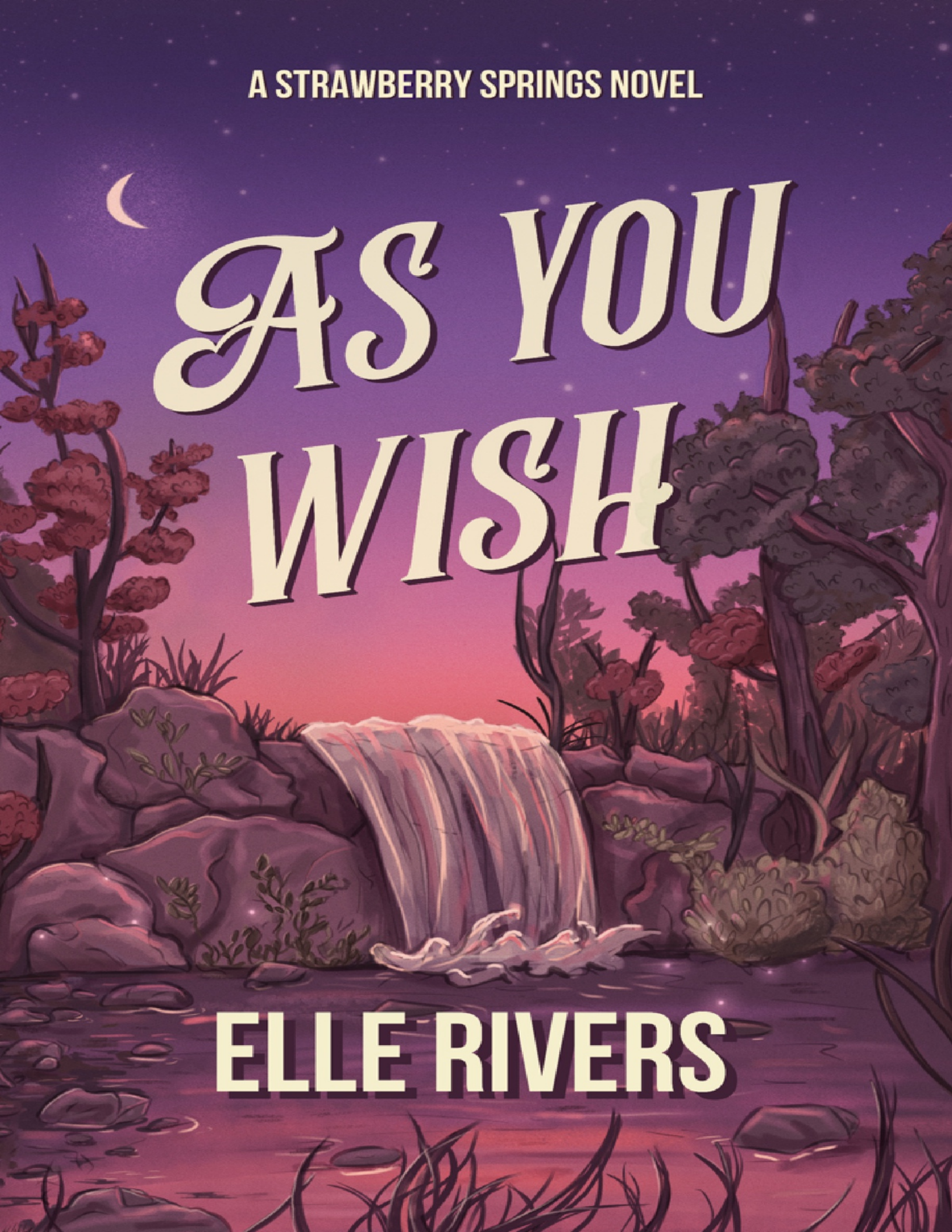
A STRAWBERRY SPRINGS NOVEL

AS YOU WISH



ELLE RIVERS

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ELLE RIVERS

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Cover Design by Summer Grove

Developmental Editing by Mae Peredo, Wildwood Author Services

Copyediting by Kasey Kubica, Basic Behemoth Edits

Proofreading by Mae Peredo, Wildwood Author Services

Formatted with Vellum

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CONTENTS

A Note from Elle
Playlist
Strawberry Springs Community Guide

Gabriel

1. Jade
2. Gabriel
3. Jade
4. Gabriel
5. Jade
6. Gabriel
7. Jade
8. Gabriel
9. Jade
10. Gabriel
11. Jade
12. Gabriel
13. Jade
14. Gabriel
15. Jade
16. Gabriel
17. Jade
18. Gabriel
19. Jade
20. Gabriel
21. Jade
22. Gabriel
23. Jade
24. Gabriel
25. Jade
26. Gabriel
27. Jade
28. Gabriel

29. Jade
30. Gabriel
31. Jade
32. