just want all of us to stay together. I want us to be like the families I see at school and at the park. It's all I've ever wanted.

Then I hear something that surprises me: the sound of daddy's laugh. And the words, "Then thank God I have this.” Whatever daddy shows mummy has her make a sound that sounds like a scream.

"You... you were recording me? Nigga, I oughta beat the hell out of you. Give me that!” Daddy lets another laugh. "The thing is, Eleanor, I knew even before I got home I wanted to divorce you. When we were.... dating, I knew that you had a mean streak. I accepted it, actually thought it was attractive for a little while. But when you got pregnant, that streak only got bigger. By the time Willow was born, you just completely closed yourself off. I know I've been gone for long periods of time, but the time I was home, you're cold not only to our daughter but to me too. That's actually the reason I came early. I knew if I waited any longer, I would talk myself out of the decision I made."

"But when I got home and found her unconscious on the floor, with half of her face gone," he whispers. "I knew I had to put those thoughts on the back-burner for now. But when the doctor came to me and told me what they... found, something inside my head kept screaming that you were somehow involved. Half of me didn't want to think it was true, but what you said just now only confirmed what I already knew. To think I was actually considering not going through with the divorce, but you just gave me the benediction I needed. So either you give me the divorce without a fight, or I'll make your life a living hell."

I think I hear mummy crying. "You won't do it. You love me too much."

"I do," I hear daddy say back. "But I love my daughter more." I hear footsteps and I know mummy is leaving the room. Before she leaves, she yells, "You two have already made my life a living hell!"

Once she leaves, I hear daddy take a deep breath, and I think I feel him take my hand. "LoLo," he whispers. "LoLo, baby, I'm so so sorry this happened to you. This is all my fault. From now on, we're going to be together all the time. I promise you that years later from now, this will only feel like a bad memory. I'll make this right, baby girl. I swear I will. I love you so much." I feel him start to cry.

I feel tears run down my face. Daddy, I think. This is my fault. Please don't cry. I'll make a promise to you too, daddy. I promise to never make you cry again. When I get out of here, I'll work harder to become the best ballerina in the world! That way, you'll have a daughter that you can be proud of.
Those are my last thoughts before I go back to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Okay so funny thing

I was ready to post a new chapter when archive decided they wanted to act like a little bitch and not let me post my work. So half of it was gone and I had to do it all over again! I am frustrated so please understand

Thx!
When I finally get out of the hospital, me and daddy don't go back to our home, we go to Grammy's house. Daddy says he thinks that it would be good for me.

I'm excited. I haven't seen Grammy in like forever. I would smile, but that hurts my face when I do. I want to take the bandage off and touch it, but daddy and the doctor said that if I did, I could get an infection. I don't know what an infection is, but daddy says that if it happens, I have to go back to the hospital. So matter how bad my face is hurting and itching, I don't want to go back to the hospital. Everything is going good so far.

I'm staying in daddy's old room for now. It's okay for a boy's room. It's got all kinds of toy planes and boats. Daddy says I can't touch them. It also has these cool posters of old singers daddy likes. He says that I can't touch those either. It's alright, though.

Waking up in daddy's room whenever I have a nightmare about mummy or... them, makes me feel better even without daddy actually being there. I don't even have to worry about if I'm going to eat breakfast because Grammy cooks all the time. She makes pancakes, eggs, grits, and bacon. Even when she doesn't feel like cooking, there's cereal in the cupboard and milk in the fridge. Grammy reads me my favorite fairy-tales.

And she never forgets to tell me she loves me.

That's the best part about being at Grammy's house.

It's a Saturday today and Grammy is taking me to her job. She works at a masquerade shop. The shop she works at is a pretty blue color. It reminds of the sky. It's not really big, but she always gets a lot of customers. She helps people get ready for parties, Halloween, you name it. She started working there when she was pregnant with daddy. She's worked here so long she now owns the shop. It used to be called *Masquerade Pavilion*, but now that it's Grammy's, it's now called *Del's Mask Emporium*. 
Grammy said the owners liked how she ran the store and the way she interacted with customers. I'm not surprised. Grammy always was a cheerful person. She always has a smile ready for everyone. Not to mention that she is really pretty. She's not skinny like Miss Violet, but she's what my Daddy would call "shapely". She has a smile that always makes others smile too, and her skin, the color of my daddy's favorite Godiva chocolate, always looks perfect. Daddy says that I look and act just like Grammy.

I really hope to be like her when I grow up. In my mind, she's the kind fairy godmother that helped Cinderella get to the ball, or the fairy that helped to kind of break Briar Rose's sleeping spell.

Oh oh! I got it!

She's like the beautiful sugar plum fairy in *The Nutcracker* that does the beautiful dance with the handsome knight. We learned about that story in ballet class and when Miss Violet showed us a video of the dance. It was so, so beautiful! One day, I'll play the fairy and dance in front of lots of people and I'll make sure that they can't take their eyes off of me.

But till then, I'll just keep practicing.

Grammy is in the front working while I'm in the back, in the storage room, looking at some masks she made herself. I think everyone she made is awesome, but there is one that caught my eye: it's the cat mask that always caught my eye. Grammy says that it's her favorite too. It used to be just a boring, yellow cat mask. But then Grammy painted it in blue, yellow, pink, and purple designs. She even glued these pretty flowers, beads, and fabric on it.

"Willow!" I turn around to see Grammy in the doorway with her hands on her hips. She has on her favorite t-shirt, which was something she bought from the Jacksons' *Victory* tour, and her favorite torn-up blue jeans that she says brings her good luck. I smile at her. "Hi, Grammy!"

"Now Willow Jane," she says. "When I brought you to the store, that didn't mean for you to lollygag about. Come on, little person. I need your help up front. There's a lady who's here to pick a mask she ordered." Upfront? I didn't think that I would have to go up there. I just got my bandages taken off a few days ago. I thought that my face would've been all better. But now it looks like what butter looks like when it's been in the microwave too long. I look ugly and I'm scared to look in the mirror and see them. I look just like the ugly monster in my fairy-tales now. But daddy says they're still healing and that my face will get better soon.
I really don't want anyone to see me like this. People used to stare at me with the bandages on. I don't want to know what they'll do if they see what I look like without them on. I want to ask Grammy if I could just sweep the storage room floor instead, but I know she won't hesitate to give me whooping if I try to get out of it. So I take a deep breath, grab the purple mask on the right rack, and follow Grammy upfront to the front counter.

The woman up front is a pretty white lady with short, blonde that comes down to her ears. She takes off the sunglasses she was wearing and shows the blue eyes behind them. She smiles when she sees Grammy.

"Honestly Del," she says. "I don't what I would do without you."

"You'd look like a jackass, that's what you'd look like." That's a bad word. I can't believe that Grammy said a bad word. But the woman just laughs. "True, true. So do you have my mask or what?"

Grammy nods. "Sure do. Give the lady her mask, sweetheart." I go around the counter to hand the lady her mask. Maybe it won't be so bad, right? The worse thing that could happen is that--

She screams. I jump. Is there a rat or cockroach crawling around? The flat used to have them and even if I couldn't see them, I could hear them in the walls. The woman is backing away from me. Her face is turning bright red. "Oh my god! What is that ugly growth on that girl's face? Is it some kind of fungus? Delphinium, I told you how important this business dinner was to me and now you bring this disgusting, germ-filled little brat on the day of my meeting?! Just what the hell are you trying to pu--"

"Denise."

Although she didn't shout, the woman, Denise, stopped her shouting quickly. I've never seen Grammy this angry before. The only time I've seen her this angry is when... is when she was around. The room remains quiet until Grammy speaks again.

"Denise, I've owned this store for 23 years. I have a lot of pride in it. I have always prided myself on treating everybody that walks through these doors with kindness and dignity no matter who they are. So when I watch people like you, who like to think that they are better than everyone else, pick on a little girl, my grandbaby none the less, who has never harmed you in any way, it... it irks me. Now, I am a lady before anything else. So instead of dragging yo white ass into the streets and beating you senseless like I want to, I will kindly ask you to leave and never, ever, step foot in my store. Are we clear?"
Denise's mouth falls open before she closes her mouth, slams the mask on the counter, and storms out the door. Not without yelling, "I didn't want your raggedy mask anyway!"

I don't know what to do after what just happened. After a minute, I start to feel guilty. What have I done? I just caused Grammy to lose a valuable customer. I bite my lip for a moment to try to stop myself from crying, and then I look up at Grammy and say, "I'm sorry Grammy. I didn't mean for you to lose a customer. You don't have to bring me up front anymore. I don't want to scare off anymore people." She looks down at me and I see that instead of anger, there's only sadness now. She first goes to the front door of the store and flips the sign from "open" to "closed".

She comes back to me and stretches out her hand for me to take. I do. She takes me back to the small kitchen area she has stored in the back behind the storage room. She sits me down at the table and goes to the fridge. She pulls out two cartons of strawberry ice cream.

My eyes widen. "Daddy doesn't like me having ice cream before dinner." Grammy winks at me. "I think I can make a special exception for you." I giggle. Grammy always knows how to make me feel better. She sets the cartons on the table, grabs some spoons, and we begin eating.

I'm almost finished when Grammy starts speaking again. "Have I ever told you about your Grandfather?" I stop eating. Daddy always told me to never ask about his daddy. He always said that it hurt him to talk about it. I didn't want to hurt either them, so I didn't ask. I shake my head.

Grammy takes a deep breath. "I met your Grandfather when I was eighteen years old. I had finally gotten out of the foster care system and was determined to become my own woman." I may never hear this story again, but I can't but ask, "What's foster care?"

Her smile is sad. "Remember when I read Oliver Twist to you a week ago? How the boy was raised in an orphanage?" I nod my head. It was such a sad story even though it had a happy ending at the end. "That's kind of what foster care was to me. Anyways, because your grandmother is a resourceful woman, I found myself working two jobs as a waitress and a janitor at the local roller rink, somewhat decent places. I met Andre when I was finishing wiping off the countertops at the restaurant. He was charming, handsome and always had a kind word for me whenever I saw him."

"It didn't take long for me to fall for him. Months later he asked me to move in with him. He didn't have to do too much convincing because I loved him that much and I was sure he loved me too. For a few months, everything was amazing. I would go to work and when I would come home, he would already have dinner prepared for me and ask me how my day was. I thought I had everything: I had my freedom, a handsome man that loved me, and a luxury flat with a fantastic view. Life was perfect. Then I found out I was pregnant with your father. I was so happy and I thought Andre
would be thrilled as well. He said he was at the time and even celebrated with me. But eventually, the dinners stopped, the kindness stopped, and I rarely saw him anymore either. I was confused about what was happening until I finally found that he was cheating on me with a woman from his job. I confronted him, and he slapped me. He then started screaming that I ruined his life and that he actually felt happy when he was with the other woman."

"I made a decision right then and there that my baby was not going to grow up around people who did not love him. So I packed my things, took the first ferry out of Wales, and headed straight to Scotland. Best decision I ever made. Because I found a decent job that I love and made my own, and I had William and he eventually had you." She puts her hand on my mine and smiles.

I'm feeling confused. Although I'm glad she told me, I don't why she did it. "But Grammy, why are you telling me this?" Her smile slowly goes away after that. "Because even though I loved your father, I closed myself off from the rest of the world. Growing up in foster care, you learn how to take care of yourself and not depend on others because they always let you down. Andre was the first person I ever trusted with my heart. When he broke it, I unconsciously stayed away from anyone who tried to care for me. I was too scared that I would be hurt again. I'm still struggling with it, but I am getting better at being more open."

Suddenly she puts her carton down, reaches over, and gently holds my face in her hands. I tried to get away. I didn't want her to feel the disgusting lump on my face. But she didn't let go. "Listen, my sweet little cherry drop. You have to promise me that won't you be a fool like your Grammy. You won't let this," she pets the left side of my face, "or anything or anyone get in the way of living your life. I refuse to let you end up like me and be afraid to be who you are. Don't let me, your father, or even your trifling mother get in the way of your happiness. I won't have it. I won't!"

It's only when she shouts those last words to I finally see that she's crying. Aside from daddy, she's the strongest person I know. She's never asked this much from me. So I take her hands off my face go over around the table and hug her as tight as I can. "Don't worry, Grammy," I whisper. "I promise." She hugs me back and I think I hear her whisper "I love you, cherry drop".

We stay like that for a long time before a question pops up in my mind. "Grammy, how is it that you were able to get pregnant without you and Andre being married?" The breath that I felt, on the top of my head, stopped for a moment before I hear her say, "You can ask your daddy when we get home."

When we finally come back to Grammy's house hours later, daddy is waiting there for us in the living room on the couch. "Daddy!" I know Grammy doesn't like me to shout too much, but I missed my daddy. He catches me when I jump into his arms. "Hey LoLo, did you have fun with your grandma today?" I nod my head. After our talk, we opened the store again and I stayed the entire time. I didn't even really care if people stared at me. Although Grammy didn't say I had to keep it
from daddy, I don't think I am going to say anything about what we talked about today. It's just something I want to keep for myself.

Oh! That's right. "Daddy, is it possible for a woman to get pregnant without being married?" Daddy stops smiling, looks over my shoulder at Grammy and raises his eyebrow. "Mama?" he asks. Grammy decides to go into the kitchen.

"Well, dinner is not going to cook itself." Daddy follows her. "No no no, old woman. What did you say to my baby girl?"

"First off, I don't know who you calling old woman." I laugh until my stomach hurts. I love it when Grammy and daddy fight like this. It's so funny. I think they would've kept going if the telephone hadn't gone off. Daddy leaves the kitchen to answer the hallway phone. I secretly creep towards the hall because I want to listen too.

"Hello? Yes, this is he." When daddy finally talks again, he sounds angry. "Look, I know you called because I'm her husband for now, but that'll soon be a thing of the past. I don't want anything thing to do with her." Oh no. I think they're talking about her. "Look, sir I rea--what? What do you mean she OD'ed? A lethal dose of alcohol and meth?"

I hear him take a deep breath. "And there was nothing you could do by the time you got there?" Another quiet moment. "OK. Thank you, officer, for informing me." I hear nothing again until there is a loud thump and I hear daddy curse. I wonder what happen? I hope nothing bad has happened. When I hear his footsteps, I race back to the living room.

When he comes back a second later, his eyes look red. Was he crying? Then he smiles and starts talking.

"Hey, baby girl. So listen, I was thinking that once you finish up school, how would you like to go to Germany with me?"

Chapter End Notes

Two words

TIME. JUMP.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

OK, you didn't know, but I was trying to talk like a little girl throughout the first few chapters. So that's why I didn't use a lot of big vocab, I wanted to sound like a little girl as much as possible.

Now that LoLo is twelve, I'll switch it up!

"Okay, Okay. We can do this. If this year has taught us anything, it is that we are stronger than we give ourselves credit for. That is why I am confident that we will slay the proverbial dragon and win."

OK.

Maybe I am being a little dramatic today but I can't help it: today is the first day of middle school. I think that it is a valid excuse to start talking to myself in the third person. Or was it the second person?

Oh heck, I don't care anymore.

I just got out of the shower and taken off my nightcap. My hair was looking fresh in its newly made plats, and it smelled like coconuts, just like I wanted it to be. I knew that my three-day method would work for my hair. My hair, even in its natural state, had always been long. I'm talking about "a little over your bra strap" long. Dad's hair, before he had to cut it for work, had been long too when he was younger.

I would smile and admire my hard work a little longer if only I knew had to my most difficult task: my face. I try not to shudder as I give full attention to it. Despite his words that they would disappear eventually, they didn't go away like dad said they would. When the... incident had happened, the insurance dad had only covered enough for me to get partial skin grafts. So I only got enough to make sure I lived. My face has healed, but now the left side of my face just looks like these big, ugly patches of rough skin on the left side of my face.

I know it's not healthy, but there are days where I leave the light off in the bathroom because so I don't have to look at myself. But today, I'll suck it up because I have a plan.
I reach for the cupboard on the right side of the mirror and pull out a medium-sized bag. I unzip the bag and pull out the cosmetics, which I got from the drug store a few weeks ago, and stare at the tubes and round compact in my hands.

My saving grace: foundation. I can't help but think of the trouble I went through to get it. First off, I inherited my dark skin from my father and Grammy. Although I will never be ashamed about it, it did make finding the foundation for my skin a bit of a challenge. I eventually found it, although it was on the other side of town and very expensive (Well, if it's expensive, hopefully, it'll be effective, right?).

The next problem occurred when I tried to apply it. Needless to say, it wasn't pretty. After the first failure and a healthy dose of cursing everything in existence and pouting, I kept trying and trying until I finally succeeded in making my face look normal.

As I apply the foundation to my face, I can't help but feel a little sad when I look at the result. This is what I could've looked like if she hadn't destroyed my face: a normal preteen. I'm pressed for time, but I can't but gaze at my reflection. Aside from the scars, pimples, and dry skin, I think I have decent skin. It's the color of pure black coffee and I always try to take care of it.

My broad nose, my full lips, and my heart-shaped chin are all things I take note of. It takes me a minute to make eye contact with myself. My hazel eyes would've probably been my most cherished feature of mine if it didn't remind of her so much.

Unbidden memories of her funeral play in mind.

I didn't understand the concept of death. I only understood that the woman that had birthed me had gone to a place that no one could reach her. Her body was burned into ashes instead of being buried. I would later learn that it was a personal request of her's.

Not a lot of people showed aside me and my father and Grammy, a couple of his war buddies, her former roommate, and an angry older lady that looked a lot like her. After the funeral ended, the lady came up to me and dad and just started screaming all of these terrible words. It didn't matter if she was cursing or not, they were still nasty.

"It should've been you in that urn!" She screamed at my father. "My baby is dead because of you!" I
remember getting so angry at her that I ran up to her and kicked her on the knee. She gave a small yelp, gripped her knee and glared at me.

"Don't talk about my daddy like that! It wasn't his fault, it was her's!" I didn't exactly hear what she said next because Grammy tugged me away from the situation.

I sigh, remembering the spanking and the never-ending lecture about how I shouldn't disrespect adults. I wasn't sorry then and I'm definitely not sorry now.

Done with my observations, I exit the bathroom and make the trek to my room. Unfortunately, because I spent most of my money on hair products and makeup, I didn't have enough to get some trendy clothes for the first day.

It's alright. I never did care for clothes like that. I throw on my Grammy's HIStory World Tour T-shirt, put on some sweatpants and call it a day. Once the preliminaries are done, I grab my backpack and stuff my cell phone, books, makeup bag (in case my makeup started to fade) and head out the door to the downstairs. I stop at the very top when I realize that I almost forgot something. I run back to my room and reach for the notebook that I hid under my bed.

It's a pocket-sized blue and green journal that I titled A Dummy's Guide to a Perfect Middle/High School Experience. Throughout most of my elementary days, I have been a loner. It wasn't a personal choice, it was mostly due to my face that tended to scare kids away.

Can't say that I really blamed them.

But this year, it's going to be different. I have made a fool-proof plan that is a ninety percent guarantee to grant me sweet, meaningful friendships. I'm talking friendships that go into the "maid of honor and bridesmaids" stage.

Oh yes, I will be victorious in the end.

I plan to primarily target girls because you gotta stick to what you know.
In my plan, I've realized that while girls my age love a lot of things, there was always one big constant: Pop Culture. So I made sure to read every teen magazine I could get my hands on in order to better understand my target--I mean potential friends.

The top three celebs I found was the girl group Destiny's Child, pop sensation Britney Spears, and the recent solo artist Justin Timberlake. I learned everything I could in my limited three weeks, which included who was dating who, their best tracks, and their belief systems. I jotted it all down in my little notebook in case I forgot something.

I must admit, I did develop an admiration for some of my research subjects. I admired Beyoncé's honey-like voice and thought Justin was very cute and funny.

Another strategy I plan to utilize is to get involved with many school activities as possible. Not only will that look good on my future college resume, but it will also cement my name in the school.

Lesser chance of being forgotten if your name is everywhere, right?

People will know my name eventually.

I clench my fists in determination. I will, I think to myself, win. This is just like all the comic books and fairy-tales I've read over the years. I am the hero triumphing over the evil-doer that threatens my town. I am the brave boy that dares to take on the hungry giant in order to steal the golden goose so that he and his mother will no longer wonder about their next meal. I will punch my dweeb status right in its ugly, foul-smelling mouth and rise to my true potential.

Just when I'm about to throw my head back and release a mighty battle cry, I hear a slightly annoyed voice call out, "Willow, are you almost ready to go?"

And just like that, I'm no longer a knight or Jack.

I'm just dorky, uncool Willow Spencer again.

Although I feel the tell-tale signs of my face heating up in embarrassment, I can't help but let out a self-deprecating laugh. Although I truly don't want to be alone this year, it sounds like I'm planning
world domination. Grammy always did say that I had an overactive imagination.

I feel my smile die down a little. Would Grammy have disapproved of my plan if she were here? No. She was so cool she probably would've helped me. I start to feel myself get sad and I quickly shake my head to rid myself of my despair.

It's way too early in the morning to be feeling so down. Focus on the plan, I tell myself. I put my notebook in my backpack, take a deep inhale and exhale, and then proceed downstairs.

When I reach the living room, dad is already there, waiting for me.

He frowns when he sees me, but he doesn't look surprised at my makeup-covered face. He had already been a witness to several of my previous attempts. "I swear, I will never understand what you women be doing half the time in the bathroom." I roll my eyes and let a playful snort. "Dad, I wouldn't try to analyze too much into it. Some things are better left unsaid." He gives a mocking scoff, stands up, and grabs his house and car keys from the candy dish on the table. We both make our way outside to wear his car is waiting in the driveway.

"So," he inquires when we get ourselves situated in the grey SUV. "You ready for the first day of school?" I let the self-assured grin spread across my lips. "Dad, I've never been more ready for anything in my life."
I'm going to die.

.....

OK, not literally, but that is exactly how I felt when we pulled up to the school. We arrived here thirty minutes early so dad said that I could wait in the car for a few minutes.

For the next fifteen minutes, the car is filled with nothing but peaceful silence. Dad had turned the radio to some random throwback station so I tried to calm my nerves by listening to Ms. Whitney Houston boldly declare how she is every woman.

It is around that time that dad decides to do a last minute check-up. "Do you have everything you need, LoLo?"

I internally roll my eyes. "Dad, could you not call me LoLo in public? I'm actually trying to make some friends this year. I don't think hearing some childish nickname will get me off to a good start." Dad sighs, but he nods his head anyways. "Okay, well, do you have everything you need, Willow?" He rolled out my name in such a dramatic fashion, I couldn't help but let out a small giggle.

"Yeah dad," I confirm, "I got everything." He still looks skeptical. "Are you sure? Do you have your school books, lunch? Did you remember to pack your gym clothes--" I don't even try to keep in my incredulous laugh. I can't help it. He is so cute, getting worked up about my first day of middle school. Dad's handsome face curls up into an irritated scowl when my laughter doesn't die down. With some effort, I try to stymie my lingering snickers.

I put my hand on his shoulder in an effort to soothe him. I look him right in the eyes. "Dad," I say. "Chill, okay? I got everything I need in my backpack. I'm gonna be fine, alright?" His face somewhat softens at my words. "Besides, I think I've gotten pretty good on learning how to take care of myself..."
Fudge. The words had slipped out before I could even stop myself. I break eye contact with him and amuse myself by looking at my folded hands. I honestly didn't mean everything malicious by the words, but I guess with everything that happened this year, the guilt is still pretty strong.

Six years ago, a few months after her funeral, dad had sold the flat, packed up everything we owned, and next thing I knew, we had relocated to Zurich, Germany.

I can't say I have any fond memories of the country because I barely remember anything about it. All I remember was that it was gloomy most days and the ballet lessons dad had signed me up for.

I, of course, didn't make any lasting friendships over. All the kids either laughed at me or thought I was a real-life monster from the horror movies they saw even though their mommies told them not to watch it.

So yeah, nothing really stuck out.

Three years later we're on the move again but this time, we relocate to Florence, Italy.

Those were the best three years of my life.

I honestly don't what it was exactly, but something about the country just made me feel at home. At peace. We had moved into this charming little cottage, which was conveniently right next to the dance school dad had enlisted me in. It was made out of brick, the color of muddy red. It was practically the size of our old flat, but I loved it because it reminded me of the cottage Snow White and the seven dwarves lived in.

It was small but hey, we were a small family.

Although I didn't make any friends my own age, I had a special connection with my dance instructor. I always tried to be the best student I could be so that I could make my father and myself proud. I'm proud to say that I impressed my teacher so well that she even gave me one-on-one lessons because I had "real potential" according to her. She says that my hardened discipline and absolute determination is what made me stand out.
She often asked me how I had seemed so mature at such a young age. I didn't know how to answer her because this was just who I am. I didn't know how to be anyone else. Not then and definitely not now.

But that wasn't the highlight of it. The best moments were when dad would have the day off. He'd make it a celebration for both of us. He'd rent a movie from the video store, buy some ice cream and soda, and said I could ditch school for the day to spend the day with him. Whether it was Disney or a rerun from *Batman: The Animated Series*, I treasured the time we spent together.

I was living in a dream for those three years. But like all dreams, it came to an end.

She started showing symptoms about a month after my twelfth birthday. It started when she started becoming more clumsy than deemed normal. The numbness and memory loss came later. She refused to go see a doctor for months until a friend of her's finally convinced her to stop being stubborn and do something about it. The doctor confirmed that there was a tumor in her brain.

The doctor also confirmed that it was cancerous.

That was when she finally called dad.

We packed up what little we had and went straight back to Scotland. They brought a hospital bed into her house. Grammy demanded that if she was going to die, she wanted to be in her home.

Grammy had said that they found it too late and that there wasn't a whole lot that they could do. She only had like two to three months tops. During that time, dad didn't acknowledge it. He refused to face the fact that his mother was dying. He carried on like Grammy wasn't going to die soon.

I, on the other hand, spent any free time I could with her before it was too late. I told her about Italy and how beautiful it was; how my instructor thinks I have a real future in dance, and how I hadn't felt this level of joy in years.

About a week before Grammy died, we had a conversation that would impact my future.
We were in her room, watching some old MGM musicals. She was laying there on her bed, with her eyes closed. Her body had become so frail and small. So different from the strong, vibrant woman I had admired for so long. I was sitting on the floor, trying to let Gene Kelly and Judy Garland take me far away from my present reality.

I kept the volume low because I didn't want to disturb, what I thought, her sleep.

"Willow Jane." I jumped out of surprise because I hadn't thought she was up.

"Willow Jane, I know you can hear me. Now turn that off and come up here, I need to talk to you." The doctor said something like this might happen. The tumor must've been affecting her ability to speak English because she was now speaking her mother tongue: Welsh.

Lucky for me, I was well versed in the language. I carefully climbed up on the bed and got under the covers with her. "Yes, Grammy?"

She laid a shaking hand on my cheek. "I'm going to talk to you like an adult for a minute, alright cherry drop?" I nod my head, smiling at the familiar nickname. "You know that I haven't got long don't you?" I feel myself freeze. Of course, I knew that. She didn't have to tell me. Pursing my lips in an effort to not start crying, I nod my head again.

"I need you to do something for me."

"Anything, Grammy." I take the hand that is on my cheek and squeeze it lightly. "You have to promise me that you will step up and help your father through this. Now, the love I have for my son could only rival my love for you, but the truth that he is weak." I felt angry when she said it. How dare she talk about my father like that? I'm about to say just that when she holds up her hand. Signaling that she wasn't done talking yet.

"I know that he is your father and that you love him. But I know my son. He will not be able to handle this by himself. That's why I need you to step up and be strong for your father. Can you do that for me, cherry?"

Ashamedly, I wanted to tell her no. I wanted to scream at her that I was just a kid. What did I know about being an adult? Didn't she know that I was going to fall apart too? Why did I have to step up? I wanted to rage at her that she wasn't being fair right now and storm out of her room.
But this was her last request. Plus, I didn't want any of our final memories to be stained in anger and regret. How could I deny her?

Setting my face into what I hope was a resolved front, I promised in a firm voice, "You have my word, Grammy. I'll look out for him."

Unexpectedly, tears gushed out of her eyes. Then she mouthed the words "Thank you."

I knew at that moment, I had done the right thing.

Just like she had predicted, dad fell apart when Grammy finally passed away.

Almost half of the town showed up for her funeral. I wasn't surprised. She had a way of bringing people together without even trying. Just when they were about to lower her casket into the ground, that was he finally lost it. He fell to his knees and broke down sobbing in front of everyone. I came up behind him and stroked his back in a feeble effort to calm him down. I made sure to not let a single tear leave my eyes. Only one of us was allowed to grieve and that wasn't me.

Although I did come close multiple times.

After that, my dad was inconsolable. He would lock himself in his room for hours at a time. When he wasn't holing himself up in his room, he would go out and get drunk to drown his suffering. I can't count how many times he came stumbling through Grammy's door, smelling and looking awful.

It didn't just stop there. He stopped bathing himself, he stopped showing up for work, and the bills were beginning to pile up. Not to mention the fridge was beginning to look empty. I never thought that I would have to worry about going hungry again, but I was right back where I started.

My father had fallen into a deep depression and I didn't know how to help him. In the beginning, his war buddies would try to help him, but they eventually had to get back to work too.
That left only me. I was terrified. I didn't know how to help him when I could barely help myself. But I knew that if this pattern continued, we could end up being homeless. And I refused to allow that to happen.

So I did something about it.

The first thing I did was adjust my schedule. I usually woke up at five to get some practice time in. But I decided I would push it back to four because I knew that dad had to be at work at seven. At five AM, I somehow maneuvered a six-foot man into removing his clothes and getting into the shower. Once he was done, and decent, I made sure that he shaved, brushed his teeth and washed his face. His uniform, which I had washed and iron the night before, was on a hanger in his closet. Throughout this entire process, he didn't say anything, he just did everything I told him to do without saying a word.

We had switched roles and now I was the parent, and he was the child.

I sent him on his way, lunch pail in his hand, making him promise that he would come straight home after work.

Once that was done, I focused on my next hurdle: the bills.

I knew next to nothing about paying bills, except for what I saw on Good Times. I took a pile of them and examined them one by one. I then went to the closet and got the shoe-box that dad didn't know about. It was filled with money that Grammy had said was for a rainy day.

The box contained about six hundred pounds in total. It was enough to pay for some but not all of the bills. I sighed, knowing what needed to be done. I went upstairs to my room, and came back down with my own shoe-box. I had saved three hundred and fifty pounds. The money had come from a mixture of allowance and babysitting jobs I had taken.

I knew combined with Grammy's stash, I would be able to cover at least eighty percent of the bills.

That was when the next stage came in: Begging. I spent hours upon hours talking to the bill collectors, convincing them to give us more time to come up with the money. I made sure to lower my voice into what I hoped was a convincing adult-like voice.
In the end, I was able to pay off some of the bills and convince the collectors to give us more time on the ones I couldn't pay. Whatever money we had left, I used that to fill our fridge. I made sure to take on multiple babysitting jobs to help out.

It became a routine after that: I'd get up early to practice, wake dad up for work and send him on his way, then I'd head out to those babysitting gigs. Afterwards, I would head home, divide what money would go to the bills, and what would go towards food and cosmetics.

I then would go back out to head to the store to buy whatever we needed. Thankfully, this all happened during summer break so I didn't have school work as another burden.

Dad did eventually get better.

It started with him getting himself up for work. He even started to cut down on the drinking because he knew we couldn't afford his habits. Then he started buying groceries himself and made his famous tuna casserole. He was getting better and the timing couldn't have been better.

Because I was going to start school in about a month.

I'm brought back to the present when I hear his contrite whisper. "Willow, sweetheart, there are not enough words in the world to describe how sorry I am for what I put you through. No child should have to go through that. I keep failing as your father. I don't why you still don't hate me..." That's when I know I need to step in. I put my hands on is cheeks, wipe away a stray tear and respond with, "Daddy, nothing you do could ever make me hate you. I know you were hurting too, so how could I get angry? Besides, it turned out alright in the end, didn't it?"

His eyes still look glassy, but he steadies his voice whispers, "Thank you."

I give a wobbly smile and say, "Always." Because in truth, I wouldn't change a thing. That period in my life told me I am strong and I can get us through anything. Besides, what dad doesn't know is that I probably would've done something destructive if I didn't know I had someone else to look out for.

In his own way, he had kept me together too.
But I don't have time to reflect on it because when I look out the car window, I see a bunch of kidsheading into the school. I clutch dad's arm in excitement and nerves. "Dad, it's starting." He lets out a shaky laugh and gives me a light push. "Well, don't let me stop you. Go."

I beam at him, give him a peck on his cheek along with a quick "love you", grab my backpack, and exit the car.

I run all the way to the front doors. My feet come to a halt just when I'm about to go in. I feel a flush on my face and my heart is trying to beat its way out of my chest.

Not giving myself a chance to freak out some more, I push the doors open and walk inside.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

OMG I have to tell you guys about this amazing fic I read like a week ago

It's called "Selfless" written by MuscleBunni. Really good if you're into poly fics like I am. Had me feeling emotional at 4 in the morning.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's so.....big.

There are probably thousands of words I could've used to better phrase my thoughts but that's about all my small brain can supply at the moment. My head feels like it's going to pop. But I have to remind myself to breathe, because I got things I need to take care of before I lose my head.

I take a deep breath and trying not to wrinkle my nose at the smell of old sweat.

First thing I do is head down to the administration’s office. Once my business there is done, I walk out with my school schedule. I decide to sit down on a nearby bench so that I could see what my first class is.

Oh, no class but homeroom. I immediately perk up. Hopefully, that'll give me a chance to introduce myself.

Not wanting to waste another minute, I hurry towards the stairs, eager to get to my destination.

Room 2C, Room 2C, Room 2... Ha, here we go.

When I peek through the window, the room looks exactly what I thought it would look like: standard combined desk and chairs, a chalkboard, motivational posters, and the teacher's desk which is cluttered with papers.

Before walking in, I take a deep breath. Remember, I tell myself, this year is all about knocking your dweeb status into Earth 2. Satisfied with my pep talk, I open the door.
When I walk through the door, I can't help but notice the stares I receive. Even when I settle into a seat in the back, I still feel them. I have to remind myself that I wanted to stand out. I got their attention without any effort on my part. I'll take it as a win.

Soon enough, the teacher walks in. I would say that she's a pretty woman, with long brown hair and her equally colored eyes. She gives us a warm smile. "Good morning, everyone, my name is Ruth Michaels and I will be your homeroom teacher." She momentarily looks down at her paper. "It looks like we have a new student here today." I raise my hand she gives me a small nod in response. "Would you like to come up and introduce yourself?"

I give a quick jerk of my head and walk to the front of the class. Standing in front of my peers, I feel the breakfast I had earlier suddenly wanting to make an encore appearance. I have to remind myself to stand out if I want to be noticed. So once again, I take a huge inhale to calm my nerves. "Hello everyone, my name is Willow Spencer." I silently applaud myself for not allowing my voice to shake. "I'm originally from here, but I moved when I was six. That's because my dad is in the military. I also really like ballet--"

"No one cares." The rude remark had come from somewhere in the throng of students. I flush out of embarrassment. I didn't think I was taking that long. Did I really seem that boring?

No, no. Calm down Willow, it was just a stupid boy making a stupid comment because he wanted some attention. With those words floating around in my head, I quickly finish up my introduction, and quickly sit down. I can still hear a few snickers circling around the kids.

And to make matters worse, not only are they staring; now they're staring and whispering.

I slouch in my seat. Definitely not how I pictured my debut.

Aside from the incident in homeroom, I migrate into my morning classes with little to no issues. It proceeded exactly as I thought it would: the teachers droned on and on about subjects I could care less about. But still, I make sure to jot down notes in every class. I do want to make sure I make good grades this semester.

But now I face a grueling situation that has a high potential of causing me psychological trauma: Finding a place to sit at the cafeteria.
Another step I took in order to increase my chances of success at Middle school was read a lot of coming-of-age books and watch a lot of original Disney channel movies that involved a strong school presence. One thing I've always noticed is that something humiliating always happens to the protagonist because they always sat at the wrong lunch table. That was when the bullies usually surfaced and then it just got messy from there. It may be a major cliche, but these authors and movie people have to be getting their material from somewhere.

Because I'm eating leftovers from last night, I don't even bother to head over to the long line of kids waiting to get whatever crap the cafeteria ladies are serving. Instead, I scan the tables, hoping to find a suitable place to sit.

I glance at a few tables that are full of kids. My observing skills aren't strong enough to detect if they are any particular cliques occupying the table, but it looks normal enough. That is until I see some random kid trying to sit on the edge on one of the benches. Another kid already sitting there, who looked like the Incredible Hulk's son, pushed him to the ground without even looking at him. Poor kid's lunch-filled tray spilled all over him as a result. Some mean-spirited kids laughed at the sight.

I internally cringe. Yeah, we're definitely not sitting there.

I start my search again. I see some empty tables near the back of the room. I perk up about to head over there when a thought cements itself in my brain. Usually, when a kid sits at an empty table, that means he or she has made no friends. It would send a message that I failed the basic concept of making friends on my first day. If I had at least two kids to sit next to, that would've signaled that I'm a social butterfly that I can make friends in an instant. To sit alone would be an automatic sign of a loser. So sitting at an empty bench is out of the question.

My head is starting to hurt from hunger, and calculating all of these probabilities. But I'm glad I did my research because this cafeteria business is some serious psychological warfare.

I'm gonna have to find a place to eat soon because I don't want to stand here like an idiot for the duration of lunchtime. And that's when it hits me: I'll just eat outside. Eating outside is the most neutral place I can think of because a lot of kids are doing it, and if I eat outside, it'll give the impression that I'm too cool to eat inside because that is where the uncool people eat. Versus me, who wants to soak up the sun because I love nature and I want to be close to it. My reasoning being that humans are slowly destroying our planet and I want to jump at any opportunity to surround myself with the natural world before we lose it all to urbanization.

Okay, that sounds stupid and kinda corny. But I'll make sure to clean up the statement if someone asks. Maybe that'll make me seem like the social issues warrior that is not afraid to stand up for what
she believes in. Yeah, I could definitely spin that.

Before I embarrass myself by letting out a manic chuckle of triumph, I turn to the double doors that lead to the courtyard. But before I can do that, I hear a feminine call out, "Willow!" Slightly shocked that someone actually remembered my name, I turn around to see a girl around my age with three other girls behind her.

Hey, I remember her. She was from my science class. How could I not forget her when she had the attention of half of the class and even the teacher! Her looks weren't hard to forget either. She went beyond the realm of being a pretty girl, she was what some of the books I read would call ethereal.

Long red hair that came down to her waist, milky white skin, electrifying blue eyes that seemed to pop against the dull gray walls, and a heart-shaped mouth that just seemed to scream kindness. It didn't help that her fashion skills were awesome too. She had on a grass green top coupled with a short black jacket, these ripped jeans that were all the rage these days, and these stylish black boots with heels. Needless to say that she was dressed to kill.

While I, on the other hand, am slowly regretting not putting much stock into how I looked this morning if I knew I was going to stand in front of this... this fairy princess. But my worries soon faded away when her lips curled into a friendly smile. "Me and my friends are going to grab a table. Did you want to sit with us?"

Oh my god. Oh my god. I got lunch buddies. Not one, not two, not even my favorite number three, but four! I succeeded and I didn't even need to put in a lot of effort. Take that dweeb status!

I don't even care how that I sound desperate when I squeak, "Sure." The girl, bless her heart, doesn't comment on my dorky moment. She just lets out a perfect laugh and I proceed to follow her and her friends to a table. She decides on an empty table that I had been scared of a few minutes ago. But hey, something tells me that she's so cool, any table she sits at is relevant because she graced her presence with it.

We all sit down and proceed to eat our lunch. Halfway through the girl's eyes widen and she lets out a girlish giggle. "Oh my god, I almost forgot. You don't know my name. I'm Haley. That's Jenna, Lucy, and Mallory. Jenna and Lucy are identical twins. I've known Mallory since we were in Kindergarten." The brunette twins have the same olive complexion with gray-blue eyes while Mallory has shoulder-length blonde hair with sharp hazel eyes.

I know memorizing all of their names is probably going to take more brain power than I have. Oh well, I'll memorize their names given enough time. For now, I just nod my head and reply, "It's nice
to meet all of you." They all give smiles that are worthy of being on the cover of *Teen Vogue.*

"Oh." Mallory is looking at my lunch with raised eyebrows. "You brought your own lunch." I freeze. I feel like I just stepped on a land mine. Should I have not have brought my lunch? Maybe if I hadn't and just got the cafeteria food, we would've had something to talk about. Dang it. Will I ever get it right?

"Oh my god, Mall. Lay off!" one of the twins, Jenna I think, scolds in a teasing manner. "We all know the food they serve here taste like absolute dog shit." If I hadn't been so shocked over the blatant curse word that came out of Jenna's mouth, I would've deflated in relief that my bringing my own lunch to school is fine. I try not to curse too much because I don't want to give dad a reason to give me a whooping if he catches me.

Although I try not to make too obvious by keeping a neutral face and focusing on the delicious tuna casserole leftovers dad had made the night before.

We eat in silence for a while until Haley asks me an unexpected question. "So what rap music do you listen to?" Well, that was out there. I swallowed the food in my mouth before saying, "Did you say rap music?" She bobs her head in response. "Yeah, you know. Jay-Z, Lil Wayne, Nas?" I shake my head in response. "The only one of those people I recognize is Jay-Z and that's only because he did that song with Beyoncé. I don't listen to rap music like that."

Lucy's pretty twists in confusion. "But Haley, didn't you say people like her liked rap mu--" She didn't get to finish her question because Haley elbows her in the side. I furrow my brows. People like me? I know they probably didn't mean any real harm, but something about the way it was said rubs me the wrong way. Before I can think to bring it up again, Haley is already changing the subject.

"So I heard from a friend in your homeroom that you like ballet." I instantly forget my mixed feelings about the previous statement and light up when I hear ballet. "Actually I don't like it. I love it! I want to become a ballerina myself when I become older. I just started taking private lessons from one of the best instructors in town. She says I have real potential. She's really strict so I know when she says it, she means..." My ramblings are cut short when I see the look on their faces. They all got the same look on their faces. I've seen it enough times on adults to know exactly what it is: pity.

Trying not to get defensive I inquire, "What?" Haley hesitates for a second but then whispers, "Look, my older sister is a ballerina for the Scottish Ballet. She says that it's really tough and that you have to be on your A-game. Now I don't doubt that you're a good dancer, but my sister says that ballet companies are choosy about who they let in. And they really don't have a history of letting in... black dancers. I just don't want you to get your hopes for something that may seem impossible to do."
And for one whole minute, I completely forget that I am trying to make new friends and decide to speak my mind for a change. "Just because it hasn't been done, doesn't mean it's impossible. I'm going to do it no matter what anyone says. I may have to work harder than the other people there, but I've never, in my life, been afraid of hard work. You'll see. I may just be the next Raven Wilkinson."

"Who in the hell is that? I've never heard of her." For some reason, Mallory decided now would be an excellent time to showcase her ignorance. I don't know what my face looks like, but it's enough to have Mallory backing away slightly. "Raven Wilkinson was one of the first black ballerinas to dance for a ballet company. It's people like her, who risked their lives to do what they loved, that paved the way for girls like me. So whenever I think it's impossible for someone like me do it, I remember people like Miss Raven, Janet Collins, Lauren Anderson, or any of the brave black women who did it in spite of what others told them. In fact, it just makes me, even more, determined to finish what they started."

I'm breathing heavily by the time my rant is finished. My fists are curled up in tight balls and my heart is beating too fast, but I feel good. When I give the girls my full attention all of their faces are deathly pale like they had seen a ghost or a violent murder take place.

Dang it. I hadn't meant to frighten them, I just wanted to get my point across. Before I could say anything to placate them, Haley grabs my balled fists gently. She has a look of such complete contrition that I instantly forgive her. "You're right," she concedes, "You're absolutely right. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said impossible. It's just I think you're really sweet and I don't want you to get hurt. My sister has made it clear that the ballet world is harsh." Oh. Was that all? Then I'm glad because it shows she cares even though we don't really know each other.

The lunch ends with me rushing to get to my next class, and also me exchanging phone numbers with those four girls.

For the next month or so, life is surprisingly good. I had made sure to join some extracurricular activities like I originally planned. I sing as an alto for the school choir. I may be comfortable singing in the lower keys but when push comes to shove, I can maneuver my voice into the fifth, sometimes even sixth octave with relative ease. I also joined the drama club.

I think it'll help me in the future because ballet not just about showing emotion through the dance, but on the face as well.
Everyone knew who I was even though I didn't half of their names. I guess that was due to the company I kept. Aside from that one incident in the cafeteria my first day, my friendship with Haley, Jenna, Lucy, and Mallory carried rather smoothly. It wasn't hard to figure that they were popular around the school. Everyone said hi to them, teachers implicitly gave them special favors.

But it was Haley that really stood out. She just has this aura that made people be naturally drawn to her. But even though her queen bee status was obvious, she never abused her power. She was nice to everyone she met and always was ready to help with whatever. I'm proud to say that she is a good friend of mine.

My grades are exactly where I need them to be. My last report card was chock-full of A's and one pesky B (Pre-Algebra). My dad was over the moon when he found out. I could've died with the amount of pride I felt when he leveled me with that proud beam of his. There were days when I thought I'd never see my father give a genuine smile ever again. Some days when I didn't even want to get out of bed, I would remember that my father needed me to be the strong one. He was part of the reason why I wanted to succeed so much. If I getting good grades and being a social butterfly meant I could lessen my father's pain by even a fraction, that would be my greatest accomplishment in life.

But if I'm going to be completely honest with myself, one of the A's I made was a total breeze.

I don't want to brag or anything, but I knew from the amount of reading I already do that English class was going to be a walk in the park. It also helped that my teacher was awesome sauce. Arthur Ricci was the type of teacher who just really cared, y'know? I think he might be everyone's favorite teacher. It didn't help that all of the girls in my class had a crush on him. I mean, I get it. He is easy on the eyes with his tanned coloring, curly black hair and equally dark eyes that spoke of such emotive depths that I aspire to have one day.

Oh god. From the way I'm describing him, it sounds like I like him like that too. I just really admire him.

The same can't be said for Haley. She's usually the rational one of our little group, but when she sees or hears about Mr. Ricci, her face turns the color of pink carnations and she starts babbling at a mile a minute.

She's usually so put together that it was kind of cute to see her get flustered over someone.
Said English class has just ended. I'm about to head on over to the choir room when I hear Mr. Ricci call out, "Willow could stay behind for a minute? There's something I would like to discuss with you." My throat goes dry at the words. Oh dear god. Usually, when the teachers in the movies I watch asked the protagonist to stay back, it meant that the student screwed up majorly during a test or whatever.

I'm about to let an excuse that I have a rare medical condition that is flaring up right now when I hear a dry chuckle. "Relax, Willow. You're not in trouble. Far from it actually." I guess I hadn't been hiding my emotions that well. Fudge. I need to work on my poker face. "I wanted to talk to you about the short story assignment that you did for class."

My story? About a few weeks ago, Mr. Ricci had assigned us to write a retelling of a Greek Mythology tale of our choosing. I decided to choose the Pomegranate seeds. I had reimagined Hades as a convicted serial killer and Persephone would be his psychologist. I remember the way my heart had been pounding when I wrote the story. I could already picture the story in my head and I couldn't wait to get it down on paper.

I let a small smile spread across my lips. "I must say, sir, I had a lot of fun writing it."

"Oh, I can definitely tell. Your passion for what you were doing came out immensely. I found myself rooting for Hades even though he was a killer. You made me care for a typically unsympathetic character. I felt his insanity but also his loneliness and need for love and affection. To sum it up, I believe you have the makings of a great writer. Do you plan on making a professional career out of your talents?"

I think I could actually feel the dopamine leaking from my brain into my entire system. The grin on my face would probably overtake my entire face if I let it. "N-No sir," I stutter. "I plan on becoming a ballerina."

Mr. Ricci, a whole grown man, pouts.

"Well that's a shame because I think you have true talent. But the main reason I wanted to talk to you was that I wanted your permission to use this story for the short story contest that the city is giving." My mouth drops open. "But sir, only one story can represent the school. Do you really think I deserve that privilege?"

The smile he gives me could probably cure diseases. "I wouldn't have asked if I didn't think that you could do it." I can't take it anymore. I wrap my arms around and give him a bear hug. I feel him stiffen but then I feel his arms come around me. I have to struggle to hold back my tears because I
cannot believe what is happening.

I let go after a long minute because I'm starting to feel embarrassed. I give a quick yes and thank you and I'm about to leave when a question pops in my head. "Ricci? Is that Italian?"

He smiles that beautiful smile again. "Yes, my father and mother are from Rome. Why do you ask?" The Italian he spoke made me ache a little inside.

I missed Italy. I missed the people, the food, the culture, everything.

So I don't hesitate to respond with, "No real reason. It's just that I lived moved there when I was nine. I lived there for three years so I thought the accent sounded familiar. You have a good day, Mr. Ricci." I decide not to stay to see his reaction. But the booming laugh I hear is all the reaction I need.

I am pumped. I feel like singing, too. Everything has been going so well lately. I guess it is what they say: you've been down so many times, the only place you can go is up!

School has just ended and I was still walking on Cloud 9 from the earlier development this afternoon. I'm walking home today since dad had to do a grocery run. I ultimately decide I'll tell Haley first and wait to tell dad when I get home.

I pull out my cell phone and bring up Haley's number. After a few rings, I hear, "Hello?"

"Haley! You're never gonna guess what just happened. I wanted to tell my dad first but I decided my friend should know first."

"Actually I wanted to talk to you too." I frown a bit. She doesn't sound like her usual upbeat self. "Why? Did something happen?" The concern is obvious in my voice.

"You tell me." Okay enough. "Haley," my tone is deadly serious now. "If you got something to say to me, just say it."

"What were you talking about with Mr. Ricci and why were you hugging him?" I let out a sound of disbelief. That was what she was so upset about?
Relief courses through my veins. "That's actually what I wanted to talk to you about. Mr. Ricci really liked my story that we did for the short story assignment. He wanted to know if it was alright to use it in the short story contest that the town is having." The line goes dead silent for, what feels to me, like an eternity. Finally, I hear her seethe, "What'd you do?" What does she mean by that? "I mean how were you able to get something that I've been working on for months? Did you sign up for it?"

"I... no."

"I figured. Unlike you, I had to work for it. No matter how many times Mr. Ricci said my draft wasn't to his standards, I redid it over and over again hoping, praying that it could finally be good enough. You weren't up til dawn writing over five pages of dialogue, you weren't writing until your fingers starting cramping." I can hear her voice cracking over the phone and my heart breaks for her. This must mean a lot to her if she sounds this passionate.

I'm about to tell her that I'll back off if it means that much to her until I hear the next words. "But what really gets to me is that instead of picking a student that actually followed the rules and worked hard for it, Mr. Ricci decides he wants to the school to be represented by a charity case and choose the pitiful black kid who he obviously felt sorry for."

At first, I don't process what she just spewed out. When I finally do, I let my rage inspire my next words. "Okay let's get something straight right now: I didn't come to Mr. Ricci or do him any big favors, he came to me. Alright? He chose me. Now I'm sorry you spent all that time writing your little story only to fail multiple times, but the reality is that some of us have it and some just don't."

The enraged scream she lets out triggers a satisfied smirk on my lips. "You can call me back when you finally decide to let some sense enter into that empty head of yours." I snap my phone shut, not letting her have a chance to respond.

How dare she? How dare she? I have done nothing wrong and she thinks that I'm to blame for her own failure? Please.

I suck a few deep inhales before continuing my trek home. My set my gait at a rapid pace, eager to get home. I have some good news to share.

Haley and I don't talk to each other for two weeks after that. I can't bring myself to feel guilty for it
though. Maybe if she hadn't brought my race into it, I would've. But I never in my life been a charity case and I don't plan to be. I'm going to confront her today. This mess has been going on far too long. It needs to be settled.

But my dad and I have been called into the principal's office this morning for some unknown reason.

It's probably about the contest. When I told dad what had happened, he dropped everything he had planned for that night and took me out to dinner at my favorite restaurant. He was so proud of me and he told me that multiple times that night. If I let a tear or two that's only for me to know.

Dad and I reach the principal's office and we're to open the door when it opens for us. It's Mr. Ricci. I smile, about to give a warm welcome until I notice the blank look in his usually alert eyes. I don't think that he even registers that my dad and I are there.

When he brushes past, my dad gives me a questioning look. I shrug my shoulders in response.

The principal, Mr. Payne, is sitting in his chair when we enter his office. He's a pudgy man with balding white hair, watery gray eyes, and a naturally ruddy face. He doesn't look pleased to see me. The first slither of unease crawls into my belly.

"Mr. Spencer, Willow. Please close the door and have a seat." His voice sounds like the result of having smoked cigarettes all of his life. We follow his orders and sit down.

Mr. Payne gives us both long stares before he finally begins. "I never thought I would have to have this conversation in my entire career, but here we are."

Before either one of us could question him, Mr. Payne chucks out a picture. It's a picture of me hugging Mr. Ricci.

I furrow my brows. Why does he have a picture of that and why does it matter. His next statement stops all the questions racing in my head.

"Mr. Ricci has been fired on the account on having an inappropriate relationship with a minor. Don't ask how we found out, what's important is that we did. But let me ask you this, Ms. Spencer: How long has your relationship with Mr. Ricci been going on?"
Okay, I know this was pretty long, but what I wanted to do with it required me to write everything into one single chapter.

Also, I think the next chapter is going to be my favorite.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Jimin.... you little bitch
Also 100+ hits....

WHO THE HELL KEEPS READING MY CRAPPY CRINGEY SHIT?! 

PS: I'm gonna leave another recommendation for y'all. It's this story called "Illusions" by MorpheusDreams. I'm telling y'all right now it involves ddlb or age play. 

Some of y'all might not vibe with it, but those who do, this story's for you!

But I have to warn you guys, the author hasn't updated in a month so may take a while. But what he has uploaded is amazing.

Sometimes with age play stories, they be really cringey, but this story is really emotive and it has my boy Namjoon as the main character so the author already winning at life!

Who knows I may, MAY, dabble with it in the future.

But it is a big ass if, because I do want to portray it right. I don't want to give an inaccurate vision. I've wanted to something with ddlg because I'm fascinated with it.

Anyways if y'all stayed to read all of that, you're brave

Happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

They're screaming at each other. The ringing in my ears is preventing me from hearing but I can see just fine. I feel my shirt clinging to my armpits in response to the sweat building up.

Dad has gone beyond the realms of anger. He's leaning over Mr. Payne's desk, right in the man's face. I can tell it's taking everything in him to not strangle the portly man. The vein in his forehead has also made an appearance.

Mr. Payne's mouth is moving but he has gone deathly pale. Most likely from the way dad looks ready to commit murder on a civilian. He's leaning back in his chair in a feeble attempt to put some distance between them.

I know I have to say something to defuse the situation and get to the bottom of this mess, but I can't move. How did this happen? Why is it always me that gets the raw deal? I work hard to get what I want and this happens?
My life is a pitcher of lemonade. I grow the lemons myself, making sure that they're ripe enough to use. I measure out the sugar down to the nearest millimeter so that the lemonade won't be too sweet or sour. I even measured the water so that the taste of the lemon and sugar wouldn't be diluted. All this effort just to make the perfect lemonade.

Of course, I never get to have a drink of said lemonade. Something or someone always finds a way to prevent me from taking a sip. In the end, I just have to watch everyone else drink my lemonade and I sit on the sidelines, pretending that I just get pleasure from watching someone else reap the benefits from my hard work.

I guess it's this analogy that brings me out of my fog. The previously muffled voices vibrate to my ears in high definition. I jump because I underestimated how loud they were.

"It's not true." I don't know how they heard me, but they stop arguing. I know I have to project my voice now that I have their attention. "Mr. Ricci has never touched or talked to me in an inappropriate manner. This is all just a huge misunderstanding." I chuckle, trying to give the illusion that it isn't that serious.

It doesn't work. Mr. Payne sends me a look of mock sympathy. "Willow, we have reports that say that you two have recently been spending long periods of time together alone outside the school. It obviously wasn't for tutoring because I've checked your grades and you have high marks. Can you account for that?"

Was that all? "Well, we were meeting to tighten the finer points of my story. Mr. Ricci wants my story to represent our school for the short story contest this year. We were meeting up at the local coffee shop to do some editing. It was totally innocent, Mr. Payne."

Mr. Payne still doesn't look convinced. "Ms. Spencer, if that were true, we would have seen your name on the sign-up sheet for the contest." He motions to some papers on his desk. "I've checked myself." I want to break down right now, but I suck it up. Crying is not going to help my case.

I try my best to stay calm when he continues. "I understand that this is hard, Ms. Spencer. Mr. Ricci was probably someone you looked up to and you don't want to betray his trust."

"But nothing happened!" I don't want to resort to yelling, but I'm just so frustrated. Talking to Mr. Payne is like negotiating with a stubborn flea-ridden cat to take a bath. I turn to my father who still hasn't sat down yet. "Dad," I inquire, voice cracking. "Do you believe me?" His anger slowly
softens to concern when he takes a good look at my face. Then he looks back at Mr. Payne. "Mr. Payne," he addresses, "I don't know my daughter's English Teacher well, but I do know my daughter. If she says nothing happened, then nothing happened." Although I feel relief, I kept help but feel shocked too. Given my past with... something of this nature, I would've thought that he wouldn't believe me. I don't stop the watery grin from gracing my lips.

Mr. Payne brings me back to Earth. "Well regardless of you believe her or not, the decision to resign Arthur Ricci still stands. Even if he's not a sex offender, just having the rumor flying across the school is a bad look. Especially with me as the acting principal." I scowl. He's not even concerned about me, he's worried about his reputation. I don't stop the snort of derision that flies out of my mouth.

"Also," can this man shut up already? "I'm sorry Ms. Spencer, but you will not be representing this school in the short story contest. I blink. "Why," I ask quietly, all my previous fire gone. "Well, you were never officially signed up and the parents don't think a selection of Mr. Ricci's choice will suffice. We've decided to choose the runner-up in your place." I press my lips together to keep the scream from getting out. "Of course," I grit out. Then a sickening thought plants itself in my mind. The back of my neck feels like it has turned to ice. It would make perfect sense, I think. Careful to keep my voice neutral, I ask, "Who was the runner-up?"

"Oh, it was a remarkable story. Better yet, it was written by the school valedictorian, Haley Danvers."

It all goes by in a flash after that. Once Mr. Payne is finally, he politely excuses us from his office. Dad asked if I wanted to come home, but I said no. I don't want to miss class on account of this. Also, I need to confront Haley.

Any hope that I had that the other kids didn't about what was going evaporated when I saw the words "slut" and "whore" spray painted on my locker. I somewhat expected it, but I had to pause when I say the words "Nigger Whore". I smirk. It's nice to know how my classmates really feel about me.

I shake my head and I'm about to head upstairs to my homeroom when I pause. I can see Haley surrounded by a crowd of people. She has on her angelic smile which I used to think was so pretty. Now I now that there's a viper hidden underneath her beauty.

I know I should probably wait until we're alone, but I'm too pissed off to care. I march straight towards her. She must've heard my footsteps because her gaze lands on me. Her smile doesn't
disappear. If anything, it only grows larger. Before I can say anything, she leaps towards me and wraps her arms around me. Her perfume is so strong I have to struggle to not start hacking. When she realizes that I'm not hugging back, she finally let go of me.

I'm shocked to see tears in her ocean colored eyes. Unfortunately, she's the type of person that looks beautiful even when they cry. "Oh my god, Willow. I just heard the news. I'm so sorry that happened to you. It must suck to have to follow in your mom's footsteps."

Everything comes to halt when she said that. My... mom?

No. No, no, no, no! There's no way she could know that. No one was supposed to know that. "My dad is a police officer that found her body. I mean it must've been difficult to know that she was a prostitute and a druggie at that."

I want her to shut up. I want everyone to just shut up and leave me alone for once. But of course she doesn't hear my silent plea and keeps going. "The things your mother must've had to do in order to feed her addiction must've affected you strongly. I mean, you could've just signed the sign-up sheets. You didn't have to get on your...."

"Was it ever that deep?" My whisper halts her mocking words. The smug glint in her eyes disappearing to show her true emotions: anger, hurt, and jealousy. I don't even think about my words anymore. I don't care about making friends anymore. Haley destroyed that notion.

"You went through all this trouble and for what? A contest that you easily could've won next year? Would've hurt you so much to have the spotlight not showcased on you for once? Stupid question, of course, it would've. I've been around you long enough to know that you love attention. No, not love. Love's too weak a word. It's an obsession. You have all these teachers and students practically under your spell. Just a snap of your fingers and it's yours. You ruled this school."

"So it must have been absolute torture for you to realize that Mr. Ricci didn't appreciate your hard work." Her eyes are shocked then desolated. I know I'm right and I got her right where I want her. "You told me yourself," I continue. "You tirelessly worked on your story for hours, weeks, on end just for him to say it's not good enough. I understand more than you know. To want to please someone so much that you will work yourself beyond your limit just so that they can acknowledge you. To hear words like "I'm proud of you". So when they continue to ignore you and not care, it crushes you because what that person will never understand is that you're giving little pieces of yourself through every bit of labor you put yourself through. But they don't appreciate it, do they?"
She's sobbing now. Her face has turned tomato red and snot is dripping out of her nose at an alarming rate. I take back what I said about her being pretty when she cries. I can't even fully enjoy it because I realize that I've shed a few tears. I'm hitting a little too close to home. Plus, I still have witnesses. The kid crowding around now have looks of confusion and intrigue to why their queen bee is sobbing.

I need to get her angry again. "It probably didn't help that you had a crush on the man." That got a few gasps, a shriek of horror from Haley, and a snicker from me. She backs up from me. She looks like a caged animal from the way her eyes are wildly darting around. Her pale hands are bunching up in her previously perfect hair.

The knowledge of Haley's crush was only supposed to be between her and the rest of her close friends. I've exposed her in front of her peers. "I can't imagine how jealous you must've been to know that he was interested in me and not you." Her tears have completely stopped. The redness from her face is quickly turning into a putrid color of purple. "What better way to get the attention of your crush than to show how talented you are? But you couldn't even do that. To be honest, I pitied you when you started sobbing to me how much it wasn't fair."

"Shut up," she whispers in a barely controlled voice. This is fun. "But really, you must've looked so pathetic in his eyes. Unless... unless it was more than that." She removes her hands from her hair to look at me in confusion. "Haley, did you wish that he had done all the things you said that he did to me?"

She instantly goes pale and her hands start shaking. Well, would'ya know? I just said that to get a rise out of her but it looks like I pulled a Jed Clampett and struck gold! I slowly walk up to her to whisper in her ear. "I personally don't blame you," I assure her. "He's a good-looking guy. Did you want him to kiss you, hug you? Maybe even take your clothes off, get down on your knees and suck his--" She makes a sound of disgust, shoves me away and slaps me square across the face.

Her glare could probably turn the chilly Autumn air to pure Winter in an instant. "You're disgusting!" she screeches. I shrug my shoulders in a careless gesture. No need to let her know I that grossed myself with my words. "I don't need your pity. Everyone knows I wrote the superior story. Ricci just chose you because he felt sorry for the black girl whose mom was a crack-head. How could you ever threaten my status when you're just a bug that's already been crushed beneath my shoe?" With those final words, she storms off. The majority of the kids watching are left bug-eyed by the unexpected showdown.

I can't find enough reasons to care. Not even the smarting pain on my cheek fazes me. I don't if I should be scared of my lack of emotion. What I do do is cast a quick glance to my peers, and adjust my backpack on my back. I decide before I get homeroom, I'll make a quick detour towards the bathroom to do a touch-up. I can't risk my make-up running.
Ever since that day, Haley will not leave me alone.

It's like the girl is obsessed with me now. Has anyone ever bested this girl til now? Well, maybe they didn't want to experience the consequences like I am now. Cause now the girl won't stop harassing me at lunch (I was basically exiled from their lunch table when we had that fight over the phone), she won't stop singling me out in gym class, and she won't stop calling our house. And every time it's with these wild and outlandish accusations that I'm stalking her or I broke into her house, or that I've been leaving strange messages on her phone.

I don't know if she's just feeling guilty about what she did, or something truly did snap when I confronted her. I don't know, but I'm tired of always having to watch my back for fear that she'll be there. Not to mention that dad is getting tired of the phone bill being exceedingly high. One would think that she would've been satisfied. I mean, she won. She made me an outcast, stole my spot in the contest, and made me look like a major slut (The incident in the hallway did nothing to change her popularity). If someone really was pulling the strings and making her suffer, I don't see why I got to suffer for it.

If I didn't before, I'm regretting the day I ever laid eyes on the girl. I just want this to be over.

It happens about a few weeks later.

It starts off like any other day: I wake up early, do my ballet warm-ups and practice for an hour, get freshened up, have breakfast, get my schoolbooks, and head to school. I've recently decided to walk since it's not that far from Grammy's house and I didn't want dad to waste gas on me.

When I reach the front grounds, the first thing I notice our the police cars surrounding the entrance. My stomach drops. Has there been a school shooting? I start running before I even realize it. I join the other kids who have decided to crowd around the yellow tape. I get up on my tip-toes to see but to no avail. So I turn to the kid next to me and ask, "What happened here?" The kid, a boy, shrugs his shoulders and replies, "No idea. It wasn't a shooting if that's what you're thinking. A few of us were in there earlier just said that they were hanging their lockers when the cops showed and kicked us out. Oh! But they asked that Haley stay inside."

I frown. What would the police want with Haley? I would've speculated a minute but then the doors
suddenly opened. Two cops walk with a man sandwiched between them. The man had the build of a telephone post, a long face with muddy brown eyes and paper thin lips, and blonde hair with a noticeable bald spot on the back of his head. "It's Mr. Jones!" I gasp. That's my Science Teacher.

Before I could even begin to process that shock, the doors open again and Haley and what I presume to be her parents are escorting her. Her parents have grim looks on their faces. Her father looks like he's ready to murder anyone that dares to get too close. Her mother looks like she's ready to burst into tears any minute. Yet she admirably holds it together.

Haley... Haley looks like her world has been destroyed. The usual cunning light in her eyes has all but disappeared and she looks like she has all but lost her will to live. But that expression fades momentarily when her eyes land on me. Something almost manic enters them and next thing I know she's bellowing, "YOU DID THIS!" Then she breaks down into pitiful sobs. Her father all but carries her to the parking lot.

I stare after them in bewilderment. What happened?

We all find out later in the school gym in the afternoon.

Mr. Payne calls a school assembly to let the students know what happened this morning. All of our afternoon classes and activities have been canceled in light of it.

He tells us that Mr. Jones and Haley were brought in early because pictures had surfaced of them being involved in a sexual relationship. Real pictures this time. Someone had anonymously delivered pictures, and an actual video of them together, to Mr. Payne's house.

Mr. Jones had been called to the school the following day and arrested there. To say that we were shaken would be an understatement. I think deep down, none of us believed that Mr. Ricci was a pedophile. So to know that an actual one was walking freely around our school was nothing short of chilling.

If that wasn't enough, Mr. Payne also informed us that Haley was expelled. That got a few gasps, protests, and choked sobs among the crowd. Apparently she had the cheat sheets of multiple tests and was blackmailing one of the teachers (Mr. Payne didn't reveal who it was for privacy reasons). Payne said that type of behavior was unacceptable at this school and that the only thing he could do was expel her.
Then he decided that would be a good time to give a speech about the importance of responsibility that droned on for at least forty-five minutes. I think a few of us had fallen asleep.

When he finally did let us leave, we were given permission to go home.

I walk in a daze, trying to process all of the information that had been thrown my way. Before I knew, I had reached the house. I reach for the key in my backpack and open the door.

Since it was still early, dad wasn't home yet. Just as well, I wanted to be alone a little while longer.

I trudge upstairs, opened the door to my room, and flop on the bed. I closed my eyes, trying to clear my head.

I then went to the bathroom, close the door, and take a good long look in the mirror.

It was only when I looked at my reflection did I finally let the figurative mask I've been wearing for weeks to be shed.

I can't say what crossed my lips to smile because it was more of a sneer. But who wouldn't sneer if they were me?

I had finally completed my goal.

I destroyed Haley from the inside out and effectively beat her at her own game.

Chapter End Notes

I'll let y'all know what happens next time!

In the mean time, I'm thinking about making a series of imagines. Would that be something you guys would be interested in? Leave a comment if it is.

But if you don't leave a comment or don't want me to do it, I'ma do it for my own
pleasure!

If you do want me to do it, please don't expect something right away since "Small" is my main concern right now, and don't leave requests right away cuz I got some ideas bubbling around in my head that I want to get out.

Thank you so much for the comments, kudos, and my very first bookmark!

U guys will never understand how much that means to me to see that y'all liking what I'm writing.

Happy New Years!
In the end, it was easy.

It had started after the confrontation after school.

Dad had offered to pick me up but I declined. I needed some time alone with my thoughts. The weather must be reflecting my emotions because it's cold, wet, and foggy. I didn't mind. My head was too muddled to fully process it anyways.

She had been so sweet in the beginning, I thought. My first day, my first day, I didn't know anyone and she plucked me up from the masses. Claiming she wanted to be my friend. But why? It just doesn't make any sense to me.

Oh, come on, Willow. It's not that hard to figure if you think about it. Just think: What was one of the first things those girls asked you?

Listening to the voice in my head (Yes I know how that sounds!), I think back to that day in the cafeteria.

Nothing really sticks except one question: What rap music do you listen to?

I remember that question specifically because I thought the way it was worded was weird. As if, she was already assuming that I liked rap music. Why they do that unless...

They only approached you because you're black.

I stop in my tracks. But what would they have to gain from that?
Think about it. You were practically the only black kid that goes to that school. They wanted to be known as the cool white girls that are friends with a black kid. A black kid that looks and acts like everything that they see every in those music videos that play on MTV. They wanted a stereotype. That's why they wanted to be your friend. They didn't like you. They liked the idea of what they thought you were.

It makes perfect sense in a sick way. They never wanted to be my friend. It was all just a game to them in the end.

To think that I used to pray for the day I could actually make some friends. I just didn't want to be alone again this year. After Grammy’s death, I didn't want to crumble as my father had. I wanted to thrive and live my life as a normal preteen. It's all I wanted.

Instead, I've been ostracized from my peers. I'm right back where I started: a total loser. Not to mention, poor Mr. Ricci. He got fired from his job because one girl could not control her jealousy. That girl knows that she can do it because she's got the innocent shtick locked down.

So what are you going to do about it?

I laugh out loud. Me? What can I do about it? This is not another one of my comic-book stories, this is real life. And in real life, the mean girl isn't defeated. She isn't taught a lesson.

She isn't.... well hello.

In the middle of my internal rant, I happened to glance to the side only to see a curious sight: Mr. Jones, my chemistry teacher waiting in his car. I probably wouldn't have paid so much attention if a certain girl with long, red hair hadn't slid into the passenger seat. Haley. She's the only girl in school with hair that red. She used to brag about it all the time, so I know.

The car slowly pulls off after she gets in. I'm following them before I fully comprehend what I'm doing. Lucky for me, Melrose is a relatively small place with small roads. Meaning, drivers don't have the luxury to be driving reckless because some unsuspecting kid or a drunk idiot could be hit. That meant that Mr. Jones was driving pretty slow.

That also meant that I would have a lower chance of losing them.
I make sure to hide by a nearby house when they pull to a stop next to a small house. The lights turn off, and Mr. Jones steps out the car, comes around, and opens the door for Haley. What a gentleman, I thought sarcastically. They both walk into the house and Mr. Jones closes the door behind them. The lights come on in the house.

I puff my cheeks out in thought. If I try to take a peek of what's happening in the front windows, someone could easily see me and that's it for me. I decide to sneak around back to see if I could get a better glimpse from the back windows.

When I circle around, I discover a mini patio complete with a grill set. I walk around it and settle underneath the window. When I think it's safe, I poke my head up to see the duo talking in what looks like an office.

For what seems like ten minutes, they do nothing but talk. I shake my head in disgust. What had I been hoping to accomplish? They're not doing anything. It's not like I had any definitive plan when I followed them, instincts demanded to see what they're possibly up to.

I sigh. This is stupid, I need to get home before...

What... what... *What the hell?!*

I know Grammy, God rest her soul, would turn over in her grave right now if she heard the crude term that came out of my mouth, but that's the best way I can think of to describe the events unfolding in front of my very eyes.

Haley is standing in front of Mr. Jones in nothing but her training bra and underwear. She sinks to her knees and unzips Mr. Jones' pants. Mr. Jones, throughout all of this, is standing above her, beady brown eyes locked on the redhead.

Once his pants and boxes slink to the floor, she takes his... thing into her mouth. Mr. Jones' head lulls backward in what I guess is pure bliss.

I want to run. This scene is bringing back too many things that I thought I had buried a long time ago. I sink to the earthy ground and struggle not to throw up, sob, or hug my knees in panic.
After a few minutes, I brave a look through the window again. They're done. Mr. Jones has pulled his pants back up and Haley is getting dressed. Once Haley adjusts her shirt, she reaches for something in the background. It's a test paper. The big "D" in red lettering isn't hard to notice. Mr. Jones, who is now sitting at his desk, takes the paper from Haley.

When he hands it back, the D is now a B.

When I get home, dad is blessedly not back yet. I set my bag down in the living room and plop down on the couch.

Haley is performing sexual favors for our chemistry teacher so that he'll fix her grades. The same thing she accused me of is the very thing she's doing.

I shake my head in disgust. The hypocrisy of it all.

If I wasn't so angry, I would actually laugh in pity on how desperate she is.

But when I think about how she ruined my reputation, all the potential stress that is now plaguing my father, and how a good man lost his job, it makes me mad.

I'm tired of allowing people to take advantage of me thinking that there will be no consequences.

This time I'm going to come out on top.

In order to execute my plan of revenge, I decided I would monitor Haley's day-to-day life and see if anything else seemed off. At first, I worried that because I had been unofficially kicked out of her circle it would make following her a challenge.

Surprisingly, it was a major breeze.
At first, I was running empty on the evidence. Aside from that one night, it seemed like Haley's angel act was never-ending. Having an intimate knowledge of Haley's cruelty, it baffled me how she was able to keep her facade going 24/7. It just didn't seem natural.

But one day, I finally got a lead.

Through my "research", I found that Haley was blackmailing our choir director, Mrs. Cameron, for solos.

It was right after choir practice that it happened.

I walked out the door about to head off to my next elective when I noticed Haley had stayed back. She and Mrs. Cameron had moved to the back of the room for a private talk. I knew it was a long-shot with my previous track record, but what did I have to lose? My pride?

So I stealthily whipped out my tape recorder that I purchased the other day, quietly opened the door, and got as close as I could to their location.

I turned the recorder on when the voices came in clearly. "... not giving you the solo. You've had it three times in a row. It wouldn't be fair to the students if you kept hogging the lead." I couldn't get close enough to see Haley's reaction, but I hear her sugary sweet voice all too clear. "I understand Mrs. C. You have to be fair to the other kids." Translation: Mrs. Cameron is going to be demolished. "I can definitely get with that. I think it would also be fair to let your husband know about your... friendship with the Gym teacher. I can even share the adorable pictures I caught of you two. I'm sure he'd love them." It would be impossible to miss Mrs. Cameron's sharp intake of breath at the implicit threat. There's a moment of silence before I hear, "You know what, it wouldn't hurt to let you have one more solo." I can almost see Haley's smug, triumphant face when she chirps, "Thank Mrs. C!"

Can't say I was really surprised by that. Haley had a lovely voice, but it was nothing show-stopping. I was always curious to why Haley ended up singing the solos when I know there are at least three other kids that can so much better than she could.

I quickly sneak out before they notice me and slip into an empty classroom to make the recording came in loud and clear. It did.

The first piece of solid evidence. I felt jubilant, I felt euphoria, it made me want to break into the cha-
cha slide in the hallways.

But as happy as I was that my labor was bearing fruit, I knew that I needed more proof. Haley and Mrs. Cameron's conversation, although obvious in nature, could easily be manipulated. And I'd end up not only looking like a bigger fool but a stalker and a spy.

No, for this to work, I need solid proof. I start pacing trying to figure out what my next move would be when a phenomenally bad idea comes to me. So bad, that it just might work.

I hide in the bushes of the Danvers house, waiting for Mrs. Danvers to finally leave. I had been conducting stake-outs for at least a week to get a good idea of what the Danvers' daily schedule consist. That was how I knew that around this time, Mr. Danvers was at work, Haley was at a piano lesson, and that her mother was just about to go shopping with some friends. All of them usually didn't come home till six.

I knew Haley well enough to know that she wouldn't risk stashing her secrets at the school, which only left one other option: Her house. I already know I've gone beyond the stages of obsessed at this point, but I really don't care anymore. Any chance of seeing Haley fall flat on her face is worth it.

But if I do get caught, the look on my dad's face. I imagine the look of disappointment on his face when if this doesn't work. But then I also remember how sad he looked when he was in the principal's office. Not only had she humiliated me, she also humiliated my dad. Whose emotional state I still worry about on a daily basis. The fact that she put us in such a position is unacceptable. I can't ever forgive someone that hurts my dad.

So as I watch Mrs. Danvers hop into her car and drive away, I adjust my disguise. I knew that if there was any chance of there being any type of hidden cameras, I needed to make sure my face wouldn't be on it. So I decided to wear a mask to cover my face.

Although I wanted to wear one of Grammy's beautiful masquerade masks, those were custom made and could possibly be traced back to me. So I decided to wear a generic Jason mask that you could buy from any Halloween store. I completed the disguise with my black hoodie and black gloves (I couldn't leave fingerprints). I am so glad that I secretly read those adult crime books at the library. I would've never been prepared had it not been for them.

Taking a deep breath, I crouched down, and slowly moved up to the front door. I reached under the
You would think for a policeman, I think to myself, he would have better security. I shrug and keep it moving. Thankfully for me, I've been over Haley's house enough times to know that her room was upstairs on the right. I open the door to her room, do a quick preliminary scan, and shake my head. She still had that cheesy poster of a shirtless Usher over her bed.

I step into the room, careful to close the door as I had found it. Okay, I apprehensively think, I need to quickly find some evidence before one of them comes back earlier than planned. Those thoughts propelled my feet into motion.

Nothing. Absolutely nothing. I had been going through Haley's things for at least thirty minutes and I had found diddly squat. I went through her closet, dresser, and under the bed with absolutely no results to show for it.

I was currently scuffling around in her workbench drawer producing the same result. I was beginning to sweat underneath my mask from the heat and immense pressure I felt. I had been so sure that this would work. I risked going to kid prison breaking into this girl's house and for what? Out of pure frustration, I bang my fist on the bottom of the drawer, not anticipating the strange sound it would make.

I do it a couple of more times to make sure that I heard right. Once I've confirmed it, I pull out all of the papers, notebooks, and other items that had been stuffed in. I run my hand over the smooth wood, testing a theory that I had seen done in one of my Sherlock Holmes stories.

I stop when I feel what I'm looking for, smile, and put my finger through the small hole. I slide it back to reveal a stack of neatly placed papers.

False bottoms, what a concept.

Trying hard not to feel too triumphant before I had found anything of real value, I carefully take out the papers, and sit on Haley's bed to examine them. At first, I didn't know realize what they were. They just looked like a bunch of papers with A, B, C, and D, written over and over...

Wait. Wait a minute. I look at the top of the page to see ID numbers. School ID numbers.
I have to struggle to not double over and start laughing at the situation.

Haley Danvers, aka Princess of Melrose, aka Miss Straight A student, had cheat sheets for a majority of her classes.

I counted at least four sheets. This is definitely what I need to expose her.

So I fold the papers so that it'll fit in my hoodie's pocket, put the false bottom back into position, and carefully place everything else right back where I found it.

I walked out the same way I had come through, making sure to lock the door and slip the key under the mat where I found it.

I knew that breaking into Haley's house was a huge risk. I also knew that Haley would notice that her cheat sheets had gone missing. I could tell that she knew by the way her face was deadly pale the next day at school. She was fidgety, snapping at her minions, and continuously grabbing at her hair. She was finally starting to feel the heat on her.

I got extreme pleasure at watching her sweat. So much pleasure, I foolishly decided to raise the stakes.

The first location I called her from was a little diner about ten minutes from her house. Her mother picked up the first time. "Hello? Hello, who is this?" I didn't say anything. I just silently breathed down the phone.

The next location I called from was a library that was a good distance so that it wouldn't be a dead give away. I knew that if I wanted to play these mind games, I had to keep switching it up so that no one would be suspicious. Unfortunately, Mr. Danvers picked up that time. Same result as last time. I did it for at least a week. Nothing really happens except for the irritated and slightly frightened responses. But it's starting to get boring.

I decided to amp it up a little by calling Haley's cellphone next.

After school, I called from a pay phone in downtown Melrose where it's at it's busiest. I wore a black hoodie and my Jason mask so I wouldn't be recognized. It was around Halloween so I wouldn't be written off as a total weirdo.
When she picked up, she sounded frazzled. "Yeah?" I didn't say anything. "Who is it?" Again, silence. "What do you want from me? First, someone breaks into my house and steals from me, then the random phone calls to my house. Whoever you are, please don't do this. If it gets out that I was cheating on tests, my parents will kill me and I'll be shipped off to boarding school. I know that I've done some horrible things lately and I regret everything that's happened. I promise if you stop, I'll confess to what I did."

Maybe it was the tone in her voice, or maybe it was my annoying habit to forgive so easily, but I ended up making a fatal mistake: I gasped.

It wasn't like those dramatic ones you see the soap opera people doing, but it was just loud enough for Haley hear.

And to instantly recognize it. "Willow?"

I don't dare say anything. I'm already screwed, it probably wouldn't be a good idea to make it worse. I want to hang up, but if I do, that'll just confirm what she already knows.

"Willow?" she asks again in a quiet voice. Crap. I know that tone. That means her anger is stewing up. "You little bitch. Are you that desperate that you had to break into my house and start scaring my parents half to death. How about I make you a deal: you give me back those sheets and I won't tell anyone how you broke into my house? You have until Monday." She hangs up on me.

My hands are shaking when I place the phone back on the receiver and walk out the booth.

What had I done? I've just exposed myself to her. I should've never tried to get revenge. Grammy always said that it backfires on you in the end. Oh God, I'm going to embarrass everyone I love if this gets out. I can't do that to my father. I feel my legs begin to wobble from the oncoming panic attack and collapse on a near-by bench. I bend over, fist my hands in my hair, and close my eyes in a fruitless effort to not face my harrowing reality.

Not again. Not again, not again, notagainnotagainnotagain--

*Girl if you don't calm your nervous behind down, you will get caught.*
I pause, sit up straight, and take a deep inhale. I repeat the process several times before clarity starts to come back to me.

I sat there for at least ten minutes, playing the conversation over and over. I was smart not to say anything or hang up as soon as she said my name. That would've completely given me away. Also, I consistently called from different, public locations in the town so that a trail can't come back to haunt me. I may be acting paranoid about this, but I am not taking any chances with this girl.

She gave me an ultimatum over the phone, but she really doesn't have a leg to stand on.

She has no evidence and she won't expose herself or risk revealing her secrets. She was probably so angry she didn't think about that. In reality, I'm the one in control. I have the cheat sheets, and all she has is assumptions. I have nothing to fear.

But the trick is I got to play it cool. I have to play the part of the confused victim. I have to be so convincing that even I believe it. If everything goes according to plan, then the end result will be that Haley will look foolish.

On Monday morning, I nonchalantly walk to my locker only to see Haley waiting there. It's still pretty early so there are only about ten or twenty kids milling about. But I know Haley must be feeling the pressure if she voluntarily came to me instead of expecting me to come groveling.

"Where is it?" she hisses. I spent the weekend learning how to control my facial expressions. That meant doing something I vastly uncomfortable with: staring at my face in the mirror. I knew a few days probably wouldn't be enough time, but I'm on the clock.

I look at her, my face neutral. Then I screw it into a downward position. "Good morning to you, Haley. Could you please stop leaning on my locker?" When I try to nudge her aside, she grabs my wrist and yanks me closer to her. It's then that I notice the dark circles under her usually flawless skin, white flakes of dandruff highlighting her hair, and the residue morning breath that I can smell on her mouth.

I was right. She was starting to feel the pressure. "Don't play mind games, Spencer," spittle flies out her mouth and lands on my chin as she whispers the words. "I know you have them, so just give 'em back already. Why are you doing this to me?" The note of desperation in her voice has me fighting the urge to snap "You did this to yourself". I couldn't afford to be getting angry right now. Besides, the kids were starting to roll in and our little show was drawing a crowd.
I widen my eyes into what I hope is a mixture of fear and confusion. "H-Haley," I stutter, "You obviously are confused about something because I swear I don't know what you're talking about." I then gently take her hand, which was surprisingly strong, off my wrist, and then soften my face and voice. "Haley sweetheart, are you feeling alright? You look like you haven't gotten any sleep. Do you need me to take you to the nurse?" I knew that if there was anything Haley hated more, it was anything she perceived as pity towards her.

So I wasn't surprised when she flinched away from me like I burned her. She looks manic when she yells, "I don't need anything from you. In fact, I don't need anything from anyone. I don't need anyone! I can take care of myself!" She storms away, disregarding the kids fumbling to get out of her way. I make my eyes go the size of dinner plates and fight the smirk that tries to come on.

I scan the crowd to their reactions and it is exactly what I had hoped: bewilderment.

For the next few days, I decide to do anything because Haley was doing all of the dirty work by herself. She started calling my house at all hours of the night, would glare holes into me at lunch, and always try to start something with me in the halls.

Through it all, I played the helpless damsel, even shedding a few tears to any sympathetic teacher who would listen. Slowly but steadily painting myself as the victim and Haley as the big, bad monster. Of course, that meant multiple trips to the bathroom to fix my foundation, but hey, it was worth it.

I know it all needed to end soon. I had all I needed really: I planted the cheat sheets in every corresponding class she had cheated for. I know that some of the teachers like to check our desks to keep us honest.

But I know I won't be satisfied until I bust Mr. Jones as well as Haley.

The fact that that creep is roaming the halls, possibly selecting his next victim does not sit well with me. If I let him go unpunished, that will just be another weight added onto my never-ending guilt.

In fact, the only reason why I've begun setting everything in motion is that I overheard Mr. Jones offer his "assistance" to Haley earlier this afternoon. I knew that a chance like this wouldn't come so easily again. There isn't a specific pattern to when Haley and Mr. Jones meet up. I guess it's when Mr. Jones needs someone to scratch his appalling itch.
I knew that I had to be even more careful this time. Haley was becoming more paranoid by the second. It seems like these days, the girl can't go two seconds without glancing over her shoulder.

That makes my job harder and yes, I have no to blame but myself for that. The phone calls weren't really necessary. I just thought it would be fun to needle her a bit.

Nevertheless, I was still able to follow them without any hassle, but I made sure to wear my disguise if trouble arose. They pulled up to Mr. Jones' place. They proceed to do the same routine as last time. When the lights turn on in the house, I crouch down, and sneak around towards the patio area and plop myself in front of the window to the office.

I settle in my spot. I briefly poke my head up to see if anything had happened yet. To my displeasure (I know how that sounds), Mr. Jones is just sitting at his desk while Haley is sitting on the guest coach. They appear to be engaged in small talk.

But it doesn't last.

Mr. Jones gets up and comes around the desk to sit next to Haley. I stiffened for a millisecond, then ready the mini camera that I got a weeks ago.

He... he starts unbuttoning her shirt. He stops halfway through to place his chapped, thin lips on her shoulder. Pushing down the panic attack I feel coming on, I raise my camera.

Snick

Thankfully, I made sure the camera didn't have any flash when I bought it. It just made a tiny, almost nonexistent sound.

Haley's face is carefully blank as Mr. Jones takes off her shirt completely. I take another photo, careful to make that Haley and Mr. Jones faces are visible so there would be no mistake that it was them. I catch the expression of longing and frustrated anticipation from Mr. Jones.

He presses his mouth against hers.
He fumbles around her back and her training bra becomes loose. He pulls, no yanks, it away completely exposing her chest. I almost don't take the picture when I see Haley's arms twitch. As if she's struggling against the urge to cover herself.

I can't help the tear that goes down my cheek as I watch Mr. Jones start palming at Haley's developing breast. I almost want to charge in there and take any large item I can find and just beat that freak until he doesn't move anymore. I hate Haley with everything I have, but I never want anyone to experience the level of pain, humiliation, and shame that I did.

Even if I did deserve it. We'll get him, the reasonable voice in my head promises, he won't do this to anyone else, but only if you keep your cool.

So once again, *Snick*

When Mr. Jones starts unbuckling his pants, I know I need to wrap it up before I lose my nerve.

So I take one last picture and scurry off into the night.

I spend half of my evening developing the pictures in the bathroom. I give myself a pat on the back when I don't shake when closely examining the photos. Once the photos are dry, I carefully stick them in a manila envelope.

Somehow, I convince my dad to let me do a grocery run at eight at night. He let me go, only after insisting I take a bat with me. I roll my eyes as I walk out the door.

I do get the milk, but not before I make a detour to Mr. Payne's residence with the recording and the envelope in tow.

I slip into my bed feeling my anxiety and excitement create an unpleasant rumble in my stomach. This could go wrong in so many ways: the ink in the pictures may have smudged in the envelope, the janitors may have decided to throw away whatever they found in the student desks as trash.
OK, I need to sleep because worrying about is not going to solve anything. I basically out-sleuthed Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys. I'll just let the chips fall where they may tomorrow.

And my God, did they ever fall.

Now that it's over, I can't help but feel a bit empty. Though it had been dangerous and bad for my emotional state, it was actually kind of fun. It's kind of like that feeling you get when you reach the end of your favorite TV. You just don't know what to do with yourself.

Thinking of TV makes me want to celebrate my amazing win. I can't share it with anyone so I might as well break my diet for a little while and pig out.

Since it was still early, I didn't feel nervous going back out.

OK, I think, I'll stop by the video store first and then get the ice cream.

When I get to the video store, I at first don't know what I'm going to rent. But then the section called anime caught my attention. I've never even heard of anime until today. But it's never too late to try something new I guess.

I decided to try out some called *Fushigi Yuugi* and *Naruto*. I don't have the faintest clue on what it's about but they had exciting covers so whatever.

After that, I quickly head over to the grocery store, get my favorite brand of strawberry ice cream, and then head back home.

When I walk through the doors, I hear low, masculine voices. Their laughter vibrates off the walls. I don't stop the smile when I see the man sitting next to my father.

"Uncle Jack!" I drop my bags and leap into the big man's arms.
Jack Dewhite is not my blood uncle but a friend of dad's from work. He transferred over here from the states and became fast friends with my dad when they were in the same unit.

Uncle Jack is a beautiful man. With his mocha colored skin, pretty brown eyes, and a crooked-toothed smile that hinted at trouble, I don't wonder how he attracted his newly wedded wife, aunt Bernadette or Bernie for short.

"Hey, cool it girl. I just got this suit dry-cleaned. And you know I need to look fresh if I want to attract the opposite sex." I giggle, knowing that he is too in love with aunt Bernie to even think about straying. But still, dad gives him a light shove and drops a kiss on my head in greeting. "Hey LoLo, how was school today?" I give a dry chuckle. "Oh, so you didn't hear?" He raises his eyebrows. "Hear what? I have to get dinner started so you can tell me about it after I get done." I grin and nod my head. He grabs my ice cream and heads towards the kitchen. I love seeing my dad like this. Happy, carefree, and content. I'd do anything to keep him like this.

"So now that your pops is gone, you gonna let me in on whatever got you cheesin' like a loon?" I turn to Uncle Jack in surprise. "Come on, baby girl, I know you well enough to know that you don't ever break your diet unless something really good or bad happened. If you're worried I'll tell your dad you know that I'll keep it between us." I shake my head in disbelief. Uncle Jack always did have amazing observational skills. Besides, I'm dying to tell someone about my recent adventures. So why not tell someone I trust and love?

"If I tell you," I start, "You have to promise not to freak out or tell anyone." He mimes himself zipping his mouth shut and throwing away the key. I roll my eyes and proceed to give him all the gory details.

All throughout my rundown, his expressions go from raising an eyebrow, to a huff of laughter, and shaking his head in what I assume is amazement. I silently hope it's good amazement, not the bad.

Then he says words I never expected or wanted him to say. "You know, baby, you are so sweet and polite all the time like your grandmother. But that sounds exactly like something your mama would do because when she felt that someone did her wrong, she didn't get mad, she got even."

The only thing keeping me from clawing his eyes and breaking down in complete and utter hysteria is that he doesn't know what she was like behind closed doors. Only Grammy and dad had known what she was like. I know that he's not trying to be malicious.

But that doesn't stop the roiling in my stomach or the way my body is experiencing a sudden heat wave.
I amaze myself by keeping my face calm from Uncle Jack's comment. But I do quietly ask to be excused.

I all but throw my face into the toilet bowl, letting the bile that I had kept locked in my throat to finally exit. Once my throat is sore from the retching, I rest my back against the bathroom cabinets and struggle not to lose myself to the memories.

_Couldn't even get fucked right... practically useless... hideous little shit... dead by the time I get back._

Memories of that awful day play in an endless cycle in my head. She had been so angry that day because I failed her. Like I always do. I could never please her no matter what I did.

I let out a choked laugh. Even after everything she did, I still love her. I always will even though I feel guilty whenever I do. What exactly I feel guilty over, I don't know.

Maybe if I had been born a little prettier would she have gotten what she wanted? Would she have been proud to call me her daughter if my skin had been lighter like hers? Nose smaller and daintier like hers? Hair just a little finer and manageable and not so coarse and nappy? Maybe if my voice wasn't so low and throaty and higher and pretty like some of the girls in my choir group, maybe we would've found something to bond over.

Because I always loved her voice. Whenever I heard, it would make me think of all the potential loving words, hugs, and kisses, she could've given me.

I don't even realize I'm whimpering until I hear get a little loud. I quiet down, pick myself up, and stare into the mirror.

No tear tracks, meaning that I don't have to look at those disgusting patches on my face mixed in with dripping foundation. I probably would've screamed in horror with the state I'm in.

A single thought occurs in my head as I examine my face: I can never do anything like this again.

It may have been for a good cause but I don't ever want to bring myself to this low again.
If this experience has taught me anything, friends are overrated. Especially when they turn on you in the end. For now on, I'll just focus on ballet.

Ballet is the only place where I can forget the unoriginal, attention-seeking, and desperate individual I am in real life. I am beautiful, strong, and confident when I dance.

It has become my refuge.

So yeah, I think that for the next few years, ballet will become my new best friend.

Chapter End Notes

OK I'm going to be honest, I wasn't expecting this chapter to be so long. Also, I wasn't really feeling it as a whole so excuse the dry spots. Maybe that's why it took so long to post.

Oh also, say goodbye to twelve-year-old Willow.
I'ma let y'all in on a little secret: Idk jackshit about ballet!

So instead of researching for hours on the correct terms, I'm going do it my way.

Enjoy!

I hack up the last bit of vomit stuck in my throat and release it into the toilet bowl.

This would happen right before I'm due to go on stage. But I guess it's better to get it out now rather than later.

I flush the toilet, open the stall door and examine myself in the bathroom mirror. Thankfully my makeup didn't take a major blow as I thought it did.

As nervous I am, the smile on my face can't be contained any longer. I finally made it. After months and months of preparing, I would make my debut on the ballet scene with my interpretation of Odile in Swan Lake.

After the incident in middle school, I stayed true to my word and never attempted to make friends again. Instead, I decided to invest all of my free time into ballet.

But when I turned fourteen, I read an article about how a ballet dancer got a full ride into a prestigious dance academy because she showed she knew not just ballet, but ballroom dancing as well. At first, I didn't think much of it, but then I started thinking that maybe it would help me get a creative edge over the competition.

So I decided to take on contemporary dance, tap, and hip-hop.

To keep the stress off dad, I paid for all of my new lessons with my own money with various odd
jobs I picked up.

I ended up loving all three of them. Ballet is such a strict dance that requires perfect motion. I could seriously let loose when I do contemporary because it requires more expressive movements, tap dance helped me learn how to transfer my internal metronome from my head to my feet since tap sometime requires your feet to be the rhythm and hip-hop... I can't really describe hip-hop.

Sometimes when I want to take a break from my ballet practice, I would just freestyle for the hell of it. It would help break me out of the stiff motions I forced myself into. It's actually quite therapeutic.

When the time came for me to pick a professional dance academy to attend, I already had one in mind: The School of Ballet Theatre UK. I heavily researched dance schools so that I could find the right one for me. I chose that particular school because the students also receive training in contemporary as well as ballet. I also wanted to learn ballet in for men. Call it strange, but I've always thought that there was something so appealing about it.

Plus, it may help in the event that I may one day play a male role.

Anyways, because dad didn't have the funds to pay for the tuition, scholarships were the way to go. My Tío Luis (Another military friend of dad's) told me the best way to impress the judges was to sell your sob story.

He said that fancy schools like that love a good "rags to riches" story.

So, with some reluctance, I relied that my mom was a meth head and died from an overdose. Also, revealed that my grandmother died from stage four brain cancer. Then of course came the BS about how my struggles made into the person I am today and how I think it's the highest art form and yadda yadda yadda.

I won't lie, I was somewhat skeptical with Tío Luis' plan, but my doubts died when the acceptance letter and full-ride came accordingly.

Like middle school and high school, I kept to myself. I focused on improving my dancing skills and didn't have time to socialize. My roommate, bless her, made a valiant effort to try and persuade me to join the homecoming, spring bash, or whatever party the school threw. I never saw the appeal of going to those types of things.
I read about them in books and one thing that always stood out to me is that the protagonist (male or female) usually gets drunk and gets into a very sticky situation, or encounters a persistent ex that results in a round of drunk sex and regrets in the morning. It's very cliche if you think about it.

No sir, not me.

Dad informed me of the dangers of those types of parties; main one being boys who don't know the meaning of the word "no" and then may even spike your drink. So if staying in the dorm doing nothing but practicing, studying, and watching anime in my free time makes me boring, then I'd take it any day.

Besides, I didn't have for friends or boyfriends. I promised myself once I get my career off the ground, then I would make time to be social.

It paid off in the end. When I was twenty-one, I graduated with my diploma in Performing Arts, and my BA in ballet performance.

My graduation is still one of the highlights of my life.

Dad, Uncle Jack and Tío Luis with their spouses came down to see me graduate. Dad gave me a gigantic hug and told me how proud he was. All I can say about that is that I'm glad I bit the bullet that day and bought the expensive water-proof makeup.

I relocated to London soon after to start looking for work. I acutely remember the excitement and anxiety I felt when I left the academy for the first time for two reasons: although I would never say that the dorm I stayed felt like home to me, it had become a familiar place and I wasn't always good with change. The second reason was that I still hadn't worked out where I was going to live. I had worked a few odd jobs while I was in school so I knew I had enough for a somewhat decent flat. I just hadn't had any time to devote myself to go flat hunting.

Turns out I didn't need to.

When we, me and dad, first got off the plane, I didn't even have time to breathe in the muggy because dad was immediately pulling us into a rental car that he had prepared beforehand.

He said he had a surprise for me. I remembering clenching my hands on the arms of the chair in
anticipation. I was burning with curiosity about what my dad's surprise was. So I had thought that maybe I could annoy him into revealing the secret.

"Daddy," I had whined in sing-song. "Are we there yet?" Yeah, I dredged up a classic. It never worked when I tried it before, but it was always fun to use.

All I got was a droll stare and a shake of the head. "No."

"C'mon now. Dad, you just can't pull this and not expect me to curious. Pops, my brain is going a mile a minute and my heart is pumping out blood faster than the speed of sound. And think about this dad, if my heart gives out, I could die in this car and it would be your fault because you weren't sensitive to my needs. The only way for my heart to slow down is for you to tell me where we're going. Please daddy? For your favorite daughter?"

"You're my only daughter," He pointed out.

Shit. That's right. The line had come out before I had thought about it.

"And little girl, I don't know about your heart but you've proven that there ain't nothing wrong with your mouth so I'm not worried. Also, don't worry, we're almost there." His last statement along with the fond smile on his face was enough to make me stop.

We drove far out of London into a little town that was just on the outskirts of the huge city. I found myself quickly being charmed by everything I saw. The stores, school, and the little white church I couldn't help but stare at. Everything was so tiny, but in a way that was just so endearing to me. But I still didn't understand what we were doing there.

My confusion only grew when dad took us onto a road that lead us into the forest areas.

Just when I was about to risk irritating my dad again and ask him what we were doing, he stopped the car in front of some huge black gates.

"Dad," I finally asked, "What're we doing here?" He just winked at me and said, "Don't get out the car just yet, LoLo."
So I sit in the car, watching him type in some code that makes the gates open. I wait a few minutes before I hear dad knocking on my window, motioning me to come outside.

Before I could do anything, dad was covering my eyes. I started laughing then. "Old man, what are you up to?" He lightly pops my forehead for the old man comment and carefully guided me towards who knew where.

We walked a good distance before we finally stopped.

I could feel dad's hands shaking from what I believed to be excitement.

"Okay baby, you can look now."

I opened my eyes, blinked, and then I fell to my knees in awe.

There right in front of my eyes was my dream house. It was a grand home that was made out of grey bricks and an equally colored roof. The shrubs, bushes, and trees that surrounded just added to the rustic aura I was feeling from it.

"Could you believe this used to be an abandoned farmhouse? Because it was in such bad shape when we first saw it, the owner sold it to us for a good price. It took us almost six months to fix it up and place all of your possible needs in there. I was afraid it wouldn't be ready in time for your graduation." I vaguely heard dad musing about in the background, but I was still too stunned to give my full attention.

"Daddy... I..." I trailed off. What could I have said? My father gave me a house to live in. He made sure that I wouldn't have to worry about where I would rest my head.

And not just any house either: It had echoes of the little cottage my father and I stayed in Italy. I always told myself that when I made enough money, I would buy a house that would be just like it and hopefully it would give the same, or ideally more, amount of joy that my original cottage had given.

But my father, my hero, and my best friend wrapped into one made my dream come true without me even asking.
He was still rambling about how he and my uncles fixed it up when I wrapped my arms around him in a bear hug, effectively shutting him up.

Of course, after I got set up into my house, the real challenge began.

Thankfully, I had met up with my school's guidance counselor a few months before graduation to set up my resume, so I knew it looked good. Graduating from one of the top dance schools in the country is a good look. I also made sure to get involved with as many extracurricular activities as possible so that I had the look of a team player.

Being skilled in three other dance areas helped me look well-versed.

I auditioned for all of the top companies in the UK that were available. I'm not very confident with a lot of things in my life, but I always knew that my skills in ballet were undeniable. I was cool under pressure and I knew that I could handle any surprise the judges would throw at me.

My only concern was my appearance.

I wasn't naive, I knew that there were little to no black ballerinas in the companies I auditioned for. They, like most companies, wanted the ideal ballerina: pale, delicate, and slender. The last thing these people wanted was some dark skinned chick with kinky, frizzy hair and the stereotype voluptuous figure that black women are known for.

Unfortunately, I fit all of the above.

When I was a little girl, I always had been a little pudgy, courtesy of Grammy's genes. Pudgy meaning I had a little more definition to my stomach than some kids. But even from an early age, I knew that all the pretty ballerinas were skinny. It wouldn't look right if the male dancer was struggling to lift the ballerina because she's too fat.

So by the time I was twelve, I made sure to cut back on anything that would hinder my chances of achieving my goal. Instead of doing 50 plies every morning, I did a hundred. I also took to doing push-ups and pull-ups to increase my upper body strength.
Cut to a few years later and my arms, legs, and thighs were toned to perfection. But my stomach, no matter how many crunches or core exercises I did, always had an element of softness to it. It's not like my stomach was spilling over my sweats, but it's not the six pack I longed for either.

I guess it's just one of those things.

Whatever those things may be.

I wasn't too worried about the appearance of my hair. I always had extreme pride in my hair.

I remember messing around in my dad's room one day and coming across an old picture of my dad when he was a teenager. He was smiling with some other kids who I presumed to be his high school friends. But what stuck out to me was his hair.

I knew that my dad had dreads but I didn't know that they came all the way down to his waist. And they didn't look dirty and unkempt like some people with dreads do. They looked clean and healthy.

I can still remember the flare of jealousy and determination I felt. I promised myself that I was going to get my hair to that length even if it killed me.

And I did. After years of experimental treatments, my 4B/4C natural hair went just past my waist. I rarely blow dry it in fear of heat damage and always make sure to feed my hair lots of moisture.

The length of my hair garnered a lot of attention. I can't even count how many times I've had people coming up to me and say "Oh my god, I love your hair! Where did you get it?" Those backhanded comments always irked me. It's almost as if they saying that we black women are not capable of having long hair that is completely our own.

But maybe I'm just being bitter. I don't know.

The real bold ones would sometimes touch my hair without asking permission. It used to happen a lot when I was thirteen. I guess since people thought that since I was a kid and not a grown woman, it was alright.
What really gets to me is that they do it with a big cheesy grin on their faces and act as if they're not invading my space.

Sometimes, I just wanted to scream that my hair ain't a goddamn petting zoo. In my mind, I would fantasize about what would happen if I were to reciprocate their actions on them. I could picture the looks of surprise and them taking involuntary steps to avoid my touch from ruining their hair.

Maybe that would teach them a lesson.

But I never did.

Instead of acting on my spiteful thoughts, I would always paste on a grin and calmly respond because dad and Grammy had drilled into me to be polite to adults no matter disrespectful they were to me.

Even though I thought the rule was absolute bullshit at the time, I would forever be grateful for it because learning to adopt a polite persona helped me stay neutral at the worst of times.

It definitely came in handy when I first started auditioning.

I wasn't naive. I knew that since I wasn't the ideal type of what ballerina should look like. I also knew that I had to work a little harder than the other girls hoping to fill the perspective slots.

So I decided that I wouldn't give the judges the chance to criticize anything about my dancing skills or my appearance.

That meant increasing my workout regimen even more than ever to sharpen my skills and reshape my body into whatever requirement the judges wanted.

I had a few auditions lined up and I was determined to be ready for them. The majority of the companies required that their ballerinas be between the height of 5’3-5’8 and that their weight be around 85 to 130 pounds.
I can't lie: I was a little worried that I wouldn't make the cut in that area. I always was the tallest kid in middle school and partially in high school too. I could thank dear oh dad for being a literal giant with his six-plus feet.

But lucky for me, I just made it with my 5''8 height. Cue the victory that occurred after I measured myself.

But then there was the issue of my weight. Like I said earlier, I made sure from an early age to make sure that my natural softness wouldn't come back to haunt me in the future.

My solution was to turn my potential flabbiness into pure muscle. But that couldn't fly anymore.

I was a solid one hundred and fifty-five and needed to lose twenty-five pounds in eight months.

I wasn't too worried because my discipline had always been a solid ten. But a hardcore will can only take you so far. Although I rearranged my workout plan to satisfy my goal, I still wasn't losing weight fast enough.

I had started out alright. I had lost ten pounds in two months. But then my weight loss dwindled down to two, then one pound in another two months. Sometimes, I would even gain a pound.

I was starting to get frustrated. I was making progress, but it wasn't enough. By the rate I was going, I started to think that I would never reach my ideal weight. The anxiety attacks that used to come every once in a while started to come every other day as my first audition date loomed ever closer. I can't count the number of headaches I got from sobbing myself to sleep.

So I decided to use... unorthodox methods to reach my goal.

I started deliberately skipping meals and taking laxatives in order to shed some water weight. I'm ashamed to say that I also started sticking my fingers down my throat to further along my weight loss process.

For those few excruciating months, my life revolved around three things: working out, the bathroom, and my scale.
I will be the first to say that I was not proud at all of what I was doing, but I didn't know what else to do. I was too proud to ask for help or a shoulder to cry on. I didn't make any close friends in school. I couldn't go to my uncles or my father.

Especially not my father. He has a high pressured job that requires razor focus. The last thing he needs is his emotional, selfish daughter calling from halfway across the world crying about a few pounds.

Besides, that's not how our relationship works. When I am fortunate to receive a call from him, I'm usually the one listening to him about his troubles and comforting him. Reassuring him that I'm always will be in his corner.

We've had this routine for so long, I don't think my father is capable of learning how to have a heart to heart with his daughter.

But I could never blame him for that. One reason being that he's my daddy, and from the time I was a little girl to this day, he can still do no wrong in my eyes. My love for him eclipses those probable wrongdoings. Another reason is that I didn't and still don't know how to talk to my father about the things that trouble me. My father has always been emotionally fragile.

When the drama with Mr. Ricci happened and he asked me if I was okay, I gave an easy smile and said yes, knowing in my heart of hearts I would never tell him how hurt, blindsided, and angry I was because I knew he couldn't handle it.

I kept quiet then and I kept quiet in this instant as well. I know that if I burden him with half the shit that poisons my mind, I know that he wouldn't look at me the same.

And if one of the few people that keep me tethered to this world is suffering because of me, it would be like the equivalent of me slitting my wrists.

So I did what I always did: Pretended that I was fine, shouldered my fears and kept moving.

Good news is that I got down to one twenty which went beyond my expectations. But I didn't feel or look good. My cheeks had become hollow looking, and my rib-cage was more prominent. I was beginning to have frequent headaches as well.
But how could I complain when I was this close to my dream job?

Two days before my audition, I made sure to wash my hair, blow dry it, and then flat-iron it. I wanted my hair to be nice and smooth so the judges would see that I too was capable of having the perfect ballerina bun.

Finally, the day of the audition came. The funny thing is that I wasn't even nervous. If anything, I was excited.

Even though I hadn't been doing it lately, I made sure to a decent meal before I left my house. No need for me to be passing out the day of my audition.

I remember when I first walked into the waiting room where the rest of the dancers were, every bit of conversation I heard ended died once I had closed the door behind. I know I shouldn't have been surprised, but I was surprised to see not one person of color in that room. Even though that had been the story throughout most of my life, I had been expecting some variety.

Although slightly disappointed, I shrugged my shoulders and settled into a nearby seat so I could give my full focus to filling out some paperwork. Slowly, the talking started back up again. I was careful to keep my eyes solely on the papers on my lap. Not eager to see if people were still staring at me.

I was in the middle of filling the name of my solo piece when I noticed a pair of petite feet encased in ballet flats standing parallel to my resting ones. I internally sighed. I really wanted to get the paperwork filled out, but that persistent politeness and me personally not wanting to be mean made me glance up.

The feet belonged to a girl. Even though I was sitting, I could easily tell that she was smaller than me in height. Her light brown hair was tied back in a bun like every other female dancer there. She was pretty enough, I guess. Everything about her seemed small: face, eyes, mouth. She resembled a gerbil. All she was missing was her whiskers.

That thought is why my intended neutral smile came out as a smirk. I immediately felt bad though. There I was judging this girl on her looks when I was easily the most hideous person here. Who was I to talk?

But my guilt quickly melted away when the girl opened her mouth and chirped, "I'm sorry, sweetie,
but I think you're confused. The nearest hip-hop studio is a few blocks away. But I know if you hurry, you can still catch their morning session." I knew she was mocking me. The tone in her voice was the same one I used when dealing with unruly children I used to babysit.

Maybe if it had been any other place or time, I probably would've cowered under the thinly veiled taunt, but I promised myself a long time ago that ballet would be the one place that I would never let anyone belittle me in. So that's what inspires me to don the easy grin and lazily reply with, "Oh no, sweetie, I think you're the one that's confused. Because I'm exactly where I need to be. Now if you don't mind..." I made a brushing gesture like I was brushing off a bit of dust off my shoulder.

Her beady eyes, that had held an expression of smug superiority, now radiated anger and frustration. But before she could squeak out a response, it was time for my audition.

I won't go into detail about my auditions, but I got through without having a breakdown in the bathroom later on. And I was poised and dignified through it all.

I thought that I would at least get a callback.

But real life gave me a swift kick in the ass later on.

It was nine in the morning when I got a call back from one of the companies. The caller ID only showed as a 10-digit number. But I memorized every last company I had auditioned for so that I wouldn't accidentally miss their calls.

I remember the anxiety and excitement I felt when they called me. I was so sure that I had been chosen. That something in the way I moved had spoken to them. Also, I thought that if they were calling instead of sending an email, that's got to be a good sign, right?

I answered the phone, heart pounding with a big smile on my face. "Y-yes?" I couldn't help the stutter that had come. "Yes, is this Willow Spencer?"

My anticipation only grew at the sound of the monotone male voice. It was one of the judges. He was an elderly gentleman that always looked like he was sucking on a lemon for the sour look he perpetually wore.

"This is she." I was struggling to keep from squealing. The toughest looking judge was
calling *me* personally. Was this real life? Were the heavens finally smiling down on me?

I soon got my answer.

"This is Jeffrey Abrams. One of the judges from the audition you partook in. I would usually do this by email, but the company is trying for a more personal touch this year. I regret to inform you that we won't be taking you on as one of our dancers at this time."

Oh. Right.

I should've known that it wasn't going to be that easy. I should've known that they wouldn't take a rookie who just graduated. No, they probably wanted an experienced dancer. Someone who has made a name for themselves. They don't have room for amateurs.

I knew that, but the phone in my hand began to shake slightly and my vision became blurry.

"I see..." I quietly responded, the rejection stifling my voice with its heavy grip.

"I'm sorry Miss Spencer. But it just wasn't meant to be. You have a nice da--"

"Can you tell me what exactly I did wrong?" I knew that if I didn't ask then, I probably wouldn't have another opportunity to ask. The line goes silent for what seems like ages. Finally, "Why would you want to know that?"

I narrow my eyes in irritation. He should know why I would ask that. "I ask because it will help me improve, sir. Constructive criticism will only help me to grow in the end, I believe." I knew I probably wouldn't like what I heard, but hey, that's life.

But I wasn't expecting to hear Mr. Abrams next words. "Okay, Miss Spencer, I'm going to be frank with you: you were probably some of the best candidates we had that day. Your technique was flawless, although you said that in your resume that you have minimal experience, your stage presence was obvious. And the way you projected the scene we asked you reenact was nothing short of marvelous. The judges, including myself, were very impressed."
My eyelids, that were rapidly blinking to avoid any tears from escaping, stretched to their limits at that moment.

"But I don't understand, if you liked what you saw, why didn't you offer me a slot?" Once again, there was a long pause. Frankly, I didn't what this man was going to tell me. Foolishly, I felt a slither of phantom hope start to rise in my chest. If the problem was minimal, maybe I could work something out with them.

But once again, I was thrown for a loop at the next words I heard. "The issue lies with your appearance." I stiffen. Oh god. I replay my appearance that day to try to figure out where I went wrong.

When I still couldn't produce a feasible answer, I boldly declared, "Sir, if this is about my weight, I'll have you know that I was well in the appropriate range of the requirements." Remembering all the hell I went through in order to acquire this body, I couldn't help if my tone was slightly defensive.

"Yes, yes, you were. But this has less to do with your weight and more to do with the color of skin."

If my emotions were a pot of water over a hot stove, they would be boiling over right now. I've dealt with subtle racism before, but never like this. "What the hell does my skin have to do with this?" I wasn't even trying to hide my emotions at that point. But I was too pissed off to give a shit.

Mr. Abrams wasn't even phased by my disrespectful tone. "You seem like a smart young woman, Miss Spencer. So I'm going to be blunt with you."

"Lighting plays a huge role in our productions. We meticulously choose our lighting so that we can portray our dancers in the best setting. Miss Spencer, with how dark your skin is, it just wouldn't look right with our particular lighting. You would stand out and I don't mean that as a compliment. Of course, we could accommodate you and replace our lighting in order for you to bend in, but that would require time and money that we don't need to spend on just one dancer. The very reason why we are so renowned is our attention to detail. One thing out of place could bring the production to its knees. I know you wouldn't want that to happen. Do you understand what I'm trying to say, Miss Spencer?"

"I... see." I felt sick. My earlier righteous fury had been doused by Mr. Abrams' cold and clinical words. I couldn't even feel angry if I tried. He's a professional that has been doing this for years. His ballet company is one of the most prestigious companies in the UK. He already has his career set in stone. What reason would he have to lie to me?
He's right.

"Look, I understand that you may feel disappointed, but I hear that there are some skin-lightening treatments out there that guarantee brilliant results. So why don't you look those up, and come audition for us again in another year? Thank you for your time." He hung before I could even say anything.

It was just as well. I wouldn't even know what to say to something like that. I put my phone on the living room table with shaking hands. I then took said hands and tightly hug myself, in a feeble attempt to stave the coldness I felt. But it doesn't do anything to soothe me.

"It's okay, it's okay." I chanted in a broken whisper, trying to stop the tears that trickled down my face.

Until that very moment, I had never hated the color of my skin. I had actually had a fondness for it.

I had inherited my dark skin from my grandmother. In my eyes, she was so radiant in her skin. I don't know to describe it, but she just glowed and I think the people around her recognized that.

I sure did.

Whenever I found myself missing her voice, scent, or face, I would even brave the mirror just to see if what people said were true about the fact that I look like her. It was like a piece of her was still with me, even though it would never truly be the same. So even though there was the obvious problem of my face, I always made a point to give the same amount of care to my skin as I did to my hair.

It's quite ironic if you think about it. One of the few traits I admired about myself is the very thing that is keeping me away from achieving my dream. As if my current agony wasn't enough, my traitorous brain decided to trudge up the old memory of the first ballet I had seen.

The wonder and excitement I felt as I watched the beautiful dancers leap across the stage for the very first time is something that filled me with such acute longing that stayed with and anchored me in the years to come.
My greatest aspiration is to pass that same amount of joy and passion onto another little boy or girl that would watch my future shows. I would consider it the highest honor.

So as I raised my arm to peek at the skin covering it, the tiny burst of pleasure I always felt was gone. In its place was only despair and resentment.

*Of course, they didn't want you, you ugly little rat. Why would they?*

The voice. The voice that comes to me in my weakest moments. The voice with the sweet southern accent that contrasts the venom its words.

*Yeah, you're talented, but they wanted beauty too. Something you know that you are not. All of those girls you saw could've easily been on magazine covers. And then there's you.*

*Bland, unoriginal you. Did you honestly think skipping a few meals, making a few trips to the bathroom could turn you into what they want?*

I clasp my hands to my ears, trying desperately to block out the mocking words. My heart had sped in pace, reacting to my alarm. Stop, I thought in distress. Please.

*How is it that you still haven't learned? No matter how many times you try, there'll always be someone more talented, prettier, and put together than you.*

Stop.

*You weren't enough for these ballet people.*

Stop.

*Your love isn't enough to stop those looks of disappointment that William gets from time to time.*

No. No. No. nonononononono....
And your so-called "help" couldn't stop me, Will.

"STOP!" I finally scream out loud. I then started openly sobbing. My guilt eating me alive.

Oh, don't start with the waterworks. They found my body in some cheap, roach-infested, motel room. I was all alone when I died. You know it wouldn't have happened if I had gotten what I needed. But of course, that didn't happen because the little monster I gave birth to couldn't even get fucked right.

"I'm sorry, mum." I cried out, curling into a ball on the floor. "I'm so sorry."

Your apologies don't mean jackshit to me. I died because you failed.

Failed. She's right. She's always right.

I have failed so many times in my life.

Ballet has always been the real-life Narnia of my life. The safe place I could go to feel like I actually belonged somewhere. So maybe that's why this rejection hurt so much.

But something occurs and I slap myself. The pain in my cheek helps me to right myself. There I was throwing a fit and it was just the first no. Even though that audition didn't work out, it didn't mean the others would say no too.

I took a deep breath, took some tissues to wipe the tears and snot from my face. I felt the determination seep back into me. I wouldn't let anything deter me from my dream.

Even if it meant researching skin-lightening treatments later on that night, or skipping another meal to help keep my weight down.

It would all be worth once I'm standing in front of whatever stage, performing for thousands of people every night.
I smiled, already hearing the thunderous applause I would get.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah.... it's been a while.

Life is my excuse and that this took a lot longer than I thought it.

I thought that this era would only be 2 chapters instead of 3. But oh well.

And I'll be honest with y'all, I think I could've done better, but this is the best my writer's-block mind could do.

So thx!
The optimism I felt after my first no quickly faded when the other companies I auditioned for quickly told me the same response. Each time I would ask them the same question: What did I do that you didn't like?

Again, I wasn't asking flippantly, I honestly wanted to know what I could do better in the future, no matter how badly my pride had suffered.

The answer was always the same, although it came in different variations. It didn't matter how skinny I made myself, or how much my feet bled from the excessive exercises I did by myself, my talent couldn't override the color of my skin, no matter how much I tried.

The responses I got varied from emails, hand-written letters, to leaving voice messages on my answering machine on my home phone. I figured that was about much diversity I would get from those people.

I guess I can't be too mad. I mean, what was I expecting when I decided to audition for companies that were predominantly white. The occasional black or any person of color I saw usually had a much brighter skin tone than I did and they never had a principal role. The chances of them making an exception for me was close to nil.

I was getting desperate at that point. I had two steady part-time jobs to make ends meet so I wasn't worried about that, but I didn't want to be in that position forever. A person can only take so much.

But as badly I wanted to fulfill my dreams, I didn't want to conform to the pressure and get my skin lightened.

I did make sure to research it thoroughly, but the treatments I read about, whether it be chemical peels or laser treatments, all had some dangerous side effects I wasn't sure I wanted to endure.

Not to mention I would be breaking the promise I made to myself when I was sixteen.
I had made a vow to never undergo any type of cosmetic surgery, no matter how unsatisfied I was with my body. I didn't want to change something and then somewhere in the near future look in the mirror and think, "The hell was I on when I decided that this was a good idea?" That wouldn't be a good situation at all.

So to avoid any future headaches, I decided that plastic surgery was a no-zone area.

But then I thought about all the hard work I put into perfecting my craft throughout the years. What was one painful treatment compared to a lifetime of happiness?

I almost did it. I had found a treatment center with rave reviews, with an 80% success rate, and was set to confirm the appointment when a certain ad caught my eye.

It was an ad about a new ballet company searching for dancers for their upcoming rendition of *Swan Lake*. Auditions were taking place on September 24th through November 1st. The actual performance would take place in March.

Normally, I probably would've shrugged off something like that with the thought, Not for me. But the three requirements were what caught my eye: You only had to be of legal age (16), all dancers had to have formal education in ballet.

And you had to be black.

For a moment, I thought that my stressed out mind was pulling a fast one on me, but a quick rub of the eyes and getting closer to the screen confirmed what I saw. My response was to automatically be suspicious. This offer sounded way too good to be true. It would probably be best not to get involved.

But something, whether it be my burgeoning curiosity, or God almighty himself giving me a swift kick in the ass, but I then decided to click on the link to get more information.

I could tell the website was still new. There wasn't a lot of detail. But the main things that stood out to me was a picture of the creator, Lance Oberman, an address to their headquarters, note-worthy dancers, and their main goal as a company.

One thing I noticed was that they weren't looking for any specific type of black dancer: as long as
they fit the first two requirements, they made a point to say that they didn't care what nationality you were; even if you were mixed, or light-skinned, brown-skinned, or dark-skinned.

Last part is what got to me the most. They would be able to accommodate me? Well if its exclusively for black dancers I guess they can, right?

In the back of my mind, I know this could be a scam. For I knew, this fool Lance Oberman could've been a serial killer. I could end in some creepy old bastard's basement, kept in a cage wearing nothing but a puppy onesie, and being called "Peaches" for the rest of my days. Or it could be a front for a drug cartel that makes their profit by selling crack cocaine from London all the way in some dirt-ass town in the heart of California (Y'all know they lenient with their drugs over there).

Okay, even I recognized that my imagination was starting to run away from me. So to calm my melodramatic ass down, I took a deep breath and made a decision.

I filled out the online application, because why not give this company called The Oberman Ballet Theater a chance?

A few days later, I arrived at the location, with my bag and resume in tow, my anxiety doing acrobatic maneuvers in my stomach. It was an hour before my audition slot, but I make it a rule to always come an hour before auditions so I have time to warm up and get my head in the game.

The building itself was pretty decent: Massive in height, although it did have the aura of an abandoned site. I reasoned that they maybe are just renting it for now. I walked in through the main entrance, catching an undercurrent smell of mildew. There was no one there to greet me, but the handwritten sign, which read "Oberman Ballet Auditions", on the set of double-doors to my right alerted me to my next destination.

It leads me down a hallway that has dozens of the same sign leading me to a door that in bold, marker-written letters read, "Stage". I lightly jogged up to the door and paused. I still didn't fully know what the hell I was doing and my mind was still fearful of this being too good to be true.

But I took a deep breath and forced my legs to move.

Now when I walked through the door, the scene that greeted me was somewhat familiar: vast room,
empty stage with stage lights illuminating the laminate floor, and the man sitting at a desk which is parallel to the stage.

"Hello!" He wasn't a tall man. I had at least two inches on the brother. But with his russet colored-skin, twinkling eyes, and note-worthy smile, it would be a lie to say that he wasn't attractive. "Thank you for coming today. I'm Lance Oberman as you might've already known and you must be..." He glanced down at his sheet of paper, probably hoping for a clue on my name.

"Spencer," I said, stopping his search for him. I held out my hand. "Willow Spencer." He once again gave me his mega-watt grin and took my hand in a firm grip. He then glanced at his sheet again. "You're an hour early, I like that." I shrugged my shoulders, but I can't help the small bit of pleasure I got when he approved.

"Well, if you want to stretch your legs before we get started, I'll direct you to one of the warm-up rooms." I gave a small smile. "That would be great." He then proceeded to lead me out the auditorium and back into the hall, stopping in front of a side door that is only a few yards away from our previous location.

"Alright," Lance clasped his hands. "You can set your stuff down here and do whatever you need to to get ready. Sound good?"

"Good," I affirmed. Instead of replying, he once again gave that blinding smile and walked out the door.

I perused my surroundings, noting the standard dance studio mirror, the barre, and the sweaty smell of what I assumed to be feet. But usually, that was the case with most dance studios I found myself in. Deciding not to waste any more time, I put my stuff down, and head over to the barre to begin my warm-ups.

By the time I finished, I worked up a good sweat on my temples and my lower back. Just in time too. Because no sooner did I finish, Oberman popped his head through the door. "Okay, I'm ready for you now." I would've said something if he hadn't left.

I can feel my heart starting to beat in my chest. Usually, that was just me being excited to show my stuff. But now? I'm plagued with all of these worries and doubts that came from my previous auditioning experiences. I knew that the ad said that black people of all skin tones are welcome, but
what if that was a lie?

What this man finds something wrong with my appearance anyways? What if my anxiety causes me to make careless mistakes?

I didn't know. But I also knew that blowing off this potential opportunity was not an option.

Straightening out my spine, I made my way back to the auditorium. But before I left the room, I spritzed myself with a little perfume, in hopes of somewhat masking my sweaty odor. I didn't feel like grossing anyone out that day.

When I got back inside, I notice that Oberman isn't alone this time. Another man, much taller than Oberman, is standing on the stage. Both of the men's eyes land on me at the sound of the door closing echoing throughout the room. I lightly jogged up to Oberman.

"Miss Spencer, this is Antonio. He will be your partner for today's audition." I take a closer look at the big man on stage. One look easily told me that he was at several inches above six feet. He had eyes the color of seasoned whiskey with skin to match. His rippling muscles didn't help matters either.

I gave a quick "Hi" before the appearance of this man made me completely weak in the knees. He gave a slight nod in return. I tore my gaze away from Antonio back to Oberman to avoid any drool that might've threatened to drop from too much exposure.

Oberman's sunny smile was nowhere in sight now. He looked dead serious. "I printed out a form of the application you filled out online." He raised his eyebrows. "You want to audition for the role of Odile?" I heard the incredulous tone in his voice.

I swallowed. "Yes, sir."

"You do realize that the role of Odile is usually played by the same person that will play Odette? And I have already chosen my Odette. What makes you think that you're special enough to sway my mind towards you?" Although the way the question was worded did sting a little, I knew that it was a legitimate question. I knew that going in there would be some skepticism in my choice of roles, but I didn't care. Odile is the character that made me realize what I wanted to do in life. I knew it was something of a taboo for a separate Odette and Odile, and that my chances of actually getting the part were pretty low. Especially since the man was telling me that he had already chosen an Odette.
I donned a mask of placidity and simply replied, "Sir, with all due respect, don't you think you should see my audition and then make the final decision?" I hoped that my words came off confident, but not too sassy or disrespectful. The last thing I needed was to get on this man's bad side.

Oberman's face was carefully blank and he didn't say anything for a few minutes. But then, "Act three, Pas de Deux. Now." I had to stop my eyes from bugging out from sockets in horror because damn! That nigga was scary as hell when he was serious.

But then again, I've been told the same about myself. Careful to keep my face neutral, I climbed up on stage, shook Antonio's bear-sized hand, walk towards the edge of the stage that led to the backstage area, noticing that Antonio was doing the same. I turned around to face Oberman. "I'm going to assume that this gentleman is going to play the prince right? And also, do you have the necessary music? Because I have the music on my phone if you don't.."

"First question, yes. And second question, no, it's fine, I got it, thank you. Play the Pas de Deux, Malik!" And music starts to fill the massive room. I don't let the sudden change startle. All I do is give myself a running start in order to execute the perfect jeté and begin.

Afterward, I felt a light sheen of sweat coat my brow and thanked God I decided to wear a simple black headband to keep the sweat from making my freshly flat-ironed hair frizz out.

I was slightly panting when I turned to Antonio, gave a big grin. "Thanks for dancing with me," I whispered in a slightly shy voice. His very, noticeable full lips curled into a smile. "No problem, sweetheart. You danced beautifully."

May the Lord forgive me for all of the sinful things I thought of when I heard that man speak. It may have been my lust-filled brain causing me to have delusions, but I swore up and down on the seductive powers of Prince's luscious lips that that man had an Italian accent. Lord Jesus, as if this nigga couldn't get any finer.

As much I would've loved to bask in the glow of this man who I knew would become the object of my future wet daydreams, I had bigger fish to fry. I turned my head towards the bottom of the stage to glance at Oberman.
He was writing something in his notes. What? I had no idea.

The only discernible noise I heard was the sound of Antonio's and my breathing. Finally, after what seemed like a lifetime but was probably only a few minutes, his head came back up.

I didn't exactly know what to make of his expression: a mix of what I believed to be pensiveness and, dare I say, interest.

"Your Odile... was different." What the hell did that mean? I thought in agitation.

So I asked him. "What does that mean?" Oberman let out a bark of laughter. I guess he heard my irritation through my tone.

"In the story, Odile is masquerading as Odette to aid in her father's plot to tear Odette and Prince Siegfried apart forever. Odile is posing as Odette, so that means she is also copying her mannerisms as well. Which typically means that the ballerina showcases Odette's innocent, naive nature which attracted the prince in the first place. Only when the game is up does Odile reveal her true nature."

"Your Odile was very... sensual. Everything from your facial expressions even to the way you walked across the stage hinted of very experienced and sexual Odile. I must admit, you held my attention. But I gotta ask, was it intentional?"

For a girl like me, who hasn't even been kissed yet, to hear that I looked like a sexy, worldly woman stroked my feminine ego to no end. "Yes, Mr. Oberman, it was very intentional," I declared, not bothering to hide the pride in my voice.

"Care to elaborate further?" I smiled and nodded my head.

I then took a deep breath and let the words fly out. "This is just my own way of looking at the story, but I realize that in most interpretations, Odile is mirroring Odette's pure nature to not alert the Prince. But I always thought of Odette and Odile has two sides of a coin. You know, light and darkness, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, you get the picture. I purposely wanted Odile to be everything that Odette wasn't in the way she acts because I believe that it would throw the prince off, but he wouldn't necessarily mind."

"Men love the chase. So even though deep down he'll know that something is off, he's so wrapped
up in the new and improved "Odette", he can't even see the warning signs. Because something in Odile is a siren call to the dark urges that the prince tries to repress. Urges that he himself probably didn't know existed until recently and wouldn't dare share with Odette in fear that it would frighten her. So when the big reveal finally does happen and Odette gets the short end of the stick, the prince does feel guilty, but it's not just for accidentally choosing another woman, it's also for the secret longing of wishing that it really was Odile he was pledging his heart to instead of sweet, innocent Odette. That just makes the betrayal all the more complete.

I end it there waiting for some type of feedback from Oberman or maybe even Antonio would give some insight into what I thought about his character. But all I get is a wide-eyed stare from Antonio and an inquisitive stare from Oberman. I can't help the blush that spreads across my cheeks from the close scrutiny. "B-but," I stuttered. "It's really just a combination of my imagination going a little overboard and watching Beyoncé MVs on repeat." That got a few chuckles.

"Well, your analyze was creative and obviously well thought of, your technique is near flawless, and the aura you give commands the average spectator to pay attention. I think I would be, to quote my sister, an outright jackass if I didn't offer you the role of Odile and a spot in my company. Would you be interested?"

The world stops for a moment at his words.

You know how you dream about something nonstop, but never truly believe it's going to happen? I guess the rejections I received in the past hardened something in me. Made me feel like the chances of me being welcomed into a company were a pipe dream.

But there I was, with man who was actively saying "Yes, I want you", "Yes I think you're good enough".

Maybe that's why I found my voice choked with emotion. "Mr. Oberman, I think I would be very interested," I stated quietly. I knew if I talked in my normal pitch, I would've burst into tears instantly. Oberman's gentle expression told me that he knew how I felt.

But his face quickly shifted into something more serious. "Now I must warn you: We are a new, unknown company for now. I'm still working on getting everything ready. We were able to buy this building, thank God, but I still have to find and hire more people to make this work. It will be rocky for a few months as everything comes together, but I already have amazing dancers, including yourself, signed with me. So I feel like my vision is slightly coming to fruition. Do you think you will be able to handle it?"
I nodded my head affirmation. I knew going in that the company was relatively new. But my optimism decided that she would do a comeback and give this little man with the bright eyes a chance on his vision.

"Also," he continues. "There is something else that I would like to discuss with you in private." Antonio quietly leaves the stage at Oberman's inexplicit prompting. I frown. I got in, what more could he want to talk about? I hopped off the stage to and planted myself in front of the desk, waiting for his words.

Oberman picks my application. "It said in your application that you weigh one hundred and twenty-five pounds, correct?" I feel my face tighten in shame. When the rejections kept coming in previously, I couldn't help but indulge a little in food to help lessen the pain.

I didn't say anything, I just nodded my head. "But it also says that your height is 5'8'?" Again I nodded my head, but I also scrunched my eyebrows up in confusion. What did that have to do with anything? Oberman shook his head in what seemed to be disapproval. "Miss Spencer, that's not going to fly in this company."

I remember feeling my stomach drop at his words. What? Did he want me to drop another fifteen or twenty pounds for me to fit his requirement?

"With your specific height, you are severely underweight. I will not have my dancers passing out during a performance because they were starving themselves. As of now, I am ordering you to gain at least twenty pounds in order to reach a healthy weight. Is that doable for you?"

I often wonder if he knew. If he knew how shocked yet relieved I was when he told me to actually gain weight instead of losing it. If he understood the hell I went through just to lose a couple of pounds or keep them off. The way I used to cry myself to sleep because I feared I wouldn't fit the crazy weight requirement the past companies had set. The near panic attacks when I occasionally broke and decided to something like one piece of food.

I used to think that if I wanted my dream job, I would always have to live in a constant state of fear.

But here was this man, telling me that it was alright for me to gain back some of my previous weight.

That maybe, just maybe, my appearance before all this would be enough for once.
I went to literal war with my eyes to keep the tears from escaping down my cheeks. I choked out, "I think I can manage." I probably looked pathetic: glassy hazel eyes, mouth kept tight to keep from crying, fists curled up into balls like I was gearing for a fight.

Oberman, bless him, said nothing about my state. I decided at that moment that if I stayed any longer, my humiliation was going to be complete. I wasn't afraid of my foundation running. I had upgraded to a water-proof foundation.

But I still didn't want to cry in front of a stranger. "Well sir, I guess we'll be seeing each other real soon, right?" That sunny smile came back again full force. "Oh, absolutely."

I smiled shakily. "Well, you have my contact information, so please tell me when we started. You have a nice day, Mr. Oberman." I was careful to keep my head down while I walked past. If I was going to break, I have enough pride to break in the safety of my car.

His voice stopped me before I exited the auditorium. "Two more things, Miss Spencer: First, I am twenty-nine. 'Mr. Oberman' sounds reserved for some forty or fifty-year-old man. So calling me Lance would be fine."

"Second, Antonio is happily married to his lovely wife of ten years, Carla, who he has two gorgeous children together with."

I blushed. I guess my thirsting was more apparent then I thought. "So yes, neither you or I have a chance with that Adonis." I feel my eyes go wide for a moment at his last statement.

But even as I feel a tear escape, I can't help the refreshing burst of laughter trickles out of me.

After that life-changing experience, that was when the real work began. I will probably say this till I'm in the grave, but Lance Oberman is arguably one of the most hard-working people I've ever encountered.

Lance wasn't lying when he said that he procured an appropriate amount of dancers for his fledgling company. For the first few weeks, Lance acted as our own personal jack of all trades. When he wasn't consulting with experts about the stage lighting so that all of us could be seen in our best light and shine like the angels we were (his words, not mine), he was overseeing the handling of the
costumes, musicians, props, you name it, he did it.

He also acted as our temporary choreographer for a while as well. He was a good teacher, but he couldn't be there on time most days because of the million things he had to do. I later learn that Lance had used a combination of his life savings and his inheritance money he received from his favorite uncle to fund his dream.

So, in reality, he was taking the biggest risk out of all of us. We all could walk away if it went south. But Lance was staking everything on the line for this endeavor.

It made me respect him all the more. It also motivated me to do my very best and help out in any way I could if it meant I could lessen his burden.

And help out I did.

It was mid-November. Us dancers were in the dance studio waiting for Lance so we could begin rehearsal.

It had been thirty minutes and still no sign of Lance. Even though it looked like everyone was taking it easy, scrolling through their phones, murmuring to each other, I could feel their agitation and their readiness to get started already.

I knew because I felt it too. But on the way there, I had spotted Lance in his office screaming on the phone at whoever about securing a decent orchestra. I had an inkling something like this was going to happen sooner or later.

We had to get started soon. So I decided to take some initiative and get the ball rolling. Dad always told me I had the makings of a leader. It was time to put that claim to the test.

I quietly moved to the front of the room where everyone could see me. I did a quick scan of the room, took a deep breath, and spoke loudly to get everyone's attention.

"Excuse me, everyone." Suddenly, all conversation ended and all eyes landed on me. I gulped, trying not to get intimidated before I even began. "It's pretty obvious Lance won't be coming any time soon. Why don't we just go ahead and get started without him?"
I could see the dubious looks all around, but I chose to power through it. "I think we should work on Act 2, scene thirteen? I know that we haven't had a chance to work on it together so why not now?" I said "we" knowing full well my only part was in the next act, but blessedly, they decided to follow my wishes.

Once the girls who played the swan maidens assembled in their appropriate spots, I quickly ran over to my bag that was in the corner and pulled the notes I made.

My notebook was filled to the absolute brim with observations I made over the years about Swan Lake. My obsession with it demanded that I study each role thoroughly and watch several different interpretations and make notes on everything I saw.

I must admit, I was a little scared of the level of intensity I felt towards my craft, but dad reassured me by saying that it just showed my passion.

Well, it was time to see if that would help or not.

Despite my initial concerns, it actually worked out. We were all able to go through the acts without too much. I made sure to give constructive criticism to everyone, including myself, where it was due. Thankfully, no one had given me any lip about it. And I guess someone must’ve told Lance how I had stepped up to the plate and taken on the role as the choreographer because he stopped showing up to rehearsal.

Of course, I did face some challenges with my new role.

It had been maybe a week or two before someone decided to question my authority.

In hindsight, I should've known that some loudmouth, obnoxious, bratty individual was going to feel the need to rock the boat and try to rebel. I also should've known that it would come from a teenager.

Cause let's be honest: what teenager doesn't get a thrill from rebelling?
I swear to God, I was completely innocent in the situation. I had only been doing my duty appointed by the powers that be (Me), helping one of the girls that were doing the tambourine dance.

"Erica," I had been saying. "I suggest that in order to come in time with the trumpet solo, you should start counting the rests in your head. And if that doesn't help maybe Imani, since she is leading the troupe, can give you some sort of signal on when to come in--"

"Maybe you should spend less time worrying about other performances and just on focus on what you got to do!" I had been so engrossed in my teacher mode, that the sound of the high, feminine voice made me jerk up in surprise.

I turned away from the young girl I was giving advice to to scan the room, trying to figure where the cry of indignation had come from.

I didn't have to search long. My eyes landed on a girl who didn't look much older than nineteen. Her pretty caramel skin glistened from a thin coating of sweat. Her braids were wrapped in individual, tight balls on her scalp. She couldn't have been more than 5"3 at best. She would've been nothing short of lovely if not for the intent glare she was leveling at me.

It was then that I realized that I recognized her. She was one of the swan maidens. She always made a point to roll her eyes or give me dark looks every time I even got close to her.

So yeah, maybe this confrontation was long overdue.

"Marigold," her friend put a hand on the girl's slim shoulder in a fruitless effort to get her to calm down. "Don't." The girl, Marigold, doesn't heed her friend's warnings. All she does is shake off her hand and continue her rant.

"I've been watching you going around, acting as if you know everything when we all know that you are just as clueless as us. Just because Mr. Oberman has not been around for a while does not mean that suddenly you can come up in here and start acting as if you runnin' something. We didn't ask for your help and we sure as hell don't need it. So please, do us all a favor and back off."

The room is dead silent, waiting for my response.

I was careful to keep my face neutral as Marigold spewed out her words.
I sighed. Our debut was coming in only a few months and this girl wanted to waste time staging a coup d'eat? Not on my watch. But judging from the tilt of her chin and the clear defiance in her eyes, I knew she was waiting for me to be equally loud and nasty as she had been.

If I did that, then I would just be proving that I was just as immature as she was. And how would that look to the others?

With those thoughts in mind, I slowly walked over to her. My footsteps echoing in the room as I did. I made sure to get so close to her she would be forced to take a step back. For a moment, I just looked her dead in the eye. It didn't take long for her eyes to start wavering from the direct eye contact I was giving her.

That's when I handed over my notebooks and went strolled over to the lineup. She stared after me, face perplexed. "What is this and what am I supposed to do with it?"

I raised my eyebrows in mock surprise. "Lead. Those are the notes I made on the production itself and analysis of the characters. I've also made some observations about our group. Our strengths and weaknesses and the best way to counter them."

"But it's obvious that I am not doing a good job. Otherwise, you wouldn't have said anything. But it's also clear that you believe that you can lead us better then I can. I gave you my notes because I thought you might need some help. So, go ahead."

There are not enough words to describe how stupid she looked right then. She obviously had been expecting some big blowout to happen. She hadn't been expecting to lead the class.

The idea had come from years of babysitting. If a particular child tried to get a leg up on me, I learned the best way is to use a mild tone and a healthy dose of reverse psychology.

It took Marigold maybe three minutes of standing there and looking foolish to realize what a big mistake she made. It took an additional two minutes to walk over to my position, her brown face tinged red.

She handed over my notebook and quietly got back in the lineup. I calmly resumed my previous position. But I made a point to look back at the spectators. My sharp glare saying, "Anyone else got something smart to say?"
They wisely said nothing.

After that, everything went smoothly. Rehearsal was over and everyone was leaving the room. I was preparing to stay behind to work more intensely on my own performance and jot down a few more observations. I was sitting on the floor with my notes in my lap, ready to write some more.

I saw that Marigold was about to leave. "Marigold," I called out. Her back is facing me but, she flinched when she heard my voice. I had to fight back the smirk. "I trust that something like this isn't going to happen again, yes?" I had already asserted my dominance, but I wanted to make sure.

"No ma'am," she meekly replied. "It's not."

"Good." My tone is flat. I hear the sound of the opening, then closing. I thought I was finally alone when I hear, "I gotta say I admired the way you handled that." I hold back my annoyed sigh and look up.

It's the girl playing Odette. Her beauty went beyond the realms of being merely pretty. Her light bronze skin is nothing short of flawless. Her curls, which look like they are 3A/3B type at first glance, are held up in a bun on the top of her head. Her dark eyes are slightly slanted in a way that made me believe that she has some Asian ancestry in her. And she had the body and height of a supermodel.

I shrugged. "She's a child and I dealt with like I would deal with any child."

"Well, I just want you to know that she's a good kid when you give her a chance. She just has a bit of a stubborn streak." I snort in derision. "Well, that streak has no business being in the practice room. She wants to act like a stubborn brat, she can do it on her time, not here."

The girl inclined her head. "Fair enough." There's an awkward silence after that short exchange. I honestly didn't know what else to say. I felt insecure when it came to talking to people who were around my age. Especially in a one-on-one setup.

I think the girl is about to leave when I blurted, "Your voice." Her manicured eyebrows raised up in surprise. "My... voice." Her tone is prompting. Her voice sounded British on a first listen. But underneath the poshness, I heard a slight sing-song in her accent that sounded so wonderfully familiar, my heart aches from the memories it brings.
So I decided to take a chance. "You wouldn't happen to be Welsh, would you?" I asked in my grandmother's native tongue. The girl looked shocked for a second, but then a gorgeous beam lights up her entire face. "Yes!" she exclaimed in excitement. "How did you know? Most people just assume I'm a Brit."

My cheeks were hurting from how hard I was smiling in delight. "My late grandmother was from Wales. She taught my father Welsh and he, in turn, taught it to me. I spent the first few years of my life speaking Gaelic so hearing phrases of Welsh kind of threw my three-old mind for a loop."

"Oh," she sighed in longing. "I wish I knew Gaelic. I personally think that the language is so lively and lyrical. My mother used to listen to this radio station where they played nothing but Gaelic folk songs and I just thought that it was the best thing I ever heard. And I always begged her to let me learn but she always..."

We ended up talking for hours that day. We talked about where we grew up, our love for ballet, the struggles of always being turned from ballet companies for the most ridiculous reasons, and just whatever came to our minds at that moment.

That day ended up being an important milestone in my life because that was the start of how Nina Mori became my best friend.

I'm brought out of the past when I hear a knock on the door. "Willow! You're about to go on. You ready?"

Tonight's the big night of our debut. Lance was able to draw out a decent crowd with a few dance critics in the audience. Depending on how we perform tonight, it could either make or break us.

I take one last look in the mirror. The make-up artist, Tasha, did a phenomenal job of doing my make-up. She said that my dark features along with my light-colored eyes made her job all the more fun.

I made sure to pull her aside early one day when no one was around and alert her to the scars on my face, hoping that she could manage. She told me that my secret was safe with her and that she could easily work around my facial problems.
I'm forever grateful for her easy acceptance.

"Y-yeah!" I can't help the stutter. As I walk the bathroom, I can't help but strut a little as I do. I feel the pressure of what this night entails, but I also feel the excitement of a four-year-old girl finally making her dream come true at long last.

So as Daniel, Rothbart, takes my hand and asks, "You ready for this kid?" I don't hesitate to declare, "I've never been more ready for anything in my life."

Daniel grins and gives me a wink in response.

I can hear the music starting to gear around mine and Daniel's entrance, I can feel my pulse to ring in my ears. But I know it's not my anxiety for once.

So I close my eyes and give myself over to the feeling.

Slowly, the pulse and music I hear in the background lull me into a headspace that is not my own.

This space felt vengeful, angry, and eager to watch her enemies fall in utter and complete despair.

This space was heartbroken by a man who treated as if she was something to use and throw away on a whim.

This space was destroyed by her cousin's betrayal.

This space...

This... space...

This...
Odile opened her eyes and focused her attention on the prince, who was waiting for his precious swan princess to arrive.

Pathetic.

Odile already knew she was going to take great pride in breaking him the same way he had broken her.

Chapter End Notes

I'm going to enjoy writing the next chapter
Odile didn't start out despising him.

In fact, once upon a time, she had loved him with all she had.

She had met him in a pub of all places.

Odile had always been a quiet girl. Never truly standing out anywhere. Standing out was a skill reserved for her vivacious younger cousin.

Her cousin: her radiant, lively, slightly arrogant cousin was Odile's hero. She and Odile were the daughters of prominent nobles in their land. It would be unbecoming for the nobility to be seen in such non-comely settings. Not just for the lady herself, but her entire family.

Needless to say, Odette didn't agree with that notion.

Whenever she had a chance, she would escape her attendants without them knowing and just go explore her village. She had started when she was twelve years old and continued the practice until her seventeenth birthday. Odile only knew of this because Odette always confided in her about her everything. Her excursions were no exceptions.

Whenever the talkative girl that was Odile's cousin would go on and on about her adventures beyond their usual tedious lessons of etiquette, school, and embroidery, she was always fascinated by the working-class citizens of their land.
Odette's expressive face would sometimes contort in mock disgust whenever she recalled things of how the children she encountered would sometimes be wearing the most unsightly shoes, how dirty their faces were. A random baker's reaction when she one day paid for a simple loaf of bread with a bag that had twenty silver coins inside.

"I swear, dear cousin," she had remarked one night. Odile had been braiding Odette's hair into a protective style for the night. Odette had been recounting her adventures as she did so. "Mother is right when she said that our people are a simple lot. I mean, the man got on his face and starting sobbing because I paid him in silver. Silver coins are not that hard to come by. Anyways I hope that the baker uses those coins on his children or some child because all of the children I have seen thus far have been absolutely filthy. It's obvious that our people do not understand the value of clean and kempt clothing. They obviously did not pass it on to their children."

"Oh listen to me. Odile, don't get me wrong: I love this land and the people in it. But there are two types of people this world: those who lead and those who follow. The gods created people like that so that people like us could rule them with a firm yet loving hand."

Odile truly believed that Odette had a good heart. But sometimes, when she heard those rare fragments of vanity and haughtiness, it made her wonder.

Were these corrupted thoughts influenced by her parents, who have been known to have less than stellar opinions about their people? Or did Odette really believe that the townspeople were beneath her?

Odile, forever the soft soul, just thought that maybe because of her cousin's naivete and shallow nature, she couldn't comprehend that the reason why that baker was so overwhelmed by the coins was that normal people with normal occupations do not get overpaid the way the poor baker had. Odile also knew that the children with the raggedy clothing and dirty faces was probably not because they didn't understand the concept of cleanliness, but because they couldn't afford anything better.

Odile would've explained this to Odette, but she knew the stubborn girl would've refused to listen to anything that contradicted her. She could already hear her cousin's indignant voice claiming that Odile had never stepped foot outside of her their family estate so how would she know.

Maybe that was the reason, along with burning curiosity, how Odile found herself standing awkwardly in a pub.

She herself had always wanted to see the world that Odette had always described, but now that she was here, she wasn't if she wanted to stay. Of course, Odile had chosen to do her trek at night to cut
down on the chance of prying eyes, so a lot of the stores were closed.

But still, for an introverted person like Odile, this was far more stimulation than she had in one week and she wasn't entirely sure if she liked it or not. The smell of alcohol, sweat, and piss filtered the air. She was surrounded by big, burly men who just got finished from their daily labor and were looking for a good time.

Sitting on one of the stools, Odile realized how foolish she had been. For once she had wanted to be the one who took a risk and had stories to tell. She wanted Odette to look at her for once with wonder and envy.

But sitting there in front of all of those strangers, she didn't feel brave. She decided at that moment that she needed to go home immediately.

But alas, fate had other plans.

She was almost out the door and into the cold night when a huge hand on her elbow halted her progress. Odile felt annoyed and alarmed. She wanted to go home, curl up in her warm bed, and read about girls who led more interesting lives than she did. But she was scared that the stranger wouldn't take no for an answer if she tried to wrench away.

But maybe if she was firm and forceful with this person, they would be so shocked they'd loosen their grip and Odile could get. So she squared her shoulders, tightened her hands into fists, and twisted her face into a dark expression that she had always seen her father use. With her armor ready, she whirled around ready to let loose.

All thoughts of making a speedy escape fled her mind when she saw his face.

A face with so many angles that an artist would sob in ecstasy if he or she were commissioned to draw it. Almond-shaped eyes that seemed to glow in the dark with their soft gold color. He was bald and although Odile generally preferred men that hair on their heads, this man's head had such a pleasing shape that she decided to make an exception this one time. But what really drew her attention was how enticing the man's lips were. They were so full and lush looking that she had the strangest urge to bite into them to see if they were as soft and sweet as they looked.

When said lips pulled back into a smile that revealed perfect white teeth, Odile realized that she had been staring. Face flushing in shame, her eyes darted back to the stranger's, hoping he hadn't noticed
her ogling. If he did, he gave no indication.

"Excuse me, miss." Heavens above, even his voice was hypnotic. "I mean you no harm, but I didn't want you to leave before I had the pleasure of knowing your name."

Odile scoffed. "It was so crowded in there. How did you even see me?" The man's gold eyes were so gentle. "Milady, a woman as beautiful as you was not hard to miss." Odile couldn't help but blush in pleasure. Odile was aware that while she wasn't bad looking, but she knew that she didn't hold a candle to her cousin who was often described as "breath-taking". Odile was always an afterthought. Up till now, she had been content with being in her beloved cousin's shadow.

But here was this man who thought that she was beautiful. *Her.* Not Odette. For once, she was someone's first choice.

So with a smile, she held out her hand. "Odile." He extended out his large palm in response. "Luka."

From that moment on, Odile spent every free moment she had with Luka. They spent the majority of their time getting to know one another. Odile found out that Luka had a wicked sense of humor, an intelligence that could probably give her tutors a run for their money, and a compassionate heart that made her melt at times. He told her that he was one of the hunters for the royal family, which is why he always had his crossbow near him. Odile told him all about her life. Her upbringing as a noblewoman, Odette, her doubts, her fears.

She felt that she could tell Luka anything and he would listen with no judgment. Although, she had to admit she was a little surprised that he hadn't shown that much shock at the revelation of her blue blood.

In hindsight, maybe she should've been more cautious, but she was just relieved that he hadn't started treating her differently.

Odile had been careful not to tell Odette about her trips to the village or Luka. She knew that if she did, Odette would want to tag along and meet Luka.

That couldn't happen under any circumstances.
Odette's beauty was like a siren spell. Any man (or occasional woman) that saw her acted as if they didn't know their head from their arse and started salivating after her like a wolf that hasn't seen decent game in months.

Odile wasn't taking any chances. Luka was hers and hers alone.

For a few months, Odile and Luka's relationship remained platonic. Nothing more than hand-holding, hugging, cheek kisses. Although Odile knew that she was falling for him, she was sure that he only saw her as nothing more than a friend.

She was proven wrong.

The evening had started out normal: Odile had snuck out again and she had met Luka at the pub as usual. But instead of taking her for a moonlight stroll like they usually did, he took her to a nearby inn.

Something in Odile was telling her that something bad was going to happen. That she needed to go back home where safety was guaranteed. That maybe Luka had ill will towards her.

But she laughed at those thoughts. Luka was always a gentleman through and through. He didn't see her like that. That version of Luka was only reserved for her wildest dreams.

So she couldn't fathom why he had brought to an inn of all places. But she didn't say anything as she watched him pay for a room. Nor did she utter a word when he brought them up to said room (although she was beginning to feel quite alarmed).

But the notion to keep her mouth shut faded away as soon as she walked into the reserved room and heard Luka lock the door behind them.

Odile liked to think of herself as a smart, competent young woman who had her head screwed on straight. But her fear was making her head cloudy and her hands tremble uncontrollably.

She whirled around, planning to demand some answers when the mouth that she had fantasized for months was suddenly on hers.
Odile didn't react right away. She was frozen from the shock that radiated throughout her entire being. Only when she felt Luka's tongue try to invade her mouth did common sense return. She pushed on his chest in an effort to get some distance between them. But she only managed a few inches thanks to Luka's arms wrapped her waist like a snake coiling its body around its prey in a strangling grip.

The analogy did nothing to soothe Odile's nerves. "L-Luka," she rasped. "W-what... what is this?" His eyes, which were usually so soft and inviting now held something a little darker behind the veil of kindness.

Something akin to malicious glee.

"Odile, my darling, I am deeply, madly, in love with you. Forgive me for not telling you sooner, but I was scared of imminent rejection. That maybe you would find someone better than me." He loves me, she thought in wonder. This... god of a man was in love with her.

"Your smile, your laugh, your scent," he continued. "Your essence haunts my every waking moment. I believe will go mad from how my love for you consumes me." Odile lets a laugh of joy. "Luka, I adore you too. I fell in love with your wit, your charm, your patience nature. You are the most beautiful man I have ever laid eyes and the fact that you chose me who is sorely lack--" She didn't get to finish her declaration because Luka's lips once again fell on hers.

This time, Odile wrapped her arms around his neck to pull him in closer. All thoughts of danger faded from her mind when she kissed him. It was like his kisses were an aphrodisiac to her system. One she could not get enough of. She could feel a tear of joy trail down her cheek.

Behind closed lids, she was picturing their fairytale: they'd start the official courting ritual, he'd eventually ask her father for her hand in marriage. She saw herself, hand in hand with her father, walking down an aisle in a pure white gown towards the true love she'd always dreamed of but never dared to hope was real. She visualized her husband rocking their beautiful child to sleep. She could see the love and reverence so clearly in his eyes that more tears leaked from her eyes.

But all of her daydreams faded when she felt Luka back her until she flopped down on the nearby bed.

Odile felt frazzled. One minute she was kissing her love, and she was lying on a lumpy, uncomfortable mattress with Luka's big body pinning her down. "Luka what..." He didn't answer.
He was too busy trying to raise her skirts to her hips. His eyes had a manic gleam to them that cut through the love-filled haze Odile was in. It was when she felt him rip her stockings that she screamed, "LUKA STOP!"

He did. He backed away from enough that so that she could be in a sitting position. He looked at her as if she had gone mad. "My love," he crooned in a sickly sweet tone. "Why are you stopping me? I desire to be close to you in all matters. I am doing this to demonstrate my love for you. Perhaps your affection for me is not as deep as I thought it was. Could it be that you lied to me?"

Odile felt panic. It's not that she hadn't thought about him in... that way. However, she was only sixteen years old. She wasn't ready to give up her virginity in a run-down inn. She had always envisioned losing her virginity after marriage in some exotic, far off location with someone she loved.

Well, Odile was sure she loved Luka. But now he was doubting her. She didn't want to make think that her love for him wasn't real and that she didn't long for him in that way. He'd be heartbroken.

Swallowing some saliva down her throat and pushing down her nerves, she out to his face with sweaty palms before he could get off her. If this was she would prove her love, so be it. "I do love you, I promise you I do. If you... if you want to do it, then--"

His weight is once again pressing into the mattress before she even had a chance to breathe. Because Luka had practically rammed into her, Odile's head hit the back of the wooden headrest, making her head throb with pain.

Once again, Odile was petrified. She had never seen this side of Luka before. The sweet, gentle man she thought she had known was nowhere in sight. Now what leaned over her was a beastly man who wanted nothing more than to...

He ended ripping her dress clean off, licking and biting her skin like she was a piece of meat. Odile's bottom lip had started bleed from how much she gnawing on it because the pain was almost too much for her to bear.

Luka hadn't once checked to see if she was alright. He had forced his hardened member into Odile's completely dry caverns. There was not one moment of tenderness or affection in his movements.
He had taken her three times in three different positions: once on her back, the second time he took her from behind like he was holding her, grabbing her right breast in a vice grip. The third and final position had Odile being shifted onto all fours while Luka pushed his member inside.

Odile had felt so humiliated and scared. She had wanted to tell him several times to slow down or to stop. She actually had raised her voice but each time, Luka would clamp her mouth shut with his wide palm.

Even while trapped in a miserable nightmare that seemed to last for days, her heart kept screaming he loves me, he loves me.

He loves...

Odile woke up alone. When Luka had finished it, he had rolled over and gone fast asleep. Odile was so sore that she doubted could lift her finger without cringing in pain. Her throat was dry, her lip would probably turn black and blue from the excessive biting, and her head was pounding was from all the silent crying she did through the night.

I just need to find Luka, she thought. I'll find Luka and everything will be alright.

Somehow mustering up the strength to move, she crawled off of the bed, pain exploding between her legs. She'd cry out, but her hoarse throat prevented that. Seeing as how her dress was torn completely in the back, Odile surmised that she could wear it as a robe until better options arose.

On pure will alone, she rose to her feet and quietly walked out the door to find her new lover.

Despite the risk her temporary wardrobe presented, she wanted to see if Luka had decided to peruse the downstairs pub to get some breakfast. She creeped down the stairs, not ready to let anyone see her.

First thing she heard was the sound of boisterous male laughter. The laughter was only making Odile's migraine worse. Then a bass voice booming, "Siegfried, you sly dog!" Siegfried?
Then another male voice, shriller than the last voice, exclaim, "I don't get it! How did you convince a nobleman's daughter, old grouchy Rothbart's daughter mind you, do fall into bed with you?" Odile froze. Rothbart was the name of her father. And the possibility of another Rothbart was out of the question. But Siegfried? She never know or bed this Siegfried.

She was confident until she heard the third male voice that was painstakingly familiar. "Ah, Lawrence, you sorely underestimate how fragile and predictable the female mind is."

Luka. Her Luka.

But that couldn't be right, her mind tried to reason. Her Luka was kind and respected everyone no matter their gender. He would say anything so crass and crud-- "You didn't tell her your real name, didn't you? If rumors of Prince Siegfried whorin start spreadin? Whew! The queen would have our heads on a silver platter."

"Relax. I told her my name is Luka. Luckily, royal decree demands that I cannot show my face until my eighteenth birthday. So no chance of her finding out who I really was. But mate, you shouldn't seen how pathetic this bitch was. I swear every wench I've bedded always is the same: I spin a pretty lie about how madly in love with them and they flip their skirts up for me. She was begging for it by the time I was finished."

Odile thought she was going to be sick.

Luka or Siegfried or just whatever the bloody hell is name was had played her for a fool. He had robbed her of her innocence while making her fall in love with him. And she never thought to question his motives, fully believing that he loved her.

She had to laugh though. All this time, she always regaled Odette as the foolish naive one. The one she had to protect from the world. The damsel in distress and her faithful dame. Now who needed saving?

Luka, Siegfried, was right. She was pathetic.

"Are you telling me she gave it up completely? She never tried to resist because your last one did." Last one? So this isn't the first time he had committed this heinous sin? Just how many girls had he raised up only to break them in the end? How many did he humiliate?
And how many times did he get away with it and laugh in the end?

As if Siegfried wanted to twist the dagger even further into her already desecrated soul, he kept bragging. "Well yeah she did try to put up some fight, but you know how these broads are. They pretend they don't want it, but are actually feening for it in reality. They're just not intelligent enough to realize it. If you think about it, I did her a favor." The room vibrates with the force of their guffaws.

"Where's the whore now?" Whore? Odile thought numbly. Is that all she had been reduced to? Just another nameless body on this monster's arsenal? Siegfried snorted. "I frankly don't know or care. Probably still passed out from where I left her. It doesn't matter. Now come on. I know Mother is waiting to give me my monthly lecture on the proper etiquette a prince should display."

A chortle rings out. "If she only knew!"

Odile vaguely hears the sound of booted feet pounding against the wooded floor as the prince and his friends leave the inn.

Thankfully, no else is around to see the pitiful girl in nothing more then a torn dress limp her way home.

She didn't tell anyone what happened. Partly out of shame, but mostly because who would believe her? Well, she knew her father would and maybe Odette but that didn't matter. Even if they did and tried to get justice, it would be a prince, that no one even knows who he looks like, against her word.

It didn't help that her father didn't exactly how a clean-cut reputation. He was known to be ruthless, cold, and calculating against anyone he didn't care for. Even his own brother wasn't safe from Rothbart's cruel nature. The only one he shed that persona for was his daughter, who was the only light in his dark, lonely world, according to him.

So no. Telling anyone was out of the question, even though she longed to get revenge for he used her.

But as long as she never had to speak to him again, she was satisfied. To make sure this goal came to pass, she never again attempted to explore the village. It was too risky. For six months, everything was peaceful in Odile's world. Of course, her dreams were riddled with giant spiders with glowing
gold eyes that trapped her in their webs.

But other than that, everything was right in Odile's world.

That is, until one day Odette came running to her room, bursting with excitement.

Odile had settled down in the garden, about to start a new adventure novel when Odette came running towards. "Odile!" she chirped in excitement. Odile sighed, but a small, fond smile still played on her lips. So much for a quiet afternoon, she thought.

Once Odette reached her cousin, she clung to her shoulders like a child clinging to her mother's skirts. "Odette, is there a specific reason you're interrupting my afternoon when you know this is my only bit of free time before I have to go back to lessons?" Odile didn't really care if she was being passive-aggressive with question. The book she had was a part of a series that she had been dying to know the conclusion of for months.

"Forgive me, dear cousin." Odile knew that Odette couldn't care less but didn't comment. "But I just had to tell someone about the man I have fallen in love with." That made Odile pause. Odette in love. Odile mentally scoffed. Odette was always saying how she love with some new man. These infatuations usually only lasted for a week at best.

But still, "Who is he?" Odette let a girlish giggle. "I probably shouldn't say since he could get in trouble. But I trust you won't say anything. It's the prince of this land."

The back of Odile's neck went very cold all of a sudden. It couldn't be, she thought frantically. Could it? But then again, how many princes did they have in this part of Germany? The answer was not a lot.

Although Odile's throat had dried up she still had to be sure. "And what is this prince's name?" she croaked. Odette let a high-pitched squeal of utter delight. "Oh Odile! His name is Siegfried. A ruffian had stolen my purse while I was in town a few months ago. He stopped the thief and delivered my purse with all my money still there."

"We started out just being friends, but I decided I would be bold and I kissed him. Odile, when I tell he had the softest lips I ever kissed, I felt like I was floating. Anyways, everything just progressed from there. But last night on one of our nightly strolls, he told me his true identity and he asked me to marry him. I told him yes." She squealed again. "Can you believe, Odile? The man of my dreams is
a prince and he loves me. Me!"

"Odette."

"I know father will be crossed when he finds that Siegfried didn't propose through the proper channels, but that can't be helped."

"Odette."

"When I get married, I want you to be my maid of honor. What do you think should be the design of my wedding gown--"

"ODETTE!" Odile hadn't meant to shout, yet it seemed that it was the only way for her to be heard over the garrulous girl. Odette jumped when Odile screamed. Her pretty dark eyes looking slightly startled.

"Odette you cannot marry that man," Odile stated calmly. Odette's mouth went into an automatic pout. "I don't see why not. My father would probably weep with joy just from the thought."

Odile took a deep breath. She never wanted to tell anyone, especially her innocent cousin, of the brutality and humiliation she suffered several months ago. But if she wanted any prayer of sparing her cousin the same fate, she needed to be honest.

So she was. She told her cousin of how her nightly trips, of how she met Siegfried, who had been going by the alias Luka, how he tricked her into thinking he loved her and how he savagely took her virginity. Then she finally told her about the morning after where she finally discovered her supposed lover's true nature.

The embarrassment and shame coursing through Odile was so great, she couldn't look her cousin in the eyes, fearing her expression may have been tainted by her confession.

Odile focuses her watery stare on her wringing hands, trying and failing not to let a whimper escape her lips. "I can't believe it," Odette finally says. Her tone, which is usually so upbeat and carefree, is flat and distant.
"I cannot believe it." Odile finally gathers some courage to make direct eye contact. What she finds shocks and breaks her heart.

Odette's eyes mirror all of the emotions she had expected to see: anger, sadness, confusion, betrayal, and rage were all emotions that Odile had been expecting to see. Had been prepared to see.

What she hadn't expected was that all of those negative emotions were for *her*.

"I cannot believe that my own cousin, who I think of as my own sister, would be so jealous and so spiteful that she wouldn't even want her cousin's happiness." Odile reeled back in horrified shock. She had just laid out one of her most painful secrets and Odette didn't believe her?

Yet, she tried again. "Odette, I would never be so low as to lie to you about something like this. I love you, Odie. You know I do. I'm just trying to protect you. I'm telling you the truth." But Odette shook her head, as if doing so would ward off Odile's words. Instead, a nasty glare clouded her eyes and a cruel and haughty smirk twisted her gorgeous face. "*My Siegfried would never do something like that. He wouldn't need to. And honestly why he would waste time doing it to someone like you?*

Odile's desperation shifted slightly in indignation. "Wait a minute, what do you mean by someone like me?" Odette adopted her haughty, pitying stare that Odile hated with a passion. "Oh come now, Odile. We both know that between the both of us, I was always the more attractive one. Not to say you aren't pretty, but compared to me..."

Odile suddenly felt the need to strangle Odette's delicate neck, but she restrained herself. Although doing so was guaranteed to be a disaster, she wanted to hear Odette's true feelings. "Go on, say it," she hissed.

Odette just merely shrugged. "Oh please, Odile, everyone in the village knows that I am the beautiful girl in this village and your looks are average next to mine. Why Siegfried try to force himself on you when you're merely pretty at best? Still, the fact that you felt the need to concoct this ridiculous about my prince really speaks about your fragile mindset."

Odile couldn't help it: she had to laugh in pure derision. She had known this girl since they were barely old enough to walk. She too thought of her cousin as more of a sister having grown up without a sibling of her own. Being painfully shy, Odette's outgoing nature had always helped balance out her personality. She knew everything there was to know about the girl.
Well, she thought.

"I think the only one here with a fragile mind set is you. This son of a bitch has made a practice of deceiving and assaulting unassuming young women for fun. I was one of the unfortunate many who chose to trust him. I'm just trying to spare the pain and suffering I endured."

"Are you actually going to believe a man who you've only known for a few months over your family whose loved you for a lifetime and knows you inside-out?" Odile had hoped the question would help convince the foolhardy girl. Unfortunately, Odette just rose her chin in defiance, determination bright in her eyes. "Odile, I didn't want to do this, but if you try to come between me and my fiance, I will be forced to resort to... unpleasant methods."

A feeling of dread threaten Odile's knees to buckle. She had to fight to keep her voice steady when she demanded, "Would you stoop so low to threaten your own blood for one man?"

A leer twisted Odette's face when she replied, "No threat, dear cousin. Although, it would be regrettable if a rumor of Uncle Rothbart practicing the dark arts were to spread outside the mansion walls. I mean from what I've heard in the village, our people are still wary of your father. I could only imagine what would happen if a rumor were to reach their ears that'd only spread the flames of their fears..."

But Odile knew far too well what the villagers would. She could imagine them with torches and pitchforks, trying to invade her home and take her father away from her.

Her father's history with black magic had been something that had always shamed her grandfather. Their family was known to be in good standing with the church. Her father's actions had caused him to be cut out of the family will, effectively becoming the black sheep.

But what the rest of her family didn't know was that Rothbart only did it out of a broken heart. When Odile's mother died giving birth to her, a piece of Rothbart's died right along with her. Desperate to get his wife back, he had poured through books of black magic to see if there was any spells to bring back loved ones from the grave.

The only reason Odile knew of this was because of the non-stop questions she had asked her father about her mother. She vowed that she wouldn't breathe a word of what he had trusted her with.

And to hear Odette trying to use her father's brief stage of grief, loneliness, and pain used against him
and her all to protect a man that had *raped* her?

Either Odette didn't see the rage on Odile's face or she just didn't care because she gave shined her angelic smile. "I trust that we will have no further issues in the future. Now if you excuse me, I have to go prepare for my wedding." She skipped off as if she didn't have a care in the world, her sweet perfume lingering behind her.

Meanwhile, Odile was struggling not to run after the girl and beat the wench with her book.

That's twice, she thought bitterly. That's twice the people I thought loved has betrayed me in the worst ways.

In the end, though, it was only her fault. The saying "no good deed goes unpunished" never rang more true. When she had only been trying to save Odette, Odette had turned on her and threatened to destroy her father.

No, she thought. She was tired of being betrayed and only watch as undeserving people get their happy ending. This time, she would come out on top. This time, the weak would make the strong cower in contrition.

But in order to do that, she knew that she had to kill herself.

She had to kill the sweet, fragile, naive girl she had once been. That girl wasn't strong enough to carry out revenge on the scale Odile was planning. Sometimes in order to destroy something you hate, you had to embrace the very darkness you fear.

In order to slay these demons that had sullied her soul, Odile had to become the Devil.

She knew that she had to tell her father the whole truth of what happened that fateful night if her plan had any hope of bearing fruit.

His reaction was predictable; he sobbed uncontrollably for his daughter and once he was done, he opened his hidden cache of forbidden books of the dark arts in order to exact the perfect revenge.
"Daughter," he had hissed in crazed excitement. "I believe I found the perfect solution to our problem. We will summon a league of leeches to sneak into the prince and Odette's beds, sucking the blood from their veins while they scream in--"

"No." She had said it so quietly, Rothbart had almost not heard her mouse-like rejection. "They don't deserve swift deaths. I don't just want to break their bodies, I want to break their minds. I want to desecrate them from the inside-out. The main prize is their anguish, misery, trauma."

Rothbart shivered. Although he was doing this to help his daughter win, he too wanted vengeance for what those two did to his daughter. For standing because his daughter was not this angry, vindictive being standing before him.

His kind, sensitive daughter was gone, just like his late wife.

He silently vowed himself that those responsible would pay for his loss.

Odile's plan had been elaborate and cruel.

She had her father curse Odette with turning into a swan during the day and only revert back to human form during the night. Odile had watched from the shadows with glee as she witnessed Odette writhe in agony from the transformation she endured. To hear the sound of Odette's bones breaking and resetting themselves brought a sick grin to Odile's face.

Rothbart had reassured Odile that the transformation would be painful every time it happened.

Odile made sure to follow the swan as she awkwardly through the sky and landed at a small lake where other swans had inhabited.

Odile watched in amusement as Odette's parents went up in a frenzy over their missing daughter, setting up rewards to whoever found her their precious offspring. There actually were a few who put a valiant effort, but unfortunately for them, Odette had flew deep into the forest were only a select could find her.
A month had gone by when Odile put the next step of her plan into motion.

Siegfried had finally celebrated his eighteenth birthday and showed his face to the public. During which he had been gifted a new crossbow by a mysterious benefactor. Odile knew that it would only spell disaster if she showed her face at the prince's birthday bash so she sent her gift anonymously as just another faceless admirer.

She knew that he wouldn't be able to resist the fancy new crossbow since she remembered how enamored he had been with his old one.

And like all children that are momentarily obsessed with their new gadgets, he decided to sneak out from his own birthday to celebrate, just like Odile. In order to lure him to Odette's location, she mimicked a swan's call after weeks of studying their sounds while monitoring Odette.

Thankfully she was just believable enough that he followed her to the location of the lake.

Odile had started to feel a little nervous then: she had carried out her plan right when the sun had started to set, estimating that it would be dark by the time they got to the lake. Because she didn't want Siegfried to accidentally kill Odette prematurely.

But her timing had been just because right when Siegfried had been about to shoot swan Odette, the transformation had taken place. The lost lovers had been reunited for the time being.

Odile had to hold back a snarl of disgust as she watched Siegfried and Odette embrace, kiss, and sob together in relief and despair. She ignored the tightening of her chest when she saw the pure love between them.

*No one could ever love me like that.* The stray thought appeared before she could stop herself. She shook her head. No use thinking like that now.

She had been banking on true affection to be between them when she chose this specific spell. The only way to break Odette's curse was if someone who has never loved before promises to love Odette till the end of time.

Since having a first hand experience of the prince's monstrous past with women, Odile knew that was no way that he had felt genuine love towards anyone before Odette.
On cue, her father appeared in his owl form. This was the part where the big bad came to antagonize the young star-crossed lovers about their current. Odile had instructed her father to disguise himself so that Siegfried would have no way to trace him back to their family name.

Odile watched as her father told how to break the curse and fly out of Siegfried's range, taunting him, and watched as her father disappeared back into the shadows. When Odile had instructed him to give to Odette and Siegfried the answer on how to break the curse, he had been understandably baffled.

"Daughter," he had asked. "I do not follow. What is the point of a curse if you just them how to undo it?" Odile, with her cool, emotionless eyes, explained, "Father, the curse itself is just a means to an end. Our real goal is yet to be realized. And father, wasn't it you who always said that sometimes in order to win the war, you have to sacrifice one of your pawns to do it?"

Rothbart had frowned at that. "I meant that analogy for chess." Odile giggled at that. "Well, think of the cure to the curse as one of my pawns. In order for the next phase of my plan to work, they need to think that they can fix it. Let them think that they're the good guys of this story and they're going to win. It's going to be that much more satisfying to watch them fall."

So that is why Odile only smirked as she listened to Odette and Siegfried plot and scheme how they're going break the curse during the costume ball that was coming up.

Odile was ready. She had had her father concoct a spell that would have her masquerade as Odette. While it appeared in her eyes that nothing had changed, when she checked in the mirror, she was a complete replica of her cousin. It also helped that she also understood Odette's mannerisms to a T. Her revenge was almost complete.

She dressed herself in a long, lacy black gown that had a daring neckline that showed off her cleavage without being overly inappropriate. Her makeup made Odette's features seem to pop even more than before. Perfect. She wanted all eyes on her tonight.

Her father escorted to the event. Ironically, Rothbart chose to wear an Venetian owl mask and Odile a black swan half mask. More a private joke than anything, really.

The palace was a sight to see: a grand chandelier hung from the ceiling, dancing men and women in their fancy apparel, musicians in their black suits flooding the hall with music.
Every noise faded slightly when Odile and Rothbart entered the room. All eyes, including the prince's, were on the mysterious, young woman. Huh, Odile thought. So this is what being Odette entailed.

It wasn't long before Siegfried is striding over to her, his heart practically in his eyes. Odile had to fight back the urge to flinch when he took her hand to his lips. Memories of endless pain, him grunting as he selfishly just took his own pleasure, and his cruel words the next morning still haunt her dreams.

Still, even she had admit that he was just as handsome as the day she first met him, probably even more so now.

"May I have this dance?" His smile was so hopeful and triumphant that Odile found herself smiling despite herself. "You may."

They danced for what seemed like hours. Odile wasn't amateur when it came to the waltz, but it seemed like Siegfried created it by how well he moved. Sometimes it felt they were gliding instead of dancing. All eyes were on them and Odile kept hearing murmurs of "Are looking at the next queen?" throughout the crowd.

Odile looked up at Siegfried's eyes only to find a tenderness she didn't know he was capable of.

And for a while, she let herself pretend.

Pretend that he was actually looking at her with the same amount of love and affection. That when he would proclaim who is bride would be, that it would be her name. That all of the trauma he caused her was nothing more than a bad dream and he was her reward for having braved such a frightful scene in the land of dreams.

But all of that faded when he leaned down and whispered, "Just know that no matter what happens tonight, just know that I am deeply, madly, irrevocably in love with you, Odette."

Odile stiffened. The warm, tingly feeling faded briskly at those words. She ignored the way her heart broke all over again at those words. She had a mission, and she would see it through.
The queen approached her son and asked in a loud, booming voice, "My son, who is this in your arms?" She was loud enough that a majority of everyone in the hall heard her. Odile straightened her back. This was it; the moment she had been waiting for.

Siegfried's grin could’ve lit up the darkest forest as he got down on one knee and looked Odile dead in the eye. "Mother," he proclaimed. "This is the woman I plan to marry and love until the very end of time."

And that did it.

With love and hope shining in his eyes, he had unknowingly sealed Odette's fate.

Suddenly there's was an earth-shattering wail that had the power and range of a banshee howling at the moon. It would be inaccurate to say that Odile heard it, it was more appropriate to say that felt it. The vibrations of the screech shook to her very bones.

Everyone, including Siegfried, looked puzzled and slightly alarmed. But Odile only smiled.

Rothbart must've deemed it worthy to lift the glamour because Siegfried suddenly gasped. Odile turned to him and he stared back in horror.

"O., Odile?" He breathed.

Odile kept her face neutral. "Hello Luka."

Even with his brown skin the color it was, he visibly paled at her response. "W-what've you done?"

She raised her eyebrows in mock innocence. "I? It's what you've done. Now you might want to hurry. I can only imagine the state your poor, precious, blushing bride to be is in right now."

Siegfried's eyes widened and he quickly cut through the crowd. The people around didn't care. They were too confused and terrified too pay much attention. They only knew that the threat of black magic was in the air.
And thanks to the chaos, Odile was able to make a clean getaway.

When she arrived home, Rothbart was waiting for her in her room. He didn't say anything, he just gave her a long hug. And that was when Odile finally let go and sobbed.

All of the pain, frustration, betrayal, rage, and shame just bubbled up in one big, snot-filled, mess.

Once she was finished, Rothbart took her face in his hands, stared, nearly glared, her dead in the eye and said, "No matter what happens as a result of this night, I want you to know nothing will change how much I love you and how proud I am to say that you're my daughter."

Odile nearly began weeping again. His words were like a balm to her wounded soul.

Long after he left her, Odile laid in her bed, hearing her heart beat pound rhythmically.

As her vision slowly faded to black and her heart beat steadily got lower in her ears, she kept asking her self one question:

*Did she do the right thing?*

"... low."

"WILLOW!"

My head snapped back to see Lance standing before, a concerned expression etched on his attractive face. "There you are. I've been calling your name for five minutes now. You alright, sugar? Seemed like you were like of in a trance for a while."

I sighed. I honestly didn't mean to get so carried away with the story I built for Odile in my mind. When I first created "Odile", it was originally just something to help me connect emotionally with a character that had absolutely no background at all.
When I was out there on stage, all I could feel was Odile's warring feelings of love and hatred for the prince and Odette and her need to seem them fall apart. I must've gotten so caught that I didn't even notice that I was already backstage.

When I realized I still haven't responded, I give Lance a shaky smile and say, "I'm fine, Lance. Guess I'm a little tired from my performance out there." To be honest, I only vaguely recall it, my head-space too wrapped in Odile. But I do feel the satisfying ache that ballet usually gives me.

"Be honest with me, Lance: how did I do out there?" Lance's concern morphs to delight and pride at my question. "Oh baby, you did fantastic out there!" he exclaims. "The audience loved you. I could even hear a few encores out there."

I fall back into a nearby chair, feeling satisfied. Lance could give me a run for my money in being a harsh critic and if he thinks I did well, I'm going to take his word for it. But then again, maybe I should've asked somebody to videotape it so I could run through the entire performance.

Damn.

I make a mental note to ask somebody to do that for me next performance. For now, I was just to sit back and enjoy the final act with the rest of my crew.

Maybe I'm just an emotional person in general or maybe it's because I'm biased but the final arc had me in tears.

But the way Nina portrayed the pure heartbreak and agony Odette was facing and how Antonio brilliantly displayed the prince's guilt and passionate love for Odette was just spellbinding to me.

Soon the production is over. I can hear the audience cheering and shouting their satisfaction with our performance. I clap right along with the audience as I watch the corps de ballet go out to receive their standing ovation. The pride I feel for myself and everyone involved is indescribable.

I'm so caught up in the heat of the moment, I nearly jump out of my skin when Nina hooks her arm around mine. "Girl!" I yelp. "Don't be pulling that shit with me! I could've messed around and killed your ass."
She rolls her eyes playfully. "You forget I can see right through your bullshit, Willow Spencer. Behind all that big talk is a pussy who's afraid of her own shadow."

I sputter. "Alright, I got your pussy. After this is done, meet me behind the building and I'll show you whose the real pussy around." We laugh. I'm so blessed to have made a friendship where we're comfortable enough to shoot the shit like this. Makes me wish I had met Nina in my middle and high school days.

But there's no point in thinking about the past when my future looks so bright right now. "You were so powerful up there," Nina whispers. "When I first heard Odile had a new role, I admit I was little pissed. I thought 'Who's this chick that took half my role?'" I snort at that. "But when I saw you dance, any need for explanation faded. You are Odile. I'm so glad you are here with us instead of some big, fancy company. Thank you for choosing us."

I'm tearing up at her words. So I decide hide my tears by giving her a tight hug. I respect this girl so much and to hear the feeling is mutual is so surreal. To hear that someone wanted me and was thankful for my presence is humbling to me. I wish I could express what I'm feeling, but I think she understands by how hard she hugs back.

Soon enough, it's the principal roles' turn to receive the glory. Me and Nina walk across the stage, holding hands with Antonio on opposite sides. The stage lights are blinding as we face the crowd, that turn ballistic as we walk out.

I'd like to think that a good bit of the praise is reserved for me, but it's probably mainly for Nina. I don't care though. The four year old girl who dreamed being like those pretty dancers has fulfilled her dream just she'd hoped.

There's one thing, or actually person, that would make this dream-like experience complete. But he's on the other side of country right now.

It's then that I feel Nina nudge me a bit. I cock my head at her, confused. She motions towards the audience with a big smile.

I look over, and burst into laughter.

My father is walking down the aisle, garbed in his uniform, with a bundle of sweet pea flowers, which are my favorite flowers.
He had originally told me over the phone that he didn't he could make because of work that demanded his attention. I had been vastly disappointed but understood that being away for long periods of time was the curse of his position.

But he's here. He was able to see that effort I made over the years was worth it. The pride in his eyes is what propels me to leap off the stage, run down towards him and leap into his arms, legs and all.

He dropped the flowers and held onto me. The people around cannot get any louder, but I don't care. I'm too busy crying and laughing at the same. But my daddy just holds me and whispers how much he loves me.

Yeah, it's complete now.

Chapter End Notes

Okay I did not mean for that to be so long. I'm actually somewhat happy with this chapter.

Just a warning, a slight time jump for the next chapter.

Thx for reading!
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Just so you know, I'm only here because you threatened to deliberately scratch up my *Naruto Shippuden* DVD that had the Pain arc episodes on it, which you know is my favorite."

Nina doesn't respond, she just continues to scroll through her phone.

It's one of those rare days that we get a day off and Nina dragged me to this coffee house against my will. The place smells of chocolate and roasted coffee beans. I would've actually been relaxed if not for the dire situation I'm currently in.

I jut my bottom lip out in dissatisfaction. I had been hoping for some kind of reaction from her.

Admittedly, that is the third time I had griped to her and it is the third time she has ignored me.

But I can't help it. This *is* my first date, which Nina doesn't know.

Nina had told me she set me up with a friend of hers she met a few months ago. She said that he hadn't been on a date in a while since his occupation kept him tied up most days. It was pure bad luck on my part that this mystery man and I were in the same general location for work. Nina set it up without consulting me. She said that she knew I would protest about it and never give this guy a chance if she had told me.

Well, she was right. But that didn't make it any better.

She assured me multiple times that he was a nice, laid back kind of guy that was easy on the eyes.

Of course, I know this is just one date so there's no actual need for me to be getting uptight about it. But that doesn't help the anxiety doing the two-step in my belly.

I know I can't hide behind the rule I set for myself two years ago any longer. Work is going fantastic
at the moment. Ever since our debut last year, we have made quite a name for ourselves. Lance was finally able to make enough money to actually pay for people to do the jobs that he was running himself ragged with before.

He also made enough to hire a choreographer for us. I'll admit, I was little sad to give up my side gig (even though I didn't get paid for it), but I liked Miss Michelle so much that I couldn't be too upset. And some of the crew still come to me for advice or ask for one on one practice if they need, so I'm not too heartbroken over it.

Our company has been in such high demand, we even are booked for shows in America, which we're currently in right now. LA to be exact. I only imagined becoming well-known in the UK, so this opportunity was nothing short than a dream to me.

Right now, we're about to give our rendition of Cinderella. I was ecstatic when I earned the role of Cinderella with Nina playing the role of the Fairy Godmother. I was going to fulfill one of my childhood fantasies of being a princess, how could I not be thrilled?

Unfortunately that just adds to my current dilemma. Since work has been picking off the ground and I'm becoming established in the ballet world, it meant that I could probably focus a little less on work and maybe spend some time on my social life.

Truthfully, I want to be able to go up to some random guy who I find attractive and flirt like a seasoned pro. But I could never be so bold to do that. One, I'm too shy and I'd probably say something stupid in the guise of trying to be cool and alluring. Two, where the hell am I going to pick up guys?

I go to work, and then I go home or the hotel. Not to say I'm a stuttering mess around a cute guy, but my problem is that I try too hard to be funny and instead say something cringey or rude.

And my supposed best friend was setting me up with some guy I've never even laid eyes on? It's like an episode from a bad sitcom where the protagonist (me) is doomed to fail from the start.

So you can hardly blame me for being on edge. "And this guy is a friend of yours, right?" That finally got a slight reaction of her. But not the one I'm expecting.

She hesitates. "Well... not exactly." I narrow my eyes in suspicion. "And what exactly does that mean? I thought you said that he was a friend of yours." I can't say that the guilt on her face doesn't
make me feel that I've gained back some of my equilibrium.

She finally puts down her phone on the table we're seated at and gives her full attention to me. "He is a friend," she assures. Then her eyes do that shifting thing that gets on my last nerve. "Of a friend, of a friend, of a friend..." She mumbles the last part, probably hoping I didn't hear the last part.

I can't say I really surprised by this statement. During the last year, because of our new found fame, we had become quite influential in our country. We were called "The Second Coming of the Alvin Ailey Revolution".

Everyone was baffled by the fact that a ballet company of solely black dancers and that we were selling out tickets. The attention was mainly focused on Nina, maybe because she played Odette. Nina loved it because she got to have a platform to speak on subjects that mattered to her.

She is a strong advocate for Women's rights, the LGBT community even though she identifies as being straight, and the importance of representation for future black and other kids of color. I tease her sometimes by calling her Sailor Moon because she actually is a champion of love and justice that the public simply adored.

I'm not jealous about. With the public's attention on Nina, that meant they relatively left me and the others alone. I am an intensely private person. Although I am glad for the publicity, the invasive down side could've made a serious problem. As long as Nina isn't bothered by it, I don't see any need to interfere in her media affair.

And since she was a media darling, she got all of these fancy endorsements to be a spokes-model for these high-fashion designer brands like Gucci, Versace, Tom Ford, you name it, she modeled it.

Being the social butterfly she was, she made friends with and exchanged numbers with the models she would sometimes collaborate with on her projects. She said that it paid to make connections in high places.

So that is what gives me a clue on how she heard about this dude. "Let me guess, one of your model friends?" I ask, raising an eyebrow.

"Close, he's a friend of this girl named Georgia, who's friends with my friend Jourdan who I did a recent campaign with."
"How many times have you met him?"

She does that damn eye shift again. "Five, maybe six times."

"Christ..." I groan. I slap a palm over my eyes, feeling an oncoming headache.

It's official: my best friend is an idiot. This girl may have set me up with a lunatic.

I wonder if I can get away with grabbing my chair and busting her skull wide open?

Nah, that only works for white girls.

I'd be arrested before I even leave my seat.

I'm still contemplating the best way to get away with murder in a public area when I feel a soft hand on my mine. I remove my hand to see that Nina is staring at me, concern radiating in her eyes.

"Bumblebee..." She gave me that nickname because according to her, I sting people on stage with my performance, but I'm also cute and fluffy just like a bee. A reluctant smile comes out.

But she doesn't smile back. "I know you're angry about this but I did this because I am legitimately worried about you."

The smile disappears as fast as it came. I know what this is about. "Nina..."

"It's not just me. We've all noticed it. You have been working yourself to death for months ever since..." She stops probably not wanting to say something so morose in the calming atmosphere.

But I want to hear it. I want to hurt. "Since my father committed suicide."
I had seen the signs but I still ignored it.

It had started by him calling me more than deemed normal.

Usually, when he'd get a moment to himself, he would call me in the evening because he knew I would be home from rehearsal and he would've just woken up and had a few minutes to talk before he started his day. Given the different timezones, it was the best solution.

But then he started calling at least three, sometimes even five times a day. I can't count how many times I would check my phone only to see dozens of missed calls from him. He would even go so far as to call the company just to get in touch with me.

I am so ashamed to say that my patience with him had been beginning to wan, especially with the multiple talks Lance had to give me demanding that my father not do that. I had only given my father the number in case of emergencies. But he was embarrassing me and making me look bad.

Maybe that's why I was kind of short with him during our last conversation.

He had been sobbing over the phone.

He told me that a terrorist group had taken a small Turkish town hostage and had threatened to kill everyone if they didn't get what they wanted. Dad and his team had been negotiating with the group, trying to insure that nobody had to die.

But the group had suddenly decided that they were not going to wait any longer and slaughtered everyone in the village, including women and children.

"When the corpses of those kids," he whispered, trying so desperately not to start crying again. "I couldn't help but think of you." That had made my throat gone dry. God, I had pleaded. Please don't let him be talking about what I think he is.

It was an unspoken rule that we had. We didn't talk about what happened to me when I was younger. It was too painful and too many unresolved feelings were involved.
But here he was babbling about it. "You used to beg me not to leave you alone with your mother. You would cry nonstop for what seemed like hours when it was time for me to ship out again. I never, not once, suspected that anything was wrong. I just chalked it up to a child missing her father who was gone for months at a time. I never dreamed that... that.." His sobs drown out the rest of his words.

At that point, I was near tears myself. I wanted to tell him that I never blamed for what happened. I wanted to tell him that I still had nightmares from time to time. I wanted to tell him the recurring guilt I felt when I thought about it.

I wanted to tell him everything.

But it was the middle of the day and the Miss Michelle was not a woman who liked to be kept waiting.

So I just said in response, "Listen Daddy, I can't talk right now. I'm in the middle of rehearsal. But we'll discuss this later on tonight, okay? Love you." I hung up before he could say anything. Throughout the rest of practice, I felt marginally guilty about the way I handled my previous conversation.

I'll make it up to him next time, I promised myself.

But next time never came.

Dad didn't call that night. I didn't sense anything wrong with the irregularity, too tired for intuition to kick in.

I didn't find out til the next morning.

Lance had pulled me aside, saying that someone from Dad's work was calling.

I rolled my eyes in irritation. I told him I would call him later. Does he not understand how important my job is?
I was about to give what I thought to have been my father a piece of my mind when a monotone voice asked, "Willow Spencer?"

My voice died out. Some part of me had an inkling of what the call was about, but I still held a bit of phantom hope that he was just injured, not dead.

"This is she," I calmly replied.

I don't remember much of the conversation. All I heard was "dead" and "found him hanging by his belt in his room". It didn't feel real. Stupidly, the question who was going to call me LoLo passed through my head.

It didn't make sense to me. I had just gotten off the phone with him the other day.

The other day.

Oh God, the other day.

Why had I been so mean to him? How could've I been so selfish? He was in pain and all I could worry about was when would this man get off the phone so I could get back to work.

What kind of daughter was I?

I remember numbly giving the phone back to Lance and quietly stumbling back out the hallway.

It still amazes me how I was able to shape my face into a neutral expression, but I did it.

And just like I did during Grammy's funeral, I didn't cry over my father's death.
I know Nina's right, but work is the only way I can avoid being alone with my thoughts. Ballet kept me sane and helped me from indulging in some... old habits.

"Yes." I snap out of my thoughts when I hear Nina's voice. "Since your father committed suicide."

"Bee, I know how close you and your father were. I can see how hurt you are by how you keep pushing your body to its limits. Now, you know me. I will be the first one to tell you that happiness is not centered around one's boyfriend or girlfriend. But I just want you to at least distract yourself by meeting someone new. Get out of your comfort zone and out of that broody head of yours." We both snort. The media loves painting me as the broody, mysterious one and Nina had gotten a kick out of that.

She laces our fingers together and looks me dead in the eye. "So can you suffer through this, for me?"

I stare at her for a long time. It's then that it dawns on me that it wasn't just ballet that kept me sane.

All the times that Nina would spend long nights on the phone with me, just so that I would have someone to talk to. The days that she would drive all the way from her London penthouse to my farmhouse, just to spend the afternoon with me.

There are dozens of other little memories that was just Nina's way of saying, "I love you and I'm here for you."

Tears flood my vision at the thought. "Okay," I finally whisper, trying to hold back my emotions. "I'll do it for you, NiNi."

There's relief in her glistening brown eyes. "Thank you, Bee."

Deciding that the mood was getting too heavy, I quip, "But you have to teach me Japanese as compensation."

I can tell her my statement shocked her a bit, but then she just barked out a laugh. Nina is the product of her African-Welsh mother and her Japanese father meeting and falling in love.
Ever since I found out that Nina's father taught her Japanese, I've been hounding her to teach me. She always said no, saying that if she wanted to become a teacher to brats like me, she would've given up ballet at age nine.

But since this is technically a favor, she owes me one. What better way to get what I want?

"Alright, if this date is a success, then maybe I'll consider."

"Deal!" Now that I have a personal stake in this deal, I am determined to have this guy proposing marriage by the time I'm through with him.

And maybe that's exactly what Nina was counting on. I wouldn't put it past her.

"Anyways, I don't why you're so nervous. He's going to love you. Who wouldn't? I mean, you got this gorgeous long hair that I'm just so jealous of."

I unconsciously smooth my hair at her words.

"You've got a cute face." I cringe at those words but I don't say anything.

"You speak four different languages."

"Actually it's five but keep going," I correct.

She scoffs in amusement. "You're caring, sweet, funny--"

"Wait a minute, then why don't you ever laugh at my jokes?"

She shrugs. "Well, you've got an old person sense of humor and does he. It's a match made in heaven."
"Thanks," I deadpan.

She continues. "And if your sense of humor doesn't blow him away, your legs should keep him glued to you. You know I've always been envious of how toned they are."

I wave off her compliment to hide my embarrassment. "Oh come on, you and I both know that you have the better legs and the freakishly tall height thing going on."

"Stop being so modest. You don't know how many times I have caught Jonathan staring at your legs during practice," she claims, referring to one of our male dancers.

"Jonathan is a whore." I say it so matter-of-fact it catches Nina off guard and burst out laughing. It's so loud that we attract a couple of annoyed stares. I try to keep my face blank, but I let a small smile escape because Nina's laughter is so infectious.

"Okay," she breathes out, once she finally gets a hold on herself. "Bad example. But it's true, which is why I can't understand why you decided to wear that big skirt."

I glance down at my maxi-skirt, trying to see the need for Nina's protest.

I think I look good today.

The skirt is this high-waist, Ankara-style skirt that has rich colors of gold, red, and ocean blue. I found it while scrolling though Pinterest. I saw it and immediately fell in love.

Paired off with a simple, sleeveless white blouse and open-toed sandals, I think I look date-worthy enough.

But then again, Nina never did understand my obsession with maxi skirts. Saying I was a major prude (which I am).

But I always liked how big those skirts because when I run, I love to bunch up the cloth of my skirt and just run because I think it's kind of funny. And when the wind hits them just right, I like how they blow around me like I'm one of those heroines on those romance book covers.
Also, they're a good cover when I don't feel like shaving my legs.

"It makes me think that you didn't shave you legs recently," she remarks. I am suddenly fascinated with the content on my phone.

"Bee," she questions, horror creeping in her voice. "Tell me you did not walk outside your house looking like a cave woman."

"Well, let's just say that we'll see if this boy is leg shaving worthy." When Nina looks likes she's about to leap over the table and beat the hell out of me, I couldn't hold it in any longer.

The giggles come out of me like trickling water. "Girl, I'm just fucking with you. My legs are as smooth as Denzel's voice."

"Bee, I almost killed you, don't play like that."

"Relax, NiNi. I'm not going to embarrass myself, but you got to calm down yourself. Because the way you gassin' this nigga up, he betta be the love child of Idris Elba and Michael Ealy, if men could reproduce."

"Uh.... he's white."

"Oh. Really?"

"Yeah. Is that going to be a problem?"

"Hey," I raise my hands in a placating gesture. "You know I'm a firm believer that fineness comes in all shapes, sizes, and colors. And not exactly in that order. But you know how some white guys and how hard it is for us black girls to date outside our race. The first question that always comes to mind is "is he interested in black girls?" And then you have the category of white guys that only date us because of some disgusting stereotypes that are made against us, or they're just using us for their own experimentation. You just can never be too sure, you know what I'm saying?"
"Yeah, I hear you. But Harry is a nice guy, you'll see."

"Alright, I'll take your word for it. But he better look like a mix of, God I don't know, Tom Cruise and George Clooney." They were the only white celebrities I think of at the moment.

She snickers. "Really? George Clooney? You couldn't pick any fine white men from this century?"

"Hey! It was all I could think of at the..."

I trail because this guy that just walked in has completely caught my attention. He's tall, not tall like Antonio or my father, but taller than Nina who is 5'10. Long legs encased in black, skinny jeans. He's got tattoos running up and down his toned arms. Makes me wonder if he's got tats in other areas.

His back is facing me so I can only imagine what he looks like, but his shoulder-length brown hair looks so soft and pretty that I just want to touch one good time.

Then he turns around and if I thought the back was good, the front is glorious.

He's white, but he has this amazing tan to his skin that belongs on the cover of magazines everywhere. His blue-green eyes are ones that I'm sure that one could get lost in if they stared too long.

His face, that had looked so serious and closed-off just a minute, lit up and a set of dimples popped out.

I know I'm this close to having another one of day wet dreams when I realize that he's heading towards us.

My suspicions are confirmed when Nina stands up and exclaims, "Harry! Good to see you." They exchange a quick hug and I realize that I'm still sitting in my seat, too shell-shocked to move.

Nina hooked me with this fine-ass boy.
I may have to promote Nina from best friend to platonic soulmate from how well she hooked me up.

"Harry, I'd like to introduce you to my co-worker and best friend, Willow Spencer."

He looks at me, and I think that he likes what he sees because he sort of nudges Nina out of the way and gets closer to me. He holds out his hand in greeting.

"Nice to meet you, Willow Spencer. Harry Styles."

His deep, British accent sends pleasant shiver down my spine. I don't why but the name sounds vaguely familiar, but I can't exactly place it at the moment. I take his warm hand in mine and give a firm shake. "It's nice to meet you too, Harry."

"Well," Nina claps her hands together. "I think I'll take my leave. Willow, I'll see at work tomorrow."

"Alright, Nina. You be safe getting back to the hotel."

I sit down and he follows suit.

We just stare at each other for a moment.

I decide to break the ice. "So, British boy, are you?"

Dimples pop out. "That I am. And your accent it's... Irish?"

I chuckle. "Nope. Scots girl."

He snaps his fingers in mock frustration. "Damn."
"Well I'm not surprised you weren't able to distinguish my accent. Not most people can. But the
difference is that Irish accents have a crisper, sing-songy tone in their voice that's there if you listen
closely. Versus Scottish accents is a bit more rough around the edges. Me myself when I get excited,
the brogue in my accent comes out a little bit more... and you must this utterly boring. Forgive me." I
can't help the flush of embarrassment I feel. I didn't mean to ramble.

He chuckles. "It's fine, love. It was actually quite interesting." Love? I have to decide whether I like
him calling me that or not.

"Well, where are you from. London?"

He hesitates. "No. Chances are you've probably never heard of the town I grew up in."

I lean my face into faces, gazing up at him. "Try me."

"Cheshire." I furrow my brow in concentration, trying to recall if I've heard of Cheshire before. I
concede. "Sorry man, I've never heard of Cheshire before. But I grew up in a pretty unremarkable
town too."

He raises an eyebrow. "Where?"

"Ever heard of Melrose?" When he shakes his head, I nod. "Well picture this; small town, everybody
knows everybody so everybody is always in someone's else business. And you can't wait to get out
so you can explore the world."

He laughs. "I can definitely understand that. When I had a chance to leave my town for a chance to
do what I love, I jumped at it."

"How old were you?"

"Sixteen."

"Sixteen?" I ask, incredulous. "That's so young."
"I sing for a living. And we all know that's a hit or miss job, so you have snatch the opportunities when you can."

I perk up at that. "You sing? That's awesome! You'll have to sing something for me next time."

His smile is teasing when he purrs, "Next time, huh? So you're saying that there'll be a repeat of this?" He's flirting with me. He's actually flirting with me.

I think I might throw up.

This is usually when I crack a stupid joke or accidentally let out a burp when I get nervous.

But not this time. This time, I'm going to be cool and confident, like the female characters in my books always are.

Channeling all of the cool bitch energy I can muster, I give a small smirk and simply say, "We'll see, won't we?"

I know I've done the right thing because his eyes darken just a little bit.

I sit back in my seat, feeling like I may just have a chance with this guy.

Chapter End Notes

I hope I wrote this okay.

Once again, virgin fanfic writer

I'm sorry if the conversation between Harry and Willow seemed a little dry because that is the first I've ever written something romantic.

But hopefully, y'all vibed with it a little.

Leave a comment or kudos if you like what you saw.
Thx!
Don't hate me

I have a boyfriend.

I have a *motherfucking* boyfriend!

We had spent hours getting to know one another in that tiny coffee shop. I know it sounds corny and cliche to say, but I felt like I got a good idea of Harry's character.

And what I found was a sweet, passionate, socially conscious guy that I genuinely want to be around.

So when we finally decided to put an end to our date, I asked him out on another one.

I can still remember how his nicely shaped eyebrows shot up. I don't think he was expecting me to be the one who was making the next move right off the bat.

But I've always been a firm believer that a woman should easily be able to ask out a man. It just doesn't have to be the man asking out the woman all the time.

Besides, if I know what I want, why waste time playing games?

He said yes to another outing and a few dates later, we are officially boyfriend and girlfriend.

It's still kind of surreal to me, but I'm determined to be the best partner I can be.

Which is why I did extensive research on the do's and don'ts of a relationship.
And thanks to my studying, I have complied A Virgin's Guide to be being the Perfect Partner.

I know that being perfect is not possible, but that doesn't mean I can't strive for near perfection, right?

And six months into our relationship, I say that my guide is pretty much fool-proof.

I have listed three, essential rules that I need to follow in order for my relationship to work:

1. Honesty and Communication

All of the dating advice sites I searched, this principle showed up 90% of the time I can't tell you how many testimonials I read that said the reason why most of their relationships failed is because they failed to be completely honest with their perspective lovers and share their expectations.

That's why I decided to woman up and tell Harry right from the beginning that I'm not ready to have sex and I wasn't sure when I'll be ready.

I've always been self-conscious about my virginal status.

I know that it's not exactly normal for a healthy, twenty-three year old woman to not want to discover sex yet.

I do, I really do. But I'm terrified at the thought of doing the actual act.

The thought of actually being that close to a person and trusting them with my body seems so intimate and private that I can't imagine doing it with a stranger.

I'm not emotionally built like that.

Then there's my face.
My ugly, deformed face.

It has to be for love or nothing else.

I'm not proud to say that I lied to my friends, even Nina, and told them that I lost my V card at age nineteen. Mostly because I didn't want to ask questions that would lead to complicated answers.

I did try to talk to my roommate about it once and she laughed in my face and basically told me to grow up and "just sit on a dick already, it's no big deal".

I know that my friends would never be so callous or insensitive as she had been, but I still don't like talking about it either way.

I definitely haven't told them about my face.

Once again, my crippling anxiety stops me from doing so and although I want to someday walk into practice one day, makeup free, and not care what I look like, I know I'm too vain and insecure to try something like that. I wouldn't be able to stand all of the likely stares I'll get.

But if I want to have a successful relationship, I'm going to have to bite the bullet and just get it over with.

That's why I've made a system for myself and Harry, which I'm about to enact soon:

If we make it to six months, I'll be brave and show Harry what I look like without makeup. I really care about Harry and I want to show him everything even if it's not pretty.

My heart is telling me that he won't be cruel if I do.

He's too gentle for that.
2. Contact

Since Harry is a part of a famous boyband and I'm in a ballet company, we travel a lot. And unfortunately, that means that we can't spend as much time together as we'd like to.

But I still make a point to text everyday. Not in a clingy "I call and text everyday every hour" type of way, but I do make sure to text something like "Hi, I hope your day is going well and I'm rooting for you".

Although it's not one of my rules, I try not to be too clingy and jealous, even though it is a struggle from time to time. I am a jealous person by nature. My jealousy is what helped me be where I am today. I used to watch dancers, ballet or other, for hours on end and think "I'm going to surpass my idols and then some".

But I knew from the get-go that I needed to tone it down if I wanted to keep Harry by my side.

And let me tell you, it's not a walk in the park.

Harry has a lot of female friends, most of which are beautiful models and Hollywood starlets. It's intimidating to watch him hang with them.

But I tamp it down because I know jealousy can be harmful.

3. Give and Take

Now I still struggle when it comes to this rule since we're so different.

He loves classic rock and roll, I love R&B. He's outgoing and enjoys having a group of friends around him, I'm painfully shy most of times and prefer to only surround myself with a few friends. He loves romcoms and horror films while I like my anime and have regular Disney binges.

Usually it's not a big deal when we clash on something.
But sometimes he gets a little irritated with me.

For instance, we decided to have stay-in movie at my house.

The public is still under the assumption that Harry is still on the market and we mutually agreed that we'd both like to keep it that way.

I don't want to be known as Harry Styles' girlfriend. I'm happy with my C-list celebrity status as it is.

We were having a movie night and Harry said that he would supply the movies for that night.

I was expecting some cheesy, eighties romcom that he loves to re-watch. But I was forced to watch in dismay as he pulled out *The Shining*, *IT*, and *The Cabin in the Woods* out of his bag.

"Sweetheart," I prompt, trying to keep the terror out of my voice. "What's all this." I know that I'm freaking out because when Harry flashes his dimples at me, I am wholly unaffected. "Well, I wanted to switch up tonight from the usual stuff we watch. I haven't seen any of this since I was seventeen years old. Look love, I know you said that you don't like this genre, but could you just indulge me for this one night?"

"But I've told you that these movies give me nightmares and then I can't sleep the majority of the night, which ultimately affects my performance at work. We're starting the production of *The Firebird* and I need to start getting ready for auditions. And I know myself well enough to know that this could turn into a problem for me. Can't we just watch something that won't have me up all night, please?"

I had hoped that he would be understanding and realize I'm not just trying to be a chicken and my excuse is valid.

But Harry just rolled his eyes. "Well I'm sorry not everything can be a prepubescent freak and get off to kiddy flims like you. Some of us are actually normal and sane."

I was speechless. I couldn't believe that he would use that against me.
About a month ago in similar situation, Harry had found my special editions of *Bear in the Big Blue House*, the first few seasons of *Sesame Street*, and *Between the Lions*. He had been, understandably, confused by it and automatically thought it was reserved for my God Children. In lieu of trying to exercise honesty with my partner, I told him the truth.

Whenever I feel stressed out from work, or I woke up from a particularly gruesome nightmare, I have a ritual of pulling out my VCR player and plopping in one of my videotapes and just sitting on my couch, letting the bright colors and happy singing on the screen transport to time before all of the madness in my life still hadn't occurred and I was truly happy.

Back when all I had to worry about is the ballet lessons daddy was signing me up for. Back before she had been just content to act like I didn't exist and didn't ask me for... favors.

Aside from ballet, It's one of the few times where my issues don't even matter anymore and I can just be.

And to have Harry use something so intimate and personal against me in argument just hurts on so many levels.

That's why I'm always so hesitant to share personal information with anyone. Because they may act like they accept it then, but when they're angry or just in a mood to be mean-spirited, they use it against you just so they can feel some semblance of control and think they're the king of the hill.

Sharing secrets with someone is giving up power to that person and trusting that they don't abuse it in the end.

I just never thought that Harry would abuse some of the power I gave to him.

I felt my anger starting to rise and I would've lashed out in retaliation when I remember all of the times he sat through the anime and Disney films I always wanted watch on our previous movie dates.

I knew he found them boring but he didn't protest because he knew I liked them. That's when the guilt finally cracked through the boiling lava of my rage. If he could grin and bear it on my selections, so could I.
Having made a decision to be the bigger person, I took a deep breath, looked him square in the eyes, and calmly said, "Okay. You're right. If you want this to be a horror night, then horror it is."

I had thought that might turn soften the glacier green eyes back into the warm spring green I was starting to get familiar with, or even a small apology for the uncalled for jab he threw me.

All he did was brush past me and insert the disc into DVD player.

You would think that would've been the end of the conflict, right? Well I was lulled into the same false sense of security, hoping that I could once again taste the sweet lemonade I had been getting drunk off of the past six months.

But things only escalated after that.

Picture this: a young couple on the couch, watching IT the clown tear off the arm of a little boy. The girl is trying not to appear like a pussy in front of her boyfriend even though the whole scene makes her want to jump off the couch and hide under her bed. And right when the girl is trying to convince her psyche not to create creepy scenarios in her dreams tonight, the boy puts his hand on her thigh.

The girl is proud of herself for not allowing her thigh to tense up at the sudden contact but she is still uneasy.

She can still remember her first kiss with the boy. It had been rough, sloppy, and a little bit of a let down. She had been expecting the warm tingly feeling that she read about in books. But the moment his lips touched hers, all he done was force his long tongue into her mouth and grope her ass.

The boy had said he was fine with his girlfriend not being ready for sex, but he had been pushing the boundaries lately. Using more tongue, touching her more than usual.

The girl hadn't complained about it, not wanting to upset her boyfriend and she also hoped that the spark between them would flicker and make her feel more enthused.

But with the movie and her boyfriend's hand continually rising up her thigh, the girl is getting antsy. She turns her head towards, hoping that she can get him to slow down when he takes the opportunity to slot his mouth over hers. Before she knows it, the boy is on top of her, grinding his dick on her crotch.
He is groping her breast through her shirt, moaning from the pleasure he is getting from her body. The girl tries to focus on getting swept in the moment like the boy but struggling with how he is being. It only gets harder when the boy takes her hand and shoves it down his tight jeans. Her hand on his hardening dick.

The girl automatically starts jacking the boy off with even thinking about it too much.

Old habits die hard they say.

She actually feels some relief, hoping that the act will crest off the rising panic she feels in her gut.

But all hope flees when the boy puts his hand in her short pants, cupping her.

And suddenly, the girl isn't in her cozy, farmhouse with her overly horny boyfriend. She's back in a dirty, cold apartment. Something is forcing her hand down someone's pants and spider-like fingers are forcing her underwear down and...

I don't even remember what happened really. All I know was that Harry was humping me like a dog in heat and when he put his hands on that place, something broke inside of me.

I was shaking from the memories I try so hard to forget when I heard Harry bellow, "What the fuck?!" My gaze whipped over to him, he's clutching his right wrist with the opposite hand. On his wrist were two, thin strips of blood slowly coming to the surface.

"You scratched me. You fucking scratched me!" he spit. He glared at me with what seemed like hatred in his eyes. He leaps up off of the couch and furiously yanks his coat on.

I felt nauseated. I hadn't meant to hurt him. Truly I hadn't. My panic had blinded me to my surroundings and I had accidentally hurt someone I cared about.

If I wasn't panicking before I definitely was in that moment. I need to fix this now, I thought as I went after Harry.
He was almost towards the door when I caught up with him. I put my hands on his shoulders. "Harry, baby, please. I-I'm sorry. I didn't mean to. It was an accident. Please don't leave witho--" I didn't get to finish my statement because Harry whirled around and shoved me.

He shoved me so hard that I crashed into the nearby coat-rack and fell onto my side. With how hard I fell, the chances of me getting bruises are high.

Harry's classic good looks were twisted into a cruel sneer. I had fight the urge to flinch away from it. "Doesn't feel good, does it?" he taunted.

At that moment, I wanted to disappear and believe that this horrible night was all in my imagination. But the pain in my side reminded me that it was real life.

Harry's voice echoed throughout my house. "I cannot believe you decide to pull this shit tonight when you knew that I've been having issues at work. Between working on the new album, planning a tour, and Louis and Zayn won't stop arguing for more than five minute. And when I try to unwind for one night, my girlfriend decides to go psycho on me. Can you for once consider how I feel and not be so selfish for five minutes?"

"I think about you all the time, I even made a dumb list so I could be best girlfriend you ever had," is what I wanted to say. But I was sobbing so hard I couldn't get the words if I tried.

"H-harry..."

"Don't! I don't want to hear it." He slammed the door, leaving me crumbled on the floor.

Yeah, that hadn't been a highlight of our relationship.

He avoided me for at least a week. I forgone my "no clingy" rule and called, texted, and emailed him nonstop. All of those messages consisted of me asking for forgiveness even though I knew I didn't deserve it.
I didn't tell Nina about it because I was too embarrassed and because she was tangled up in this new guy that she started hooking up with a few months ago.

He did eventually forgive me and things were relatively normal again.

Which is why I think it would be a good time to put my six-month vow into action.

We're at his place this time. We just got back from going out to dinner at this vegan place that his friends has told him about and he wanted to try it out. I am strictly anti-vegan but he just flashed those incredible green eyes at me and I caved almost immediately.

"How many times do I have to say that I'm sorry?" he asks, mirth dancing in his eyes.

"As long as you promise to never, ever, suggest going to a vegan restaurant again. The food purified garbage and you know it." His dimples pop out in the cutest fashion and I can't find in me to be too mad. He wraps his arms around and plants a kiss on my lips.

"But you're so cute when you're mad about something, love. It makes wonder how you'll fare at a Rolling Stones concert." I lightly punch him on the shoulder. He let me listen to his vinyl edition of his Rolling Stones albums.

I quickly found out I'm not a fan, something he teases me about constantly.

He lets go of me and takes my coat to go hang it up somewhere. I sigh in contentment. It's moments like these that I live for. When we're joking, relaxed, and just happy to be around one another.

Harry has a wicked sense of humor, even though his voice can be so monotone. His sarcasm always gets a snort out of me.

He so laid-back I know he won't freak out about what I'm about to show him.

"Baby?"
He raises his eyebrows in question. "There's something I need to tell you. I feel we're at a point in our relationship where it's only appropriate that I share this with you. But in order to do so, I need to use your restroom for a minute."

I've been here before so I don't need directions on where his restroom is. Harry's inquisitive look is traipsing through my mind as I walk into the bathroom.

I take out my makeup kit before I lose my nerve.

It takes me no more than fifteen minutes to remove my foundation and there lies my true face, scars and all.

I've forgotten how lengthy they are, mainly because I don't spend too much time looking in the mirror. I mostly leave the lights off when except when I'm putting on foundation.

I trace the rough, patch-like skin, noting how it reaches to the side of my forehead and goes to the corner of my chin. I vaguely wondering what life could've been like if she hadn't destroyed my face.

But I don't dwell too much on it. Harry's still waiting for me.

My legs are shaking as I walk back out, but I'm determined to see this through.

Harry is sitting on his couch, watching a rerun of *Friends*.

"Harry?"

"Hey, babe what did you want to.... Jesus!"

I feel dread course through me. That is not the reaction I was hoping for.

"What... what the hell happened to your face?" I swallow. "M-my... my face has been like this for a
long time, but I just hide it with makeup. I got into this... accident when I was six.” Although I'm revealing this part to him, there are still things I am not ready to talk about.

He still has this stiff look on his face, but once I'm done talking, his face goes into this impassive shell he adopts when he's contemplating something.

My heart rate is steadily picking up with how long he is silent. I'm beginning to think this was a bad idea when he finally breathes out, "Thank you... for sharing this with me. I know that it probably wasn't easy, but thank you for trusting me."

The elation and relief I feel rise through my chest is indescribable. He's okay with it. He's really okay with it. I feel my eyes start to well up with the emotions I feel. My face hurts from how hard I'm smiling.

I don't have to hide with him.

The joy I feel inspires to me to lunge onto the couch and give him a big kiss.

But he backs away before I could. That's when I see it: he's uncomfortable.

"Love," he starts. "Like I said, I'm glad that you opened up like that, but that doesn't mean I want to see you like this all the time."

"...what?"

"Look at it this way: if I had a pet spider, and I know you hated spiders with a passion, I would respect your wishes by keeping it away while you were here. I would do it because I know that it upsets you to see it. You get what I'm saying?"

I feel like an idiot. But I try to smile when I croak, "Yeah I get it."

He sighs in what I think is relief. "Okay, thank you for understanding, love. And, are you going to stay like that for the rest of the night?"
I don't answer, I just numbly get up, grab my purse, and walk back into the bathroom.

I know the tears are free falling off my face as I continue my tread.

But then again, it wasn't so bad. He accepted it, he just doesn't want to see me like this on a regular basis. I can't really complain when I can't even look at myself in the mirror without makeup most days.

The alternative would be him ending our relationship, but he didn't.

I'm lucky that a gorgeous guy like that is even giving me the time of day. I have no right to be feeling like crap. I should still be on cloud fucking nine right now.

I completed what I wanted to do....

So why do I feel like I failed?
Chapter 22

Practice has just ended and I am feeling some sweat gather in some uncomfortable places.

A shower is in my immediate future.

Everybody is filing out and I'm still gathering my stuff when I happen to Marigold try to scurry out the room.

Ever since the confrontation between us two maybe three years ago, we have become friendly. Nina, as usual, was right. Marigold is a sweet girl beneath the thorns she exhibits. And although I wouldn't count her as my friend exactly, I have a lot of affection for her.

I drop what I'm doing and jog up to her. "Hey Mari, how's it going?" She glances at me in confusion. I have never been one to spark a conversation. Nina usually does that for me.

"Can't complain. God, I thought rehearsal would never end today with the way that Michelle was on the warpath. I love that woman but I think she gets off on watching us bleed and sweat."

"Yeah right, like you were any different. Some of us used to call you "Queen Bitch" behind your back. You could give Michelle a run for her money in being a slave driver." Humor's dancing in her eyes and her crooked yet charming smile is on full display.

I purse my lips in mock irritation. "I can't help the fact that I had a vision and all of y'all were slow to pick up on it." Giggles peal out of her mouth like a bubbling stream. I feel my face soften at her peaceful air.

But I quickly harden it. Once I notice that mostly everyone has cleared out, I lean over so that I can murmur in ear.
"Marigold, the bruise on your back is the third one I've seen in the past two weeks." Even though I'm not touching her, I can sense her stiffening at my words. My hand is moving before I realize it, reaching out to her wrist to hold her in place. I'm careful not to touch her arm since I know there's a bruise on her upper arm as well.

"Calm down," I coax. "I haven't told anyone. It's not my place to tell anyone what goes on in your relationship. I'm going to trust that you know how to handle this."

"But know this: if you need help and you don't have anyone else to turn to, you have my number and my home is always open to you. Do you hear me?" She's biting her lower lip and I think it's to hold back tears.

That theory is only strengthened when she only nods her answer. I gently let go of her and head back to grab my bag.

"Why?" My back is turned to her but I can hear the wobbliness in her voice. "Why would you do something like that for me? You don't even know me that well."

*I'm looking out for you the way I wished someone had looked out for me.*

"You're a good kid, Mari. Why wouldn't I?"

My is still turned to her so I can't see her expression. The only response I get is the shuffling of feet and a door opening and closing.

I heave a sigh and check my phone to see if I have any messages.

I see a few from Nina talking about we should get together since she missed me. It has been a while since I've seen her. I type out that it should be in the following week.

I see no new from messages Harry.

He's been acting... distant ever since that night I showed him my scars. Whenever I do manage to catch him, he's got the same excuses: He's too tired, he's working, or he's hanging out with his mom
and doesn't want me intruding in on their time.

I know he's lying half of the time. But the way he sounds like he can't wait to get off the phone so he doesn't have to hear my voice makes me lose my nerve to call him out.

I'm trying not to regret my decision of showing my true face to Harry because I still believe that I did the right thing of being forthcoming about it. But the proverbial wall that is now between us so obvious and painful.

Harry's not helping anything either.

Every time damn time I open my phone, computer, or just whatever to see what shenanigans the rich and famous are getting up to, I always forced to see some bulletin link my boyfriend with some socialite or model I didn't even know he was friends with.

And yes, I know that gossip rags get off on making outlandish assumptions about interactions that may be completely innocent. But the half the girls that Harry hangs out with I've never met before. Harry has introduced me to a couple of his friends in the past. None of them were the women I've been seeing recently.

It doesn't help that Harry just gets angry whenever I try to bring it up.

"Last time I checked, I'm a grown ass man. You have no say on who I do or do not hang out with. You don't own me so stop trying to!"

That is the gist of what he usually says whenever I try to question him about his "friends".

Somehow, he always makes me look like the obsessed girlfriend that tries to prevent him from seeing his friends. I just want some answers.

But sometimes I wonder if I really desire the truth or I just want a answer that will kill the little voice inside my head telling me that there's a reason why he always gets so defensive.
Finally, on a cold January night, we spend some time together.

We decide to grab some pizza from a pizzeria that is from my house.

I feel more relaxed than I have in months.

I want this. I want to be able to relax and not think about who he was with and him acting as if he has something to hide.

These quiet moments are why I work so hard to make this thing work.

Musiq Soulchild is crooning in the background and Harry has one arm draped around me. He's got this look in his eye that tells me that he wants to kiss me.

And for once, I'm not dreading it or have to talk myself up like I usually do.

So I lick my lips in a subtle gesture to make his move.

He's already leaning towards and I anticipate his bubble-gum pink lips on mine when I hear my phone vibrate in my pants.

I am truly perturbed and I can tell that Harry feels the same.

I peck him on the cheek and pull out my phone, intending to get off the phone as quickly as I can.

Maybe because I was so eager to get back to my boyfriend, I didn't even look at the caller ID.

But the whimpering I hear makes me sit up straight and pay attention.

"Hello?"
"H-help me."

Oh my God.

"Marigold? Is that you? Honey, what's wrong?"

"He's... he's gonna hurt me again..." That's as far as she gets before she collapses into sobs.

"Who? Who's going to hurt you?"

Before she could answer a man's thunders in the background. I hear Marigold's sobs morph into screams, something shatters and the line goes dead.

I don't even hesitate to get my ass off my couch and go put my workout shoes on. I pause for a moment because I don't even know where Marigold lives and that might keep me from getting to her.

But Nina knows where she lives.

I'll call her as soon as I grab my--

"Where are you going?" I honestly forgot that he was still there. He looks confused and exasperated. "Babe, something came up. I need to like now." I know he hears the urgency in my voice but he just runs his hands in his long, brown hair.

He only does that when he's aggravated. "Really? You hound me for months to spend time with and now you want to run out the moment I do? You're so full of it, Willow. What is it really, hm? Your other man wants to see you?"

If I wasn't in such a hurry I would cal him out on his hypocrisy. He can get mad when I try to ask about those girls but he can accuse me of cheating?
"Harry, I really don't have time to appease you. My coworker may be in serious danger."

"Whatever," he says in a scornful tone.

I'm running upstairs when I hear the door slam shut.

"I'm just scared at what we're going to walk into," Nina says as pull up in front of a small house.

As soon as I grabbed what I needed, I dialed Nina immediately. Thankfully, she picked up and insisted that she come with me.

That was fine with me. I didn't want to go without backup anyways.

"I just hope that she's alive because she sounded terrified over the phone." I fail at keeping the frenzy from my voice. When we got in the car, I told Nina about the bruises I started seeing and I sort of confronted Marigold about it.

"Looking back on it," I remark. "I should've insisted that she tell me what was going on. Maybe this wouldn't be happening if I had been more aggressive." I had been putting myself in her shoes, thinking that the subtle approach would do the trick. Hoping that she would come to me if I gave her space.

And she might be dead as a result of my inability to act.

"Hey." Nina puts her hand on my shoulder while balancing the steering wheel. "Don't even start that. This is not your fault. That girl is so proud she probably wouldn't have admitted it outright. All we can do is focus on helping her now. Just focus on that."

And once again, I realize that I would be lost without Nina. Where I'm all tsunamis and flash floods she's calm, peaceful lakes. She balances me out and has the uncanny ability to bring me back to earth without evening trying.
The only person that could ever do that was Grammy.

I tamp down on those thoughts when she stops the engine. She gazes at me, anxiety twisting her beautiful face. We don't say anything. We just nod and proceed to get out the vehicle.

The cold air does nothing to ease the churning in my stomach as we march up to the front door.

Nina has a key to the house so there's no issue there.

The house is an absolute mess.

Beer bottles, junk food, and broken glasses litter the area. We tread deeper into the house and we come across the living room.

The wide screen TV is lighting up the room, highlighting more empty beer bottles and a huge man is passed out on the sofa.

He's black, burly and has a five o'clock shadow developing on his face.

He could almost be described as handsome if not for the sweat stained wife beater that looks like he's been wearing for days, and the smell coming off of him.

Nina and I don't stay long. We're here for this cretin.

We continue our search until we come across the bedroom.

The sight that greets us is one that I know will haunt me for months to come.

We turn on the light to find Marigold curled up in a ball on the side of the bed. She's crying softly.

There's no hiding the bruises that decorate her body. They all vary in coloring.
Hold back my swirling emotions, I crouch down and gently touch her shoulder.

She jumps like I stuck a hot iron on her skin. "Please Jackson! No more!" she screams. My heart breaks a little further as I shush her. "Mari, it's me, Willow. Nina's here too. We've come to get you out of here, baby. We're here to help you."

It's then I really take a good look at her and I just want to hit something. Her face is literally unrecognizable. Two developing blacks eyes, a fat lip, and her bleeding head, which I suspect means that she has an concussion, just makes my guilt all the more potent.

"You can't be here," she cries. "J-jackson said he'll kill you if I told anyone." Tears run down her face and Nina decides that she'll take from there, sensing I'm too numb at the moment.

Aside from Marigold's sobbing, we get out of the house silently.

We try as best as we can to place Marigold in the back seat. Her cries are now whimpers and I think she might pass out. Nina gets in the driver's seat, ready to go to the nearest hospital. But I stay outside.

My mind can't leave it. The memory I have of Marigold, the stubborn girl with the fast mouth, is conflicting with the broken mess I encountered tonight.

To think that one man could cause this much damage to a young girl's psyche is the reason I go around my car, pop the trunk door open, and pull my black hoodie, gloves, full face Venetian mask, and dad's old aluminum baseball bat.

I put the hoodie on and secure the straps on the mask. I'm not worried about getting caught. I know that one no will be able to identify the mask since it was custom made by Grammy herself.

Besides, I'm too angry to care much about details.

I hear Nina yell, "What are you doing?! We need to take her to the hospital. NOW." I know she's right, but this needs to happen.
"This won't take long," I promise as I stride back into the house and right back to where that son of a bitch is lying.

And when I bring down the bat on the fucker's leg and hear him a release a satisfying howl of pain, a memory flickers in my mind.

I'm six years old again. I've just gotten out of the hospital and I still haven't gotten used to my new normal yet.

My face burned and itched at the same. But I couldn't take off the bandages because Grammy it'll never heal if I do that. I wanted to look normal again so I pay attention to her words.

The nightmares never leave me alone though. I can't remember what happens in them and I didn't want to.

I just wanted my daddy.

I didn't want to bother Grammy, she's already helped me too many times as it is.

I've just woken up from a particular bad dream. Thankfully, I didn't scream this time. Maybe I subconsciously knew that my cries would've woken Grammy up. I didn't know.

But I did know I didn't want to return to the world of dreams just yet.

The monsters could be lurking, waiting for me to lulled into false security.

I tip-toe to the kitchen to get myself a glass of water.

But I secretly hoped that I could get the fridge open without a lot of noise so I could sneak some fruit juice.
In the end, I chose to get water from the sink because it was easier.

I sat at the table, terrified at what would happen if I went back to bed. But those thoughts are wiped from my head when I heard the door opening and closing.

It's daddy.

He had been coming home late recently and I missed him so much.

He sat on the sofa in the living room. He's didn't move to turn on the TV, he just sat completely still in the darkness.

Since the kitchen was connected to the living room, I could peer over and see daddy's side profile without him being able to see me.

I saw him lift his shaking hands to his face. He started crying soon after.

I would've gone over to comfort him if I wasn't so hung up on his hands.

Even in the dark, I could see his hands were covered in what I believed to be blood.

In that moment, my six year old brain comprehended something: my father had killed someone.

He killed for me.

He went out there and found the men who hurt me. I know he did.

My brain screeched to a halt as I continued to watch my father weep like a baby.
But two words did manage to make themselves present in the fog my mind was in:

My. Hero.

Marigold is fast asleep when I get back in the car. "Oh my God, Bee. I was so..." Nina's relieved words trail off when she takes a look at the bat in my gloved hands.

There's blood smeared on it.

Once I was done punishing Jackson, I thought I would some type of pity or guilt.

But I felt only righteousness and relief.


There's a long silence. The only thing filling the silence was the sound of the car engine.

"Marigold," I blurt out finally. "Marigold is one of my girls."

"Your girls?"

"Yes," I confirm. "You, Marigold, Imani, Erica, Patrice, Zipporah, all of you are mine. And the male dancers, even Lance, are my boys. You all are my family. You're all I have left in this world so I'm going to protect you as much as I can. So when of you get hurts," I clear my throat to rid myself of the tears that threaten to come. "And I have the power to something about it, I will. No questions asked."

Nina wisely chooses to stay mute at my declaration. She knows that I'm not in the mood for backtalk.

She just puts the car in drive, and slowly drives to the hospital.
It's Harry's birthday.

We did eventually make up after the situation with Marigold, but things are still a little strained.

Between work and checking in on Marigold, I haven't had enough time to pay attention to my love life.

Not like there was anything to be paying attention to.

Harry was so cold and withdrawn from me these days. It's like he's not even interested in being with me.

But hopefully, that'll change today.

My plan is to surprise Harry with a gift and cake. The gift is this vintage Rolling Stones vinyl album which will be added to Harry's collection. The cake, which is buttercream with roasted coconut flakes sprinkled on top, is one I made myself. I usually don't bake for sport, but I think that dessert may help me on the road to recovery.

Even though everything is a mess between, I can't let this relationship fail. I refuse to give up when we've been together for nearly a year now.

Even though I don't think I'm in love yet, I definitely getting close to that precipice.

As pathetic as it may sound, I'll even offer sex if that would make him happy.

Harry's birthday falls on a Sunday which is conveniently my day off.

Because of the sun's rare appearance, I take that as a good sign and continue maintain a brisk pace to
Harry's front door.

I'm wearing my favorite grey, maxi dress today and my hair is in twist out that I know I'll pay for later when it's time to tie it up for the night but for now, I'll enjoy the way it brushes my upper thighs.

I already know that he keeps a spare key under one of the flower pots (Which is pretty cliche, but whatever).

Since I want to surprise him, I didn't tell him that I was coming over today.

I do a quick survey, notice the coast is clear, and proceed to put the cake in the kitchen and sneak upstairs to his bedroom, gift in tow.

I feel the shower running in the adjoining bathroom.

I've only been up to his room a handful of times, but I don't think I've ever seen it this messy before.

His clothes are all over the place, the comforter on his mattress looks like it was torn off in haste.

I shrug my shoulders.

He just began his tour with his band mates, I tell myself. Since he is on break, he probably got drunk and decided to play tug-of...

My thoughts screech to a halt when my eyes land on the pink, lacy lingerie that is on the side of his bed.

I rub my eyes, trying to convince myself that I'm not seeing, but it's still there.

Even though there's a burning sensation in the pit of my stomach and my throat feels like it could catch on fire from how dry it's gone, I still feel the need to investigate the piece of cloth.
Even though my head is screaming at me, my heart, my foolish, naive, hopeless romantic heart says to take a closer look because it’s a misunderstanding.

I pick it up by its end, noting the initials KNJ embroidered right under the elastic. Who is KNJ?

I drop the underwear, not wanting to feel the smooth material on my skin any longer than I have to.

As if God decided that my suffering wasn't finished yet, I hear a feminine giggle come from the bathroom.

My head snaps to the sound.

By now, even my heart is agreeing with my head that going in there is a bad idea, but I have to know.

I creep up to the bathroom door, ease it open and walk inside.

Steam blankets the mirrors in the luxurious bathroom and makes the floor kind of slippery.

I walk over to the shower, hoping what I heard was just my imagination.

But that dream fades when I hear the same girl's moan, "Harry!"

A grunt in response. Harry's grunt.

It's as if the grunt sets off a chain reaction because the few minutes is a symphony of moaning, groaning, and naked flesh slapping against each other.

"Shit, Kendall..." he groans in ecstasy.

The slapping sound grows faster.
"Right there, right there. Yes, yes, fuck. Me," the girl, Kendall, is basically chanting in perfect rhythm with the slaps.

I wonder, if they knew that I was standing right outside the shower curtain, what would they do?

Would they be ashamed and get down on their hands and knees, beg for my forgiveness?

Or would they just laugh in my face and continue their cruel dance for my viewing pleasure.

Who am I kidding?

They have been laughing at me, I just didn't know.

I've been playing the fool for months, trying so hard to make this so-called relationship with Harry work. When in reality, Harry hadn't cared one iota about me.

Not one.

This act of adultery sends a single message to me: I wasn't worth it.

I wasn't worth his honesty.

I wasn't worth his time.

And I most certainly was not worth his fidelity.

Suddenly, something ugly and twisted in me wants to grab a knife from the kitchen and just slash their naked, wet bodies with the blade.
I feel a leer decorate my lips.

I can already picture the way their blood would stain the pristine, white shower curtain with their red/brown blood. Their screams as they plead for mercy that they won't find from me. Harry's deep voice, which I used to think were mesmerizing, pitched higher as he asks for forgiveness I'll never grant him.

Maybe if they'd suffer the way I'm suffering now, they would know how much they destroyed me.

But my murderous thoughts come to halt when my mind supplies images of Nina, Grammy, and my father.

And rational thought floods back in.

How would I be able to look at my best friend or my family's tombstones if I carried out what my rage wanted to do?

That's easy: I wouldn't.

So before I could become Norman Bates the Sequel, I hightailed it out of there before they spotted me.

I left the album but I took the cake.

I sat in my home for hours, wrapping my brain at my new discovery.

But once processing was done, I knew that I had to do something that was long over due.

Harry comes through the door twenty minutes later after I call him.
He tries to kiss me on the mouth, but I swiftly turn my head so it lands on my cheek.

Harry doesn't think it odd and instead plants himself in a chair in the dining room.

"Happy Birthday," I say in a monotone voice.

"Thank you, love. I must say turning twenty-one is something I can't wrap my brain around. My life for the last five years has been a bit of a blur. Some days, I still feel like that same sixteen year old kid who worked in a bakery and only dreamed of being able to sing all across the world. But you know, I'm just glad I'm able to spend this day with someone I care about deepl--"

"You know what, Harry? It's amazing on how many new things you can learn in the span of one day. For example, I learned that when a Polar Bear and Grizzly Bear mate, their offspring is called a Pizzy Bear, which I think is just fucking adorable. I learned that Nintendo coined the phrase 'It's on like Donkey Kong'. Die-hard videogamers might've known but I remember where I had a phase where I always said those words."

"Love," I can see how irritated Harry is getting by the way he keeps clenching his jaw. "This is all very fascinating, but I really--"

"I also learned," I interrupt. "That Miss Kendall Nicole Jenner puts her initials on her lingerie." He freezes. "But you see, I would've never have known that if I hadn't gone over to your place earlier today to surprise you."

His usual golden skin has a pale undertone to it.

I think it's appropriate for me not to waste anymore time. "How long?"

"Love I--"

"Boy," I grit out. "Don't try to lie to me, just tell me the goddamn truth for once."

Silence. Then, "Four months."
"Did she know you were seeing someone?"

"Not at first, but I told her about a month later. She didn't care."

I can't help it: I laugh. My marginally hysterical laughter ricochets on the walls. Harry looks extremely uncomfortable and is fidgeting in his seat.

In truth, I have to laugh to keep from crying.

"And to think," I remark once the laughter subsides. "I was actually considering having sex with you to make your sorry arse happy." My accent starts to slip out from how angry I feel myself getting.

"Oh please," Harry bites, sudden fire in his eyes. "It's not like you're completely innocent either. You were always playing this hard to get game with me. Always getting my hopes and always playing for a fool in the end. That along with the fact that you've been acting like one of my obsessed fans anytime you saw me with my female friends, who I happened to know much longer than you. And if I'm going to be completely honest with you, baby, once I saw what was lying underneath all that makeup, I knew that there was no way in hell I was going to sleep with you. So yes, I sought comfort from a close friend I've known for years. What about it?"

I shake my head in pure disbelief. What had I ever seen in this cracker? The moment he got cornered, he tried to put this on me.

Not this time. Not ever again.

"Harry, my only true sin was trying to fix something that was already broken beyond repair from the start. Although I'm not perfect, I was honest with you from the very beginning. I told you from the very start of our relationship I wasn't ready to have sex and I wasn't sure when I would be ready, so don't you even try to hold that over me. You got a lot of nerve. I only asked who those girls were because I've never met them before, you were the one who was getting all mad over a simple question."

"And then you have the audacity to accuse me of cheating. When in reality, you just said that to cover up your whoring around that little slut of yours--"
Before I even know it, he's right in front of me and holding my wrist in a vice grip. "Don't you ever talk about Kendall that way!" he shouts. He actually cares about the bitch?

Tough.

"You're a whore and she's a slut by association! And don't you ever," I twist his hand on my wrist and knee him in the balls, "Put your hands on me like that ever again!"

Groaning in pain, Harry falls to his knees and cups his crotch.

Just the sight of him, which to release a colony of butterflies in my stomach, makes me sick.

I don't want him here anymore, I need to put an end to this.

Taking a few deep breaths, I calmly command, "Do me one more favor: delete my number, my email address, and give me my key back. We're done."

He doesn't say anything, he just reaches inside his pocket and throws my house key onto the floor.

Once he finds his bearings, he limps over to his coat rack to yank his jacket off and then hobbles over to the exit.

He throws one last jab before he truly leaves. "Your loss, baby. In a few months, you're going to be wishing for another me. Cause I'm the only man who would ever put up with your ugly ass anyways."

My response is automatic. "If he's anything like you, then I'd rather be alone."

Slam

And just like that, Harry Styles is out of my life.
Although I am sad, I'm relieved too.

During those hours I just sat thinking, I realized a couple of things.

I was subconsciously changing myself to please him. Every little thing that made me me, I tucked away because I knew Harry wouldn't accept them.

He put me down so many times and I took it because I wanted him to stay.

I realize now that abuse is not just limited to being physical.

I'm heart broken by what Harry did to me, but I'm also thankful too.

Thanks to all the hell he put me through, I now know what to do and what not to do for my next relationship. I guess I'll have to update my list to add a few new rules.

And even though Harry damaged my heart, I will not make my grandmother's mistake and close myself from people in my life and future people who will want to love me.

If I do that, he wins.

I sigh, but I know what my next move is.

"Hello," Nina's posh accent comes through.

"Hey NiNi."

"Bee! Baby, it's been forever. What have you been up to? How's Harry?"

Oh right. I kept the drama between me and Harry a secret. Nina still thinks that we're tight
"Actually, we ended things."

"Oh Willow," she sighs, sympathy in her voice. "I'm so sorry, honey. What happen between you two?"

"It's a long story and I rather not do it over the phone. Can you come over?"

"Girl, I'm way ahead of you. Actually I could use a distraction myself. You know that guy I was seeing?"

"Yeah?"

"It didn't work out."

"Shit, Nina I'm sorry."

"Well, he's an actor based in LA and my life's here. It would've been too hectic in the end. We ended things on friendly terms though."

"That's good, I guess. But you what? I'm converting this get together into a full fledge slumber party. So bring over the pizza, chips, and soft drinks. And to top it off, I just made this kick-ass cake I want you to try."

I hold the phone back so I don't go deaf from the inhuman squeal she lets out.

"And, I want to invite Marigold. With everything that went down last month, I want her to know that her friends are there for her. Is that alright?"

"Will do. This is perfect because there's new anime I want to watch with you. It's called *Attack on Titan*."

"Alright, I'll see you soon."

I hang up, feeling a euphoric bubbling up to the surface.

For a day that started out so terribly, I get to end it with people I know would never betray me.

What more could I ask for?

Chapter End Notes

I guess this is the part where I start singing "Thank U, Next" right?

Anyways, next time jump is taking us to 2018
Chapter Notes

Kim Fucking Namjoon with his fine ass!

If I wasn't before, I'm pumped to the masses.

Get ready for MOTS: Persona y'all!

You know that Lady Gaga meme?

The one where she saying something or someone is amazing in at least twenty different words?

Well, that is what I would use in order to explain how mind-blown and proud I was in Black Panther.

Just seeing extraordinary people that look like me being superheroes and villains on a platform like this and for it to actually be successful...

Shit. I might start crying again.

I already cried two hours before the movie and I started shedding tears during T'challa's speech.

My head is still pounding from the excess water my eyes released.

My life for the past years has been... pretty fucking awesome.

After Harry and I broke up, although I decided not to close myself off from future love interests, I definitely wasn't going to do any active searching myself and focus on improving my craft and stretching myself.
And stretch myself I did. But not the way I was expecting.

About three years ago, we were giving our rendition of the production *Coppélia* in France to a sold-out audience.

In the crowd, a certain woman was watching and analyzing our performance.

What we didn't find out until later was that that woman was a casting recruiter a project that Miss Beyoncé Knowles-Carter herself was creating and planning to release to the world as early as next year.

Since I was sick that night, my understudy, Michaela, was performing as Swanhilda, the principal role.

The recruiter called the next day and offered her a spot in the project that would soon be called *Lemonade*.

I'll be honest, I was happy for Michaela and wished the best of luck, but that didn't mean I wasn't a little envious.

What would've happened if I had been well? Could I have been working with Beyoncé instead of Michaela?

I know my thoughts were selfish and self-centered, but Beyoncé is the reason why I love being called "Queen Bitch" during practice.

The way she expects excellence from her peers and won't hesitate to speak her mind if she think something could be better is something that resonated with me.

She never took anyone's shit and I decided I would never let anyone belittle me in my profession either.

But then again, it's arrogant of me to think that I'm the only young girl to be inspired by Beyoncé’s confident nature on the stage. My affections weren't anything original and it's self-centered of me to
think otherwise.

Besides, a few hours later during practice when Michaela broke down and sobbed with joy in front of us, my envy strangely subsided.

For some odd reason, Michaela asked me and a couple of other girls to go with her to the set.

You know, moral support and all that jazz.

The actual queen Bee herself wasn't there unfortunately. Michaela and Beyoncé were shooting separate scenes.

No chance for me to start blubbering in front her then.

Michaela was so nervous that they had to re-shoot at least five times before finally calling a break.

This was Michaela's big break and the last thing I wanted to do was get in her way.

But something needed to be done. My ears picked up on the grumbling the big-time producers and director were making.

Something needed to be done and fast. Not just for Michaela's sake, but to prevent a smear from ruining Oberman's reputation.

So being the dutiful coworker/friend I am, I pulled her to the side and gave her some pointers on how to perfect the routine.

I watched her do the routine enough over the last few weeks to get a good idea of what to do.

Thankfully, I always have a spare pair of pointe shoes in my bag.
I did the routine with her, gave her some feedback on what she needed to tighten up on, gave a few encouraging words to go by, and sent her on her way. She ended up doing just fine after getting a confidence booster from yours truly.

Afterwards, I thought that was that, and life would go on as usual.

Grammy always used to advise me to carry myself in a certain way because you never know who could be watching you and judging from afar.

Turns out that she was right.

About a few months after the short film was released, Beyoncé's casting team contacted us again. She was going to open up the BET awards with Kendrick Lamar and she was looking for at least twenty-four dancers. Half of them had to be male and the other half female.

They said they could choose anyone else that we wanted but that I had to be a part of the equation no matter our decision. When Lance had first told me that, I was baffled by the conditions until he told me one key factor:

They wanted me to help choreograph the dance.

My first reaction was to exclaim, "No!" What experience did I have other than leading a few rehearsals in the beginning of our uncertain futures?

This was the big leagues.

It's Beyoncé Fucking Knowles-Carter. The greatest performer of this generation? You can't get any bigger than that!

You don't get the luxury to fuck up with a mega-star like that.

But as I tried to reject the offer, my team, my awesome, hardworking team, vehemently voiced their
protest against my choice.

"I've never met anyone who was such a stickler for detail and perfection," one of our male dancers, Donovan, chimed. "You're gonna kick ass with this like you do with every other routine you're given."

"There's a reason why we call you 'Queen Bitch'," Marigold quipped. That got a few laughs, me included. "I think you could give the queen Bee herself a run for her money in terms of bossiness and confidence in your work. You can do it."

"And no cares more than you do," Nina said, maneuvering her way through the crowd to come to me and to clasp our hands together. "Don't think that I, we, didn't notice how you're constantly taking notes after practice so you can help yourself and us improve, how you help us hone our individual strengths and tamp down our weaknesses. How you always stay late or come hours early to assist one of us who need a little extra attention."

"That's we're willing to put our faith in you to guide us."

It was an honest effort to keep my jaw from dropping open. I never knew that my team held me in such high regard.

It's... humbling.

As I stared into their earnest, excited faces, how could I say no?

After the BET awards, offers started appearing out of the woodwork.

I made a few rules for myself when I officially started my side hustle: I would not choreograph for white performers and no showing my face.

I don't do it out of spite, it's just that white entertainers like Ariana Grande (I thought that she was Hispanic for the longest time thanks to her last name), Dua Lipa, or Taylor Swift probably already have great choreographers who make millions of dollars just by being associated with them.
But I'm not interested.

I make routines for black artists, whether they be well-known or not. I do it because I love to see my people make a name for themselves for in a industry that is guaranteed to have more than a few racist, corrupt individuals. So why not use my talent to help other artists.

It makes me feel like I'm making a difference no matter how small it may be.

Although I primarily just offer my services for black people, I occasionally do make routines for other entertainers of color.

But it doesn't happen often.

Also, I rarely meet the artists I work with in real life.

When I choreograph, I always cover my face with a mask that Grammy left for me in her will. What I do is record myself with the finished product, wearing a mask and black hoodie, making it covers my arms and legs completely.

And when I do send out my work, I make sure to repeatedly use the moniker W. James.

I am still intensely private and take extra precaution. The Paparazzi is sometimes hanging around the stars I work for and if I took the option of going to the location to artist for a face to face consultation and I will not risk my face somehow being photographed.

I just send a video of the routine I made and let that star's primary choreographer take it from there to teach them.

That's leads to my name being discovered and then they find out where I work and then maybe, for a more in-depth take on the woman who works for the stars, they dig into my personal history.

My past is something I never want anyone to find out about. Notwithstanding my childhood, but I
did some questionable things when I was in my pre-teens and teenage years. Although I made sure that I didn't get caught, they could still connect it to me somehow.

Worst, they could find out where I live.

My house is my sanctuary. The house is surrounded my trees so no chance of me having neighbors. Only a select few even know where I live and that's if I absolutely trust them.

I guess since my customers have always been satisfied with my work, maybe that's why I haven't received any complaints.

I also have dedicated myself to learning some new languages as well. Languages are something that has always come easily to me (most of the time), and it helps that we get asked to perform in some pretty exotic places.

I've now added Portuguese, French, BSL (British Sign Language), and I can finally say that I have mastered Japanese, thanks to Nina and long nights of binge-watching anime.

I'm currently trying to learn Russian and Cantonese.

I given that same amount of passion to learning new dance genres.

I now know the tango, the Argentine tango, the Viennese waltz, the Rumba, and I even learned how to belly dance.

But there's one, defining thing in my life that just tops all of that entirely.

Our company has made a tradition to give to a group donation to UNICEF every month.

We all agreed that it is something we, as a group, feel very strongly about.
I was conflicted by the act. Don't get me wrong; I love the fact that my company is so passionate about helping defenseless children in need, but I felt somewhat... detached from it.

It something to with ballet, not me personally.

I love ballet and I love that I can give back through my platform.

But I wanted to invest in a charity that has special meaning to me, Willow Spencer, not the dancer.

God, I'm not even sure if that made any sense. But it makes sense to me and that's all that matters!

I eventually found my charity of choice, though.

So along with the donation to UNICEF, I give ten percent of my earnings to a private hospital dedicated to children who have been victims of burns.

The hospital is located deep in the heart of London and it's very discreet, which is what I wanted.

Because of my past and what I hide under my makeup, I haven't told anyone about it. This is something for me.

When I have time, I go there, completely makeup free. There's no need to hide behind any facade when I'm surrounded by kids with the same problem as me.

Being around them makes me realize one thing: I was truly lucky when my face was burned.

Some of the children in there can't even get out of bed from how severe their wounds are. Some kids have lost their limbs as a result.

Never mind facing society, some of these children are fighting for their lives.
Makes me think how superficial and cowardly I am.

But don't get it twisted; these kids are not depressed by their circumstances.

Far from it. They are determined to live, by any means necessary.

I visiting the children almost two years ago now and I've come there so much that most of the veteran patients know me by name. Doesn't matter if they're five or fifteen, I get along with all of them.

Most of the time, I bring videos for us to watch, I read to them (We're currently reading a tween series called *Keepers of the Lost Cities*), I tell them about my job, and so many other things.

It gets to the point that I'm more sad than they are when it's time for me to leave. Those kids just keeping stealing little fragments of my heart and refuse to give them back to me.

Maybe it's because being with them just increases my longing for my own family.

This yearning inside of me just keeps growing.

It's been three years since Harry and I broke up and I still have yet to get back on the dating scene.

I'm twenty-seven years old and I know the clock is ticking if I want to have a family, but my work, along with my side job, has kept me pretty busy over the years.

Plus, I refuse to settle like I did with Harry. I was serious when I said I would rather be alone than be with another Harry. I will not be with someone who makes me miserable for the rest of my life just because I'm lonely.

And I know that I can easily just adopt or do the sperm donor thing, but the hopeless romantic in me demands that someone share in my joy (and finance) of having a little person depending on me.

I just have to be patient and trust that my Eros and Pragma soulmate would come to me in time.
But that doesn't mean I don't get impatient sometimes.

"Black Panther."

"Uh huh."

"Black Motherfucking Panther."

"Yeah, Bee. I get it."

"Black--"

"WILLOW!"

I jump. I know that I'm being annoying, but I can't help it. "My bad, girl," I apologize. "But a movie that good deserves to be declared at least a few times."

"Maybe, but did you really have to say it five times?" I pout, but that doesn't prevent the smile that eventually defeats it.

Thanks to Nina's high-profile connections, she was able to get us tickets to the Black Panther Premiere in LA.

Being the Marvel fan that I am, was not about to turn down an offer that sweet.

But my enthusiasm dimmed when she told me that since it was the premiere, we had to go wearing our Sunday best.

I had pictured wearing my favorite Avengers T-shirt, buying my candy from the local convenience
store (we all know they overcharge at the movie counter), and getting to see it in 3-D and D-box.

Alas, beggars can't be choosy.

Thanks to our showing of *Romeo and Juliet*, we were able to be in town for the premiere, just like Nina had planned.

Miss Tasha made sure we both had our faces done up to the nines and we were able to rent these designer dresses. So there went my chances of sneaking some food into the cinema. I couldn't do that with the fancy dress I was wearing.

Nina wore this stunning Versace sequined gown that showcased her golden brown skin and her model-esque figure. She wore her hair in a twist-out and adopted this makeup that made her look more exotic than usual.

I decided to wear this amazing Alexander Mcqueen gown I found. I loved the way the train dragged behind me, making want to walk slowly just to see it rustle against the ground. Plus Nina and everyone else said it really showed off my hourglass figure.

I'm not sure if they said that to be nice or not because I looked in the mirror and I honestly don't think my figure is that nice. It's decent, but it's not Beyoncé's body.

I don't know why, but the top of the gown always reminded me of butterflies in their migration period. I thought the best way to top off my amazing outfit was to wear something one of Grammy's masquerade masks. So I wore this pure white butterfly mask.

I love wearing masks even when I'm alone in my house. I have fond memories of late nights watching Grammy create them by hand, millions of accessories cluttering the kitchen table as she worked.

I concentrate hard enough, I can imagine her disgusting cinnamon perfume that she used to wear to sometimes just to fuck with me, her boisterous laughter, and the steady *swish swish* of her paint brush as she worked on some new creation.

That's why I cherish my masks so much; it's like Grammy never let me.
When we arrived at the premiere, all we had to do was show our invitations and they let us in, little to no problem at all. I was secretly relieved that we didn't have to walk the purple carpet and get photographed by all those people, I don't think my nerves could take all that attention.

And as much as I imagined being besties with Lupita Nyong'o and Danai Gurira, daydreaming that they were desperate to be my friend, I was glad that we didn't run into any stars.

I know Nina would've turned on her mega-watt smile and charmed the pants or skirts of any A-lister that came our way while I would be too worried about the nervous sweat gathering under my armpits, soiling my designer dress.

Expectations versus Reality really sucked ass sometimes.

"And can I just say how powerful every woman was in that movie?" Hours later, I'm still ranting and raving about this movie. We're back at the hotel, which is only a few blocks away from where the premiere was held.

We're walking through the extravagant lobby as I praise the movie we just saw.

"It was just so amazing to see," I continue. "To see black women, dark skin women at that, being in positions of authority and being badass superheroes. It was nice to see someone that looks like me, being an phenomenal character that was funny, knew how to fight, and was dedicated to her country and would fight for it at any means necessary. Not the same old angry, ghetto persona we assigned."

"It was refreshing to see," Nina agrees.

"But don't get me started on the fine ass men because I might make a thirty-page essay on them if I do."

"Then don't say anything."

"Too late!" I yell. Nina rolls her eyes. "I swear to God, if I knew that you were going to make my
ears bleed with this endless spiel about Black Panther, I would've gone by myself."

"Come on, you know we're Marvel buddies. Besides the fact that I saw a awesome film that celebrates our people, I'm happy that I was able to see it with someone I consider my sister." Her exasperated expression softens at my words. "You're just buttering me up that I'll let you keep blabbering."

I shrug. "Well... yeah, but the sentiment rings true." I knock shoulders with her, signalling her that I truly do mean it.

"But back to these men," I start.

"Oh Lord," she groans. I grin mischievously. "Ryan Coolger knew what he was doing casting Chadwick Boseman and Michael B. Jordan as the protagonist and antagonist. I've watched some his interviews, and Chadwick just has this inherent intelligence and poise in the way he speaks about his work. You can tell that he has a real love for what he does. And it translates to his performance. In Civil War, we only got to see the aloof, angry prince that was thirsty for vengeance."

"Yeah, I know. It was kind of cute to see more sides to him when he was relaxed."

"Yes!" I squeal. I feel giddy knowing that Nina is finally willing to be my discussing buddy now. "Mr. Boseman's T'challa was brave, loyal, and his sense of honor and kindness is what ended up saving his life."

"To sum it up, he's my dream man."

"Uh, no. He's mine," she retorts, merriment dancing in her eyes. I feel euphoric bantering with her like this. "Careful now," I warn in response. "You may have a few inches on me, but I will not hesitate to knock that head sideways to prove my undying love for my King."

All I see is a waterfall of Nina's shoulder length loose, black curls as she doubles over in laughter. "You're so full of shit!"

"I shit you not!" We're probably attracting stares from how loud we are but I'm having trouble not finding enough reasons to care.
I'm having too much fun for that. "But you know who does deserve a good dicking, Erik Kilmonger with his homicidal behind," I say, knowing full well I'm too much of a pussy to be giving anyone a "dicking".

Nina snorts. "Oh yeah, I'm sure with the way he shot his girlfriend in the head shows how loyal he is."

"No one is perfect," I counter. "Besides, she made herself a liability. He had no choice. I on the other hand would never make such a rookie mistake like that. I would've been the much better looking Bonnie to his Clyde. You know I'm a ride or die kind of chick."

"You can be so stupid sometimes."

"But," I say sobering up. "Michael's performance was stunning to watch. Erik had a valid point about how the Wakandins have the resources to help their people beyond the safety of their country. The way that you knew that he was a villain, but you couldn't help but sympathize with his mission."

"I know, right? The balance between being the sociopathic terrorist who wants blood and the vulnerable young man that was abandoned at a young age was an emotional tightrope that I think Michael mastered beautifully."

"Ugh," I groan. "I love this movie, goddamn!" I turn around so I'm walking backwards while still facing Nina. "And incidentally, Erik's ass looked so good in those cargo pants."

She shoves me. "Bee, you're a mess." She stops suddenly, her face tightening into what can only be described as a grimace.

But I pay no mind and carry on with my thirst rant. "You not going to tell me that man wasn't looking cut in this movie. His body, his voice, those lips. You know I've always had a weakness for men with full lips. And them dreads weren't helping my libido at all."

"Uh Bee, maybe you should..."

"If that's not bad enough, he's got the nerve to have dimples along with the lips and sexy smile. You
know I've always had a thing for men with dimples."

"Bee...."

"I swear, the thoughts that were swimming in my head just at the sound of his voice. You can't tell me that he don't have a massive dick just waiting to be sat on, licked, and stroked the right way. Shit, the things I would do to him if I just had two minutes--" Nina takes me by the shoulders and whirls me around.

Behind me stands an gorgeous black man who is only a few feet away from me. He's wearing a dapper black suit which compliments his caramel toned skin. His broad shoulders and thick arms are filling out his suit in the best ways possible.

His buzz cut coupled with the facial hair on his face made for an eye catching visual.

He's watching us, dimples denting his cheeks as he grins. His brown eyes are glinting with what I think is amusement.

Michael B. Jordan is standing right in front of us.

Jumping Jehoshaphat, my brain supplies.

I'm standing in front of Michael B. Jordan, AKA Erik Kilmonger. Just a few hours ago, I witnessed this man give one of the best performances I've seen in a superhero movie.

The fangirl in me rises to surface as a big smile stretches across my face.

Oh, I think in utter delight. The things I want to ask, will ask, about the movie now that he's here. I want to know how he exactly prepared for this movie. I want to know how he....

Wait.

Wait a minute.
My thoughts screech to a halt when my mind takes in the sights I previously witnessed: Nina's face and her subtle warnings and Michael's smirk.

Oh shit.

Shit shit shit shit!

He heard me. He heard me talking like all of those other thirsty women do on social media (I'm don't have any account on any social media site, I just stalk fan accounts sometimes).

He'll probably think I'm just another whore, which I probably am at heart.

I can't even look to Nina for help. Why should I? I embarrassed her in front of established actor. I don't deserve her aid.

I feel that familiar uncomfortable sweat start to build up. My legs are shaking and my heart is pounding.

An elephant must've did a round house kick to my chest because I suddenly can't breathe.

I can only look at the ground, the shame acting as a weight on my head.

But even as I focus my attention at a single, pink tile, trying to regain some semblance of calm, it's not working.

God, I gotta get out here before I start bawling.

I know what I have to do now, even if it may be a coward's move.

"Sorry," I mumble, before I turn in the opposite direction and run away.
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

My baby boys got nominated for Top Group on Billboard!

I'm so proud of them!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Am I aware that this real life or am I really that delusional?

Because the way I ran out of the lobby like some air-headed damsel in distress from those god awful soap operas Grammy used to watch every Thursday night has me questioning some things about me.

Look, I'd like to think that I know myself pretty well. I know can be pretty dramatic at times, but I've never been one to flee from a situation. Given my recent behavior, I wouldn't shocked if Grammy came back from beyond the grave so she could beat my ass.

I wouldn't blame if she did. I feel so embarrassed and I only have myself to blame.

She always taught that when you make a mistake, you face it, head on no matter the consequences. Running away is a coward's game.

And playing it is how I ended up in this random bar in the hotel, drowning my sorrows in Sierra Mist (Because of personal reasons, I don't drink).

I don't know how long I've been sitting because I haven't bothered to check the time on my phone. But that probably due to the mountain of missed calls that Nina is leaving every ten minutes. It's clear that Nina probably worried sick but my mortification is overriding my guilt at the moment.

Maybe, I plan, I'll just stay here for the rest of the night and then come back to our room when I'm sure I won't run into you know who...

Someone sits down to the left of me. I can tell it's a man even though my eyes are trained solely on my sweating drink. His cologne smells like sandalwood and something that can only be described as
spicy.

It must be expensive because nothing cheap has an aroma that appealing.

I can feel his eyes starting a hole into my head and I can feel anger beginning to seep through. I want to wallow in self-pity with no interference. This man's got another thing coming if his goal was to pick on the girl he saw.

I whip my body around to face him, ready to tear him a new one.

"Alright, listen up boyo I...."

"I'm listening."

Fuck. It's Michael.

"I-I," I stutter. Oh yeah, that's intelligent, Willow. I place a sweaty hand on my face, thanking God that I was wearing water-proof makeup so that my perspiration coming from my hand wouldn't smudge anything.

Well, even though I was truly hoping I would never see this man again, I'll just need to woman up and apologize.

"Look," I start again. "I'm really sorry about what I said."

"You have don't apologize. It's all good."

"No, I do. What you heard was me and my friend tossing the shit around and it got out of hand. Even though you are very attractive, I don't think We had actually attended the Black Panther premiere tonight and it was breathtaking."

His eyes light up. "Thank you, sweetheart. I really appreciate you saying that." I feel myself blush at hearing his smooth, American accent refer to me as "sweetheart". "And to respond to what I heard
you say." I hunch my shoulders. "The reason I'm not freaking out about it is because what you was
tame compared to some of the things I've in a boys locker room."

I frown. "Boys locker room?" His confident aura is momentarily disrupted by the flash of discomfort
his eyes reveal. "Well, guys like to talk shit about women they claim to have gotten with and
exaggerate the experience. Sometimes they just lie all together, never having gotten with the girl."

I blink. "Sounds like a bunch of immature asswipes to me." He huffs a laugh. "Pretty much, yeah." He
signals the bartender and asks for a rum and coke.

There's silence between us as we wait, albeit a comfortable one. A minute, the bartender reappears
with Michael's drink. I sip my now watered down drink, in a feeble attempt not to stare at Michael's lips wrap around
the tip of the glass or the way his throat muscles contracted as he swallowed.

So in order to assuage my perverted ways, I blurt, "Where you ever one of those locker room boys
that talked crap about girls?" He chokes on his rum. I pat his back as he coughs.

When he calms down, I can almost see the cogs turning in his head as he works to give an answer
that won't make me want to throw my drink on his expensive suit.

Due to my previous fuck-up sometime ago, I decide to let him off the hook. "You know what?
Forget I asked. Since you were willing to forgive my crap, I can forgive yours. Besides, your hacking was answer enough." I make sure that my tone is light and my smile is wry as I make that last observation.

I get the reaction I was hoping for as his dimples surge out and an open mouthed smile rewards me.
"Thanks."

"I think that we're even, we should start over again." I hold my hand out in a greeting. "Hi, I'm Willow Spencer."

He reciprocates my gesture and shakes my hand in a firm grip. "Michael B. Jordan."

"You can pay me back by telling me how you got ready to play Erik." Once again, I can tell I
pushed the right button because he spends the next thirty minutes telling me how he played the
emotional train wreck which is Erik Kilmonger.
He described to me how he isolated himself from his friends and family and started carrying himself in such a matter that people that saw him coming down the street would hurry not to make eye contact.

He also told me that the dreads were ninety percent real, which I was thrilled and sad about. "It's shame though," I remark. "You looked good with the dreads."

"Maybe, but the time and effort it took to grow them is not something I truly enjoyed."

"I can understand that. Natural hair is no cake walk. It's tough yet fragile at the same time and breaks easily if it's not dealt with regularly enough. I can't even begin to tell you how many hair care treatments I have dabbled with in my teen years until I finally found a method works for me personally." I finger one of my braids as I talk.

"Well, some people have the time and patience for it but not me. I would only grow it out again if it had to do with a role again."

"Fair enough. But back to what you said earlier, I think I can kind of understand what the process of transforming into Erik."

He raises in eyebrows. "How so?"

"Well, I am a ballet dancer and, this is just for me personally, I don't know how other dancers get in the zone, I believe that there is an element of acting in my profession. So I try my best to connect with the character even if there is minimal background story. And if there's nothing for me to go on, I often create story lines so that whatever emotion I need to translate to the audience carries through. If I going to be completely honest, I don't even remember some of my performances I give because while my physical body is there doing the routines, my mind has convinced itself that I'm not even Willow Spencer anymore, I'm whoever the character I have trained myself to be."

When I get no response, I'm momentarily worried that I talked too much for his liking. But when I gaze at his face, his expression is stunned, not annoyed.

"Wow. That is... wow." He then laughs self-consciously. "I'm sorry, I swear I do have a better vocabulary than that, but what you said stunned me because I don't think I've ever heard someone in ballet describe a process like that."
"Well no offence, but how many people in ballet do you actually know?" He chuckles. "Okay, I'll admit, not many. But--" He's interrupted when his phone vibrates on the counter.

Before he grabs it, I peer at the time: 11:28 PM

Shit. I did my little running away routine around nine something and it's already eleven? Nina must be having a fit.

When Michael is done doing whatever, I hastily get up. "Michael, I'm sorry, but I didn't realize how late it's gotten."

Maybe it's my hopeful heart playing tricks on me, but I think I detect some disappointment in his voice as he replies, "I see. Well I wouldn't want to keep you from your business."

I hesitate. I think I felt something between us and I think maybe he did too. If I let go now, I'll never know what could've happened next.

"Well, maybe if we exchange numbers, we can plan a get together and continue this conversation over dinner?" I boldly ask.

The same smirk I saw in the lobby is back in full force. "Are you asking me out?"

"Yes, I am." The smirk slides off his face. Surprise decorates his face now. "What?" I tease. "Weren't expecting that?"

"I..." he begins. "I just didn't think you were actually being serious and truly asking me out. I just thought you only said it because you wanted me to say it for you."

Now it's my turn to smirk.

"Honey, there is one thing you have to know about me if we're going to continue this: I don't play mind games. If I'm attracted to you and want to go out with you, I'll ask out front. Playing hard to get
is reserved for high school children who don't know what the hell they want."

"But baby, I'm a grown woman who has a job that requires ninety percent of my focus and I do not not have time for the bullshit. So when I say I want to spend time with you, I mean it. That, of course, is if you say yes to what I'm proposing. I won't pressure you if that's not what you want. If not, then I can only offer friendship."

"So how about it?"

"Oh Nina, everything has been going so well with me and Michael lately. Of course, we can only see each other when our collective schedules clear up, but when we get together it's just great and peaceful."

"Mm-hm."

Once Michael got over his initial shock, we exchanged numbers and promised each other to get together soon.

Surprisingly enough, it wasn't just talk on his part. He called like a week later and we met at a local restaurant that he frequents whenever he has work in LA. We still had some shows left here so the timing worked out perfectly.

One date became two, and then three, and so on.

Even when I had to go back to London and he had to leave finish filming for Creed 2, we still found time to call, skype, and text.

This arrangement has been going on for just over three months. We're not exclusive yet, but I think we're heading there. And aside from a few hugs and kisses on the cheek, no notable physical contact.

But that just takes the pressure off me to hide how inexperienced I am. Our sex lives haven't come up and although I am planning on being truthful about it, I would rather not bring it up just yet.
We're still taking things slow at the moment, which I'm glad for frankly.

"I think the difference between Harry and Michael is that Harry was a boy and that Michael is a man. And maybe Harry has grown up since then, he's definitely doing well for himself from what I've heard, all he cared about was sex. With Michael, I don't know, I can have a mature conversation with him and not worry about him veering towards you know what. He's not one track minded."

"Yeah."

"We mainly talk about work when on our dates, but I love hearing his stories about the antics he and his costars get up to. And he always shows genuine interest when I talk about my roles and my thought process for it."

"Good for you."

I can feel myself starting to irritated. I called Nina because I wanted to tell her about Michael and I, but her short responses reek of disinterest and impatience.

I've never heard her sound so distant before. So I ask, "Nina? Is something wrong? Are your parents and brother okay?"

"No, everyone's fine."

"Nothing happened at Oberman's did it?"

"We work together. Don't you think you would've noticed if something was wrong if you stopped talking about Michael for five seconds?"

Okay. She's definitely pissed. But what exactly?

"Is that why you've been so short with me? Because ever since I told I've been seeing him, it feels like you don't want me to bring it up. Which I don't think is really fair because I always let you tell me about the guys that you're seeing. I just don't understand why I can't do the same. I really like this guy and I think we have a future together."
Nothing is said for a long time. Finally, I hear her sigh and then say, "Bee, it's not that I don't want you to be happy because I truly do. But I see how fast you're falling and that man has a job that puts a lot of scrutiny on him and we both know that you hate attention like that. Harry is a celebrity too and look how well that turned out. I just don't think rushing into this is going to help. Plus, if the media finds out about you, you'll always have to worry if someone is watching you or not. It may be better to let this one go so you don't get hurt in the end."

I cannot believe that she is throwing that in my face. "Alright let's get something straight," I nearly growl. "You were the one who introduced me to Harry and you were the one who set us up on that blind date. And second, I'm not rushing into anything. Hell, we haven't even kissed for God's sake. Look Nina, I love you with all my heart and while your opinion does matter to me, this is my life. And even if Michael and I don't work out, that's on me and I will deal with it."

Again, a long silence. "Okay," she concedes. "But don't say I didn't warn you."

I chuckle, even though I find nothing funny about our conversation. "From the way you're speaking, it's almost as if you know the man even though you refuse to meet him." She doesn't respond to that comment.

The conversation kind of dies out after that.

"Michael? Michael," I have to shake his arm to drag him out of whatever stupor he stumbled into. He jolts, as if he was sleeping.

Well, he might as well have been sleeping from how despondent he's been tonight.

It has now been a good four months since we first met. Our last showing of Romeo and Juliet has just finished and we're moving onto our next production, Giselle.

On Friday, I've decided to fly down to LA to meet up with Michael and we are currently having dinner at some high-end restaurant.

I'm trying to enjoy myself, but Michael is so distracted tonight that I can't but feel exhausted.
"Michael, should we just call this a night and try again some other time?" I suggest, finally losing patience.

"No!" he grabs both of my hands and plants kisses all over them. "I'm sorry sweetheart, work has just been kicking my ass recently. My head is kind of in the clouds right now."

I feel myself relax at those words. I can totally agree with what he was saying.

"If that's truly all it is, then no harm done. It's just that we're wrapping up the production of *Romeo and Juliet* and after this break, I have to immediately go back and get ready for another showing. So that means more practice, more note-taking, and more sweat."

We both laugh at my last comment. "Plus, things between me and Nina haven't been going very well."

It may have been my imagination, but I swear I saw a flash of panic in his eyes. But when I try to take a closer examination, his eyes read nothing but sympathy. "What seems to be the problem?"

Maybe I just imagined it, I muse.

"It has to do with you." I don't look at him directly, fearing at what I might find. "She hasn't been the most supportive of us ever since we started seeing each other. It's almost as if she resents me for seeing you. But whenever I try to talk to her about, she claims that nothing is wrong."

"I'm sure she just trying to be a good friend to you, sweetheart," he squeezes my hand in a comforting gesture.

I smile. "I guess it just has to do with the fact that I haven't dated in while. Chances are she's just being overprotective."

It's like the ice broke because conversation came easier to us and we began our routine of talking about current events.

We had been so deep in our conversation, a waiter had to come up to us and make us aware that the
restaurant would be closing soon.

Like all of our dates, I'm sad to see this one come to and end because I don't when we'll be able to do this again.

"Let me walk you to your car," he offers.

He wraps his arm around my waist and we carried on.

We are almost at my car and I still haven't said what I've been wanting all night.

Come on Willow, I command myself. Daddy and Grammy didn't raise no pussy. The worst he could say is no.

Just as we've arrived at my rented, red Lexus SUV, I turn around and face Michael.

"Michael," I begin. "We've been seeing each other for a little while and I gotta admit that I'm very much attracted to you."

He smiles that dimply smile of his that makes my knotted belly feel even more tighter. "And I really want to take our relationship to the next level. What do you think?"

I wring my hands as I watch Michael's expression morph through so many emotions that my eyes can't keep up. Finally, he gives me a wan smile. "Why not?"

I frown. "You don't sound like you want to, Michael if you're not interested, then tell me straight up. I told you before I do not have time to be playing mind games with you."

My irritation is obvious and Michael responds by grabbing me by the waist and kissing me for the very first time.

My anger fades away as I feel his soft, moisturized lips on mine. I slide my hands onto his back and nearly groan at how the muscles contract from the touch from my hands.
God, I wish I could just turn my brain off and enjoy what he's giving me, but then he puts his thick tongue into my mouth and immediately freak out.

I freeze up as I feel his tongue rub up against mine. Damn, I never did really get french kissing down. I'm worried about how I should move my own tongue and how Michael taste like alcohol and green beans.

Hang on, what must I taste like to him? I had lasagna and a coke. Do I taste like sauce and meat gone bad?

Shit, I would've taken a breath mint if I had known this was going to happen. Romantic whims be damned, I need time to prepare for this crap!

Feeling completely turned off, I gently pull away from Michael. The parking lot is only filled with the sound of us trying to regain our respective breaths.

"So," I inquire once I regain my composure. "Is that a yes?"

"Yeah," his eyes are gentle (thank god, he doesn't realize what a terrible kisser I am yet). "That's a definite yes."

I can't help it, but combined with the way he's staring at me and the fact that I have a new boyfriend, I let out a giggle.

"Alright then. I think we should meet up tomorrow because I want to talk about a few things with you if we're going to do this."

"We can do it at my house."

My Masseter muscle works overtime to keep my jaw from falling open. I've never been to his house before. I wouldn't be freaking out so much if he hadn't told that his parents live with him. When he first told me my heart had melted at how he takes care of his parents.
But that same heart's rhythm has been interrupted because of what I might have to do.

"I haven't even been your girlfriend for, what, five seconds?! And now I already got to worry about meeting yo' mama?" My voice cracks on the last word. The nigga has the nerve to laugh at my turmoil. He then takes me back into his arms, planting a soft kiss on my forehead.

"Baby, my moms and my pops are the most laid-back people you can come across. Don't trip, they'll love you." I feel the knots in my stomach start unfurl slightly when I hear his reassurances. He hasn't lied to me yet, so I have no reason not to take his word.

"They'll instantly see how cute you are and fall for you the same way I did." I try not to let my smile slip at the word "cute". My insecurities are trying to get the best of me and I won't let them.

Chill out LoLo, I scold myself. This poor man does not need you to unravel of all your baggage right now.

So I just do what I always: I paste on a smile and pretend that I'm not slightly disappointed at his choice of words.

"I'm such a poor person," I say out loud to my passenger-less car.

Michael and I agreed to meet up on Sunday around eleven at his house so we could discuss a little further about us. I decided to grab some sandwiches from a local deli that Michael seems to love to frequent. I put the turkey and chicken sandwiches I bought into this adorable picnic basket I also bought for the occasion.

I want this meeting to be as enjoyable as possible as we lay out the groundwork of our new relationship.

I don't why I'm surprised at the size of his house. He's a renowned actor that makes millions of dollars, of course he wants the finer things in life. Plus, he also shares the space with his folks.

I pull my car up to the security gate, type in the pin that Michael supplied me with, watch as the iron gates swing, and put my car back into drive so I can proceed. I park my vehicle in the driveway, turn
the engine off and grab my reach for my picnic basket from the first set of backseats.

Nina has never understood my fascination with SUVs, always ribbing me about how I don't know enough people to be wanting all that space.

I've always liked the idea of having a car with lots of space. I have room for all of my comic books, manga, and my animal masquerade masks I keep just hold onto for the hell of it.

Plus, I may have to drive a lot of people in the near future and I want to be prepared if that ever happens.

My car door closes with a thud. I walk up to the front door, picnic basket in tow.

Before I ring the doorbell, I smooth the wrinkles from my orange, Daishiki Jumpsuit, wriggle around in a fruitless attempt to get rid of my nerves, and ring the doorbell.

I wait for only thirty seconds before the door opens and I'm greeted by a lightskin woman who looks to be in her fifties or sixties. She must be about only a few inches shorter than me and she has a heavy-set build.

Her face is reserved even though she offers me a small smile when she says, "Um, hello. May I ask who you are and how you got in?"

Courage, Willow, courage. "Y-you must me, I-I mean b-be, Michael's mother. I'm Willow Spencer. I've been seeing your son recently, ma'am, and w-we're supposed to meet today. He gave me the password to the gate." Now I wish I had grabbed the strip of paper that Michael had wrote the pin on. Seeing her son's handwriting would've surely convinced her.

Mrs. Jordan doesn't say anything for a long time. I know she's sizing me up, debating whether I'm telling the truth or not.

How is it that someone so fragile looking can scare the stuffing out of me?
I'm currently debating if I should've given a better explanation when her face suddenly transforms into a huge grin.

I can definitely see where Michael get his smile from. "Oh yes, now I remember. Michael's mentioned you several times." My heart flutters. He talked about me to his mother? "Come on in, sweetie. You can go put that picnic basket in the kitchen." She steps aside and motions me to come inside the house.

I melt like an ice cube in the Sahara. "Thank you, Mrs. Jordan."

She shakes her head. "It's Donna to you, young lady."

I feel my nervousness start chip off, piece by piece. I think I will like Donna Jordan.

I try to take in everything I see as Donna leads me to the kitchen area. It's a very modern space and I can't help my anticipation bubble as I hope that Michael will give me a tour of his home later on.

"That is quite a big basket you got there," Donna observes. "What did you pack in there?" I perk up at the mention of the food I'm carrying.

"I would love to say that I made them myself, but they're just some sandwiches from a local deli shop that Michael..."

The warm, easy atmosphere that Donna and I created for ourselves disappears at the sight of Michael in a passionate embrace with another woman.

I blink hard several times, wondering if I imagining what I'm seeing. But reality has never been a close friend of mine.

Michael has got this woman pushed up against the kitchen island, her long, bronze legs wrapped around his waist like tree vines. He's wearing a pair of baggy sweats and a black wife-beater.

The woman, whose face I can't see, is only wearing a T-shirt which is clearly too big for her.
She spent the night here, I absently realize. It's the only logical explanation. He slept with this woman only days after agreeing to being exclusive with me.

I don't even know what to feel. I'm hurt, confused, angry, humiliated, and guilty.

_Not again._

Was our kiss really so bad that he felt the need to find a more experienced woman already? Had I already doomed our day old relationship before it began?

Their moans bring me to my senses though. Rage saturates my being.

It doesn't matter. The only thing that does matter is how I'm going to get Donna, who watching the scene in front of us with disgust and burgeoning anger as well, to leave the room so that she won't witness me breaking her son's pathetic neck.

Swallowing hard so that my voice can come out strong and steady, I call out his name. "Michael."

He swivels around, immediately protecting the girl from our view. When he registers that I'm standing in front of him along with his mother, dread covers his face.

I'm so focused on ripping this lying, cheating, conniving negro a new one that I don't pay much attention to his little bitch.

But when I catch a quick glance of her face, I think I'm going to be sick. I drop my basket and my knee threaten to give out on me from severely they're shaking. I want to be anywhere but here.

No...

It... It can't be.
It's not her, she told me that she went back home to Wales to visit her family.

It's just some random lightskin girl he met in some seedy bar.

*It's not her.*

Her almond shaped eyes.

*It's not her.*

Her impossibly high cheekbones.

*It's not her.*

The three, little moles that lie in the corner of her right eye. I referred to them as little, black stars.

*Please God, no! It's not her. It can't be.*

Her dark brown, which usually are filled with mischief and affection for me now only stare back with pity now.

*It's...*

"Oh dear God, Bee."

Chapter End Notes

Things start moving forward next chapter...
You'll understand why I did this later
Thx for reading!
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

Thank you for the 500 hits.

I may not say often, but I appreciate every hit, kudos, and comment I get

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Michael Bakari Jordan, what is going on? Who is this young lady?"

I dimly hear Donna demanding answers while I still stare at Nina with empty eyes, still hoping, praying, that the sight I'm seeing is the result of me not having breakfast and my stomach taking its revenge by sending my brain false images.

And yet, my best friend still stands in front of me, with this strange defiance to her trembling lips.

I want to move. I want to throttle both of them, break something, and ask them how could they do this to me. Ask Michael what he had seen in Nina that he hadn't seen in me.

But in order to that, I need remember how to un-stick my feet from the marble flooring.

"I can't do this right now." It's Nina's distressed tone that brings me out of my daze and back into the world of my painful reality. I watch her begin run out of the room like I'm the one who has just betrayed her. Like I'm the one who got caught wrapped around someone else's man. Like I'm the one who played her for a fool.

Whenever I read books and they described the protagonist seeing red or black, I didn't understand what that meant. How could anyone see different colors when they're angry?

But I think I have an inkling of what that phrase meant because as I storm after the cunt who I used to call my best friend, my fury is giving me some serious tunnel vision.

"What the hell you mean you can't deal with this right now?!!" I don't care that I'm practically yelling in some else's house, I just want answers. Maybe if I had actually ran after her instead the fast walk
I'm doing, I would've caught her skinny ass, but I don't.

She slips into what I think is a nearby bathroom and I hear the door lock. The ease of how she did it suggest to me that this isn't her first time here.

And doesn't that just twist the knife that's already inside my back?

I'm this close to banging on the door, demanding the witch come out, when a hand circles around my elbow. The slight shock of pain is incentive for me to spin around.

It's Michael. He's got this determined look on his face.

He probably doesn't want me to cause bodily harm towards his little girlfriend.

How sweet.

I rip my elbow out of his grasp, draw in a huge breath, and prepare to curse his ass out.

"Please, I know you're upset, but my parents live here too and I really don't want them to hear this. Can we go back to the kitchen and talk about this?"

He knows and I know that the time for talking is way past due and all I want now is hellfire and brimstone.

But of course, my killjoy of a conscience decides to make a cameo appearance to remind me of the kindness and the anger that Donna had displayed on my behalf. She, and her husband, is an innocent in her son's mess.

So I relent.

Michael's handsome face relaxes once he sees I'm off the warpath for now. He heads back to the kitchen and I start to follow, but there is one thing I have to do first.
"Nina," I call out. "Your knight in shining armor may have saved you for now, but rest assured, sooner or later we are going to handle our business."

Even though there's no answer, but I know that bitch hears me.

I walk back into the kitchen trying to regain some of my cool back.

Donna is gone and Michael is now sitting at the kitchen island where he had Nina pushed up against just minutes ago.

I choose to look at the stove instead.

I don't want to, but I have to look at Michael. He doesn't even have the decency to look me in the eye. He's too busy staring at twiddling fingers.

Although I'm fuming on the inside, I can't help but let out a giggle that may be bordering on mania. If he won't talk, I will.

"You know what's funny? When first you told me about how the media accused you of not dating black women, I actually felt sorry for you. My naive behind genuinely thought 'Why does everyone put a microscope on when we as black people want to date outside our race?' But now I see that you're no different from those NBA or NFL players who think that if they score some white, biracial, or whatever racially ambiguous woman who is willing to hop on their dick, they're suddenly their status is elevated and they're hot shit!"

That got a reaction. He gets and marches right over to me. "You know nothing about the situation!" He looks outraged that I would even say something like that. But I honestly don't give two fucks if his feelings are hurt or not.

"Then what was it, hm? Because all I see is that my black boyfriend cheated on his darkskin girlfriend for her lighskin best friend. Tale as old as fucking--"
On the other hand, she hadn't mention that she was screwing my boyfriend behind my back but that's another story.

Michael sighs a long-suffering sigh. "We met a few years ago," he explains. "I had just filming up Fruitvale Station and I wanted to do some traveling. Long story short, I went to London, bumped into Nina at some random bar and the rest is history. We only dated for a little under a year."

A part of me really doesn't want to know but I have to know. "Why did you two break up?"

"Although we were good together, we both agreed that the idea of a long, distance relationship wasn't something that interested us. It was a mutual decision."

It's then I remember. During my drama with Harry, Nina had been seeing some actor from L.A. But she said since the relationship was new, she didn't want to mention his name unless they became serious so I never really asked for details.

Now all of those months her odd behavior make sense. But what I just don't get is why? Why didn't she tell me when I told her that Michael and I were going out? If she was that bothered by it I would never gone out with him in the first place.

Hell, I would've even helped them get back together if she so desired it. From the way they were so wrapped up in each other, any outside would instantly think that they were in love or something....

Wait.

Oh my God.

My thoughts stop as a nauseating notion crosses my mind. I want to dismiss it. No one can be that heartless and underhanded.

But given everything that's happen thus far, I have to ask.
"Is...is that why you agreed to go out with me? So through me you could keep tabs on her or maybe find a way to get back together?" My voice is low, as if the words I speak are a spell that will bring catastrophe.

I want Michael to be angry with me now.

I want him to enraged and demand why would I ask such an awful question? He would never to do that to anyone.

It's pitiful, really. Even though Michael has cheated on me, I still want to believe that he's not capable of being this cruel.

But he doesn't.

He stiffens and looks away from me.

"It... it may have started out like that, I'll admit. When I first heard you talking with Nina, it was easy to see you guys were close friends. I don't know what I was thinking to be honest. When you ran off, I tried to get Nina to talk to me, but she insisted that we were through. At first, I accepted it. My moms always taught me if that a woman says no, she usually means no. Who was I to push it?"

"And then she asked me if I could go look for where you might've run off to." The guilt contorting his facial features as he gazes at me again makes me want to tell, plead, with him to stop. Ask him to not destroy me anymore than he already has.

But my silent request goes unanswered. "I did enjoy our conversation in the bar, I really did. The only difference is that I couldn't see us being anything more than just friends. But then I thought maybe if I went out with you on a couple of dates, maybe she'll see what she's missing. So I did."

I can't believe it. When I accused him of using me, it was said more out of rash anger. I didn't think that he would actually have the balls do admitting it.

"How..." I breathe. I have to pause to collect myself and stymie the filming in my eyes. I'd rather die than letting this selfish negro see me weep before him.
"Why? How could you do this to me? You led me on this entire time! Making me think that I had a future with you when all along you knew that you never wanted me in the first place."

He shakes his head and then grips my shoulders. "Wait, wait, wait! It wasn't the entire time. I know you have no business believing me now, but it's the truth!"

I scoff and push his hands off my shoulders. "You're liar and a manipulator. Why should I believe a word you say?"

"Along the line, I did start to gain some feelings for you and when I kissed you, I was so sure that I was ready to forget about Nina. But then..." He pauses. His words stay frozen in the air for what seems like millenia.

That is, until I holler, "But then what!" My voice bounces off the kitchen walls. Michael jumps. "A few hours after our date, Nina was at my front door. She was angry. Saying how dare I use you to get to her and how she couldn't stop thinking about me since she saw again, how it was torture listening to you talking about wonderful you thought I was. Next thing I know we're kissing and tearing each other clothes off. My parents live on the opposite side of the house, so there was so chance of them hearing what was going on in the main quarters. After we... you know, we agreed that breaking up was a mistake and that we still cared about each other. Our plan was that I was going to tell you today that my career was more important to me and that I wasn't ready for a relationship right now. We weren't going to reveal our relationship until a good, six months later."

"So... what? After you two finished fucking like two dogs in heat, you conspired together to deceive me more than you already did? So you were never planning on being honest with me? If I hadn't caught you two, you were still intending to pull the wool over my eyes." Michael's doesn't dare acknowledge my words. His Adam's apple just bobs up and down as he swallows. "Did it ever occur to either one of you to tell me the truth?"

"Nina said knowing you, it was probably better to let you believe a picture-perfect lie since she told me that you are extremely sensitive since what happened with your last--"

It's those words that make me finally lose it.

Before he knows what's happening, I rear my fist back and I'm connecting it with Michael's jaw.
Thanks to Uncle Jack's teachings, I make sure to tuck my thumb inside my fist so as not to harm it. Although that doesn't stop my knuckles from throbbing. I breathe through my nose heavily trying to regain my composure.

Michael's head knocks backward from the force of my punch. He cradles his jaw with his hand. Before he covers it, I can see a trace of blood start to well up at the surface of his mouth.

Good.

"Her pity," I seethe. "And yours, means jackshit to me."

I grab my basket and stride out of the kitchen, not once looking to glance back at him. I may be tempted to do more if I do.

I'm almost out the door when Donna stops me. My back is turned to her.

"Young lady." I really don't want to stop because I'm this close to crumbling. But that ingrained need to respect my elders blocks my progress.

"Yes ma'am," I whisper, trying desperately not to cry. She slowly turns me around to face her, concern and sympathy shining in her eyes.

She cups my face in her wrinkly hands. "I am so sorry that my son has treated you like this. He's my child and I love him with everything I have, but I am also very disappointed in his recent behavior." I exhale shakily.

Hearing her tell me explicitly that it was alright for me to be angry, mad, heartbroken makes me want collapse in her arms and sob till my head starts to hurt.

She makes me long for daddy, Grammy, heck, anyone to hold me and tell me that I am worthy of love.

I pull it together long enough to tell her, "Thank you, Miss Donna. We've known each other for a few minutes and you've been so kind to a complete stranger. And yeah, this hurt a lot, but don't
I trail off as I hear someone crying. It was Nina.

They're standing in nearby hallway. She's sobbing into her hands and Michael is holding her, stroking her hair with such affection that it startles me.

It hits me in that moment.

This was never my fairy tale to begin with.

Nina is the beautiful, resourceful peasant girl that the handsome prince, Michael, falls madly in love with.

They get their happily ever after.

I, on the other hand, am the monster.

I'm the ugly, black-hearted fiance that prince is being forced to marry for the good of the kingdom.

Ever since I was a little girl, fairy tales have been my escape when the world proved to be too cruel for my fragile, young heart to take.

It got worse when I first got my scars and the kids at school made a point to ostracize me, saying no one wanted to play with the monster and they'd even scream or throw things at me.

Even at a young age, I knew not to bother Grammy or daddy with what was happening at school, even though they probably suspected.

Instead, I looked to my picture books for comfort.
*Beauty and the Beast* was a favorite of mine, no coincidence there I guess. I ran that book ragged from how many times I poured through it. The way that Beauty was able to love the Beast despite his ugliness and then he turned into a handsome prince gave me hope and encouraged me to not give up.

Of course, my six year old brain believed that if I met my true love, the scars would disappear and I would become beautiful.

I put away such naive thoughts when I got older, but my romantic heart still held out hope for the dreams I held when I was a little girl.

Dreaming that along with becoming a famous ballerina, I would become someone's greatest love story.

But I never have.

I've always been the obstacle.

The trial that someone needed to overcome to get to the main prize.

I've *never* been anyone's first choice.

And I'm starting to fear that I never will.

I don't stay to listen to anything else Donna has to say. I basically run back to my car.

I know it's dangerous to drive while in an emotional state but I have to get away from here, from them.

I drive aimlessly until I settle into a little parking lot for some supermarket.

I park there and finally open the floodgates.
I sob big, ugly, gut-wrenching sobs.

"Grammy," I moan in despair. "I did what you said: I don't close myself off from anyone. I opened my heart, just like you told me. But every time I do, they keep crushing it and abusing it..." sobs cut off my words.

Unbidden images of Nina and Michael having sex enter my mind. They must had a good laugh over how much of an idiot I was to fall for their games.

What was the point? What was the point of loving and living if people just kept deciding that I wasn't good enough?

Nina, Harry, Haley, Mr. Abrams, her.

None of them thought I was worth it.

So why should--

My phone vibrates in my pocket.

I take a break from toxic thoughts to read it. It's from Lance.

He wanted me to know that an offer to choreograph a dance for some group from South Korea came in this morning. He attached a copy of the song and its lyrics in the email. He wanted me to let him know my final decision to take the job when I got back to the UK.

Well, I decide. I ain't got nothing else to do. Why not just listen to it?

I opened the attachment. The song is called *Serendipity*.

I plug in my aux cord, hook my phone up, and let the ethereal voice and dreamy beat carry me
My troubled nerves are soothed as I continue to listen, almost as if the music is a balm to my battered soul. Even if its not in English, the song speaks to me.

It doesn't help that the lyrics are so utterly romantic. It speaks to the hopeless romantic in me.

And I can't but feel envious.

Whoever gets the privilege of having someone like this writing love songs to them is very lucky indeed.

Chapter End Notes

So.....

Yeah
Chapter Notes

Okay, what your top 3 MOTS persona songs?

Mine are Home, Jamais Vu, and Intro: Persona

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nina doesn't try to contact me at all during the rest of the day.

That suits me just fine.

I spend the remainder of my last day on break binge-eating the sandwiches I made and abusing my repeat button to hear this gorgeous song again.

I could kiss Lance for sending the translated lyrics because I'm already starting to piece together the routine.

When I put together a dance, I always try to base off three things: The lyrics, the beat, or the emotion in the singer's voice. It's a rare treat for me when the lyrics isn't generic crap that anyone mediocre songwriter could come up with.

Don't get me wrong, I love love songs. I grew up on the shit, how could I not? But it's tough for me personally to connect and create a dance when the lyrics have no heart in them or no real conviction.

But I could always count on the trademark catchy beat and sometimes the autotuned vocals to aid me.

Not this song.

I wonder if the person who wrote this was thinking about someone in particular when he or she wrote this?
But then again, it's none of my business either way.

In the great words of Beyoncé Knowles-Carter, Imma fuck me up a bitch.

It's been close to three weeks and Nina is avoiding me.

Ever since break ended, I've been careful to keep it cordial with her. In truth, I wasn't sure what I would do if I saw her face. It almost made me want to call in sick and just stay home to shield myself from my never ending issues.

But I love my job.

And because I love my job, I refuse to let anything or anyone prevent me from doing it. Which meant I was the poster child of professionalism.

But as soon as rehearsal was done, I was always ready to corner the bitch but by the time I put my gear away, she was already gone. She barely spoke to me and avoided eye contact when our eyes happen to meet on occasion.

She was acting as if I'm the one that did wrong when all I want is for her to explain herself.

And don't that just make me want to do some illegal things to that girl?

But not today.

Today, I'm going to corner her.

As soon as Miss Michelle calls it a day, I notice Nina hastily trying to put of her shit into her tote bag. I watch her, vaguely amused. Just as she's about to head out the door, I make my move.

"Hey Nina, do you wanna go over some of Act II with me?" I take great pride in seeing Nina, who
is usually the most cool-headed person I know, flinch like she just saw a ghost.

I know that she won't say no. We always practice together, everybody knows that. And I can tell that the others have been feeling the unrest between us. I've had a few of them come up to me asking if everything was solid between Nina and I.

The only reason why I haven't told them the truth is because I don't want my business to be spread out like that. I've been humiliated enough. I don't need to be pitied on top of everything else. And we're unit. If the truth came out, I don't want to even imagine what kind of damage that can cause.

Well, at least those are my reasons.

I think the only reason Nina doesn't say anything is because the girls, not so much the guys, would make her life a living hell if they knew.

So I know the only reason she paste on an artificial smile and trills, "Sure!" is so the suspicion rising in our tight-knit group will die down.

I may be dumb when it comes to love, but I've always been a good sneak.

The room empties in a matter of minutes and soon it's just the two of us.

I'm not planning on breaking the silence first. I want to see what she will do next. Avoid it or confront it.

"If you're looking for an apology, you won't be getting one from me," she finally says. Her chin is tilted upwards and her eyes are defiant.

I smirk, careful not to show that I really want to wring her neck. She's really going to stand there and act like she didn't betray my trust and break my heart? I'm honestly starting to question whether there is something mentally wrong with her. Because this heifer actually believes that what she and Michael did to me was right.

I clench and unclench my jaw, trying to hold onto my waning sanity. "So you did nothing. Is that
what you're telling me?"

She puts her hands on her hips. "Yeah," she says, bravado making her sing-songy accent more apparent. "Me and Michael are in love, always have been. I'll admit that maybe we should've just told you the truth straight out, but I don't, can't, regret it because Michael is finally mine again."

I can't help it anymore, I bust out laughing. The fact that I may have never truly known this girl and how easily she was willing to betray makes me feel like dying on the inside. But instead of giving into the need to destroy everything in this room to ease my suffering, I decide to express myself through the gift of laughter.

For what feels like hours, but what may have only been two minutes, I release huge, booming, deranged shrieks. Acid tears burn my eyes as they scald my hot cheeks. Through my hazy vision, I can my reflection.

I look like a true lunatic.

My mouth is open in a wide arc, a manic smile displaying my bared teeth. My eyes are bulging in a beastly manner. A thin line of saliva has escaped the corner of my mouth.

If I weren't so wrapped up in my misery, I probably would've screamed the gruesome sight.

"What's so funny?" I whip my head back towards Nina. Her earlier cocky persona is still there, but I note that she has edged herself towards the exit.

I get a handle on myself long enough to respond. "What's funny," I croak. The laughing has made my throat go dry. "Is how much I'm having to hold myself back from wanting to see my hands make your head twist until I snap your neck. Maybe then you'll feel sorry."

Nina's cheeks, which had been flushed a pretty pink from rehearsal, lost their color at my demented thoughts.

In the past, whenever we used to go out somewhere and some asshole was wouldn't stop bothering her, it was always my job to put them in their place. Uncle Jack and Tío Luis made sure by the time I was thirteen, I could defend myself through any situation.
And adding the incident with Marigold’s ex a few years ago, she knows that the two inches of height she has on me wouldn’t stop me from beating the hell out of her if the wind hit me just right.

"You..." I breathe, suddenly sobering up at the thought of Marigold and her disgusting ex. My temporary insanity is gone and the rage is back. "You... we were supposed to be girls, sisters even. How could you do this to me? To me?" My voice breaks at my last statement.

"When have I ever told you I consider you my sister? You yourself may have said it a million times but I don’t recall saying it once."

Ouch. Her harsh words put a solid dent in my heart.

It's true, I have never heard her say it to me, but with the way she always gave an affectionate smile, I always thought that the feeling was mutual. "Okay," I grant. "Maybe you haven't, but we were still best friends. And given my prior history with being cheated on, I just can't understand why you would do something so underhanded. You how hurt I was when I found about Harry stepping out on me."

She shakes her head. "See? That's one of the main reasons I don't regret sleeping with Michael. For the majority of the time I've known you, our whole relationship has consisted of you having some type of drama and me always having to come pat you on the head and telling you that it'll be alright."

I reel back in bewilderment. "Excuse me?"

She gives me her best "Bitch please" glare and continues. "I can't count how many times it has constantly been you and your never ending problems. If it's not one thing it's another with you. Look, I'm sorry your own mother was a drug addict and didn't care about you. But I'm tired of always having to play the role of your mother because last time I checked, I'm not your goddamned psychologist. I am not obligated to listen to you whine about every little that crosses your self-absorbed brain of yours."

I regret ever having confronted Nina. If I had known she held this much animosity towards me, I would've never done it. I had been so self-assured that I was in the right and she was in the wrong. But now she has me questioning myself: Did I really make our entire relationship about myself? Am I really as self-absorbed as she claims?
Nina always made me feel safe enough to tell things I don't usually tell to anyone, excluding my face, the gory details of my mother and my nonexistent sex life.

Was I really such a burden to her?

"I bet you can't even recall the times where you were there listening to my problems for once. It just seemed like you forgot that the world doesn't revolve around you. It's always been about you and I'm sick of it. So I decided that for once, I was going to love myself and actually care about my own happiness for once. And I refuse to allow you or anyone make me feel bad about it."

I don't know what to say to this. What can I say? She has firmly convinced herself that she has done nothing offensive.

She's standing here looking so self-righteous and she even has me feeling guilty. I know I have a lot of issues. I would be delusional not to. And yes, I have shared with Nina a little bit about her and her drug addiction. But I never, not in a million years thought that she would think I only thought of her as my personal diary. I love this girl, whether she believes me or not.

Yes, maybe I could've been more receptive to hearing some of her problems over the six years of our friendship, but she never gave any indication that she had any issues. She never told me anything so I believed that everything was rainbows and sunshine between us. I had no idea she held this resentment towards me.

But the guilt vanishes when images of me standing outside Harry's shower listening to him fucking another woman and watching Michael practically having sex with my best friend on his kitchen counter surface in my mind.

I remember how right after the break-up with Harry, how I had went through hundreds upon hundreds of pictures and interviews with Kendall Jenner.

Thoughts of how she's this naturally beautiful girl who wears makeup regularly but uses it because her job demands it, not to hide her deformed face. She makes more money than I do, has more friends, she's way skinnier, her skin is lighter and more healthier, and her hair is never the tangled, knotty and nappy mess mine sometimes always is. Why wouldn't he choose her over me?

And when I found about Nina and Michael, the same thoughts went through my head. How I struggled not to punish myself for things I wasn't born with and do something I would later on regret.
So even knowing that I may have unintentionally hurt Nina's feelings, I also know that there is a fine line between self love and just being plain selfish.

"If you really did nothing wrong, then why did you lie about where you were going to be that day?" My tone could slice through concrete. Her confident stance wobbles slightly.

"That's--"

"If you truly did nothing wrong then why did you never bother to come clean about your history with Michael when you knew I was still seeing him?"

"I--"

"And," I swallow back the tears and force the words out. "If what you did was completely innocent then why were you planning on never telling me the truth and still play these sick mind games even months later?"

I had been steadily getting closer to her, wanting to see her every facial expression, until I'm only inches from her face. I have adopted a serene smile.

She can't even look me in the eyes. Her head is tilted downward and her eyes skit to everywhere except my own intense ones.

I shake my head in contempt. "That's what I thought." I snatch my bag and stalk out the door, suddenly can't standing the thought of being alone with this girl.

I'm walking down the hallway and I almost make it out the exit when I feel a hand on my shoulder.

It's Lance. The smile on his face disintegrates slightly when he sees my face. "Honey, are you alright? You haven't been yourself for weeks now and I was just wondering is everything good with you?"
Oh, how I wish I could confide in Lance and tell all the sorted details with my drama with Nina and how her betrayal has shook me to my core.

But I don't. If Nina was right, then I need to make a bigger effort from now on not to burden others with my problems and consider other's feelings.

I am not an attention whore.

I am capable of thinking about others and their needs.

I just need to be stronger and learn how to shoulder my problems without burdening someone else.

I've done it before, I can do it again.

So instead, I give my best, more cheery smile that I can muster at the moment and basically, "Oh love, I'm always alright. You should know by now that nothing gets to me that easily. Now, you obviously wanted to talk to me about something, so just spill it already."

Lance still looks dubious but he blessedly lets it go. "Anyways, you remember that dance you made for that group I told about? Well, they loved it and now their personal choreographer is requesting that you come out to Seoul to give a one-on-one teaching to the member that is going to do the routine, along with the backup dancers. They're even willing to rent a out a place for you stay while you're there."

"Now, I know what you're going to say: You don't take jobs that require you to meet up with your client face to face and you don't want to risk that your face get revealed and the public makes the connection to your primary employment, I get that. But honey, I think that this could be a once in a lifetime opportunity for you to branch out and-"

"I'll take it." I don't even hesitate. I want, need, to get away from the never ending trainwreck that is my life. Now that I know that Nina has no plans to repent of what she's done, I honestly don't know how I'll get through work without wanting to strangle her or just start crying at the mere sight of her.

No, I need some time away from London. What better than to go to a foreign country where no knows who I am?
Lance, poor man, is understandably stupefied at my quick response. You will never know how many times he has come to me before with offers like this and I have always shut him down immediately. He get this suspicious glint in his eyes for a millisecond, but it goes away just as fast.

"I... well, okay then," he lets out a booming laugh that echoes on the walls. "They say that they would like for you to be there no later then two weeks from today."

I nod my head. "Alright. I'll make sure to talk to Michaela and make sure she's solid on the role of Giselle. And I also need to check my local airport for the earliest flights to Seoul."

"Sounds like a plan."

I smile and make to turn around to head towards the exit like I originally planned.

But a thought crosses my mind and I have to ask. "Incidentally, do you know if any of them speak English?"

Lance scrunches his face up in thought. "From what was said in the email, only one of them speaks fluent English."

Huh.

Well, I guess I better brush up on my Korean.

Chapter End Notes

Okay...

If I don't post for a while, it's because I'm going to edit the past chapters (something I know I should've done ages ago!)

Who knows I may later on in the week or maybe the week after that, idk.

But anyways, thank you for reading and getting my story to 600 hits.
So...
I lied.
Enjoy!

Seoul is...

Murky.

I know that this description is pretty vague in its self but that's the only word that comes to mind when I see it.

It reminds a lot of New York, with its grey skies and the buildings that make up for the gloom of the weather with its bright lights and flashy advertisements. Except the words are written in Hangul, not English.

When I made the announcement that I was going to Seoul, everybody, minus Nina, was enthusiastic.

Especially the younger people of our group. Even though they just went through a four to six-hour grueling rehearsal, they somehow found the energy to be giddy about this group who call themselves BTS.

"You have to get me J-Hope's autograph, promise me you will!"

"How is the universe saw it fit to grace you with the opportunity to meet Jungkook but not me!"

"Miss Willow, it is your solemn duty as the Principal leader of this company to be a good big sister and promise to request a flying kiss from Jin for me!"
That was only the first few comments I received.

I won't lie, I have heard their names throughout the media lately but I haven't really paid any attention to them. And for now, I want to keep that way.

Since I'll be working with them, or one of them, it will be good to walk in with a completely unbiased opinion of them and let their personalities do the talking, not their fame.

I made sure to pack all of the bare essentials: One decent dinner dress, plenty of old t-shirts, sweatpants, pointe shoes, my retainers, my favorite nightcap, and my haircare products, etc.

Along with the bare necessities, I brought my plethora of video games, my favorite books, my beloved childhood sitcoms, my prized anime collection and I also...

Okay, if you let me, I'll go on forever about all the things I have in my bag of goodies. So I'll just stop there and move on.

When I got onto the plane heading to my destination, that's only when my decision that I made only less than two weeks ago feels real.

I have to remind myself to not only think of this as work but also a sorely needed vacation. Who knows? Maybe I'll be able to explore the city when I'm not working.

The terminal is crowded with people. Of course, the majority of them are Korean and they are wearing these face masks that cover their mouths. I had seen Michael Jackson, God rest his soul, do this multiple times in the videos I've seen him in and I always wondered why some people did this.

But thanks to the research I did, I discovered that many Asian countries do this to cut down on the odds of contracting a virus.

It sounds like common sense to me.

I could feel the stares on me as I strode through the airport. Because I checked, I noticed that they were ones of curiosity and bewilderment. Unexpectedly, I wasn't that bothered by them. When you
grow in an environment where you're always the oddity of the group, you learn to become numb to it.

In the end, I just ignored them and kept it moving.

But I did wonder if that was the first time for many of them seeing a black person in real life.

Lance told me that someone would be waiting for me at the arrival gate to pick me up and lo and behold, there was a man holding a big, white sign that read "W. James" written in black marker.

I walk towards him and he keeps his eyes on me as I get closer.

His dark eyes do a quick sweep of me and then asks, "W. James?"

I nod my head. "That's me." The minor suspicion is gone and is replaced with surprise. I have to physically stop the smirk that was forming.

I seeing as how I had limited time, I nearly killed myself rushing to learn Hangul and then actually being able to speak Korean words and putting them into sentences without sounding like a total novice.

But like the boss bitch I love to pretend that I am, I was able to get the basics down. I won't lie, Korean is probably one of the most challenging languages I've encountered yet. If I didn't have a natural affinity for picking languages, I would've ended with a massive headache.

I meet my client tomorrow. Today, I'm going to spend the day getting set up in the flat they were gracious enough to provide for me while I stay here.

Along the ride to my ride, The man, whose name is Sejin, tried to start small talk: How was my flight? What did I think of Seoul so far? Was I planning to get some sight-seeing in?

I could only give short responses. If it had been any other time, I would've gladly interacted in conversation because Sejin seemed pretty sweet, and to flex my Korean language muscles.
But I had chosen to take a direct flight here and the different time zone was finally hitting me square in the chest. My only desire was to plop on a bed and not move for maybe eight to sixteen hours.

I think Sejin sensed that and the conversation just drifted into a comfortable silence.

What. The. Bloody. Hell?

And I mean that in the best possible way.

I knew that they had rented me space for me to rest my head, but I had honestly thought that it would be at a three-star hotel or something.

No.

These SOBs had given me a penthouse.

My future lodgings resided in an area that just screamed of money with clean and put together everything is. I had hoped that I could live somewhere decent but I never imagined they set me up in luxury like this.

Maybe if I were a more modest person, I probably should protest against this and demand that they set me up in a smaller flat.

But hey, who was I to look a gift horse in the mouth?

If BigHit thinks I'm worthy enough, important enough, to be offered something like this, then I'm not going to complain. Besides, how ungrateful would I appear if I vehemently demanded that they give me something smaller and not appreciate the fact that they went out of their way to provide me the very best?

But still, it's hard for me not to feel intimidated by the finery of it all.
They gave me a flat at the very top of the massive high-rise.

Sejin comes with me to help me find my place and because he was entrusted with the key.

Since it was near night time by the time we got to my building, I was not expecting any type of bustling around or any noises of life. So imagine my surprise just when we stop in front of our door, this high-pitched whooping sound came from one of the doors, which is followed by some high-speed chatter that is too fast for me to dissect in my head.

I think it's someone laughing but I can't be sure. The wheezing sounds like a mixture of zebra bleats and the sound of what I imagine a real, squeaky window wiper sounds like rubbed against a car window.

I inwardly groan as the animated noises continued.

"Tell me those aren't my new neighbors? " I am very aware that I'm whining, but I don't care. I enjoy my solitude and the chatter I'm hearing sounds like these unknown people aren't afraid of getting loud Sejin's face had been stoic for the last hour that I've known him. But his face softened into what I believe what is a fond smile.

"Don't worry," he assures me, "They're not that bad once you get to know them."

"So you know them?"

"You could say that. But don't worry, they won't be a bother. " I give Sejin a long stare, hoping my eyes will cajole him into revealing more information on my new neighbors. But all he does is give me my key, tells me to have a good night and that'll he'll see me bright and early.

The next morning, Sejin is waiting downstairs for me.

I would love to say that I am bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, ready for the exciting challenges life had in store for me.
But if I'm going to be completely honest, I went to battle with jetlag and jetlag won. That meant that I was feeling very lethargic and the strong desire to yell "Sike!" to Sejin and run back to the warm comfort of the big, plush bed that had greeted my tired body last night.

But work is work and I have to do mine.

"This is will be your practice room," Sejin explains. We've arrived at Bighit studios and Sejin has led me to a big room that looks similar to the dance room back at Oberman. "While you wait, why don't you get yourself familiar with the place. Unless circumstances change, this will be your primary practice room for you, Jimin, and the backup dancers."

I nod my head and bow at a perfect ninety-degree angle. "Sounds good. And before I forget, thank you for everything you've done for me, Sejin-shi." He responds with only a smile and promptly leaves the room.

I put my bag down against the expansive mirror and decide that I'll just get my usual warm-up in before this Jimin guy gets here. I place my hand on the wall since there's no barre and I begin my daily set of pliés.

About fifteen minutes in, I hear the door opening behind me and I peek whoever it is in the reflection of the mirror.

It's a boy I've never seen before. He looks to be at least twenty-one or maybe even twenty-three at the oldest. He can't be that much taller than my 5’8’’ height. He's wearing a baggy grey sweatshirt and matching colored sweatpants. His dark hair is styled in a way that has one side his hair falling over one eye, and the other half is slicked back, giving him a classically attractive air. One thing I notice immediately about him his pulpy cheeks and his full, pouty lips.

It suddenly baffles me that there are probably some women in the world who would have paid thousands upon thousands just to have a pair of lips like the boy standing behind me. Case in point, Kylie Jenner.

I turn around to the boy. The first thing he does is a quick bow and then he gives me a sunny smile that obscures his brown eyes in the cutest fashion, makes his full cheeks bunch up in a way that makes me want to pinch them, and those pouty lips curl into a heart-stopping smile that reveals he
has a crooked front tooth that only adds to his charm.

"Hello! I'm Park Jimin. You must be W. James." He chirps in an upbeat tone. Although I wouldn't say that I'm a no-nonsense type of instructor, I like to keep a margin of distance when I work.

But something about this kid has me wanting to reciprocate his smile and then some.

But like the true professional I am, I control my emotions and give a curt nod instead. "I am, but since we're going to be working together in person for a while, I'll let you know that W. James is my choreographer persona. My real name is Willow Spencer."

"Well, it's a pleasure to be working with you, Willow-nim. When they told me that my teacher was going be someone that worked with Beyoncé and Kendrick Lamar, I almost didn't believe them. I mean you have to be the absolute best to be lucky enough to work with artists like that."

His words, along with his puppy-dog eyes shining with innocent enthusiasm make me blush. To this day, I credit Beyoncé for helping me fully realize my love for teaching and creating. Sometimes, I think that my working with her was a lucid daydream my mind conjured to fuck with me. I didn't even bring it up with coworkers most days in fear that it'll make me seem puffed up and arrogant.

So you can hardly blame me for getting a little startled to hear my own accomplish broadcasted out loud like this. "Yeah," I mutter bashfully. "Working with her is an experience that I will never forget. I can tell you right now that she's a real class act. But enough of that let's get to work." I clasp my hands together and the sound echos on the walls.

I have to say, I wasn't really sure what to expect out of Jimin when I first laid eyes on him, but this boy is the definition of a diligent worker.

Passionate, tenacious, open to criticism, and even added on some suggestions of his own. AKA: The perfect student.

We have been working together for at least two weeks now and he gets better every time I see him. More times than not, I'm the one who had to pull the plug because I didn't want Jimin to be late for his rehearsal with the rest of his group and I still had to teach the routine to the backup dancers who
came later on in the day.

Today, we've been going at it for at least four hours and the poor lad is plum tuckered out. His previously perfect hair is now matted to his head because of the sweat that clings to him, and his cheeks are flushed red from exertion.

I certainly have no room to judge from the way my T-shirt is clinging to me in some unmentionable places.

"You did good today, Jiminie Cricket. Well, you always do good, but you were on the money this time." I'm rewarded by witnessing that happy smile again. I've quickly discovered that if there is anything that Park Jimin loves more, it's to be praised.

"Thank you, Noona. Coming from you that means a lot."

I don't know how, but somewhere among the fourteen days I've spent with Jimin, I've been upgraded from Willow-nim to Sunbae, and finally a few days ago, I've reached my final form: Noona.

I like to jokingly gripe that I don't like being called Noona because it makes me feel like an old woman. But secretly, it gives me a little thrill.

I will never be known as a particularly warm person, but Jimin still felt comfortable enough to affectionately call me "Big sister". And didn't that just make nine-year-old Willow, who used to daydream what it would be like to have a sibling to play with, preen with joy?

Especially since my own best friend just told me recently that she never saw me as her sister even though I did.

So naturally, I took to calling to calling Jimin "Jiminie Cricket". He, of course, got a kick out of that.

To be honest, it's not hard to love Jimin. The boy just radiates pure light.

"You wanna know a secret? When I first heard your song, I couldn't stop listening to it for hours." I leave out the fact that I was sitting in my car sobbing pathetically as well cause really: who wants to
hear that? "It would be superficial of me to just say that you have a beautiful voice. Your voice is what I imagine springtime would be like if it had a singing voice." I didn't think it was possible, but his already red cheeks are now turning beet red.

He tucks his head and runs his hands through his hair. "Thank, Noona. But really, I can't take too much credit for it. My Hyung wrote the song. All I did was sing it."

"But you brought the song to life," I counter. "A song is just a song without the right voice to bring it to life. Don't sell yourself short because refuse to let you."

He scoffs. "You sound like just like him," I smirk. "Then your Hyung must be very intelligent then." He laughs and I smile. His squeaky, carefree laugh makes my heart flutter.

"You have no idea."

"Well, I'm sure I don't. But anyway, that's it for today. You know the drill, we'll back here again tomorrow morning as alwa--"

I stop when I hear the sound of a ringtone going off. I know it's not mine when I hear the sound of Trey Songz whining Slow Motion.

We don't say anything for a long time even when his phone turns off. But finally, I release a series of snickers and guffaws. I never pictured Park Jimin, baby-faced, sweet as pie Park Jimin liking someone like Trey Songz.

"What? I like this song," he pouts. I reign my chuckles long enough to choke out, "I'm sorry, baby, but every time I hear that man, I remember him attempting to sing Purple Rain at the BET awards and how Prince, rest in peace, was not feeling him at all."

"Ouch. Was it that bad?"

"Prince was a perfectionist to the core. And it doesn't help he has never been one to hide his true feelings on someone he didn't like. And his reaction to hearing Trey force out those tired runs on live TV clearly said one thing and one thing only: That ain't it."
We both start cracking up. If I had any doubts about coming here and meeting Jimin, they’re all gone now.

"But still," he suddenly says, catching me off guard. "Don't judge me for liking Trey Songz and I won't judge you for having that Friday song on your phone."


And suddenly the doubts are back in full-force.

It's times like these that remind that this angelic boy could easily turn into the devil if he felt like it.

It had been a stroke of bad luck on my part when one day we had stopped to take a break and I decided to put some music on.

Mind you, I had a secret agenda. I always have a secret agenda when it comes to my music.

I like to wow people with my selection of unsung black artists that I had found during my late night perusals through Spotify.

Since I knew Jimin had an R&B soul like yours truly, I was sure that he would be able to vibe with at least some of my favorite songs.

My mistake was that I had put my shit on shuffle and that... that... damn song came on rotation.

A couple of years ago, Marigold, with her sneaky ass, knew how much I despised that song. She capitalized on my agony by constantly singing it. But then one day, she made the decision to raise the stakes by downloading it while my phone was open and my back was turned.

Since I have so many songs on my phone, I didn't even realize I had it till it frightened me half to death while I was listening to my music on the way home from work.

My only excuse for not deleting it was that it just slipped my mind and always a result of me vowing
"later" but never following through.

But I paid for it later.

This little fatass midget has this smug grin on his face and I'd love nothing more than to wipe it off his face with my fist!

Instead, I croak, "Jimin-ah, I thought we agreed that we would never bring that up again."

"I never agreed to anything. Maybe that'll teach you to make fun of my music taste."

That's it.

I plant my feet, ready to lunge for this punk's throat when he suddenly changes the topic.

"Oh! I almost forgot. Noona, I wanted to invite you to have dinner with me and my brothers."

"Brothers? I thought you said that you only have one younger brother back in Busan."

"I do," he assures, "I meant my bandmates." Here comes that swell of affection again.

It comes every time I hear Jimin talk about the other boys in his group. The way he just lights up whenever he brings them is so sweet and endearing.

"I told them about you," he explains, "And they really want to meet you."

"Jimin, I don't know. I'm not anyone special; I'm just your dance instructor for a limited time."

"But you're more than just that; you're my friend. At least I thought we were..." The unsureness is an unwelcome bitterness to his sweet voice.
Well, don't I feel like a sack of shit?

Desperate to stop his train of thought, I hastily grab his hand (Oh God, even his hands are so cute!) and give a solid squeeze.

"Honey, of course, I'm your friend. It's just I don't know if it's really appropriate for us to be hanging out together. We do work together." He only rolls his eyes at my explanation. "Noona, I promise it's no big deal. If it makes you feel better, the CEO of the company doesn't even mind if we date employees as long as we don't bring any personal drama into the job. It's fine, I swear."

"You sure?"

"Yes!" There's a hint of exasperation in his tone now. "Now say that you'll come tonight." His statement is half pleading, half demand.

"Well... alright." His face brightens instantaneously and he moves like he's going to hug me but I back up. "Uh huh, young man. You smell like shit. Ain't no way you're coming around with that funk."

He puffs his cheeks out. "Noona," he grumbles. I just shake my head and hide the grin that threatens to slip. "Alright, if I'm coming to partake in the festivities, I think I will need an address so I can actually get there."

"Oh! Right!" He scurries out of the room for a minute. Probably to look for a pen and paper.

In less than a minute, he returns and hands me a small slip of paper.

It takes me a minute to understand the Hangul. My reading skills need a good whittling.

But as soon as I translate what I'm reading, I frown. "Jimin-ah, this is the same building I'm staying in. In fact, your place is right next to mine." He doesn't even have the decency to look me in the eye. "Oh, is it?"
I narrow my eyes. "You already knew, didn't you?"

"Oh, would you look at the time! I need to get to rehearsal. I'll see you later on tonight, Noona!""Jimin!" I bellow. "Boy, you better get your narrow behind back here and--" The door closes while I'm still ranting.

I just stare into space for a while, not knowing what to do.

And then, "I'm gonna cut his dick off next time I see him."

Hours later, I stand in front of my next door neighbor's, Jimin's, door.

I've showered and put my lucky Death Note T-shirt and a decent pair of jeans.

I don't why my stomach is churning, but it is.

It's just dinner, I assure myself. Nothing life-changing is going to result in this night.

I knock on the door and wait for a minute.

When the door opens, I fight the urge to curse.

Standing in front of me is another beautiful man that could give some women a run for their money.

It's like God is taunting me.

How many more beautiful guys would I encounter?
He's tall, but only maybe a couple of inches over me. His hair, that rest on the very tops of his shoulders, is the same dark brown that Jimin's is. His eyebrows are thick yet well manicured with their perfect arches. His lips, although not thick like Jimin's, is shapely and the of pink carnations.

His slim body is wrapped into something similar to what I'm wearing, but it doesn't hide how he could easily be a runaway model if he wanted to be.

His eyes bore into me and I fight the urge to fidget. I don't think he's glaring at me, but goddamn, it sure feels like it. His stare is that intimidating.

Then out of nowhere, he opens his mouth and this deep voice comes out. "Jimin! I think your friend is here." Where the hell did that come from?

I would have never suspected that low, masculine voice to come out. I just hope that my face didn't betray the whiplash that I'm experiencing right now.

A second later, Jimin arrives and stands in the door next to the supermodel.

"Noona! I'm so glad you're here. You are in for a real treat tonight." He turns to the boy. "Seokjin-Hyung made Sundubu-jigae tonight." I get the pleasure of watching the boy's solemn, closed-off face transform into the boyish smile I've ever seen. "Really?"

The way his whole face just lit up leaves me baffled and wondering if the other boys in this group are just as capable.

Jimin turns back to me. "Noona, this is my best friend, Kim Taehyung." Ah, Kim Taehyung. Jimin had mentioned how this boy was basically his platonic soulmate with close they were.

I take Taehyung's big hand in mine and we promptly shake hands and bow. "It's very nice to meet you Taehyung-shi. I'm Willow Spencer."

"Likewise."
After introductions are made, we make are into what I assume is the living room. Like my place, it's luxurious. But there's a sense that it is well lived in with the way the coffee table is cluttered with mail, magazines, and other assortments.

The TV is on and I notice the dozens of pictures that are in the entertainment center. But I don't get a chance to examine them further because Jimin, without warning, suddenly hollers, "Guys! She's here. Come say hi!"

I internally groan. When Jimin asked me to come to dinner, I had expected to meet the guys organically. I didn't think that he would call them out here and I would be put on the spot like that. Even though it's hypocritical of me to say because of my main occupation, I never enjoyed having the spotlight on me. It just makes my mind go into overdrive and create unnecessary anxiety on how I'm going to present myself.

Especially when I caught unprepared like I am now.

But there's nothing I can do now.

Four more guys walk out of every crook and corner and, of course, they're all beautiful and dark-haired too. I don't why I'm still surprised at this point.

Standing in front of all these good looking people and knowing that I'm the only exception to the beauty overload does wonders for my already plummeting self-esteem.

They just blankly stare at me for what seems like ages. Nobody knows what to say and I can see Jimin shuffle from one foot to another. I think he wants to fill the silence but I finally decide to do it for him. I can't take it any longer.

I bow to all of them and declare, "Hello everyone. My name is Willow Spencer and thank you for opening up your home to me. It's really nice to meet all of you."

For a minute, the silence remains and I start to think that I may have misworded something.

And one of them exclaims, "Oh my God! Jimin told us that you speak Korean, but I didn't know that you were that good. Your pronunciation is flawless!" He tops it off with a heart-shaped smile.
I blush. I can't help it. I was so concerned that my Korean would come out broken and unrecognizable and to hear from a native Korean that I nailed it makes me feel good on the inside.

"Thanks. I'll admit that I still haven't mastered it completely but I'm getting there."

"I can tell it's definitely paying off. I still can't remember English word phrases even though my dongsaeng repeatedly tells me what they are."

"Hey, English is a hard language and I myself didn't even fully learn it until I was about six years old. So you can quit that nonsense right there. It takes time and discipline to learn a new language, which you obviously do not have with busy you must be."

He beams at me. "Thanks for that. I'm Jung Hoseok, but you can call me Hobi if you want."

"It's very nice to meet you, Hoseok-shi. I can't tell how happy I am to finally meet everyone."

"Actually, we're not all here."

God, how many more could there be?

When Jimin sighs, "Namjoonie-Hyung, I told you that my instructor was coming over here tonight. Why didn't you take a shower earlier?"

A deep, masculine voice behind me rumbles, "Since someone hogged all the hot water, I had to wait for it to come back. I don't feel like coming down with a cold anytime soon."

"Whatever," Jimin rolls his eyes. "Anyways, this is Willow-Noona."

I turn around, ready to give the same greeting I gave the other boys.

But all coherent thought leaves when I take in the sight that is Kim Namjoon.
That is when I realize that I'm already in deep, *deep*, trouble.
Okay y'all, Namjoon is my bias so if you notice I go into great detail about his looks, just remember this fact.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The first thing I notice is his lips.

I can't stop staring even if I wanted to.

Shapely, soft-looking, full, plump lips the color of...

Shit, I probably look so creepy right now.

Trying to not be caught gawking at this man's distracting mouth, I kind of duck my head and try to focus my gaze to something, anything else that might give the illusion that I wasn't ogling him just a few seconds ago.

So I move my eyes to his body.

Big mistake on my part.

His skin is the color of burnt caramel and makes me wonder what he would like covered in sweat.

God, the thought of sweat beading down on his gorgeous skin, preferably his back, makes my throat go a little dry.

His arms and legs, though slim, are toned. Like his arms, his body is slender. But from the way his shoulder and chest are filling out his shirt, I can tell that he has the type of physique that I love in men.
I'm so busy in my own, private examination of this man, it puzzles me when he sticks his hand out to me.

And that's when it hits me that I still haven’t said anything to him for maybe a good two minutes.

The flush I feel on my neck could be used to fry up some eggs, bacon, and a whole stack of pancakes from how hot it feels.

Crap, thanks to that image, now I can't stop thinking about food.

Ah hell, maybe it's the good Lord giving me a reprieve from my current dilemma; because of the thought of sizzling bacon, fluffy yellow eggs with the perfect amount of salt applied, and perfectly cooked pancakes with syrup drizzling down them and just increasing the savory sweetness that--

My stomach decides to make its apparent hunger known. The sorry sound it makes seems to fill the empty space.

I blush and finally decide to talk to hide my humiliation.

"H-hello! My n-name is, um, W-willow Spencer. I-it's v-very nice to meet you..." I trail off.

I don't know what's wrong with me. I was speaking it just fine a minute ago. But looking at this boy causes every language I've learned over the years, including English, to fly out of my head. Now I just sound like a bumbling idiot in front of everyone.

Ain't that a bitch?

I chance a glance at those lovely brown eyes of his. There are mirth and something softer dancing in them. Finally realizing that I've been struck dumb, he takes a step closer, places my hand in his hands and, instead of the usual handshake, he wraps his long, slim (Is there anything on this guy that isn't skinny?) fingers around my slightly damp hand.
"Hey," I have to stop myself from reeling in surprise when Namjoon suddenly starts speaking English. "Just calm down, it's all good. None of us are going to judge you if you don't speak perfect Korean. I myself still struggle on a few English words from time to time. I promise you, it's no big deal. Just take a deep breath and think about what you want to say."

I'm such a bad person.

Here is this sweet young man is trying to soothe me and tell me everything is going to be hunky-dory and my perverted brain can't stop thinking about how sexy his English-speaking voice.

When Namjoon speaks English, his tone has little to no accent at all. If I didn't know any better, I would assume that he was American from the way he talked.

But to save face and show that I hear what he's saying and that appreciate it, I force a shaky smile and mutter, "Thanks."

He smiles and two dimples pop out. The left one is more prominent than the right one.

And something peculiar happens to me.

I feel a subtle ache down... there.

Although I have been attracted to men I've dated and celebrities that I knew I had no chance with and have concocted numerous fantasies about them living happily ever after with me, I've never been able to achieve this inherent throbbing that is happening between my legs right now.

I don't know what is exactly that makes Namjoon differ from my previous significant others that incite this reaction in me. He doesn't have muscles popping out of every crook and cranny as Michael does. Nor does he have tattoos running up and down his body as Harry does.

And yet something about him, whether it be the way the silver hoops in his ears or the sound of his sensual voice, just draws me in and refuses to release me.

A cough springs my mind back to the present day. I see that we've garnered an audience to what I
thought was our own private showing.

There's shock on everyone's faces except Jimin who has blatant amusement on his face.

I scowl at him. I know I'll be hearing him ask a thousand questions during practice tomorrow morning about this strange, frankly terrifying, reaction I just had to his bandmate.

With those ice thoughts drenching my hot libido, I slip my hand from between Namjoon's, who strangely hadn't shown any plans of letting go of my hand. "So," I cringe when my voice cracks, "Who's hungry? Gosh, I know I am. Do you guys want me to help set the table?"

"Uh, no, that's fine. Jimin will show you where the bathroom is so you can wash your hands," one of them replies.

I don't answer back. I just follow as Jimin leads me to the guest bathroom.

It's pristine like I expected. I squirt some soap onto my palm from the dispenser and rub my hands together. As I turn the water on, I can feel Jimin's gaze on me, waiting for me to sate his nosiness.

Although I can see him in the corner of my eye, I don't even turn around. "Don't ask."

He deflates.

I swear, I think God thinks playing with my life is the highlight of his day when he's not running everything else. Because when Jimin and I get back from the bathroom, I somehow find myself seated between Jimin and Namjoon.

Knowing that if I take a look at this man again I'll get struck dumb again, I strategically do everything I can to focus on everything but him. Instead, I focus on this delicious stew that has been made. I scoop some onto my spoon, eat it, and just have to revel in it for a minute.

I'm not a big fan of spicy dishes but I think this dish has the power to make me turn over a new leaf
because damn!

Thanks to the power of Sundubu-jjigae, I forget that a sex god is sitting right next to me.

When my meal, unfortunately, runs out, I demand, "Okay, one of you is going to tell me right now who made this delicious food. I won't accept less anything except the truth. Because the food this good, only deserves the motherfucking truth!"

Silence, and then almost everyone busts out laughing. I don't join, though. Although I'm glad I was able to make the tension loosen up, I wasn't playing when I asked for the chef. I do not kid when it comes to food.

Once they finally got their laughs out, Taehyung answers, "That would be our oldest Hyung, Seokjin-Hyung." He gestures across the table and I follow his hand.

This one is classically handsome with his impressively wide shoulders, slightly wavy dark hair, and pink, plump mouth. His ears are kind of pink from all of the attention that is on him now.

But since I'm on a mission, I don't stop and coo at him. "Seokjin-shi, if it's not too much trouble, can I have the recipe for this, if there is one?" He looks like I've just asked him to give me the cure to Alzheimer's disease from the way his eyes are bulging out of their sockets.

"You... actually want to learn the recipe?"

"Yes? Why are you acting so surprised?"

Seokjin sends a cursory glare around the table. "Because usually no ask me how to prepare meals because they don't want to learn. It's always up to me because by now they automatically expect it from me."

"But Hyung," Jimin protests, flashing one of his signature angelic smiles. "We all know how much you enjoy cooking. Why would we try to take you away from something that brings you so much happiness?" The words he was saying weren't utter bullshit, I probably would've fallen for it from his innocent expression alone.
"Happiness my ass!" Seokjin shoots back. I hold back the laugh I want to let out and just enjoy the obvious affection I see swimming between.

It makes me long for my own best friend right now.

She doesn't care about you.

Did you forget how easy it was for her to drop you for a man she didn't even bother to tell you about?

But we both know that it's really your fault that she left you. If you just hadn't been so selfish and needy and actually cared about her instead of yourself and listened to her problems, she would still want you around.

You heard her, she was tired of having to carry the burden of your issues.

Haven't you learned already that your narcissism only brings misery to others? Did you forget that your father died because you couldn't even spare him five more minutes?

Did you forget I died because you couldn't even get fucked--

".... hope it turns out alright for you."

Seokjin tears me away from her words putting a piece of paper in my face and I'm eternally grateful for that.

She always comes to taunt me when I'm feeling especially weak. In the past, Nina was always there to help me when I needed a pick me up. And it wasn't just her giving me encouraging words, just her presence alone made me feel like I could do anything.

But not anymore.

Now, instead of being the beautiful butterfly that I always felt blessed that she wanted to be around
me, the thoughts of her is now an angry wasp swarm that constantly prickle with the horrible reminder that I wasn't enough for her.

The more I think about it, maybe I did play a part in her betraying me.

But enough about that. What was I doing again?

Oh. Right. The recipe.

Careful to keep my hands steady, I accept the paper from Seokjin. "Thank you, Seokjin-shi. Hopefully, it'll turn out as delicious as yours."

The cutest (Crap, all of them are adorable in their own ways!) smile graces Seokjin's face that causes his smile to make his cheeks bunch up kind of like a chipmunk.

"Honestly, thank you for being interested. And don't stress out if it doesn't come out right the first time. This recipe was originally my Eomma's. The food you're eating now is only from years of altering to my personal style. But don't worry, I included my personal edits in the copy I gave you. Also, you don't need to be so formal with me. You can just call Seokjin Oppa."

Oppa?

How old does this boy think I am?

"Seokjin-shi, uh... first of all, thank you but what age do you think I am?" His eyebrows scrunch up as he considers me. "When I first saw you, I immediately thought that you were around the same age as Jimin and Taehyung. So, twenty-three. Why, are you younger?"

I mentally take a few steps back.

Damn.

When they say that "Black Don't Crack", I didn't know that it applied to me too.
"Thank you Seokjin," I say with a giggle, "But I'm actually twenty-seven." Noises of disbelief ring throughout the dinner table when I make this confession. I won't deny that it brings me little bursts of pleasure to know that they all genuinely thought I was around the same ages as them.

"Yah!" Namjoon exclaims, "That means that Seokjin is no longer the oldest in this room."

"Hey!" Seokjin squawks. "That's Hyung to you! Second, I'm practically the same age as she is." Namjoon shakes his head. "Not quite, Hyung. Maybe over here in Korea, you are. But technically, she is older than you."

"Hey, I think the most simple way to solve this problem is to ask what year the both of them were born in," Hoseok suggests. "Willow-nim, Seokjin-Hyung, what year were you born?"

"1992."

"1991."

There it is, official confirmation that I was the oldest person in the room. This time everyone started laughing. Especially since Seokjin's ears turn a harsh shade of pink and he starts spitting rapid Korean. Since I'm not at the level where I can decode fast gab like that, I could only assume that he's trying to still prove his case. Even the more quiet members are chuckling and cracking a smile.

It quiets down again, everyone returning their focus on their food. Seeing as how I ate already, I decide to make conversation.

"You know, Jimin has been telling me about the concept for your current series; the topic of self-love. In this day and age, I think it's important and really cool that you guys are addressing this topic in your music. Although I never I would be saying this because I always hated it when adults said it, I'm really starting to be concerned where the future of music is going. And to hear that you guys are spreading this message in this day and age is something to really admire."

My words are for everyone but it's Namjoon that responds. He beams at me, his eyes are alit with something akin to excitement, and there's a slight flush to his tan cheeks. It is then that I notice that his left dimple is even deeper than I previously realized.
It's bad enough that this fool has dimples, but he has the deep kind too?

Not everyone was meant to have dimples. On the wrong person, they just look like holes that only enunciate the homeliness that's already obvious.

But on the right person, they'll have the power to make a person swoon.

Like I am right now.

"Thank you," he says. "This project has been in the works for almost three years now and that it's almost over, it's like I'm saying goodbye to a close friend. I'm confident in saying that this venture has had a positive effect on all of us. And I can confidently say the same can be said for our fans."

"I'm not surprised that it did. It's a beautiful message, something young people in this day and age need. Good Lord knows that I could've used it when I was in my teenage years or early twenties. But thankfully for me, I had plenty of self-help books to get me through high-school. It was my godsend frankly."

I don't know why, but something I said obviously turned Namjoon off because the mega-watt grin he had is now nowhere in sight. He has a deep frown thinning his alluring mouth.

I chuckle nervously, not knowing how to react. I do a quick recap of my recent words in my mind and I still can't find the error in my words. So I ask, "Did I say something wrong?"

Namjoon hesitates and then lays it out for. "No, you didn't. It's more my personal issue than anything else. I've never truly seen the value of self-help books. All they are is some made-up shit produced by old men who make their living by profiting off of gullible people who don't know any better and take these swindlers' words for gospel."

It takes him five seconds too late to realize what he just implied. Those lovely brown eyes go wide as he turns to me to try and clean up his words. "Wait, I didn't mean to say--"

"No, you meant what you said and now you're going to listen to me. I'll admit that yes, some people that write self-help books are just trying to get a quick buck. Although this is true, mental health was still being treated like a major taboo back then. The idea of actually regularly seeing a counselor in my high school would've been an automatic flag that a kid was basically wearing a straight-jacket.
I'm even going to begin to explain the issue of black people and mental health because then we'll be here all day. But my point is that given the era I lived in as an impressionable teenager. Self-help books helped shape me a lot.

"Okay I can see your point and I hope you know I meant no offense when I said gullible. But they're so impersonal. And sometimes, the people writing these books are not even trained professionals. What these imposters do is just enforce recycled stereotypes that do more harm than good. From how to eat, sleep, date, you name it, they profit. People just eat it up while blatantly ignoring all of the signs that their problems are not going to be magically solved with a few pretty words from a conman."

"Once again, I get where you're coming from because yes, fifty percent of self-help books are written by people who don't have the faintest clue on what they're talking about. But the only reason I don't fully agree with you is that I think this is a situation where you are being jaded by a few bad apples that have, unfortunately, gained a lot of ammunition. But for every negative, there is a positive. Self-help books are essentially a branch of positive psychology. Although often corrupted, they're meant to be a ray of hope for people suffering from anxiety and depression. You just need to be wary of the uneducated people trying to pass themselves off as experts."

"I think that this is an issue where you and I going to have to agree to disagree." I nod my head in assent. "Yeah, it's clear to see that you're not going to see my point of view."

"Oh I see it," he argues, "I see that your experience has made you biased to all self-help books."

"And your experience has left you judgmental and frankly obnoxious," I shoot back. I've never been one to back down from a friendly debate. Although I can sense that it if we're not careful, this could easily escalate into a petty fight.

"I'm just stating my opinion. I can't help it if you're just too naive to see my way of thinking on this matter."

I scoff in disbelief. "I see your point of view on the subject and I can't help it if you are just too closeminded to see how prejudiced you are."

"Do you honestly believe what you're saying, or do you just realize how sexy your voice is and just will just say bullshit you can just so you can hear it more of it?"
"I don't know, Peach. Maybe you just like talking out of that tight little ass of yours."

My heart is pounding, my lips are dry, and my fingers are trembling. I honestly don't know how this polite conversation turned into a full-on battle of words.

But now that my competitive haze is gone from my vision, I realize how close I am to Namjoon's face. So close, in fact, I can see the little freckle on his right cheek.

I want to move back and pretend that this discussion never happened, but I'm frozen in place. Too busy ogling the way Namjoon's perfect lips are now parted as he takes in deep breaths.

Pink, full, and biteable lips that I can't have.

You would think that after the heated argument that we just had, the glamor that surrounded would've worn off for me. That I should've been thinking that he was the biggest asshole in the world because he dared to call me naive and gullible.

Well for one, if two grown people can't have a healthy argument about a topic they feel strongly about, then what is the world coming to?

Second, the way he got so passionate and fired up only made me even more aroused.

Not only does is this man gorgeous, but he's intelligent and loves to debate too?

Not to mention the way his jaw was clenching and unclenching and how his pupils are now fully dilated.

I subtly cross my legs in a feeble attempt to relieve the ache that has returned with a vengeance.

Unconsciously, I lick my lips, feeling how uncomfortably dry they are. Maybe it's just my own lust- addled brain created mirages, but I swear that his eyes were following the direction of my tongue.

But then again, it was probably just me because while I'm usually doing the lusting and extreme
wanting, the men I'm interested in seldom reciprocate my feelings. Or they just pretend they do so they can get what they want later.

When I finally tear my stare away from Namjoon, I notice that everyone is staring at us yet again.

Everybody's staring at us like it's a Serena Williams match. They're all on the edge of their seats, waiting to see who's gonna pop off next.

Okay, I think. This has already gone too far as it is. Order needs to be restored.

Making sure to put a safe between me and Namjoon, I ask in English, "Truce?"

He jerks his head up and down. "Truce."

We turn our heads away from each other.

I lift up my bowl, put a big grin on my face and basically sing, "Seconds?"

Chapter End Notes

Ok, not exactly the ending I was hoping for, but I realized that it was getting kind of long. So I decided to cut it off for now.

Hopefully, you guys liked it.

Thank you for reading and don't hesitate to let me know what y'all thought!
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

No sexual tension in this chapter.

Pure Fluff (W/ hints of angst)

This scene has just been buzzing around in my head for a while

So you can kind of count this as a filler chapter!

I think in the future, you'll be seeing a lot of these kinds of chapters because I want the development between the other boys and Willow to develop too.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

If Grammy was alive and displayed the mini-debate that Namjoon and I just had, I knew my ass would've been fried for two reasons.

I cursed and brought politics to the dinner table.

Well, if the topic of self-help books can be considered political at all but still.

Things have gone back to being dead silent, no one wanting to stir up the pot.

I devoured my second bowl of stew and my stomach is sending a clear message that anymore is going to end up with two conclusions: Me, laying down and not getting back up for hours; Or me, sitting on a toilet seat for hours (Yeah, ew, I know. I'm just being real).

I stare into my bowl, using my spoon to scrape the little bits of broth

I think that after everyone is done eating, that's it for me. They just wanted to meet Jimin's new friend, say hi, maybe fatten her up a bit, and send her on their merry way.

No more, no less.
But I'll admit that I would be kind of sad because I sincerely like these boys and would honestly like to get to know them better. But they probably have no interest in getting to know the loud, opinionated black chick who made it her personal mission to screw up dinner by opening her big mouth. Even if Namjoon started it.

My morose thoughts would've continued if not for someone remark, "I like your cartilage piercings." I look up to investigate who the voice belonged to. The culprit's voice was deep like Namjoon's voice, but there was something different about it.

If their voices were like chocolate, I imagine Namjoon's to be like dark chocolate, specifically Godiva dark chocolate. It's so deep and rich, and yet there's this undeniable bitterness to its flavor that makes it unique.

Like dark chocolate, Namjoon's voice is an arousing mixture of what happens when sweetness and bitterness were to coexist.

The voice that calls me now has an explicit sweetness that is immediately noticeable.

This voice is milk chocolate.

This voice is Kim Taehyung.

His puppy dog eyes are on the two gold hoops that are sticking up like golden beacons in the tops of my ears.

I nudge my right piercing, heave a weary sigh, and let a chuckle.

"Thank you, Taehyung-shi. But the only reason I have them is that I lost a bet. I would've been too much of a pussy to get them if had come down to it." His eyes widen in intrigue. "What was the bet about?"

I can't help but snicker at myself. "It would figure the one time I show an interest in sports, it comes back to haunt me in the worst way. Back in 2016, it was the NBA championship. The Golden State Warriors versus The Cleveland Cavaliers. What can I say? Stephen Curry fascinated me, with those pretty green eyes of his. So anyway, I was so confident that they were going to take it home that year. So confident, in fact, that my foolish ass agreed to a bet my coworkers set up."
"Long story short, the Warriors lost the Finals, I ended up with these." I gesture to my hoops. Taehyung's face breaks into that grin that transforms his entire face. "Well, that sucks. At least they look on good on you. Oh, and you can just call me Taehyung."

I shrug and smirk a bit. "I do feel like a badass every time I put them on. But seriously if you had seen the tremendous lead the Warriors had, you would've made that bet too! That was just a disgrace."

"I know, right? How do you lose when you're ahead in a 3-1 deficit? It just doesn't make any sense." The quiet, low voice comes from one of the two I dubbed the quiet ones.

All of the boys have generally light brownish but this one is probably the palest of them all. His eyes have a sharp, almost feline-like quality that makes me squirm slightly in my chair. He has a thin, pouty mouth that is currently chewing on some stew.

This is the first time I've heard him directly address me all night.

"You like American Basketball?"

His thin shoulders go up and down in a mild shrug. "I don't have a love for it, but I do try to check who's playing in the finals when I can. I also used to play basketball when I was younger."

"Really? Ever thought of turning into a career before you got into music?" His brown hair ruffles around his face with the force he shakes it with. "I liked it as a hobby but nothing more. I always knew that music is what I wanted to do. I feel like anything I would've done as an alternative would've been me settling." I nod my head in understanding. "I feel the same way about dancing. It's all I've ever wanted to do."

"How long have you been dancing?"

"Almost twenty-five years. I started when I was four and I still love it now. When did you starting doing music?"

"I started writing lyrics in my notebook when I was in Elementary school and it just kind of took off"
from there." I shake my head in amazement. "Isn't just unbelievable that sometimes you figure out what you want to do when you're young and other times it doesn't come to you until you're way into your fifties?"

"Then again, I didn't start experimenting with other dance genres like tap and contemporary until I was a teenager. Ballroom dancing, another love of mine, also came later into my life. So I guess it just varies."

"By the way, I didn't catch your name."

He stretches out his hand, which are surprisingly very long and veiny-looking. Given his delicate appearance, it is a shock to see.

"Min Yoongi." I smile, remembering Jimin mentioning a Yoongi. From the way he described him, I thought I would be a little intimidated by him.

Not because I thought he would be outwardly mean to me, but I feared he would be so cool and that my bad habit of saying offensive, stupid shit in the guise of trying to be funny. Plus, Jimin says that it takes Yoongi a while to warm up to strangers and he was used to wearing a poker face, which I could totally understand.

With those thoughts in mind, I didn't know how my meeting with Min Yoongi would go.

So far, I found out he likes basketball and that his passion for music has been around for God only knows how long.

I also now know that he has the most cavity-inducing smile that makes him look ten years younger.

I take his hand in mine and give it a firm shake. "Nice to meet you, Yoongi-shi."

"Okay," he sighs, "It's obvious to me that we're going to be seeing more of you in the near future. So there's no real need for you to call us Shi or Nim all the time. I think I can speak for all of us when I say that we don't honestly don't mind." I turn towards the others, hoping to see the truth in Yoongi's words.
Nodding heads and smiling faces.

Okay, cool.

Seeing as how dinner is finally over, Jin reaches for the pot of stew that is in the middle of the table and stands up, probably to go put the leftovers in a Tupperware, I assume.

When he walks away, I get a good look at his physique, which makes ideas explode in my head.

So when he comes back into the dining room, I tell him exactly what I'm thinking. "Seokjin, you have a very nice body."

When the man freezes and stares at me like I just told him he has two days left to live, I realize that maybe being blunt wasn't the right approach.

Feeling like I need to clean this up now, I move my lips preparing to expound upon my words. But instead of being embarrassed like I thought he would be, the smuggest grin, which could only be rivaled by some anime characters I've seen, appears on his face.

Then he puts his hands on his hips, puffs out his chest, and whisper-yells, "I know." For a moment, all I can think about is that one scene in Star Wars that everybody knows. But I shake myself loose from those memories and continue with, "Have you ever done any Ballroom dancing?"

Whatever Seokjin thought my motives for commenting on his body is, I can tell it wasn't this. "No?" His response coming out more like a question. I see the glance he throws at Yoongi. A glance that screams, "Where the hell is she taking this?"

"It's just that I realized that you have the perfect triangular body: Wide shoulders and a tiny waist. Complimented with long legs, I could easily see you doing something like the Tango or the Cha-Cha."

Seokjin now has a considering look on his face. Then a bashful smile forms and then he giggles, "You really think so?"
I hold my hands up in an almost surrender-like gesture. "Hey, I've been doing this for a long time. I'm just speculating, but I think you could do it if you put your mind to it. And if you do want to it in the future," I add, in my best saleswoman voice. "I'll have you know that I am very skilled in Ballroom genres and I would love to teach. I'll have you know that ladies, or young men if that's what you're into, love a man that is cultured and knows their way around a dance floor. My services are open to you if you want them, Kim Seokjin."

"Don't do it, Hyung!" Jimin cries. "You think Hobi-Hyung is strict, you haven't seen anything yet!"

It never fails.

It would figure the one time I try to do a little self-promoting, this boy tries to stall my bag and make me look bad. I turn to face Jimin, determined to set this brat straight.

"Little boy, last time I checked this is a conversation between me and Seokjin. In nowhere in that context was there any room for you to jump in and give an opinion that nobody asked you for. As my Grandmother would say, 'Grown folks business, young man. Go back to the kiddie area where you belong.'"

I used to despise when Grammy would say those words to me whenever she was talking to her friends or my father.

But now, I understand the appeal of using it because I feel the righteous power surging through me as I use it on Jimin.

"Hey! I'm only trying to look out for my Hyung," Jimin protest, with a wicked gleam in his eyes. "Jinnie-Hyung barely makes during regular dance practice. Hyung, I guarantee you if you do agree, you'll be wishing you hadn't. She will work you until there's nothing left your soul and--"

"Jinnie-ah," I sing-song in my most syrupy tone, "Just know that for every word that comes out of your mouth for now on, that's an extra ten minutes I'm adding onto your practice time with me." Jimin's voice dies out when my words process through his mind. Then his eyes go wide from the horror that fills them when he realizes that I'm dead serious.

"You wouldn't..." Jimin tries to sound brave, but he just sounds unsure. I give a dead-eyed glare and offer, "Wanna make that twenty minutes?"
A beat, then Jimin promptly gets up from the table and walks away.

This round goes to me.

"Uh, thank you for the offer, but regular dance practice leaves me tired enough as it. So I'm going to have to decline."

But was it worth it in the end?

I've won the battle, but I lost the war with Seokjin.

Well, at least that little butthead ain't here to see my failure, he'd get a kick out of that and never let me hear the end of it. "It's all good, Seokjin-ah," I sigh, "It probably wouldn't be a good idea to add more work on top of the things I do here and at home. Maybe now I'll finally dedicate my free time to actually finish my manga, graphic novels, my video games, catch up on--"

"You like video games?"

I already know who it is before I make direct eye contact with Jeon Jungkook.

Jimin's description of the boy was was spot on. He does look like a bunny. His pointed nose and saucer-sized brown eyes being his most prominent features.

His small, rosy lips parted as he awaits my answer.

His eyes alone, which almost seem to stars swimming in them, could have almost convinced me that he is no more than sixteen years old. But his chiseled jaw, toned arms, and the tell-tale maturity in his musical voice tell a different story.

"Yeah! I brought some of my PlayStation games even though I wasn't really sure if I would have the opportunity to play them while I'm here."

Jungkook's face splits into this blinding smile that makes me want to vow to do whatever I can to
make this young man happy. "You can play them over here," he offers, but then immediately blushes and ducks his head. "That is if you want to, of course."

Someone needs to stop me from wanting to pinch this boy's cheeks.

"Well, what games do you have?"

"Overwatch and Fortnite. But I don't really like them anymore." My heart sinks a little of the mention of Overwatch and Fortnite. "Oh, so you were one of those gamers, huh?" I can't help the disdain that oozes out of my voice.

"I don't understand, what gamers do you mean?" His cute face is contorted into a puzzled expression.

"One of those gamers that just love shooting games with no real storyline. Just playing random missions with no real purpose. I'm sorry, but I never saw the appeal of those types of games. They always bored me."

"Oh, so now who's acting prejudiced and obnoxious?" Right now, I could kill the way my stomach jumps at the sound Namjoon's smug tone.

I know I'll probably regret it later, but I have to know what kind of facial expression he's making right now.

His arms are crossed, which emphasizes the muscles in his arms. Trying not to be sucked into another sticky situation, I focus on his face instead.

The smirk he's wearing has the left corner of his mouth is slightly higher than his right. His eyes are triumphant and he's leaning back in his chair in a relaxed stance.

Sometimes I wonder why I open my mouth. Because if I hadn't, I wouldn't have to deal with this man and this new-found lust that I never knew I had until this very night.

Because the way he looks right now, makes me want to see if his lips are as soft as they look and
wring his fucking neck.

"This is not prejudice, this is culture." He raises one eyebrow in the air and I think he's trying not to laugh. "Really? Culture?"

"Yes, culture," I insist loudly. "See, you boys are still young and inexperienced of the finer things in life, video games included. But as for myself? I am a connoisseur of video games. Yes, I went through my period of being a simpleton and thinking that games like Fortnite were the absolute best thing ever created. And that was a dark period in my life, I will admit."

"But I am a woman of substance. And because I am a woman of substance, I had the epiphany that I deserved better. So I decided better to look for better gaming experiences. I now realize it's not just the shooting and fighting that will satisfy me; I want the game to have a compelling storyline, amazing graphics, awesome voice actors... why are you laughing?"

Namjoon is now bent over his seat, busting a gut with how loud and boisterous his laughter is. His laugh is high-pitched and has a wildness to it.

I don't want to, but I start laughing too. Because truth be told, I do sound ridiculous.

Once Namjoon and I finally get all of his remaining giggles out, he sits upright in the chair and glances at me in challenge. "For one," he states in English, "You're insane. I think you could give Jin-Hyung a run for his money in outlandish behavior."

"Debatable," I reply. He rolls his eyes and chuckles. "Second, since you obviously think that you've tapped into the fountain of youth for video games, I-- we want to see it for ourselves." Namjoon quickly translates his request to Jungkook. He nods his head in encouragement.

Maybe it's because Namjoon staring at me so intensely, but I suddenly feel shy, which is ridiculous but I do.

As I quickly run back to my flat to get my favorite game and my notes, thoughts like "What if they end up hating it?" keeps plaguing my head. I know it's not a big deal in hindsight, but I really want them to like this game.

I really want them to like me.
Oh God.

I sound like I'm that lonely twelve-year-old girl who used to dream up strategies on how to make lifelong friends for hours on hours, thinking that everything would work out for once.

*And we all know how that turned out don't we, Willow?*

So can you blame me if my hands were shaking a bit as I come back into the boys' place?

Namjoon is the one who opens the door this time and I feel like time stands still as I get caught in his eyes again.

Damn it, why does this keep happening? Why do I care so much? It's just a fucking game that nobody cares about.

It's not a big deal so *why...*

"*Detroit: Become Human!*" My voice breaks on the last word. "I-I personally think that it is one of the best games that has come this year. Do you know that it has more than forty endings? Forty fucking endings, can you believe that shit?! I only just got the good ending only a few months ago. I even made notes. So I know we can get the best experience we follow them. And, uh, there's three main characters who you will just love right off the bat and their evolution depends solely on you. Plus, there's... there's, shit what was it? And you could die if you're not careful--"

"Hey."

Big hands wrap around my shoulders.

My heart is trying to pound its way out my chest. He's only touching my shoulders, but from how warm I suddenly am he may as well be touching my waist.

Oh man, I talked too much. He didn't want to hear all of that.
He could've found that out later when he played it. Why didn't I think of that? Why do I always have to be so stupid?

My eyes pathetically tear up from embarrassment and I focus my eyes on the floor so he can't how pitiful I am.

"Are there really forty endings?" I look up. He doesn't look irritated or that look that people sometimes give me when they want me to shut up and stop rambling all the fucking time.

He's smiling at me. And it's the type of smile that has his left dimple pressing deeply into his cheek.

He's curious. He really wants to know.

I'm not bothering him.

I don't why that thought makes me want to cry.

I nod in response, unexplained emotion clogging my throat. He slides his hand from my shoulder and takes my left hand into his much larger one. "Kook is setting up our PlayStation, why don't you tell me about this amazing game since you're the self-proclaimed connoisseur."

He squeezes my hand softly.

I swear this boy has a sensor that's connected directly to my moods. Because the teasing aura is almost nonexistent and that softness I caught a glimpse of when we first met is back.

Does he know?

Does he know the crippling anxiety I feel from the need to impress them? To show them that I'm worth their time?
Does he know that I'll probably won't be able to bounce back as easily if I'm rejected again?

Probably not.

But as he leads to the living room where Jungkook is waiting for us, I find it a little comforting and disconcerting the way Namjoon was able to help me get my anxiety under control and not make me feel like an idiot at the same time.

This probably isn't healthy. Longing for this man even though I just got my heart broken by another.

But it's not like he feels an iota of what I feel.

Besides, this is just lust and lust fades with time

Chapter End Notes

Y'all pray for me, I'm going to Endgame tomorrow with my siblings.
Chapter Notes

Guys... can I just say I love to write?

Sometimes I really don't because it seems like a major drag when the words won't come to me or archive acts like a bitch.

But overall, I can't imagine doing anything else!

Also, wow!

This would be the first time I've ever written something that spanned over 100,000 words!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Noona, stop worrying so much. It'll be fine, I promise."

Jimin and I have just finished our rehearsal for the day. Although it's not my usual MO, today I walk him to the room where he has his group practice with the other boys because I want to talk to him because I have concerns regarding the routine I made.

"Jimin-ah, I'm just asking you to at least consider my offer. It would only be a slight alteration."

"No," he stubbornly insists. "I've been practicing this part of the routine for weeks and I think I finally got a solid grasp on it. Now you want me to drop weeks of progress? No chance."

I drag a huge gulp of air through my nose, trying to rein in my impatience so I could properly deal with Jimin's obstinate behavior. "Look, I understand where you're coming from. I know you've worked hard on this routine. I was there right along with you. But when I was running through the dance by myself the other day, I realized I severely underestimated how taxing it would be on the neck and upper back muscles. I don't want this to balloon into something that can be fixed right now. It would be no problem for me to create something different."

Jimin stops walking and turns around to face me, a seriousness in his eyes that I've only witnessed when he was practicing with me.

"Willow-Noona," he says with maturity I wasn't aware that he possessed. "I understand that you're
worried about me. It makes me happy to know that you care so much. But at the end of the day, it's my decision. All I ask is that you trust that I can handle it. I know what I'm doing."

I slump my shoulders, knowing that I have been defeated. But can I do? Jimin's a grown man who's capable of making his own choices.

With great reluctance, I nod my head in consent. Jimin's angelic smile appears. "Don't worry, Noona," he assures, "Everything will be fine, you'll see." I wish his words could put me at ease, but my gut instinct is screaming at me that something may go wrong.

That's why I silently vow to make alternative steps after I'm finished working with the backup dancers today.

I'll just show the steps to the steps to Mr. Son before it's time for me to go, I reason.

Before it's time for me to go.

Damn.

I wish my heart wouldn't tighten at the thought of me leaving here.

Leaving means going back home to face Nina flaunting her boyfriend in my face.

Leaving means no more seeing Jimin and hearing his carefree laughter.

Leaving means no more playing video games with Jungkook while Namjoon and the other boys watch and sometimes cheer.

Namjoon.

Why do I care about this guy so much?
So far, the only time I interact with him is when I come over to play video games with the younger boys. That's also depending on if he isn't busy with his work.

I don't even really know this guy.

But I'll still miss him.

And I'm woman enough to admit to myself that I really don't want to leave here just yet.

Not yet.

As Jimin and I continue walking, we stroll by the break room where Jungkook and a young lady are in what look's like a heated discussion. Jimin and I are too far away to hear what is being discussed but their body language does all the talking for them.

Jungkook is flailing his arms around with something akin to panic in his Bambi eyes. The girl, who is petite and has straight dark hair, has a sardonic expression on her face that tells me that whatever he's dishing out to her, she is less than impressed.

"What do you think they're talking about?" I whisper in Jimin's ear as we take in the KDrama that is Jungkook's life. "Probably striking out," Jimin snickers. I elbow him but I secretly agree with him.

We watch as Jungkook continues to make pleading gestures towards the girl and the girl looking like she wants to be anywhere but here. Finally, the girl raises a hand in the air, signaling him to stop. She says something that makes a huge grin come onto Jungkook's handsome face. He gives the girl a quick peck on the mouth and turns on his heel towards the exit.

He waves when he sees us and jogs up to join us. Before we continue our trek, I glance back at the girl. She's still frowning.

"Jungkookie, how'd it go? Did you work things out with Min-Seo?" At first, I think that Jimin's trying to dish for dirt, but the sincerity in his tone tells me different. Jungkook shrugs. "She said she's not mad at me and that we can maybe try again this weekend. Overall, she was pretty lax about the
Jimin pats Jungkook on the back. "That's good, Kookie! Didn't I tell you that if you just explained what happened, she would understand?" Jungkook's head bobs up and down and then he starts talking so fast my brain can't catch up.

I'm thoroughly confused. Am I the only one who saw the way that girl looked like she wanted to whack Jungkook upside the head?

The girl, Min-Seo, is obviously still upset. I need to set this boy straight before this comes back to haunt him. Although I really don't want the baby to stop smiling, I wouldn't really be a good Noona if I didn't help my dongsaeng out.

But first, I need the facts before I can determine the best course of action. "Jungkook, what exactly did you do to warrant anger from that girl?"

He flushes and avoids my gaze. "Remember last night when we were playing Detroit: Become Human and it was the part where we had to get Kara and Alice out of the creepy man's mansion?"

"Yeah..." Suddenly I have a feeling that I know exactly what happened but I'm hoping Jungkook will prove me wrong. "Well... I may have forgotten that Min-Seo, that's her name, and I had planned to spend the evening together at her place."

"Jungkook..." I let out a frustrated groan.

"I know, I know! But you were there. I wanted to burn the house down but you wanted to be the pacifist. Those poor androids were finally getting revenge and I felt like I was on top of the world and all I could think about was getting through the next level. And I put my phone on vibrate so that we wouldn't be distracted. I only remembered this morning." He runs a hand through his freshly dyed cherry-red hair and lets out this dumb chuckle.

It's divine intervention that keeps me from taking my messenger bag and shoving it down this dumbass' throat. Then we'll see how many stupid giggles he can let out then.

Quelling down on the anger that is threatening to rise, I ask in a tight voice, "And you honestly think that girl isn't furious with you right now?"
He looks nervous, as he should be, and unsure at my tone. "I apologized several times and promised to make it up to her maybe this weekend. She said that it was okay and it didn't seem like she was mad." He sounds so sure of himself and I would've believed if not for two reasons.

One: He's a guy. And when have guys ever been able to read women correctly?

Two: If looks really could kill, Jungkook would've ended with arrows, knives, swords, and axes in the center of his back. Min-Seo being the prime suspect.

"Alright kid, you're not going to listen to Timon anymore because he don't know what the hell he's talking about when it comes to women. Simba is going to lead to the promised land." Jimin scoffs at the nickname.

I've gotten pretty close to not just Jimin but Jungkook as well. So close, in fact, I christened us Simba, Timon, and Pumbaa: The Dynamic Trio. But those nicknames are only reserved when we're all together.

Jimin is Timon because he's short (I'm centimeters taller than him) and got a big mouth. Jungkook is Pumbaa because he's got Pumbaa's sweet and sometimes confused (Not to say he isn't intelligent because they're all very smart guys) demeanor.

Another reason why he's Pumbaa is that one night he let out this noxious fart while I was over at that the boys' place. At first, the little shit tried to pretend that he didn't do it. Then he tried to blame Seokjin, who had wanted to watch us play. Then he just sniggered, admitted to doing it, and kept it moving.

I kid you not when I say that I almost died that night. My throat closed up, my eyes were watering and I nearly hurled from the impact.

Lastly, I'm Simba simply because my hair looks the same as his when it's out in a twist-out.

Nuff said.

After I lead Jungkook a safe distance away so we can have our privacy, I start.
"Alright B-Bop," another little nickname I gave him. B is for bunny and Bop is for the way he's always in constant motion whenever I see him. "I going to give you some valuable advice on women right now: We have a habit, whether it's good or bad depends on the situation, on sometimes not saying what we actually mean. We'll use it for our partners, friends, family, whoever. When we say yes, we mean no and vice versa."

"Now if it had been something small like getting a stain on your favorite T-shirt or leaving the TV on all night, maybe. But when you screw up on the caliber that you have, I guarantee you that girl is lying through her teeth about how mad she is."

Poor Jungkook. The boy looks absolutely bewildered. I can't say I blame him too much. It took me years and a lot of doing myself to finally understand it.

"But I still don't get it: if she really is still angry with me, why didn't she just tell me the truth?"

"I guess she didn't want to spell it out for you. She probably was hoping that you would figure it for yourself." Jungkook's confusion shifts to irritation. "Well, how the hell am I supposed to figure that out?"

"Body language is your best friend, my boy. I was able to figure out the girl was angry just by noticing the way she was carrying herself: her lips were pursed, she wasn't making direct eye contact with you, and her arms were wrapped around herself like she was protecting herself. You got to learn how to read between the lines. If you don't remember anything else, remember that."

Jungkook runs a hand through his hair again, a habit I think he got from Jimin because I've seen him do it too. "Okay, I hear what you're saying. But how is that going to help me now? I've already fucked up. What do I do to make it up to her?"

I shrug. "Baby, that's up to you. Hopefully, you know this girl enough to know her likes and dislikes. Capitalize on that and go big. I'm talking RomCom-sized gestures. And after that, you make sure to let her know that nothing like this will ever happen again. Do you think that you can do that?"

Jungkook's eyes do that thing where his big, brown eyes go blank and he stares off into space. I've been around him long enough to know that it means that he's either in deep thought or he's having a brain fart.
Finally, those adorable rabbit teeth come out in an excited beam that overtakes his entire face. He surprises me by nearly crushing me in a bear hug that has my ribcage protesting. But that doesn't stop me from wrapping my arms around him and returning his hug.

"Thanks for the help, Noona," he says into my hair, "I couldn't have gotten this advice from Jimin."

"Well, no offense to Jimin but situations like this call for a woman's touch. But hey," I pull back and hold Jungkook's face in my hands. "The only reason I gave you this advice is that I'm assuming that you're serious about this girl. I don't want you doing it just because I said so. If you don't see the relationship going anywhere, then what's the point in you putting in this much effort?"

Jungkook soberes up and gives me a serious nod, letting me know he understands what I mean. Then he gives another quick hug and runs off to dance practice.

I watch him, feeling joy and melancholy warring in my heart.

I'm not ready to leave this behind.

I am thirsty. But this is not the type of thirst that demands I drink anything just to quench it. No, I'm coherent enough to be selective about what crosses my tastebuds.

I want sugar.

I have just gotten finished going over the routine with Jimin's backup dancers and I decided that nature was calling.

My only problem is that on the way back from the bathroom, I realized that I was thirsty and wanted a soft drink. But aside from my room, I still don't have a solid grasp on where everything is.

I'm still wondering down random corridors when I finally admit to myself that I'm lost and I need help. I continue walking, hoping that someone is still here and can guide me to the nearest vending machine.
"Come on Willow," I say to myself. "It's almost eleven at night; who else would be here?" Still, I put the old saying "hope springs eternal" into use and hope that someone is still around who can guide me.

I listen carefully for noise coming from some of the closed doors. When I hear music coming from a door that has the title "Rkive" on it, I believe I'm in luck.

Before I can second guess whether I'm bothering the person behind the door, I knock.

I hear music be muted and the door opens.

As I stare in Namjoon's tired face, I vaguely wonder why I couldn't just mosey my fat black ass back to my corner of BigHit.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, if you guys don't see anything posted for the next week or so, that's because I'll be out of town and away from Wifi. :(

Also, this chapter was going to be longer originally, but the BBMAS is tonight and I want to see it.

So another filler for tonight!

But anyways the babies are going to be on the BBMAs tonight!

Fingers crossed for best group win!
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Fuck my life.

And while we're on the subject, fuck my anxiety too.

In my mind, anxiety is that annoying, blonde cheerleader from those cheesy teen movies that always come to talk down to you at your worst moments.

I have three types of anxiety that follow me daily: there's the anxiety that fills me when I'm about to go on stage to perform; the kind where I know that I'm in big trouble for something I know I'm entirely responsible for and it finally came back to bite in the ass.

My final and most terrifying form of anxiety thankfully only comes once in a blue moon; when I have to interact with new people.

Whenever I try to be social, I feel that the other party is just waiting for me to finish so they can go do something more interesting than be with me. It doesn't help when I try to talk, they sometimes even talk over me and just skip to the next person and I'm standing there, feeling foolish.

That anxiety is what is clinging to me right now as Namjoon stares down at me.

He's wearing a grey hoodie, black sweatpants, and black sandals that show off his narrow feet.

He doesn't look annoyed from what I can tell, but he's not exactly wearing a friendly face either. Neutral is the best word way I can describe his expression.

Come on, Willow. It's obvious he's busy and he doesn't have time to indulge your nervous ass. Say what you got to say so that he can get back to whatever it is he was doing.

"I'm sorry to bother you. Especially when it's late at night and you're obviously very busy. I swear
this will only take a minute." My heart is starting to beat faster and my anxiety is chanting 'Hurry up, Willow'.

"I-I was just hoping that you could direct me to the nearest soda machine. Not to say I want you to leave your office! I wouldn't want to do that," I assure, an almost hysteric giggle coming out of me. I even raise my hand in a placating gesture as a sign of good will. He only lifts an eyebrow in response.

That makes it worse because, at the sight of that, my anxiety is now screaming "Shit, shit, shit! Spit it out and shut the fuck up! You always ramble when no one wants to hear it!"

"I was just hoping that you could give me some instructions on where to go. But if you don't know, that's fine too and I'll just take my leave and--"

"You can have some of mine." Namjoon's quiet voice halts my ramblings. He's shifted to the side so that instead of blocking the doorway, he holds it open with his body.

I stand there, blinking like I don't know what the hell is going on. "Uh, it's no big deal," I shake my head so much I'm likely to become dizzy, "I don't want to impose."

"Please, you're not imposing. I've pretty much hit a dead end in my work. You'd be a welcome distraction. Besides, I've been hoarding a good number of soda cans in my mini-fridge for a little too long. I wouldn't mind if a few went missing."

I try to read his face for any hint of insincerity. When I find none, I take tentative steps into the dimly lit room.

I take in my surroundings as Namjoon shuffles to the small, white box in the corner of the room. I hug myself, trying to take in every little thing I see. Namjoon bends down to his fridge and his sweats are pulled taut against his backside. My mouth dries and simultaneously waters at the sight of his amazing thighs and butt. God, what would it feel like to run my hands over them just once?

Not wanting to get caught ogling, my eyes dart around until they land the shelves with black, white, and grey figurines.

They have distinguishable X's on the front of their faces and their heads are shaped like...
"I like your Mickey dolls."

He's upright again and glances over at me. He looks confused for a moment but then he chuckles. "That's not Mickey Mouse, they're a line of dolls called KAWS. I started collecting them about a few years ago. I don't know why, but it's just a hobby that never died out."

"Obsession's more like it," I remark under my breath as I run a finger on one of the ears of the figurines. But then again, who am I to judge anyone about obsessions when I got all of the Muppet movies back at my flat? I turn away and my gaze falls on the couch and the adorable round, yellow teddy bear on it.

Before I could control myself, I run over and plop myself down to squeeze it. The design of the bear is so simple; with its deadpan expression, round black dots for eyes, and cute, white snout. And yet, it is endearing somehow. The material is so soft and I'm probably touching it a little bit too much but I don't care. I've always had a fondness for stuffed animals.

"He's called Ryan." I glance up to find Namjoon looking down at me. His hair, which I think is grey now, sticking out from his hoodie. "Along with KAWS, I started collecting these teddy bears a while back. It's a popular line of stuffed animals in South Korea. What you're holding is a gift I got from a fan."

I turn my attention back to the bear and smile. "Well, you're going to have to tell me where you get it from because it is absolutely adorable. I could totally add this to my collection of stuffed animals I hoard back home." I snort at my silliness.

"Really? You don't think that it's too childish?" His tone makes me look up again. He's refusing to look at me and although the room is dim, I think I detect a flush on his adorably round cheeks. I would probably internally coo at him if not for the self-deprecation in his words.

I frown. "No? And I refuse to let you feel bad for owning some. In fact, these toy companies should pay people like you and me. We're the reason why they still have a business. Most kids these days would rather prefer a hand-held game over a cute plushy. Hell, they should make you the spokesperson for this shit. Watch it sell out in three seconds flat. Everybody will be salivating at the mouth to hire you. And when you get your first check for five hundred million won, I want twenty percent of the profits because for copyright reasons."

I feel like I won the lottery when I hear Namjoon's high-pitched giggle. It's then I notice this adorable
thing he does with his eyes. They usually scrunch up into slits when he laughs, but then out of nowhere, they go wide and it stalls my heartbeat for a few seconds.

I file this new trait away for later analysis.

"I have at least twenty more versions of these at my house. I even brought my favorite teddy bear over here because I can't sleep anywhere without it. As a matter of fact," I whip out my phone and go to my photo gallery to find the last picture I took of Pepper.

Once I find it, I walk over to Namjoon and for once that I'm so close to him. My breathing is coming in short, jittery beats. I don't usually get a chance to bond with someone over my more trivial interests like these, save for the children at the burn center. This is a rare treat for me and I intend to take advantage of it.

"This is Pepper," I point to the little white colored bear wearing a blue and green sweater that encases his entire upper body on the screen. The picture is Pepper sitting upright on my quilt-covered bed. The picture had been taken a few days after I finally got unpacked and acclimated to my new home. "I know that his name is a contradiction to his fur, but his nose is so black it reminded me of pepper. Besides, why would I name my bear salt? Pepper has more of a spiciness to it. Ha! Spice! Get it?" I laugh at my corny joke.

"When I was a little girl, my father and I lived with my Grandmother for a time. One day I was messing around in her room and I found Pepper stuffed in the back of her closet. I don't know what it was, but it was love at first sight. Isn't he cute?" I know I'm cooing, but my bear is coo-worthy.

"Yeah, absolutely adorable."

The way he says it makes me foolishly believe that he's not referring to the bear.

So I tell myself that I'm only imagining his eyes are on me instead of the picture.

I shut my phone off and take a step back. His comforting scent disappears from my nose as I do.

"So," he clears his throat, "Got any soda preferences?" Oh right. He probably needs to get back to whatever it is he needs to do.
"Uh... you got any Dr. Pepper in that fridge of yours?"

He walks over to his fridge, I get treated to another lovely visual of his tight ass, and he returns with my drink.

He hands the cold, red can to me and I hope he doesn't notice the slight shudder I get when his fingertips brush against mine when I grab the drink.

Having completed my mission of ending my thirst I decide it's probably best for me to leave him alone.

I have my hand on the doorknob when Namjoon blurts out, "Thank you!"

I turn around. "For what?" I know my expression is contorted in perplexion.

"Jungkook came home from his date last night. He was able to properly make up with this girl that he's been seeing recently and although he wouldn't say it out loud, I think they had sex. Hence his good mood." We both chuckle at that.

"Anyways, that he couldn't stress enough that it was thanks to your advice that he was able to make things right. So thank you."

I bite my lip to hide my smile, but it does nothing to stop the flush I feel on my neck.

"Oh please," I try to play off. "All I did was give the boy some much-needed advice. In the end, it was up to Jungkook to make the effort."

"I know," he shrugs. "It's just that Jungkook is the youngest of us and he's still very innocent and naive in a lot of ways, including how to conduct a healthy relationship. Plus, although he's gotten better at it, he's still pretty shy when it comes to meeting new people. Which is why I was so shocked and pleasantly surprised at how fast he took to you. So yes, thank you."
Despite how warm my face is, I beam at Namjoon. "Jungkook is a sweetie. Becoming his friend really didn't require any type of force on my part. Although he can be a complete brat sometimes, I can't deny that he has wormed his way into my heart."

"Yeah," Namjoon laughs, "he has that effect on people. But the same can be said for Jimin. I literally can't go five minutes without hearing him talking about you. How funny you are, how protective you are of him, and how hard you work. Oh, and how you like that Rebecca Black song."

He smirks at me in pure amusement.

Remember that warm, fuzzy feeling I had a minute ago?

Yeah, fuck that.

Of course, that little midget could not resist revealing my most shameful secrets.

"That just reminds me that I have yet to complete my task of castrating him."

I nearly jump out of my skin when Namjoon releases that chaotic laugh of his. He's sitting at his work station and I fear that he might fall off his chair from how aggressive his laugh is.

But that just proves to me that not only is he sexy and intelligent, but he also has a love for cute things like plushies.

I wonder if he would still find it cute for a grown woman to still watch TV shows geared for preschoolers.

Or would he think that I'm a perverted freak like Harry did?

You know what? Stop it, Willow. The one thing you're not about to do is force your stupid fantasies on Namjoon just because you share one thing in common.

"Jimin also mentioned your violent side," Namjoon mentions when he finally calms down. I bare my teeth at him. "Jimin needs to learn how to shut up," I mock snarl.
"Well, I'm going to give you some tips on us right now: if you tell one of us an embarrassing secret, make sure it is anyone but Hoseok or Jimin. Jimin because he is a gossip, and Hoseok is a terrible liar."

"Noted," I deadpan. "But really, Jimin is a good kid when he's not acting like a little butthead. The way he dances with such passion and emotion, he's everything I could hope for in a student. It also helps that the song we're dancing to is utterly beautiful. When I read the lyrics to the song, I just thought that whoever wrote this has to have the most romantic, gentle, and probably absolutely amazing in bed. I don't know, but they definitely spoke the secret to unlocking my fragile heart. I would love to meet them if I had the chance."

When I finish my rant, I can't help but notice that Namjoon has his large hand covering his beet red face.

Before I could ask what was wrong, I hear him mumble, "I wrote it."

At first, I don't, can't comprehend what Namjoon said. But when the words 'I wrote it' finally register in my mind, my body explodes with heat. My stomach does that awful sinking thing again.

Oh my God.

Oh my fucking God.

I don't want to believe that he's telling me the truth, but as I gaze around his office with new eyes, I see the microphones and headphones, numerous computers, and the open notebook with chicken-scratch-like handwriting written on it.

If I had only paid closer attention to my surroundings, I could've avoided my current situation by a solid mile.

It would figure the few times I actually try to engage in conversation and try to be attractively witty, I put my whole stank ass foot in my mouth! Like, what the hell? I'm starting to think that my life is God's personal reality TV show because this is getting fucking ridiculous.
I know I didn't say anything wrong in theory, but I basically waxed poetry and implicitly declared that I wanted to sleep with him.

Well...

No, no, no. Not going down that road.

He's still not looking at me and I've found a riveting stain on his wall.

When the stillness becomes too much, I do what I always when confronted with uncomfortable situations: I ramble.

"W-well, it's a, uh, a-l-l-lovely s-song. So...yeah."

"Yeah," He coughs. "Well, uh, thank you I worked really on it and Jimin made my words come to life."

Sucking up my mortification, I continue my praise, albeit, G-rated this time. "I'll say as a person who makes routines to music as a side living; it's really nice to be able to create dance moves that are cohesive with the song lyrics. It makes the creative process flow a lot better. It gets tiresome having to think of new ways I can make new moves based on how the beat drops. Do you know what I mean?"

His face had returned to its normal light brown tone when he says, "Yeah, I get what you're saying. It seems now like today's music is more based on the sound or a catchy melody."

I feel myself getting excited at his words. "Yes! Then you see my point. It's nice to know that I'm not alone in my thinking. When any member of my family used to talk about 'Good Music' in the seventies or eighties and how my generation does not know about good music, I scoffed at them and brought up the argument that the singers of present and the past both talked about sex."

Namjoon's left dimple presses into his cheek as he lets out a dry chuckle."Yes, I think I've had variations of the same conversation with my parents when they discovered my love for Tupac and Eminem."
I pause. He likes Tupac?

But I get back to what I want to say.

"But now that I'm older and a little wiser, I can see that maybe they weren't exactly off kilter. Nowadays when I listen to a song for the first time, I focus on the beat first, and the lyrics later. So when I listen to the song for a second time to determine whether or not I'm going to buy it, I'm always surprised by the lackluster lyrics I hear. I always end up wondering where the hell did these god-awful lyrics come from and did the singer actually write them or did some hotshot producers just decide to recycle them from their pile of 'generic but radio hit pile'."

"I'll admit to myself that I'm guilty of not focusing on the lyrics as much I want to. The beat commands my attention and it makes me overlook the lyrics. But even though we're in an era of music that doesn't focus on lyrics, I want to make music that goes against the trend. I want to take the most meaningful, beautiful words ever created and make not only my listeners feel something, but myself as well. Because before produced music, my first love was writing poetry. Because while I may be in a slump right now, I love that magical moment that when you think that it may never appear, the elusive words suddenly appear. But you have to be careful; as fast as the words come, the quicker they can leave. So then it's a race based on how fast your fingers can jot down the words before they float back into the trenches of your subconscious. Adrenaline is making your hands tremble a little and gallons of endorphins are being spilled in your brain."

"When your fingers win against your brain, there's this sense of victory because you know you have written something that can invoke the listener to feel a strong emotion, whether it be positive or negative depends on the person. It's a powerful feeling to know that you were able to pry those types of reactions from even the most stoic of people."

I stand there in awe.

This boy, no, this man speaks with such a zeal that has me taken aback. I've been blessed to be able to surround myself with people who love what they do. But Namjoon... I really don't know what it is about this boy.

But watching the way his large hands match the grace in his words when he moves them to emphasize his words, the way his eyes light up with enthusiasm, and the way that I am the oldest person in the room but watching Namjoon speak with a wisdom that some people only dream of obtaining has me wanting to go listen to the boys' music discography after I leave.

The way Namjoon talks makes me want to see if that level of passion is matched in his music.
His words also make me want to dance harder than I ever had before and make a dance that matches the beauty and pureness in his words. I want to tell him how much I admire him for refusing to let anyone in the music industry try to dictate how he creates his art just because a certain trend is proving to be popular. Even stranger than that, I want to tell him how I nearly bleached my skin because I was so desperate to get into a ballet company. I want to tell him how ashamed I felt about myself and getting into Oberman helped restore a bit of my self-esteem as a dark-skinned black woman and made me see that it wasn't me who needed to change.

But I don't.

My anxiety doesn't let me.

I can its slimy voice snarling in my head, "All he's gonna do is listen to what you have to say, secretly waiting for the moment you finally shut the fuck up. You and I both know that the little speech swirling around in that empty head is something he's heard a million times from fans that are less pathetic than you. What makes you think that your words will be any different?"

In the end, I only mutter, "That's... really nice."

His shoulders sag in disappointment and I can't say I blame him either. I'm disappointed in myself.

"Yes, well," I scramble to think of another topic to fill the empty space. "I do love songs of romance. The promising of forever, how extraordinary you are in someone else's eyes. As cliche as they are, I love romantic songs and have loved them since I was a little girl. But let me ask you this: do you feel that sometimes the things depicted in songs and romcoms are less than desirable in real life?"

He purses his lips in consideration, once making those dimples pop out. Finally, he snorts. "A little bit. A few years ago, I was seeing this girl. I was at her place, we were watching our favorite show. During the commercial, she stands up to get some more popcorn. Her ass was right in front of me. I don't know, she had a nice ass and I wanted to touch it. So I smacked it. I had seen it done in movies and TV shows. And it wasn't the first time I had done and she seemed to like it."

"Mm-hmm," I force out. The image of Namjoon with another girl, even if it was a few years, has that evil twisted part of me wanting to find this girl so I can see if she was really as attractive as Namjoon thought she was.
"Big mistake on my part," Namjoon laughs. "She let out this huge fart with my face only a few inches away from her ass."

"Oh, ew!" I exclaim, trying to keep my obnoxious laughter at bay. My jealousy is a small whisper now.

Besides, I now know that Namjoon is an ass man.

"I won't tell you what happened next, but that was the last time I ever tried to do something like that. It never occurred to me that something like that could happen."

I shrug and chuckle. "I'm thankful that has never happened to me. But when I was younger, I used to religiously watch old MGM films. They had to be the ones with Gene Kelly featuring Frank Sinatra and Judy Garland or I wasn't having it. But one thing I always noticed was the way they kissed. It was strictly closed-mouthed and somehow the ideology that all kisses are like that stayed with me until I was way into my teenage years. So imagine the culture shock I experienced when I discovered French kissing."

Namjoon's lips curl with amusement. "I can imagine."

"I was a little grossed out at the notion of my tongue coming in contact with someone else's tongue, but I thought it would feel better when I experienced it firsthand. But the few time I have french kissed, I only felt awkward and I think about what I ate before I started kissing them. It always ended with either my partner not noticing that something was wrong, or they get frustrated with me on the rare occasion that they do notice. Based on how horrible I am at it, I don't think French kissing is meant for me." I give a weak chuckle

I don't know how I was able to say all of that without my anxiety crippling me. Maybe because I'm making fun of my shortcomings is why I can force the words out of my mouth despite the nervous pace of my heart. But still, I choose to focus my glance on the KAW dolls on his shelves so I don't have to see him smirking.

"Why do you think it's your fault that you don't enjoy it?"

His tone has me forgetting my fears and looking back at him. The amusement is gone and what could only be as described as anger is in its wake. His jaw is doing that clenching and unclenching thing again. I've never seen him full-on angry before now.
"Well..." I falter, not knowing what to do with this anger that came out of nowhere. "The problem must be me since I've never enjoyed it."

"The reason why I know you're not the problem is that from what you described, your partners' only concern was their own pleasure. If they had really been paying attention to you, they would've seen how uncomfortable you were and slowed it down to where you were comfortable. But they chose to get mad at you instead of taking a mirror and examining their own faults."

The only partner I've ever truly made out with was Harry. At first, I had tried to tell him that I wasn't enjoying it. I stopped bringing it up when I noticed all of the impatient noises he would make, the rolling of the eyes, and how he would just shut down, mentally.

My shame makes me defensive and I lash out. "Then tell me how you would've handled it since you're such a damn expert." I cross my arms and wait to hear his response. Instead of getting irritated like I thought he would, a lazy smile spreads across his lips.

"First thing I would do is to let you know that you are safe in my arms and that if you want to stop, then we will. Next thing I would do is kiss your neck, your shoulders, your cheeks..."

"Why prolong it?"

He chuckles darkly. "Sweetheart, if I gave it to you without putting any work in, you and I wouldn't appreciate it as much. But if I take time to lavish attention on not just those very distracting lips, but the rest of you which deserves just as much care as your lips, it'll make the longing even sweeter."

"Anyways, when I finally do reach your lips, I'll breathe on them, making your lips moist with my breath. I would kiss you then. Our kisses would be chaste at first. But once I sense that you are ready, I'll lick the shape of your lips with my tongue, asking you for your permission. I do this because one, this is all about consent and I want you to want this too. Two, it is also a preview of what is to come and all that I could give you if you'll just let me in and give you what we both know you really want."

Right about now I really wish I had opened up my Dr. Pepper because my mouth has gone completely dry. His words, his low voice as he says them, and the way he's leaned back in his chair, the picture of nonchalance has my stomach doing twisting and my center aching.
Why?

If it had been anyone else, I probably would've slapped them and told them to mind their damn business.

"And... and you're saying that will get me to enjoy French kissing?" I had wanted my voice to come out strong with a slightly mocking edge to them. But the shallowness of my breathing prevents that and my voice actually comes out as meek and timid as a mouse.

His already dark brown eyes darken even further, and he licks his full lips in a slow, deliberate manner. Since I'm a weak woman, my eyes follow the transformation of his former dry lips become wet.

"That's exactly what I'm saying."

I need to leave. If I stay I don't know what will happen next. Namjoon does things to me that no man has been able to do and it frightens and arouses me.

I want to be free.

I want to be able to free myself from my inhibitions and kiss Namjoon like I want to. To be a sexy, confident woman like my coworkers or the models I see on magazines.

*How confident would you be if Namjoon knew what a whore you were underneath it all? If he saw the scars that even your Father couldn't bear to look at sometimes?*

He wouldn't want me anymore.

Just like none of them did in the end.

I end up staying most of the night; watching him work, listening to him explain to me the in's and out's of producing, putting a blanket on his shoulders when he passes out from pure exhaustion.
I spend too much time gazing at his face, admiring how innocent he looks in his sleep.

I am all too aware that I'm falling with no chance of gaining back my equilibrium.

Chapter End Notes

Ok...

I'm back from vacation!

I hope you guys liked my attempt at building the sexual tension in the story, even though I wish it could've been better.

Have a nice evening!
1000 hits...

When I started this, I was just glad to have 100 hits.

So thank you to everyone that just took a quick glance, who gave my story a chance, and to the people who are like me and scroll the comments first before taking on this story!

There might be a killing today and Jung Hoseok is trying his damnedest to get elected for the slaughter.

Let it be known that for the most part, I do not go off the deep end. I make sure that my homicidal thoughts just stay thoughts despite the little devil on my shoulder whispering sweet nothings to me; I try to be polite to everyone even if they insist on treating me like trash.

No need to give into the ugly stereotype of the Angry Black Woman that non-black people just love to mock and black men use as an excuse to bring down black women as a whole and to put their white or other raced partner on a pedestal.

Ok, I'm getting a little off track. That's an issue for another day.

I wasn't even irritated when Hoseok dropped by this morning to visit Jimin and see his progress. Well actually, I was a little nervous at first. I may be confident in my ballet skills, but I still get a little self-conscious when I'm doing another genre; only because I haven't been doing as long as ballet.

My bad mood began when about an hour or two into our rehearsal, Hoseok ever so slightly started giving suggestions to Jimin while I was in the middle of instructing Jimin myself. At first, I try to indulge him because that is Jimin's friend and let it be known that I am not an active fun-killer.

But when the little fucker actually started to get in between us, move Jimin to the side and give him his own advice and whispering so that I couldn't hear, completely disregarding my authority, I had had enough.
I'm already in a piss-poor today: my period decided to make its special guest star appearance so now I have severe cramps; I've scratched my head several times today which can only mean that a wash day is in my immediate future, which means I have to douse my hair in coconut oil tonight in preparation for tomorrow's inevitable washing of my hair and...

I'm tired.

My feelings have been squashed on so many times in the previous months by people I never imagined. I've been walked all over and just expected to take it. Then when I don't, they lash out at me, as if I'm the villain in the story.

But not today.

I've worked hard to get where I am today and I refuse to let anyone, voluntarily or not, disrespects me in the one place I vowed I would never let anyone try it.

"Jimin-ah, go take five. Hoseok-ah and I need to have a little chat." Jimin's blonde head pops from the little circle that he and Hoseok had created. Whatever he saw on my face causes the angelic smile to slide off his face. "Noona, is everything alright?" He asks in a tentative voice.

I rub his sweaty shoulder in a comforting gesture. "It will be in a minute. Now go." Jimin still takes a minute, looking between us like we're Godzilla and King Kong and we're about to get into a grudge match for the ages.

Who knows? We just might.

When I hear the door close I don't even waste time. "Listen: I get that Jimin is your dongsaeung and that you've been best friends for a long time. You have a bond that I couldn't possibly begin to understand. I also understand that you have been somewhat of Jimin's dance instructor in that certain stretch of time. I get that and I love that you guys are so close to another."

My voice goes flat. "But when Jimin is with me, none of that matters. For these four or five hours, I am his Teacher. His ass is mine. This studio is mine. I don't mind you being in here for moral support, but I will not tolerate you coming in here and constantly interrupting our rehearsal by giving your side comments every time a thought crosses your head. You got something to say Jimin or me? You say it afterward once we're done. I will tolerate this happening again. Do I make myself
Hoseok blinks, then he blinks again. His eyes are carefully blank as he processes my words.

I honestly don't know what to make of Hoseok sometimes. One day, he'll be all rainbows and sunshines, next he'll be razor sharp energy that'll cut you if you get too close. If I'm to be completely honest, he makes me a little nervous. He could either lash out or accept my words. But I said what I said and I don't intend on taking it back.

He runs a hand through his floppy brown hair as he considers me. Then out of nowhere, a bright pink flush appears on his high cheekbones. He covers his mouth and lets out what I think is a high-pitched whine. "Oh my God, I did it again, didn't I? I'm sorry, Noona. I've been helping my members out in dance for so long, I kind of forget to reel it in sometimes. Sungdeuk-shi is alright with it, but I have to remember that everyone isn't. I didn't mean to step on any toes. I promise you, Noona, something like this will not happen again. I truly am sorry."

Well... okay. I had been bracing myself for a fight of wills and opinions since the last fight I had been in ended with me confused on who was really at fault. Hoseok's eyes are filled with nothing but sincerity. He listened to me, understood where I was coming from, and didn't make me feel like I was overreacting for how I was feeling. That I was acting too sensitive and needed to suck it up.

I almost don't know what to do with that.

No, that's not entirely true.

I do know what I want to say Hoseok. "It's all good, just as long as you respect the way I teach. Because don't misunderstand, I have no problem taking advice from other dancers on how to improve, but I prefer it if happens afterward. I accept your apology." He gives another one of those smiles that pulls his lips into an almost heart. It pulls a reluctant grin from me.

"Don't tell anyone I told this, but you're my favorite member."

The flush that had been on his cheeks slowly spreads out to his neck.
"Oh!, " he exclaims bashfully, "Thank you. I didn't think that you listened to any of our music."

"I wasn't planning on it, originally. In the past, I've tried to keep a line between me and my employers. But something N--" I feel the heat on my neck when I think about how the road that particular conversation went down and how I had been ready to jump Namjoon even before he was finished flirting with me.

No, not flirting. Teasing. He was just teasing me.

If my past dating experience has taught me anything is that I don't know how to read men at all. It's only wishful thinking.

Trying to convince my mind to focus on Hoseok instead of the visual of Namjoon licking his tannish pink colored lips, I continue. "Something one of you said to me spoke to me as an artist. So I decided to see if that passion translated into your music. Long story short, I loved it. My current favorite song being Love Maze, and I found out that you are my favorite, although I think all of you are equally talented. Your flow is so unpredictable and colorful and playful. And I love when you sing. Maybe that's why I love Piece of Peace."

"Wow... I honestly don't know what to say but thank you for your kind words."

I smile, not really knowing what to say next. Apparently, neither does he because of how long the silence stretches on. Not being able to take it any longer, I suggest, "Since I'm a newly converted fan, why don't you show me some of your previous routines?" Hoseok looks puzzled. "Don't you have to get back to Jimin?"

I wave his concern off. "Jimin knows that routine backward and forward. At this point, we're just refining the fine details. Missing one rehearsal isn't going to hurt anything." He still looks unsure. "I have to warn you that it took the others weeks to get it down."

"How long did it take you to learn the dances, estimate-wise?"

"I can't really put a time limit on all of them. But if I had to say... maybe two hours? Three at the longest."

"I can learn them in an hour. " He balks at my audacious claim.
Wanna know why I said that and potentially may have put my pride on the line?

Well, when you figure it, could tell me too cause I haven't figured it out either.

I can claim that the humidity in the room was causing me to have a heat stroke and causing to spew shit I don't mean, but that wouldn't be the truth. My competitive jealousy reared her ugly head. She does that when she founds that there is some cool and innovative dance move out there. It's the only explanation of where my bravado is coming from.

Plus, when Hoseok smirks like he doesn't believe me, my desire to prove him wrong increases tenfold.

"Okay," he says after a long silence. "I'll show you our latest routine. We'll see if you can get it down in an hour." I roll my shoulders and neck and clap my hands in a boisterous manner. "Trust, I am ready. Just let me put a timer on my phone so that the timing will be accurate. Let it be known that I'm not a cheater when it comes to challenges or bets."

Hoseok chuckles as he stretches. "Now if only Taehyung and Yoongi-hyung could follow the same principles. They, especially Taehyung, always find a way to bend the rules to their liking."

"Taehyung? Sweet, sensitive Taehyung? No way, not my little Tigger." When I found out that Taehyung had a special love for tigers, I had taken to calling him Tigger. Mostly because alongside Eeyore and Rabbit, Tigger is one of the best characters from Winnie the Pooh.

"Okay, don't believe me. But I'm warning you right now; do not play UNO with him."

"I'll keep that in mind," I laugh. I set the timer on my phone and put it in a corner in the room. "Now are we going to do this or what? Time is wasting." Hoseok shakes his head like I don't know what I just got myself into. Maybe I don't, but I refuse to back down.

Hoseok fiddles with his phone for a minute and then the music comes on.

I know I'm in for it when I hear the South African beats come on.
Well... I did it.

With three minutes and twenty-two seconds to spare, I might add. I don't even care that I'm spread eagle on the floor and that my period is letting me know that it doesn't appreciate being ignored.

I am victorious.

I've never seen Hoseok dance before, even though Jimin warned me that he was the best dancer out of all of them. I must've been hit by a touch of stupid to take him on, even though I did win the challenge.

Where Jimin is all expression and sensuality, Hoseok is sharp edges and cold hard precision. Although I did feel a little intimidated by his skill, I was overall excited.

Not only is their new song, *IDOL*, a major club banger, I also adored the routine, even though the Gwara-Gwara gave me a little trouble at first. Hoseok is annoyingly still on his feet even after the major workout we went through. But it's hard to stay irritated when Hoseok has that delighted smile on his face. "Noona! You were fantastic!" I open my mouth to suck in a huge amount of air and to respond to him. But the cheers stop me.

With great effort, I turn my head to see all three of the Maknaes and Jin clapping and hollering, cute smiles and chubby cheeks all around. I wrinkle my forehead. When had they slipped in?

"Jimin-ah came because you never called him back. He called Taehyung who was with Jungkook. Jin-hyung heard the music going and wanted to see who was practicing so early."

I blink. How is it that I didn't hear any of them come in? I must've been solely in the zone. That's the only explanation because these boys can be very loud when they put their minds to it.

"That's the last time I do something like that again. Pride be damned," I wheeze. Jimin's eyes are dancing with amusement and I think, I hope, awe. "Noona, you deserve a medal just for keeping up with my Hyung."
"Well can the medal be made out of chocolate? Or better yet, strawberry ice cream. Yeah. A big bowl of strawberry ice cream while watching reruns of I Love Lucy or Murder She Wrote." I whine at the visual of me back at my house, curled up in my warm pajamas, watching the old sitcoms that are now apart of my endless collection.

"Well, I don't know about all of that, but I have to say that I was shocked by how fast you picked up the routine." I summon enough strength to sit on my elbows, ignoring the subtle burn that results for my stomach.

"The moves themselves weren't hard to pin down. It was really a matter of endurance and attention to detail that is a challenge." Hoseok doesn't answer. Instead, he looks pensive as he stares down at me.

I squirm under his gaze, not understanding what I said to cause this look.

He still looks serious and kind of uncertain when he says, "You know, we are running short on back dancers for a few of our songs and we've been concerned since it is pretty close to the start of our tour..." I feel something like hope rise in my chest. Although, I'm wary when I draw out, "Yeah..."

"If you're interested, I could talk to our head choreographer and our CEO about the possibility of adding you on as a backup dancer. If you're worried about people seeing your face, you would be placed in routines that require you to have your face covered."

I blink and blink again. Was this the opportunity I was secretly hoping for? I know that my time here is coming to an end and I am not ready to go back and face the drama waiting for me.

I feel at peace when I'm here. Being surrounded by these boys and their positive energy makes me feel not so alone. They make me feel like I matter and not something to use when it's convenient. It may be immature of me to not want to face my problems, but I'm not ready to give up this feeling of pure contentment. If I can hold onto to this little piece of heaven for even a little bit, I will.

So I make sure to give my complete focus when I inquire, "How exactly would this work?"

I go to him when I'm sure I'll be able to catch him.
I had given Jimin's backup dancers the day off so Hoseok and I could talk to Mr. Son, Mr. Bang, and even phone in Lance about the possibility of me being a temporary back-up dancer. We worked out a deal that had me working in three routines. I would be here till the start of the new year.

When I got out, he is the first I want to let in on my wonderful news. This... giddy sensation is coursing through my veins. My heart is pounding and this unshakable smile is making the corners of my mouth hurt from how hard they have to stretch. Although I'm running to his studio, the headspace I'm in makes me feel as if I'm floating.

I think what I'm feeling is joy.

Joy that I get to stay longer and experience the happiness that had been absent from life. Joy that when I go back to my flat tonight, I can count on Jungkook or the other boys to knock on my door, asking if I'm to playing some videogames.

It is that same joy that prompts me to burst through Namjoon's door without knocking, too high in my euphoria to care about manners. His back is turned to me.

"Namjoon I--"

"What do you want?"

He whirls around in his chair. His stance is frigid, his mouth is pursed in a thin, unforgiving line, and his eyes are daggers hacking into my soul.

I don't know how to deal with this Namjoon. This one is a stranger to the one I have been getting to know. Over the last week or so, I always found myself coming to him, requesting some of the unlimited supply of soda he has. We have an unnamed system of this: If he invites me in while he gets it for me, that lets me know that he wants me to stay. But if he gets it while I'm still at the door, that's a signal that he needs to focus solely on his work and that he doesn't have time today.

But in my excitement to tell him my news, I forgot everything.

I mentally shrink under his glare. "I... I just wanted to, uh..." He runs his hand over his hair, which I
vaguely notice is now a silvery blue color. His usually alert eyes have dark circles looming under them and one of his hands, although balled into a fist, is shaking. Poor boy's exhausted.

Not only do I feel my ever-present anxiety, now I feel guilt as well. When I don't answer him right away, he groans, "Look, if you're just going to stand there like an idiot and say nothing, then please shut the door and leave me alone. I have work to do." He turns back to his desk.

Selfishly, stupidly, I feel tears rushing to my eyes. God, I wish I wasn't so fucking sensitive all the time. Maybe this wouldn't hurt so much. It's just that Namjoon always had a kind word for me and he was always so patient with me even if I had my awkward moments. He even pretended to be endeared by it.

Was I just bothering him this entire time and he finally had enough nerve to tell me off? If so, he didn't have to pretend that he wanted to be my friend all this time.

The sudden rush of anger inspires me to straighten my spine, harden my eyes, and glare right at his turned back.

"Namjoon, I am sorry that I barged in unannounced. It's clear that you're very busy and it was rude of me." Despite the tears burning in my throat, I steel my voice. "But I do not deserve to be called an idiot. I don't care what you got to do to uncurl the stick that has found its way up your arsehole. Whether it be yoga, sleep, or, hell, smoking a goddamn joint for all I care, you better try it. Because I refuse to be around anyone who prefers using me as their own personal punching bag whenever the mood hits 'em. Good night, Namjoon." My voice catches on my last statement. But I can't seem to summon the energy to care too much. My blissed-out mood has been effectively evaporated. I'll cry if I fucking want to.

I whirl around, already strategizing the best way to conduct my pity-party when I feel his hand grasp my wrist.

"Wait." You might not believe me, but I would've wrenched my hand free if not for the tone in his voice.

Sad, broken, and unsure.

I'm so used to hearing utter confidence and self-assuredness in this man's voice, it takes me off guard.
"Could you please come inside for a minute?" He whispers.

If I was a stronger woman, I would've denied his request and walked away in my righteousness. He would've deserved it. But when I turn around and see the hangdog expression on Namjoon's face, something in me softens a bit. The image I've had of Namjoon in the past has always been this impenetrable rock.

But even rocks crumble eventually.

As I walk into Namjoon's studio, I unsubtly remove my wrist from his grip. Even though I'm willing to hear him out, I am still angry with him after all. We sit down on the couch with Namjoon sitting on the edge of the sofa, keeping a respectable distance from me. For a long moment, I just watch him wring his hands as he thinks about what he wants to say.

Finally, turns to look at me, contrition shining in his expression. "I am so, so sorry. I didn't mean what I said. From the moment I met you, I've never once considered you an idiot. You're probably one of the most thoughtful people I've met in a long time. Although you might not believe me at this point, (and I wouldn't blame you if you didn't) it wasn't personal. Anyone who was brave enough to walk through my doors would've gotten the same treatment as you did. It doesn't excuse my behavior, I just wanted you to know that fact."

"It's just that... I am so tired. Our album comes out in less than three weeks. I still haven't finished my solo song, I keep messing up the choreo for our title song, and I haven't slept well in days. I keep having these nightmares that this comeback is going to be a disaster. We got our first number one on the American Billboard charts. The Korean group ever to do it. Isn't that something? When we first heard the news, I remembered seeing Yoongi cry and that was a feat in itself because I've rarely seen Yoongi in the eight years that I've known him. For the next few days, it was like this bubble of happiness we just existed in. But of course, real life had to pop that bubble. I kept seeing these comments on social media that it was a fluke. A mere stroke of luck. I know that Korea and everyone else in the world are watching to see if we could do it again. But Ariana Grande and Nicki Minaj, both more popular and well-liked than us, are releasing some work in August too. If we don't succeed, then every insult that has been flung at us over the years will be true in everyone's eyes."

"What worse is that if we do fail, it would be my fault..." When his voice gets thick with tears and he tries to hide his face from me, I make a split decision to ignore my anxiety, who is telling me that what I'm about to do is a bad idea. But I decide not to listen for once.

I eat up the distance between us and ignore the plushies that fall onto the floor as I wrap Namjoon in a tight embrace. When he stiffens me, it doesn't discourage me, strangely enough. It only makes me tighten my grip.
"Oh, my neach-gaoil," I croon. The Gaelic seamlessly leaving my tongue as I rub Namjoon's back. "It's alright, dear one. Let it out. No one's here but us." The words feel so little to what I want to convey in my heart, but the sentiment rings true.

Namjoon doesn't verbally respond. All he does is hold onto me and lay his head on my shoulder. Aside from the occasional shudder, he doesn't make any sound. I just continue to rub his back. After a while, he detangles himself from me and rubs his nose with his jacket-covered arm.

"You gonna be alright, Peach?" I ask, breaking the heavy silence. He nods. I steadily ignore the wet patch I feel through the thin material of my t-shirt on my shoulder.

He opens his mouth but I beat him to it. "If the next words that come out of your mouth is an apology, then I don't want to hear it." He closes his mouth again. He tries again with, "I usually don't break down like that. I really don't. It's just that the last two years have been such a shock to us. Suddenly, we're getting all this attention from the US, and all this mounting pressure just keeps coming. Don't get me wrong, I'm thankful for the new opportunities coming our way and I roll with the punches. It just some days I think all of this cruel, beautiful dream I'm having and I'm gonna wake up and find myself back in a cramped, one bedroom apartment again and that the most humiliating day of my life has just happened again."

I frown. "Define humiliating." He proceeds to tell me about how when BTS was still relatively new, Yoongi and him got invited to this rappers seminar of some sort for underground rappers. He describes how the rappers there basically called them sell-outs and accused them of turning their backs on hip-hop so they could make some easy money as idols.

"It didn't help when my friends, who were from the underground community as well, deserted me. I never felt so alone. It took me a long time not to resent being called an idol. And writing a lot of angry rap songs did help," he adds with a self-deprecating chuckle. But I find nothing he said worth laughing about. My tears have dried up and my blood is a roaring dragon whose hoard has just been molested. I stand to pace, needing to work off the potential energy that demands I destroy something. Namjoon, whose nose and eyes are still a little red, looks so confused at my sudden mood shift. "What's wrong?" he asks innocently. I spin around, my plats flying around and almost hitting Namjoon in the face.

"What's wrong? What's wrong is that I just stood here and listened to you recount how several grown-ass men, who probably bald and living in their mama's basements, conspired to gang up on two kids, two fucking kids, and destroy their self-esteem by poring a bunch of toxic insecurities about what defines a man into their brains. What the hell do you think is the matter with me?" This nigga
has the nerve to actually laugh. "I didn't tell you that to get you riled up. I said it--"

"No, no, Peach, I heard what you said. The question is do you hear what I'm saying? As a matter of fact, do you have their numbers? If you don't, then I know Bang-shi has them. Give me five minutes with those fat, hypocritical, jealous fuckers and I will have them wishing they nevah--"

"Willow."

The sound of my name leaving his lips strikes me like lightning. The tirade leaves me and I'm left feeling winded.

This is the first time Namjoon has ever called me by my name. I know it seems so cheesy and cliche to get hung up on. But it's different from when people like Jimin or Jungkook call me by name because they're just friends to me.

Namjoon is...

I don't know what Namjoon is to me.

But I do know that when he calls my name in his low voice, with a gentleness I didn't know was possible for someone like me to receive, I feel warm all over.

He grabs my hand and brings it to his mouth, his eyes on mine. I try to jump when I feel his lips on my hand.

"Thank you for getting upset on my behalf. It's nice to know that you are so willing to fight for my honor." If it had been any other man saying, I would've questioned the sincerity of his words. But I don't because Namjoon is saying them. "But I promise you that I'm okay now. It doesn't affect me the way it did in the past. I'm really okay." I try to read his face for any hint of deceit. When I find none, I decide to let it go.

"Well," I grunt out, "Thank you for trusting me enough to confide in me." Namjoon shakes his head. "I don't know what it is about you, but you make it easy to open up to you. I think it's your accent because I love the sound of your voice. So rich and melodic."
I blush. When he called my voice sexy those few months ago, I just thought he said it to be a little shithead. I didn't think he actually meant it. I had always been a little self-conscious about my voice because of how low and throaty it is. It didn't help when people who didn't know me called, they called me Sir.

My skin is dark enough that he can't see me physically blush. And yet the little smirk on his face makes me suspect that he knows.

But I push my embarrassment aside and focus on the important things. I sit back down on the couch and simply ask him, "What do you need to do now?" He gives a perplexed stare. "Didn't you the five-minute rant? I need to work on the steps on the choreo and--"

"I'm not asking you about all the things you need to do in the future, I'm asking you what you think that you can accomplish now. Everything will fall into place eventually and you will do great. You just have to take it one step at a time. So, what do you need to do now?"

He stares at me with an unreadable expression. I fight the need to squirm because I feel like he's searching for something but I don't know what. He slowly says, "I need to work on my song."

"Then I'll leave you alone to work on it." I try to stand but a quick tug to the hand makes me sit back down. "Could you stay with me?" he asks sweetly. "If you don't want to that's fine too. It's just that I like having you here in my space." My stomach leaps at that. I don't hide my smile as I say, "Yes!" a little too eagerly.

Namjoon grins at me, his left dimple coming out to play. But his smile quickly fades. "I still have the dance to worry about. I would go to Hoseok or Mr. Son, but they got a million other things to worry about and I don't want to bother them."

I clap my hands together. "First of all, once you make the song of the year, your next mission is getting some food down your throat and getting some sleep. Don't even try to fight me on this, young man. And if you're so worried about getting the dance right, I gonna carve out some time and help you myself." His eyes go wide and immediately shakes his head. "I can't ask you to do that, you've already done enough. I don't want to take advantage of you and your kindness."

"Well, thank God that I wasn't asking. Now get to work before I put you over my knee." His guilty expression disappears and a salacious smile takes its place. "I didn't know that you were into that." He dodges my hand as I go to smack him upside the head.
As I watch him work with renewed vigor, I think that this is what I'm comfortable with. I've been taking care of people since I was a little girl. I took care of Grammy during her final days, Dad during his depressive period, and my coworkers whenever they need help with something professional or otherwise. I've made peace with the fact that I am a natural caregiver.

No matter how much something inside me longs for someone to want to take care of me.

If our relationship only evolves to this, then I'm okay with it.

At least, that is what I tell myself as I try to ignore the fact that he's still holding my hand and that somewhere in the midst of our conversation, they are now intertwined.

Chapter End Notes

Okay please don't come at me for the take of me comment. I swear my girl is an independent woman who doesn't need a man to take of her.

Just thought I put that out there.

Thank you for reading!
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

This is your filler warning. This chapter is a filler.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Giselle is breathing hard

She's been preparing her dance for the fall festival for months now. She could practically do it in her sleep at this point. Despite her mother's fears about her weak heart, Giselle knows that she can do it as long as she remembers not to exert too much energy.

In truth, Giselle doesn't even know why she should be nervous. This wouldn't be the first fall festival she has danced at.

The only difference between the festivals of the past and now was that Loys wasn't there before.

Loys.

Just the thought of him put a blush on Giselle's cheeks. Loys is a newcomer in the small German village that Giselle lives in. Loys was so beautiful and charismatic, Giselle still couldn't believe that he actually showed interest in her. There were dozens of girls who were more prettier and outgoing than she was. But Loys seemed content with only paying attention to her, which thrilled her to no end.

Of course, Hilarion was suspicious of Loys. For some reason unknown to Giselle, he seemed to think that Loys would only bring mayhem. Each time Hilarion tried to bring his less than trustworthy thoughts about Loys, Giselle would laugh it off. Along with her mother, Hilarion had always been protective of her.

And she loved him for that, she really did. But there was nothing fear with Loys. Along with being devastatingly handsome, he was also kind and treated her as an equal. Giselle thought he was the smartest person that she has ever known and yet they could still talk about anything for hours. Hilarion warned her that he was only after one thing, but Loys never even touched her for the most part.
Really the thought of Loys actually breaking her heart was laughable. Just the thought of his lovely brown eyes...

No, wait.

Loys has blue eyes, Giselle thought. But her brain wasn't listening to her. Loys had a towering height and a pale complexion. His hair was the color of strawberries and sunshine. His thin mouth always had a quick smile for her.

That was Loys.

So why was her brain supplying an image of a man who had a light brown skin tone? Whose eyes were dark as the night itself? Where Loys was all thickly muscled, this unknown man was slim and lithe body features. His hair a peculiar shade of silver with tints of blue in them.

Once again Giselle couldn't help but compare their eyes again. Where Loys' eyes sometime felt like a locked gateway to where all his secrets hid, Namjoon's eyes are an open door that never hid what he was feeling and never tried to hide who he was.

And wasn't that the biggest difference in the end?

"... Willow?"

It's when I finally notice that Namjoon is calling my name do I realize that I got caught up in the mindset of Giselle. I didn't mean to do it. All I remember was that since I finally got the steps down for the Singularity routine, I would take a small break and do some recreational ballet.

When I first started getting into the mindset of Giselle, I had always pictured Tom Hiddleston as the role of Loys/Albrecht because I had a serious crush on him a few years ago and thought his ass was fantastic.
Besides, mistaking Namjoon for Albrecht is a travesty in itself. Albrecht lied to Giselle and indirectly caused her death because he wasn't man enough to be straight with her.

Namjoon doesn't have a deceitful heart. He's good in every way I didn't know a man could be.

In my mind, he's like Hilarion. Protective and loyal to a fault. God, if only Giselle had fallen in love with Hilarion instead of being seduced by Albrecht, her fate would've been different. And poor Hilarion wouldn't have been forced to dance to death by the Wilis. I always found it funny that the princely character of the story got to live in the end even though he didn't deserve it at all.

My whole body feels like it's been doused in a bucket of sweat. And to think, I was actually considering today to let my hair out of the Bantu Knots I put them in a few days ago. All that hair in my face coupled with the heat and oil, it would've been a disaster and an absolute chore to deal with. My hair is the type that will suck up any type of moisture and oils I put into it.

I touch my yellow headscarf protecting my knots, sending a silent prayer that it's still firmly in place where I put it.

Once I catch my breath, I focus my attention on Namjoon. "What's good, Peaches? You still need some more help?" He doesn't respond to my question. He's staring at me as if I'm something new and exotic creature. His eyes are doing a lazy perusal of my body. Although I'm wearing my signature baggy, white T-shirt, thanks to the sweat I've accumulated, the shirt is now clinging to the sweat on my back, stomach, and the undersides of my breasts in a way that's almost see through. I can't help the quick scan I take in the mirror. This would be the day I chose to wear cargo shorts over my comfy sweat pants.

And Namjoon's just taking in all of this.

I can't lie. Although the more dominant part of my emotions is embarrassed by how Namjoon's just basically taking in my body, there's a deeper, more intimate part of myself that I don't want to closely examine right about now, practically preens that he's looking at me and hopes that whatever he's seeing is pleasing to his eyes.

God, the thought of pleasing him by my body alone makes my mind go to some places I didn't think was possible. So if I happen to bend over a little longer than necessary to retrieve my towel just so Namjoon could get a good look at my ass, it's neither here or there.
Namjoon does eventually come back to himself. He flushes once he realizes how long he let the silence roll on. "Uh, yeah," he scratches his head, "No, I don't need any more help. I finally got it thanks to you. But I ordered some take out and it seems like I got too much. I knew you were still here and I thought you might be hungry too so..." This is not exactly new. Sometimes, he comes down to my dance room and I come over to his studio.

But this is the time he comes to me bearing gifts. The big bags he holds has grease staining the bottom. Seeing as how I've been running fumes and skipped breakfast and lunch, I definitely need this.

"Let it be known that I never turn down hot and free food. Bring it on!" He laughs as I motion him to come closer. We still down and rummage through the food together. I don't even try to front and act like I have manners when my hunger is involved. I hope that in the midst of this Chinese take-out feast, there is some chicken fried rice.

"Oh by the way," I only half-listen to Namjoon as I dig into the chicken wings I find instead. "I ran into Taehyung a little earlier when I went to the front of the building." At the mention of Taehyung, I scowl, my appetite dimming. "He had the same expression you're wearing right now," Namjoon blankly notes. "Did something happen earlier today?"

I look Namjoon square in the eye. "You wanna know? You really wanna know the trials I had to endure earlier this afternoon? To know my tale of woe?" Namjoon grimaces and scoots away from me. "On second thought, let's just eat this food. I'm tired."

"Nope!" I shake my head. "You fucked around with the piper and now you're going to hear the damn tune! Besides, I'm still pissed off and I need someone to rant to without having to think about how it translates in Korean." Namjoon looks vastly unimpressed with me. "Thanks," he deadpans. "It's nice to know that's all you think I'm good for."

"Ah, come on, Peach. You know that's not entirely true." He smirks at that. "You're a good listener. Ergo, I'm choosing you to tell my story to."

"Oh my God," he groans. "Here we go again." I frown, slightly offended. "What do you mean 'again'?"

He crosses his arms. "Every time you recount a story, you do the following things: you stand up, pace around, and raise your voice when you get excited. Oh, and you always start off by saying 'Picture this'."
I would love to be offended and yell that I am not that predictable, but I can already feel my hands bracing on the wooden floor, preparing to propel myself off the floor and do exactly what Namjoon figured I would. Just to prove a point, I plant my ass firmly on the ground and tuck my hands in my lap.

"Ha!" I feign. "I wasn't going to do any of that. Just proves how little you know me."

"Maybe," he concedes with a sly smile. "But I'm starting to learn how you tick, which helps me know that you're probably resisting your urge to stand up now because you hate being proved wrong."

You know, someone could really learn to hate this nigga with his know-it-all personality. I bet the whole fucking farm on it that he was the number one snitch in grade school.

"Can I tell the damn story or not?" I grate out. Namjoon responds by opening up a box of Pan Fried Noodles and saying, "By all means."

Rearing back my irritation at Namjoon, I relay what happened.

I had just gotten back from the bathroom and was ready to go over the moves for *MIC Drop* once more. I had been so focused on jotting down strutting and body rolling in my brand new notebook, I didn't even notice it at first. But when I glanced up and saw the little ball of black and brown tearing at my messenger bag, I went ballistic.

I crossed the distance in five, large steps. A quick scan of my bag told me not only did the little rat chew up my bag, a yellow puddle and damp spot on my bag suggested that it peed on it as well.

Now let it be known that I am not an abuser of animals. I don't go around with a shotgun putting a bullet in the first cute puppy I see. But surprisingly enough, I felt no remorse as I grabbed the furball by the scruff of its neck. The demon wriggles in my hold. It barks and tries to bite me like I'm the offender here.
That's when I noticed with utter horror that the rat dog is a Pomeranian. Just my fucking luck.

"Yeontan!" At the sound of Taehyung's distressed voice, I turned around just in time to see Taehyung and Jimin running towards me. Taehyung snatched the rat away from me and handed it over to Jimin, who immediately made baby noises to console it.

Taehyung's expression was pure ice and a complete contrast to the happy faces he usually makes around me. "I don't tolerate anyone handling my dog like that. Not even you, Noona. Just what exactly were you doing with my dog that justified you abusing him like that?" There was a fire that I wasn't used to seeing in Taehyung's eyes. The only time I had seen an expression like that was when we rehearsed together, but that was only a hint of what I was getting.

But I didn't give a damn if that was Taehyung's dog. Taehyung's glare had nothing on mine.

If Taehyung's glare was ice, mine had the power to summon hellfire.

I literally growl as I bent down to retrieve my ruined bag. The strap looked like it was on its last leg, there was a noticeable hole at the bottom. Not mention how a single drop of urine conveniently fell to the floor, because it was just that soaked. The ice in Taehyung's expression slowly started to melt away as he took in the state of my bag.

"Imagine," I seethed. "How surprised I was when the bag that was Graduation gift from my father was being ripped to shreds by some unidentified dog I've never seen before. Believe me when I say what I was doing was far from the abuse I should've dealt out with Cujo." The damn, dirty dog chose that moment to start barking at me and growling at me. Hearing its nauseating noises and holding my destroyed in my hand made me desire to make a purse out of it, just because I'm petty like that.

"Jimin-ah, could you get Yeontan out of here?" Jimin didn't waste any time and the little beast's screeching was soon muted. Taehyung's eyes had gone back to the puppy dog quality that I knew and loved. "Noona..." I narrowed my eyes at the almost whine in Taehyung's voice. "I'm really sorry about your bag. I swear that Yeontan is not that bad once you're around him enough. I promise that I will pay for your bag to be cleaned and repaired. It'll be good as new."

I wanted to stay angry for a little while longer, but since I could sense that Taehyung was feeling responsible, I decided to let him off the hook. I ruffled his pink and orange hair as a sign of good faith. "It's all good, baby. You're still my Tigger even if your dog is pure evil." Even though Taehyung looked like he wanted to protest, he wisely said nothing.
"I don't see what's so funny!"

When I finish recalling the events that took place this afternoon, Namjoon is rolling around on the floor, dying from laughter.

"That's right," I snarl, "Just keep laughing. It's all fun and games until it happens to you." At that, Namjoon stops cackling long enough to say, "But your claim of Yeontan not liking you couldn't possibly be true. If you only knew how many things that dog has chewed and pissed on, you'd be surprised. I think the only reason why he was snapping at you was that you grabbed him the way you did. I guarantee you that that dog does not hate you."

"Namjoon," I drawl out. "You didn't see the way that dog was growling at me when I saw a little after that. I swear to God, Peach, that dog was eyeballing me like I was wearing his mama around my neck." Once again Namjoon laughs at my claim, but I see nothing to joke at. "I still believe that damn dog is a descendant of Cujo."

Namjoon wipes tears from his eyes. "Cujo was a St. Bernard. Yeontan is teacup Pomeranian." I glower at him. "Now you know as good as I do that dogs take after us and love to partake in interracial relationships."

Any hope of Namjoon reigning in his laughter fails. "Oh my God," he breathes in between chuckles. "Interracial relationships? Really?"

"Yes!" I yell as I finally give in and start cracking up too. I do sound ridiculous but I'm on a roll. Namjoon's left dimple is winking at me and I feel like I just won the raffle. "Dogs be mixing it up with different flavors too. They know what's up." That's the last thing I say before laughter takes over both of us.

For a long time, we lay there on the floor, content to wallow in the comfortable silence.

Until...

"You're a cat person, aren't you?"
Oh God. "I fail to see what that has to do with anything." Namjoon snickers. "So I'm right?"

"Yes, Kim Namjoon, I am a cat person. But that doesn't automatically mean that I hate dogs. I actually love dogs. All dogs except Pomeranians." Namjoon turns his head to me, "Any special reason?" I smirk as I get up and bellow, "Picture this!"

Namjoon could've been a Konoha ninja from how fast he moved. "Uh huh. Hell no! Storytime is over. I'm hungry. Let's just eat this food." I feel triumphant as I bite into my wings.

Guess I'm getting pretty good at reading Namjoon too.

Just as I'm about to dig into the chicken fried rice I finally located, Namjoon suddenly exclaims into the empty space. I dig my fork into the food and turn to Namjoon, ready to bite his head off for scaring me.

But he beats me to the punch. "I finished my song!" All thoughts of frustration fly away and excitement takes its place. "Well, don't keep me in suspense. I've assumed since you've told me you're going to let me listen to the finished product.

He fiddles around with his phone for a minute and when he finally finds his target, he grabs a set of tangled headphones from his hoodie pocket, hooks them up to his phone, and scoots closer to me so he can insert a headphone into my ear.

Meanwhile, I try my best not to shiver when his index finger brushes against my earlobe. He puts the other headphone in his ear and waits for my reaction as he presses play to a file called *Trivia: Love.*

Before I even hear the piano start, I already love it.

And it has nothing and everything to do with the fact that Namjoon has situated himself in front of me, the headphones tethering us. It also has nothing to do with the fact he's watching me closely with the biggest, childlike grin like I'm some mystical fairy he's found and wants to keep. It especially doesn't have to do with the fact that he's doing the thing with his eyes where they squint when he laughs but then out of nowhere, they get wide in his glee.
I swear it's only the song that has me giggling and smiling like I just met a fairy too.

It's only the song that I am desperately falling hard for.

Chapter End Notes

I swear that when I made this chapter basically bashing Yeontan, I didn't anticipate that the next bangtan bomb would be centered around him.

PS: I DON'T HATE YEONTAN!

I just wanted to have a little fun. I think this was my favorite chapter to write tbh!
Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

God, I hope the relationship between Namjoon and Willow was broadcasted correctly...

Because I'm going to attempt something in this chapter...

Just another side note that I neglected to say: WE BLACK GIRLS CAN HAVE NATURAL WAIST LONG HAIR. IT IS POSSIBLE!

Now that I got that off my chest... enjoy

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's the night before the first concert of the tour.

There's unspeakable yet palpable energy that thrums throughout the entire BigHit workplace. Everyone, even the receptionist, is on edge with anticipation and nerves.

I should know. I can barely hold anything down at the moment. My stomach is in literal knots even though I know I'm not the main attraction. My worries are all over the damn place. I'm eager and nervous to see how Jimin's solo performance will go and I'm scared that I'll do something to throw us off sync.

I haven't experienced nerves like since my debut on the ballet scene and I can't even remember half of what happened that day since I was fully immersed in the mind of the Odile I created. That way, I can fully connect with my character and not mind the millions of faceless eyes that watch me on stage. I've trained my body to the point where it follows the music and the steps, while my brain disconnects from the real world. In the beginning, my coworkers had to shake me out of my trance. But now I've learned how to drag myself back to the real world.

I guess this is what they would call disassociation. But since I've learned how to control it, I'm not too concerned about it.

But I can't do that here.

Nope, I have to be completely coherent for the shows.
Usually the night before a show, I do one more run through of the entire show, watching myself through my personal mirrored wall that I have at home. It's just to make sure that my body knows what times to come in or when to make my movements more aggressive when the music shifts to a crescendo or an Allegro.

So how I find myself in my designated practice room with Namjoon's head in my lap is beyond me.

It had started out slow. Frankly speaking, aside from that one incident, I didn't peg Namjoon for the touchy-feely type. In the past, I noticed that he allowed the younger boys to initiate hugs and cuddles, but I've never actually seen him do it himself. Like Yoongi, he seemed too reserved to do that, at least around me that is.

But ever since that night in his studio, my hand always found its way into his. At first, it was me just shyly nudging his hand while he was working or hanging out with me in my practice room. He never turned my silent request down, always locking my hand in his much bigger one. I had always thought my hand was pretty big for a woman's, but Namjoon's slender yet graceful fingers make me pause that theory.

You'll never understand when Namjoon's hand started seeking mine as well.

Hand holding became heads on shoulders, and the hands started finding themselves on shoulders, backs and then waists. Namjoon putting his hand around my waist always came as a surprise to me. He always did it when I least expected him to. It usually happened when I was standing right beside him while he was working. Sensing my presence, he rests his hand on my waist. He never said anything about it and I wasn't about to stop him either.

The head in lap thing has only been happening recently though. It had started only about a few days ago when I decided to take a quick cat nap in my practice room after going over the three routines I'm doing. In hindsight, resting my head on the wooden floor and risking getting a major crick in my back or neck was not one of my brightest moments but I was dog-tired.

When I woke up an hour later, instead of my head being on a hard floor, it was on a firm thigh. Namjoon wasn't even looking at me. He was looking at his phone but his hand was softly stroking my arm. It was then I realized that I had unconsciously curled up to him in my sleep.

Once again, it just those instances of contact that we don't talk about.
But strangely enough, we don't need to. It's just what it is.

Right now, we're not doing anything, we're not even talking. He came in only thirty minutes ago and convinced me to stop before I pulled a muscle and we somehow ended up in this position. He's watching videos on his phone and I'm raking my hand through his now blonde roots, trying to relieve my stress. He doesn't complain about my actions, even welcomes it, moving his head into my waiting fingers.

For the moment, I am content with the silence. That is until I hear the music playing from Namjoon's earbuds. Deciding to be nosy, I remove my hand from his hair and angle my head to see the screen. I smile when I realize that he's looking at Janelle Monáe's music video of her song *PYNK*.

In one of our many discussions about today's music and how songs with the most meaningless lyrics always find themselves on top of the Hot 100, I took that as an opportunity to start gushing about Janelle Monáe. Surprisingly (Maybe not in retrospect. This boy be listening to black music that I don't even know about), he knew of her and proclaimed that he loved *Electric Lady*, her 2013 release. When he told me that he hadn't had a chance to check out her latest installment, *Dirty Computer*, I told him to get on it immediately. How her lyrics were all about female and black empowerment and heavily politically charged. Plus her style, fashion and personality wise, spoke to me.

He said that he would when he got the time and look at God, he did.

"You like it?" I ask. He cast a brief look at my face before turning his attention back to the video. "This music video is aesthetically lovely. I've always found Janelle's voice to be quite unique. She's a vocal chameleon and the way she's able to manipulate it to be aggressive and in your face or sweet and soft like in this song show the signs of a true singer." I don't even sing for a living but I feel a burst of pride at his analysis.

"The lyrics are clever," he continues. "To a naive child, the lyrics only seem to talk about the color pink. The lyrics are just abstract enough that it can be played off like that. But a seasoned adult who knows better knows she's referring to... you know." Even as inexperienced as I am, I know what he's referring to. A tiny part of me was kinda hoping he would say pussy or cunt. The crass words coming off his gifted tongue would probably sound delicious and cultured coming from him.

"Honestly, I didn't think that far ahead into the lyrics," I shrug. "All I saw was beautiful black women of all shades, but primarily darker shades, which is something I love to see, being happy and carefree. In control and proud of their sexualities."
"In a nutshell," he chuckles. He offers me an earbud. Even though I have the song on my phone, I accept it, happy to bond over one of my favorite artists with a person who is close to being elected as my favorite person.

When the scene of Janelle and Tessa Thompson gazing seductively at each other while being separated by dozens of asses, which are going up and down, comes up, I glance down at Namjoon to gauge his reaction to the scene. Like I hoped, his cheeks are tinged pink, hinting at his embarrassment at the scene.

"Are they dating?" he asks me. "Because they are... wow. Their chemistry is really showing in this video."

I pause the video. "I wouldn't be surprised if they were. Janelle just came out as Pan earlier this year and I know that Tessa is bisexual. I saw some reports that said that Tessa confirmed that they're dating but that could've been just a rumor. I think Janelle doesn't like to talk about her relationships anyways."

He sits up and stares at me. "Well, they definitely would make a good couple, looks wise. That scene proves it." I frown. "I don't know, I always found that particular scene to be symbolic and romantic."

He blinks at me. "How so?" I give him my most lecherous smirk. "Well look at the way they distanced by the asses. When I saw that, the first thing that crossed my mind is this profound statement: In a world of fat asses, real or otherwise, I only see your fat ass."

He stares. and stares some. Finally, he nearly falls over from how violent his burst of laughter is. It's that high-pitched one that I love so much. It has the power to make me start giggling.

He shakes his head at me, still grinning like a loon. "That would be the first thing that crosses your mind. I swear, the moment I think I got a solid understanding of you, you turn around and say some out of pocket shit like that."

"Hey, it was all worth to those cute dimples of yours. You got the cutest dimples in the land, has anyone ever told you that?" He snorts and rolls his eyes. "A few times."

The smile slips off my face. I can't imagine how many times someone has generically complimented his dimples because they're just there. It's probably a cliche to him at this point.
I don't know why I'm suddenly so fired up, but the thought of me being everyone else in his eyes has me placing a hand on his left cheek. I can tell he's thrown off guard by the sudden contact. We haven't worked up to this yet and I've been pretty shy about touchy-feely things too even though I secretly love to be touched by those I know and care about.

"I specifically love this one," I remark, caressing his cheek where that deep indent of his is hiding. Now the poor baby looks vastly confused. "Willow what--"

"Just," I cut him off, "let me do this. Please?" I can already hear my anxiety telling me to abort this mission before I make an ass out of myself but I don't care. For once I'm going to be transparent with how much I admire Namjoon.

He sighs but doesn't interrupt me. I take this as a sign to continue.

"There are a lot of physical attributes I could compliment you on. Your laugh, your cute little nose, your hands, or your resilient hairline." He chuckles at that. I had previously given him grief about all the dye jobs he gets and how his hair remained a trooper throughout all the abuse. "But your dimples hold a special place in my heart especially the left one. One thing I noticed right off the bat is that your left one is deeper than your right one. I also realized that it only truly makes an appearance when you're really feeling something in general. I would love to say that it comes when you're really happy, but I'm smart enough to know that it also comes out when the bullshit is abundant."

"You would know, wouldn't you?" he scoffs, amusement dancing in his eyes. "Ah, there it is," I say, referring to his dimple that comes to play. "Now do you think I act a mess around you? Huh? Because I love when you're real with me. And this little dimple is my mood indicator. I always get excited when it comes out, especially I know it's because I made you laugh or made you smile in awe when you see me dance... it does things to me that I sometimes don't even understand. But it makes me feel good to know that around the millions of people that you have to give a fake persona to every day, I'm one of the few that gets the privilege of you showing me something real and honest."

Namjoon's not smiling anymore. His eyebrows are furrowed and his eyes are clouding over with some emotion I don't have a word for. I think it's shock mixed with... awe?

My panic makes me talk faster. "Your smile makes me want to come up with new ways I could make it reappear. Whenever I think about you, one of my main thoughts is 'how can I get him to smile today?' But you want to know what one of my favorite smiles are?"

"What?" His voice is so faint, I almost think that I imagined him saying it. The rush of warmth I feel
in my veins prompts me to cup both of his cheeks now, starting to feel truly euphoric when his own hands come up to rest on my wrists. "My favorite is when I'm not trying hard and I'm just being me, you still find reasons to smile at me. And..." Oh God, I'm starting to get emotional. My voice is choking up a little and Namjoon tightens his grip on my wrists. "To know that I don't have to jump through hoops to prove myself worthy of your time and that who I am..." I pause to wipe my nose with my shoulder. "For once, who I am is enough reason for a beautiful smile like yours to appear."

He gapes at me in total astonishment. I'm not exactly shocked, given the way I just pored a piece of my heart out to him.

When the shock wears off, his expression becomes softer, gentle, and so tender that it has my stomach going in knots at the sight of it. His smile is slow but oh so sweet as his trademark dimples reappear.

I can't do this.

Although I've dreamed of having Namjoon stare at me like this, I suddenly feel shy under the weight of it. I'm not used to this type of attention from the guys I'm interested in. I'm not used to this level of intensity and emotion

"Whew! That got unexpectedly emotional! Now that I got that off my chest, let's get back to this video." I scoot away from Namjoon, scared to look him in the eyes and see what he's thinking. I only stop moving when I'm a safe distance away from him and my back is turned from him.

He still says nothing, not letting me off the hook like I hope he would.

Goddamn it. "You know, t-there's a short f-film that goes to this. If you want, we... um, w-we could watch it toge--"

I don't even get to finish my offer or even attempt to fumble my phone from my pocket. A set of strong arms wrap around my midsection and whips me around like I'm a rag doll so I'm sitting in front of the mirrored wall.

But it's where I'm sitting that has my breathing malfunctioning.

I'm sitting in between Namjoon's long legs. I have no hopes of making a speedy escape with the way
Namjoon has made it his mission to put those toned arms of his to good use to keep me in place.

I stare at our reflection in the mirrored wall: Me, hazel eyes bulging out of my sockets, mouth open as I suck in the air conditioning nervously playing with the ends of one of my waist-long twists. Namjoon, eyes dark and tight with determination, shocks the everliving hell out of me when he drops his head into the crook of my neck.

I freeze. My heart is a congo drum, in sync with the rapid heartbeat I feel behind me.

For a moment, all I feel is his hot breath on my neck, but Thanos must've done another snap because I nearly disintegrated on the spot when Namjoon plants a kiss on my neck. I flinch because I wasn't expecting it and because my neck is sensitive.

But the feeling of his plush lips on my neck is something that I've fantasized about when I was alone. So can you blame for tilting my head to the side to give him better access?

I close my eyes so I don't get further embarrassed by our reflection. That's why I only sense Namjoon's chuckle on my neck. The kisses on my neck continue. He doesn't seem to be in any rush and I both love and despise him for it.

The slow examination he does on my neck ranges between chaste smooches that I don't even feel to open-mouthed, wet kisses that stain my neck with his warm wetness. When he rests his mouth on a spot between my collar bone and my neck and starts to suck on it like it's his favorite candy that he just wants to suck on for hours and hours, it is very much a struggle for me to hold back the noises I want to let loose. This an exquisite torture Namjoon is subjecting me to. The thrumming between my legs is back and it's pulsing in time with my heartbeat and my face is flushed from the simulation.

When Namjoon surprises me by biting the spot he had been sucking on only moments before, I whimper from the sweet pain. Namjoon shushes me as he licks the smarting spot, almost as if he was apologizing. All it does is make squirm in a meager attempt to relieve the persistent ache I feel.

"Namjoon..." I croak, my voice is a needy, unrecognizable high-pitched cry that I didn't know I was capable of making. "I... I don't... why... Oh, God!" I choke the last past when Namjoon started his original method of littering kisses again. But this time, his kisses have a destination as his lips finally stop at my ear. "Did you," he stops momentarily to plant a kiss behind my ear. "Honestly think I was going to let you say all these things about me without me rewarding you? Hm? You want me to tell you all of the things I love about your sweet self?"
I want to cry out "Yes!" but the more conservative part of myself prevents me from yelling out my
desires. "I don't..." I swallow to try and get some moisture down my dry throat. "I meant what I said
about you. I w-wasn't trying to fish for c-compliments. I don't... I don't want to seem like I'm begging
for attention."

Again, he does that sexy laugh that makes his voice even lower and raspier than before. "Baby, you
don't ever have to beg for affection from me." I shiver when he calls me baby. I've been called
"babe" or "baby" before. But one thing I love about Namjoon is how every word that seems cheap
and generic always sounds stunning coming from him.

So I don't hesitate anymore. "Tell me."

"Where do I begin?" Another kiss is dropped behind my ear. "I could start with how I nearly popped
a boner when I first saw you. Your ass in those jeans was nothing short of legendary." I forget my
haze of lust long enough to slap him on his thigh. "Boy, be serious," I chide while blushing
furiously. He retaliates by squeezing my thigh. "What, you don't think I am? And it's not like you
were just the perfect angel yourself. I saw you checking me out too." My eyes fly open. God, was I
that obvious?

My face could literally be a fire hazard from hot it is. Namjoon smirks and kisses my flaming cheek.
If I only knew where Namjoon is getting this new-found confidence because I could really use it
right now.

"Although I think you're absolutely adorable when you're shy, there's no need to be embarrassed.
But back to my original purpose. I think what really captures me about you is... your essence."

"My... essence?" I don't hide the dubious note in my voice.

"Hey, I heard you, now you're going to listen to me."

"Good point. Alright, I'm listening."

"Would you mind if I..." He hesitates as he casts a long look at my hair. I roll my eyes. I had told
Namjoon early on that illicit touches of my hair were strictly off limits. Namjoon's earnest puppy dog
stare wars with my steely glare. He trumps my glare with a pout and I melt like ice cream and
concede.
I'll give him some credit though; he didn't paw through my scalp like I thought he would. What he did do was release my plats from the simple ponytail I put them in. He grabs a single plat and holds it like it's something fragile (which it is).

He holds my plat by its very end and smiles fondly. "I remember walking out of my studio because I was just drained. My inspiration was absolutely shot to hell."

"You lost a battle with your mind, Peach?" He chuckles. "It's all good. I won the war in the end."

I nuzzle against his cheek. "Hmm, that you did."

"Yeah. Anyways, I was drained. I thought that if I filled myself with food, maybe something would hit me when I would least expect it. Once I got what I wanted, I was heading back towards my studio when I saw you and Jimin walking down. You guys didn't see me because I was going in the opposite direction."

His bright eyes hold my gaze in the mirror. "You had these little orange beads at the ends of your braids that swayed in time with your hips. Call me a pervert if you want, but I couldn't stop watching you. At that moment, you were pure music in my eyes."

"Your beaded hair was like xylophones as they collided against each other. Your sneakers on the pavement were like percussions. I could tell Jimin was upset about something and even though I was far away, I could hear you murmuring comforting words to him. I've told you before that I think your voice is amazing. I liken your voice to cello because of how smooth and mellow it sounds. But if your voice was a color, it would probably be the same color as your eyes: A light brown that is reminiscent of leaves in Autumn time."

"But then, like you always do, you shocked me when you started laughing. If your voice is a cello, your laughter is a violin playing a rapid set of high trills. It was so unexpected that I almost didn't believe that I heard it come out of you. But just seeing you move, gesture with your hands, and hear how animated your voice was, I had the greatest urge to go back to work and make something spectacular. And maybe it's because I am very much attracted to you that I think this way, but your aura was like being in the presence of a beautiful symphony."

"You... you just shine wherever you go and I know I'm not the only person who sees that."

Mirror me's jaw has dropped to the ground in utter speechlessness. But once his passion-filled words
sink into my psyche, my traitorous eyes fill up again.

You're probably going to think I'm the vainest person to have ever lived but I don't care.

Although I have only had two (technically one) boyfriends, they had never called me beautiful or gorgeous. Even guys who were just trying to hook up with me.

It was always cute, cutie, and the occasional pretty. I started to hate being called cute, even when it came from Nina. It was like they couldn't think of anything else to call me except that word. I tried not to get offended by it because it's not like it wasn't true.

Even with my foundation on, I'm alright looking, but nothing to classify as beautiful. I never did learn how to put on full-fledged makeup aside from foundation. I always got confused about what layers to put on next. If I'm going to be harsh about it, I think I would've been very plain-looking if I hadn't got half my face melted off.

It didn't help that since I was always going out with Nina, she would be the beautiful girl that everyone wanted of a piece of, and I was the dutiful yet less attractive best friend that tagged along for moral support. I can't tell how many times I have had guys coming up to me, calling me cute, pretending to be interested, and just when I'm about to offer my number, they ask me if I could possibly slip Nina their phones numbers. That was probably when "cute" started to leave a sour taste in my mouth.

I told Nina about it because it was too humiliating to talk about.

From then I just thought that the word "cute" was reserved for me when people saw how plain I was and didn't want to hurt my feelings. I learned to live with being known as the "cute" one. And yet a part of me still yearned to be called gorgeous or radiant from someone special. Because as vain and insecure as I am, I know that the compliments would only count if it was someone who mattered to me.

But Namjoon.

Kim Namjoon with his poet's soul and pure heart thinks my essence is the equivalent of a symphony. He thinks about me in ways I never knew were possible. Desires me in ways I never thought I wanted.
He wants me.

He actually wants me.

To know that every instance of flirting was actually factual and not in my head helps me make a decision.

I'm taking the lead this time.

I balance myself on his lap, wrap my arms around him. His eyes widen at my boldness.

He opens his mouth to ask a question, but I cut him off by kissing him square on the lips.

Chapter End Notes

Well... that was embarrassing to write

But I hoped you liked it despite how it was!

Leave a comment or kudos if you liked it
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

Y’all should know by now that the fluff couldn't last forever...

TW// Recollections of past sexual abuse

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There's a reason why I rebuke romantic whims.

Instead of my lips meeting Namjoon's in a passionate embrace like I had hoped we would, it was a disaster. Because I got caught up in the moment, my eyes were completely closed so I wasn't watching were I was going. It was also a matter of me underestimating how tall this boy is.

Instead of the perfect slot like I was hoping for, my top lip hits his bottom lip and my bottom lip met his chin.

For several seconds, I stay frozen in that position because I honestly don’t know what to do. The passionate, spontaneous headspace I was in is gone and now we’re in this awkward position of my own making.

My face feels uncomfortably hot as I duck my head, not daring to look him in the eyes and risk the chance of seeing him laughing at my expense, even though I don’t think he would deep down. I can hear the sound of my own labored breath. My throat feels icy and tight from the anxiety clogging it.

I need to do, say anything to get rid of this tension between us. Why hadn’t I just let him take the lead instead of screwing it up like I usually do when it comes to anything sex-related? Now he’s probably going to get irritated that the mood was ruined. But he so good on inside, he probably won’t tell me. Unlike Harry, who never neglected to show me how annoyed he was with my non-existent making out abilities.

In the face of my impending humiliation, I pulled into one of my most effective defense mechanisms: Joking it off and making it seem like no big deal.
“Wow! Well, that was something, wasn’t it?” I practically force the light-hearted giggle out of my dry throat. “Not exactly a highlight, but at least we’ll have something to look back on.” I inch myself off his lap as I continue rambling.

“In hindsight, it probably wasn’t a good idea to just spring that on ya. But hey, what can I say? I thought I saw an opportunity and I took it. It just turns out that I sorely miscalculated my aim and now I look like a bumbling idiot in front of you. Ain’t that a bitch?”

He’s not laughing. His body language is stiff and the muscles in his arms are tensed. Shit, that’s not good. He was supposed to at least chuckle at my antics. Usually, when I use myself as the butt of jokes to tamper with my humiliation, it always gets at least a smirk out of people.

He must be really mad at me. I’m almost off his lap by now and I think that if I play my cards right, we can go back to camaraderie of just a few minutes ago and forget this strange moment in our friendship ever happened.

I just have to try harder. “It seems like me and stupid always go together whenever I try to do something to impress someone I really like…” Crap, that wasn’t supposed to come out like that; if I had played my cards right, I could’ve written this off as a tension-reliever because the first concert is tomorrow. We could’ve gone back to the way it was.

But no.

I just had to turn this into a Hallmark moment and ruin everything.

My mortification complete, I don’t even try to say anything to fake the funk this time. I slide off his lap and crawl towards my stuff, determined not to make eye contact with him as I attempt to make a speedy exit.

But once, he halts my progress. I can even find time to gasp before those big, gorgeous hands of his grab my waist and sit me back in my original position except this time, I am facing him. My thighs rub against his as he forcefully sits me down on his lap.

His hands got my hips in a vice-grip with no hopes for immediate escape (not that I really want to escape from him).
His eyes are boring into mine, leaving no room for escape this time. Please God, I pray, let this foundation really be as sweat proof as it claims. Intimidated, I drop my eyes to his throat and fidget, trying to convince my hormones not to get turned on by how he is restricting my movements. But it gets worse when I feel something big rubbing against my…

Sweet mother of Moses is he…

All thoughts of what’s poking against me fade away when Namjoon relinquishes one hand off of my waist to grab my jaw. He angles my head so I am forced to meet his stare head on. I’m baffled by this. I knew that Namjoon was toned in the right places, but I didn’t he had the strength back it up as well.

And damn if that doesn’t encourage my libido.

I swear this boy has a degree in the art of whiplash because one moment he’s trying to stare a hole into my head and then his lips are back on my neck. I don’t know whether to giggle or sigh because while his soft lips on my skin are making my stomach churn with need, my neck is one of my sensitive areas and I think he knows that from the way I feel him smiling.

“You are…” he pauses to suck at my throat and I let out another whimper. “Melodramatic.”

“Debatable,” I drawl out.

“You have a short fuse.” He paints the nape of my neck and my jaw with lips and my hands curl themselves into Namjoon’s hair.

“Only when Jimin or that damn dog is around.”

Namjoon chuckles as he moves his kiss onto my cheeks. “And you’re a Sasuke Uchiha anti, which is a negative alone.” I groan. We’ve had this lengthy discussion when I mentioned that *Naruto* was one of my favorite animes of all time. What started as a lighthearted conversation between one weeb to another, ended in us fighting about whether Konoha deserved the fate that Sasuke was about to give them on the behalf of Itachi, his late older brother.

Namjoon said that because Itachi slaughtered a majority of his family to protect Konoha, Sasuke was entitled to want to take revenge on the city that cost him his parents’ lives and caused him to kill
Itachi because he didn’t know the truth. Although I agreed that the elders and that no good Danzo was responsible for what happened, I argued that Sasuke couldn’t take it out on a whole nation. Most of those had nothing to do with the demise of the Uchiha.

I also said that Sasuke reminded of a privileged white boy that felt like the world owed him something just because he was born from a high-powered family and felt like he was above everyone else just because he has the Sharingan.

I can’t believe he threw that in my face.

“Nigga, just because I’m not you, Naruto, or every other Sasuke apologist out there that’s up that pale, whiny, sorry excuse for a ma—“

My rant is cut short when I hear Namjoon laugh softly and kiss the corner of my mouth. His cologne and natural scent doing weird things to my senses and my ability to talk.

He adjusts his grip on my jaw and he levels me with a stare that alerts me that his next statement is serious.

“But you are not stupid and you are not an idiot.”

“It hurts me to hear you think so lowly of yourself. I do not want to hear those words come out of your mouth again. Do you understand?”

“But I…”

“Say ‘Yes Namjoon’.”

There isn’t a hint of humor in his expression or words.

I’ve never felt like this before. I should probably be defensive or maybe say something flippant like “you’re not my father”, in another attempt to relieve the tension by being sassy.
But I think that I’ll only succeed in making him angry and frustrated with me.

Besides, I feel strange.

Namjoon’s restricting me in ways that leave no room for protest. He’s basically manhandling me like a ragdoll. He’s giving me an order and expecting me to follow it like a lost little girl.

But oddly enough, I like the idea of that.

At an early age, I had to learn how to be an adult and take of others. Whether it was my father, my grandmother, my friends, or her, I just did it because it’s how I grew up. I didn’t know anything else. I just thought that the only way to prove my affection for the people I love is through my acts.

It was the only way I knew to guarantee that I was worth their time.

My life experiences taught me to be independent and how to fend for myself when nobody else would.

Is that why I’m melting at Namjoon’s authoritative tone? Was some broken, lonely part of me secretly yearning for this type of treatment all along? For someone to yank the control out of my hands and just take care of me for once instead of the other way around?

There’s a discernable fog clouding over my brain. Every average worry that courses through my brain has been quieted down to mere static interference that you might hear on a radio. All I can focus on the tiny puffs of Namjoon’s breaths on my face, his big hands on my waist, and the bulge under me that’s leaving me wetter by the second.

What he’s asking, demanding, of me is coming from a place of… love? And I desperately want to please him and have him be proud of me; to have him take my control and take care of me.

Wetting my lips with my tongue, and feeling my insides perform a delicious yet painful clench around nothing as I watch his already half-lidded eyes follow the movement, I follow his command.

“Yes… Namjoon.”
There’s masculine triumph, unbridled lust, and undisguised tenderness in his dilated eyes.

“Good girl.”

I don’t even get the chance to preen over his praise before his lips are on mine.

Namjoon’s mouth is an ocean that drags me under water.

Like the ocean, I take in a sharp inhale of air before his lips descend against mine. I close my eyes in an almost automatic response. My hearing has been muted and my movements are heavy. I try to take it all in, but my air supply is running low. But also like the ocean, Namjoon is warm, vast, and makes me want to explore even more of him even if he is overwhelming in everything he is.

In truth, I want to be overwhelmed by him.

I have had detailed fantasies about how soft Namjoon’s plush mouth would be against mine. Thanks to his constant supply of lip balm, I already know that his lips are smooth against mine before he started kissing me.

At first, his mouth is gentle and sweet against mine. It’s just as well too. My hands are trembling as I latch onto his shoulders and my palms are slightly damp. But when he momentarily lifts his head to change the angle of his mouth and sucks my bottom lip in his mouth and gently bites it, I snap. I forget all of my reservations and wind my hands around his head so I can run my hands through his soft hair. I readjust myself on his delicious thigh so that I have better leverage.

He makes a noise of surprise at my actions, but then he quickly reciprocates by slipping one hand down to roughly grip me by the ass, steadying me.

I moan into his mouth and he responds by squeezing harder. When his tongue darts out to lick at my mouth, I’m so eager for what’s about to happen that I don’t even care about how inexperienced I am and open my mouth wider to let his tongue slip in.

Oh.
Namjoon is definitely a good kisser.

He doesn’t immediately plunge his tongue like I was afraid he would. It’s difficult to describe, but it’s more like a lazy perusal. He takes his time, licking into my mouth and silently encouraging me to explore his mouth too. Although I’m still unsure, I shyly lick his bottom lip, not wanting to be a total pussy.

I definitely won’t win any sensual points for the way I sloppily move my tongue in Namjoon’s sweet mouth. But I must be doing something right from the way Namjoon groans and decides to take it up a notch by moving the other hand that isn’t on my ass into the back of my sweaty T-shirt. His fingertips brush lightly against the bare skin of my lower back, almost as if he’s touching something delicate.

At this point, I am full-on grinding on Namjoon’s muscular thigh, trying to achieve some type of pleasurable relief that I have always tried and failed to get by my own administrations.

For a full minute, the only noises in the reserved practice room are the sounds of our lips and tongues meeting and parting, Namjoon’s grunts and groans, and me moaning like I’m the star of a steamy porn movie.

Namjoon’s wandering fingers have migrated up to the clips on my bra straps, hesitating there.

With great effort, I separate my swollen lips from his and slur into his ear, “Do it.”

My chest is heaving from the lack of air it’s getting; I’m overheated and I have the strongest urge to persuade Namjoon to rip off my clothing, lay me down on this floor, and paint his hands, lips, and his talented tongue all over my sweltering body.

Every rule I set for myself on how I would lose my virginity vacates my head the moment Namjoon and I began our make-out session. As long as I have him inside me, I don’t care if he knows all of my secrets or not.

He removes his hands from under my shirt and my ass.
I barely hold back a pitiful sob.

Before my regular toxic thoughts can run amok, Namjoon kisses my forehead, holds my face with those big gentle hands of his, and softly says, “Not here.”

This time, I don’t hold back my reaction.

“Why not?” I know I’m whining, but he can’t just quit while it was getting good. That’s playing against the rules.

“One, I don’t have a condom on me.”

“I’ve been on the pill since I was sixteen. It was for balancing out my cycles,” I add on the last statement without thinking how embarrassing it is to talk to a man about my cycles.

From the way he closes his eyes and shudders, I think his mind got stuck on the birth control comment.

“Be that as it may,” he replies in a strangled tone, “I care about you: more than you could ever know. And don’t think it’s because of a lack of attraction on my part. If I didn’t make it clear before, you are absolutely gorgeous in my eyes, inside and out. I know I would always regret remembering our first time together as some romp on an uncomfortable surface. I want it to be special for both of us. And if we did end up having sex right here, that gives out the message that it was a one-time thing in my eyes. Don’t get me wrong, if you want it to be a one-time thing, I would totally understand. But do you get what I’m trying to say?”

His brown, almost black, eyes are shining with nothing but sincerity as he gazes into my watery eyes.

His words confirm what I already knew but refused to acknowledge because I thought it was too soon: I am in love with this man.

It frightened me at first. Each time I dared to open myself up to potential love interest, I’ve always ended up being humiliated and alone. Unsolicited memories of standing outside Harry’s shower listening to him fucking someone else and Michael humping my best friend invade my mind.
When I agreed to take on this job, my original goal was to distract myself from my problems, not think about my men troubles, and maybe take the wonder that is Seoul when I wasn’t working. But of course, my goal of avoiding handsome men went out the door when I laid eyes on Namjoon.

I am willing to admit that the lust factor was there from the very start.

I may be a hopeless romantic, but I am a practical one.

Maybe the reason why I wasn’t going to lie to myself on my lusting was that I didn’t think Namjoon would ever share my feelings.

But when he slowly let me into the dazzling universe that is Kim Namjoon’s world and made me see the larger than life personality that hid behind those dimples, I knew I was a goner.

I know that he’s not perfect and that he has flaws just like every other human being on this Earth.

But goddamn, he’s pretty close to my idea of perfection.

Here I am, temporarily ready to lose my morals and offer sex to him, and he puts a stop to it because he wants our coupling to be memorable.

I cup his round face in my hands and press my mouth to his and hold them there for a long time. No tongue, just lips on lips. Once I separate our lips, I rest my forehead on his and mutter, “Okay.”

I would love to say that I wanted the serene moment to continue but I would be lying through my teeth. Namjoon’s words have my imagination running wild.

Being too shy to look him directly in the eye when I ask, I maneuver my head next to his ear. “Could you tell me how our first time would go?” Of course, Namjoon never misses an opportunity to tease me.

He backs his head away from me and has the most provocative grin on his face.
“Well that depends on what you like in bed, sweet girl,” he playfully growls. I deliberately choose not to reply to his comment. “Everybody has different preferences when it comes to sex: some like it hard and fast, not wanting to wait to reach their climax” he nips at my earlobe. “While others prefer it nice and slow, wanting to savor every. Last. Drop.” For the last three words he utters, he pauses to kiss my spit slicked mouth at different angles, each kiss deeper than the last.

“And um… what kind of sex do you like?” I inwardly curse myself the minute I ask. Asking would only bring unwarranted jealousy on my part. Namjoon is intelligent, kind, and sexy as hell. He probably has had no problem finding a partner in the past. Yet, on the other hand, I love it when he describes things to me. He always speaks with such passion and precision.

I wonder if he’s that detail oriented during sex. Oh hell, who am I kidding? Of course, he is!

He shrugs. “It honestly just depends on what I’m feeling in the moment. When I’m angry or stressed out, I would probably go for a quick fucking. Something to take off the edge and release some pent up emotions that could be easily let loose between the sheets. I’ll admit that that has been the majority of my sexual experiences have been one-night stands. The work I’m in doesn’t really allow me the luxury of making relationships with people that really matter.”

“Oh… okay.”

I’m not judging him. Really I’m not.

It’s just that my natural jealous bitch is now conjuring images of thin, leggy, supermodel-like chicks wrapped around him like a dog gnawing on a bone. They probably were vastly experienced and knew what buttons to push to drive him wild. How could I ever hope to compete with that?

I don’t realize how long I’ve left the silence run until I startle at Namjoon caressing my face.

“Ah, sweet girl,” he coos, “There’s no need to be jealous. They never lasted long.”

Crap! Am I that transparent or is he just good at reading me?

“Why would I be jealous? It’s not like I have any right to say what you can and can’t do with your
body. You said so yourself that they never lasted long. To be jealous over something that happened ages ago would be petty, small-minded, immature…”

“The forgettable sex I had with those other people could never compare with how badly I want to bury myself inside you.”

I choke on a gasp and have to fight the urge to swivel my head around to see if anyone was to hear his crass yet orgasm-inducing words.

“It’s obvious to me,” he continues, “You don’t understand how even the smallest things you do cause me to go insane. When you ball your hands into fists in determination, I wonder how they would look clawing down my back as I make you convulse with pleasure.”

Oh shit. Once again, I feel myself clench around nothing at his words. Namjoon’s voice never fails to turn me on. I am briefly reminded of how he basically told me of how he would make love to my mouth in his studio.

Namjoon has proven that he loves to be… descriptive. Coupled with the fact that I now have definitive proof that he can back up all of the dirty shit that comes out of his mouth, I know that I won’t possibly survive this.

“When your lips,” he runs his thumb over the full swell of my bottom lip, “Curl into the most beguiling smiles when you’re thrilled over something; I imagine how they would pull apart in ecstasy as I put my head between your soft thighs to eat your sweet little cunt out for hours and hours on end; or how much more plump they would be after having been wrapped around my cock.”

Driven by pure instinct and the promise in Namjoon’s words, I wrap my lips around his thumb and pretend that it is the head of his cock that I am suckling on. Hearing the term “cock” come out from Namjoon’s articulate voice is sending my head right back into that confusing yet intoxicating fog that had overwhelmed me earlier. I want to hear more of his deliciously debauched thoughts and compare them with my own.

Namjoon smirks at the eager way I suck his calloused thumb; his teeth toying with his bottom lip as he watches me watching him.

“You…” his voice gradually getting huskier as I repeatedly swipe my tongue on the pad of his thumb, “Work in a field that requires having people touching you at all times. It should’ve made you
desensitized. But yet again, you defy my expectations by being extremely ticklish even if it’s just a simple touch on your back or waist. It makes me wonder what would happen if we were in a different setting.”

I don’t even have time to mourn the loss of his thumb exiting my mouth when he yanks me right on top of his crotch and my core is now in direct contact with his hard dick trapped within his sweats.

I gasp and struggle not to move in fears that I might accidentally let some more embarrassing sounds.

Then Namjoon starts slowly rocking his hips, forcing his cock to rub against the wet outer lips of my labia. I throw back my head and keen out his name while Namjoon’s cheeks are flushed and his breathing is labored.

“If we were in a different setting,” he repeats, “Completely alone with no one to hear us…” I shiver at the images my filthy mind is supplying. “I would take my time with you because I want to see how sensitive you really are. To know if I toyed with, pinched, and sucked your hard nipples, I could watch your body create an arc so beautiful it would seem like you’re performing a dance that only we would know the steps to.”

Imagining what it would be like to have Namjoon’s mouth on my nipples and leaving love bites all over my tits for everyone to see motivates me to copy Namjoon’s grinding. Every time his harden cock brushes against the little nub hidden between my soaked folds, I want to forgo the obstacles between us and feel flesh on flesh.

The pleased yet agonized sounds he makes throws me even deeper into my mind-numbing headspace. I’m panting and I can barely keep my eyes open.

“Tell me something, baby,” his mouth is pressed towards my ear. “How you ever dreamed what it would feel like to have me holding you down while my cock is sliding in and out of your sensitive walls?”

I whimper in pure need because yes, I have thought about it. In my mind, we’re back at my house, in my bedroom. Namjoon, completely nude, sweat glistening off his golden torso; his hips are pistoning in and out of my core. My legs are wrapped around his waist; my nails are digging into his back, trying to endure the friction of his cock moving in and out of me. Our screams and the squeaking of the bed are echoing off the walls.
“Have you?” Namjoon’s question makes cognizant of the fact that I still haven’t answered him yet.

Oh no. It wasn’t a rhetorical question: he wants an answer.

You would think after everything we just did, I wouldn’t be demure after everything we just did, after everything I did.

But up until this point, he had been revealing his nasty fantasies to me, not the other way around. It’s easy to think about our bodies grinding against each other in constant motion and surprisingly, even easier to do it. But to say it out loud?

I think I would expire on the spot if—

“Breathe, baby.”

His voice.

The voice I have fallen in love with is a soft lullaby across my ear.

There is reassurance and understanding in his soft voice.

“It’s just you and me now. No one else. There’s nothing for you to feel self-conscious about. I want you as much as you want me, little one.”

I freeze.

I am twenty-seven years old. I came into this world learning that I could never truly depend on anyone because they either never stayed long or they would stay long enough to turn on me in the end.

I just thought that was how life was meant to be for me. And I accepted it and just thought that it meant that I was supposed to suck it up and go on with life because no one felt sorry for me.
It wasn’t all bad. I learned how to provide for myself and I’m living every modern woman’s dream.

So why am I this close to melting when Namjoon calls me his “little one”?

I feel a mixture of lust, love, and overwhelming shame. I don’t know if I want to fuck him or sob in his comforting arms.

I should be insulted that he’s calling me a name reserved for children. I’m a grown woman with grown woman desires. That phrase should be turning me off and I should be chiding him or rolling my eyes.

And yet…

I have this… need within me.

Of course, I want what every woman wants during sex: to receive pleasure from my partner’s body and vice versa.

In the past, when I attempted to masturbate, I usually pictured standard vanilla sex (with buckets of romance attached to the act).

But there were times when my mundane sexual fantasies would dip into something a little more personal than a regular jack-off. It usually occurred when my self-esteem was particularly low.

I dreamt of being manhandled. I dreamt of someone whispering instructions to me on what to do. Of someone running their hands up and down my body the same way, one would handle precious artwork. Of someone gently giving me praises and correcting me when I did wrong but never putting me down at the same time. My dream lover would know how I look with my protective layers of foundation but never flinch away in disgust. Instead, he would find me beautiful and never ask me if I’m going to put on makeup to hide my shameful blemishes.

My lover would take care of me in bed but know that I am fully capable to take care of myself in the world outside our bedroom.
He would know that I am strong yet knows that at my most vulnerable moments, I need someone else to take the reins.

My lover would have an aura that exceeds the galaxy itself, but still be content to rule a small solar system that revolves solely around us.

Being wrapped in his arms and surrounded by his heady scent would have the power to make me feel delicate, loved and… small.

Namjoon does that for me in all the little things we experience together.

Namjoon makes me feel small when he holds my hand in his much bigger one, when he patiently listens to me gripe about the pettiest things. When he didn’t mock me over my lack of kissing experience.

Or when he told me that he thinks that I’m a beautiful symphony.

I feel peace when I’m around him and I—

*Oh, spare me.*

*We get it! The boy likes to wax poetry about you. Bet he wouldn’t be writing sonnets about you if he knew how sick you are underneath that innocent, quirky front you like to portray.*

No. Not now.

Thanks to Namjoon, my less than savory thoughts had been put on the backburner. But the innocuous pet name sent me in a whirlwind of emotions and the negative voice inside my head had found it suitable to make a reappearance.

Thankfully, Namjoon still has his face nestled at my ear, so he can’t see my nauseated expression. I just hope I can control my trembling hands before he notices.
How many times do I have to tell you that you are original? There are thousands of people out there that share the same twisted fetishes as you. You wouldn’t be the first person to have pedophilic tendencies.

My chest and throat tighten.

I do not have pedophilic tendencies.

Oh? Then why do you have a huge stack of kiddie videos reserved for kindergarteners in your entertainment center? Why do you have coloring books hidden under your bed or Disney princess onesies you keep at the back of your closet? What does that say about you?

Just put two and two together. Even you can’t be that stupid, Will.

The blood in my veins turns rigid and icy. There is only one person who has ever called me Will; with that saccharine southern accent.

It’s almost funny how you try to delude yourself into thinking you deserve love when what you really need to be thinking about is ending your life so that you’ll be saving everyone around from yourself.

No…

It’s not true, I think frantically. I do deserve to be loved. I have to be. Grammy—

The old hag didn’t live long enough to see the monster that I did; neither did your equally sick father.

That little white boy of yours saw it, though. He recognized you for the freak you really are. Why you think he was so quick to seek comfort elsewhere?

Unwanted memories of Harry holding my Bear in the Big Blue House and looking like he wanted to be anywhere but with me.
When I found out about his infidelities, I regularly told myself that it wasn’t my fault. But with the voice in my head telling me otherwise, the doubts of whether or not I was to blame suddenly don’t seem so black and white anymore.

*Why do you try so vehemently to deny what you are? I know you. I even know what you try to hide from yourself.*

*That you secretly liked what those men did to you.*

I want to break something, but my body seems to be on autopilot. I want to scream that it’s not true and run away. But how do you run away when your tormentor is trapped within your head?

*You seem to forget that I used to watch you sometimes. To make sure that my dealers were satisfied by you and you weren’t getting any big ideas. Tell me, Will, do you remember Steve?*

My eyes are burning from the effort not to spill the proof of my shame, because I do remember Steve.

I had always been afraid of the ones who pretended to be nice. As wrong as it sounds, I preferred dealing with cruel men because I knew what to expect from them.

But it always devastated me when the men who touched me pretended to be nice. They talked to me, made me think that they were different from the others and made me trust them.

So when they forced me to do the most heinous things with them, I was always confused. I thought that they were different. Did I do something to upset them? Is that why they’re doing what they’re doing?

But unlike the others, Steve didn’t start taking want he wanted.

He got to know me first.
Like I did with her johns, I hid as long as I could until the inevitable occurred. When Steve came along with his pretty cornrowed hair, smooth black skin, and kind eyes, I thought surely a man who looks so handsome wouldn’t treat me like I was nothing.

For a while, it seemed like I was right. He played with me, asked me how my day was, and even helped me with my homework. During that time, he never touched me in an inappropriate manner. Of course, I still entertained her “guests”, but Steve seemed like the single ray of sunshine to my gray clouded existence.

I began to look forward to when Steve would come over: him being there meant that I was safe for the time being. I even began confiding in Steve about the abuse and how I wished it would stop but I couldn’t because she was sick.

The son of a bitch held me as I cried in his arms. He even had the gall to say that he would figure out a way to get her the help she needed so that I wouldn’t be forced to use my body to help her.

He must’ve been laughing on how naïve I was. You think after two years of experiencing the worse of humanity, I would know a con when I see it. Nevertheless, I wanted to believe that he would be different from the rest. That his intentions were really pure.

I’ll never forget the last time I saw him.

I had just gotten home from ballet class. Steve and her were in the living room when I got home. I was ecstatic, of course. If Steve was here, everything was going to be okay. I foolishly thought that the reason he was here was that he made good on his promise and figured out a way to get me out of my current predicament.

Later on, I often thought about the signs were there: his shaky hands, the used syringe on the coffee table, and the predatory leer in his eyes.

I still weep when I recall the way he shoved me down on our ratty couch and yanked my stockings down, slapped me across the face so I would stop screaming, and forced my legs open.

The image of him sticking his head between my legs is forever burned in my brain. My face was throbbing from the slap and the sensation of Steve’s tongue down… there had me whimpering in fear.
When Steve had finally stopped licking me, I felt moisture and thought that I had peed on myself. I remember how embarrassed and sick I felt. More so when Steve lifted his head, moist lips curving into a malevolent smirk, and yelled in the direction of her bedroom, where she had retreated, “Hey, Eleanor! Think’s we got a squirter on our hands!”

I didn’t understand what he meant until I was a young adult.

*You’ve already killed me, are you going to lie to your mother too? You would’ve never have cummed the way you did if you didn’t secretly liked it.*

*Admit it. Admit that you never wanted to help me as you claim, you just wanted the attention. And we both know that you love attention.*

No, I didn’t like it. I didn’t want it! I remember standing outside on our balcony, wondering if the distance would be enough to kill me.

There is no way in hell, I wanted it.

At least… I don’t think I did.

My juices on Steve’s lips come back to my mind.

*You wouldn’t have orgasmed if you didn’t want it.*

I didn’t want it, I *couldn’t* have wanted it.

I didn’t…

“Willow! Willow, answer me. Sweetheart, please don’t cry. Was I moving too fast? I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

Namjoon’s panic-stricken voice filters back into my hearing. His big, gentle hands that I adore so much are cupping my wet face like he’s afraid that I’ll physically fall apart in his hands.
I blankly take in the unshed tears in his eyes. It may sound crazy, but they look like diamonds to me.

His obvious concern for me just makes the disgust I feel for myself all the more stronger.

I need to get away from him.

Being around a literal angel makes me all the more aware of how unclean my soul is. It was a mistake getting close to him. I don’t want to wait for the moment when he finds out what I really am.

So I need to end it here.

“I’m sorry, I can’t do this with you,” I mutter. Because I’m a coward, I avoid his eyes when I say it. But not fast enough. I saw the hurt and confusion register in his eyes.

Just another visual that’ll be added in my dreams.

When I feel his hands slacken on my face, I rip my face away from his warm hands. I fumble for my phone, leap to the corner for my newly repaired messenger bag, and dash out the room, ignoring Namjoon calling my name.

I veer down the hall to the nearest restroom, blessing everything holy that it is empty. I need to retouch my foundation.

Even though I upgraded to the waterproof kind, you can never be too sure.

I reapply the makeup with quivering hands.

“You’re doing the right thing,” I comfort myself. “You’re doing this because you love him. Remember that.”

Even if my heart shatters like glass at the words, I have to remain strong.
Chances are he probably wanted to score with a black girl. He probably heard the stereotype and wanted to see if it was real with the first one he saw.

“NO!” My shout, near shriek, reverberates in the pristine restroom.

Namjoon is not a user. He doesn’t play with people’s hearts just to prove a point.

He’s good like that. Too good for me.

He’ll probably be angry for a few weeks, but he’ll get over me eventually.

As for me, I’m not so sure. But this isn’t about what I want; it’s about doing what’s best.

And what’s best is letting Namjoon go so he can be with someone who isn’t me.

Better a momentary dent in his heart, than a devastating break that may never heal.

Chapter End Notes

So... yeah.

My horrible attempt at writing dirty talk, which is a major turn on for me.

And I think I’m going to hold off writing the next chapter for a little bit because A, this one sucked the life out of me. B, I’m trouble deciding whether to make the next one a filler or not.

But anyways I hope I didn’t scare you guys off with this update.

Good night y'all!

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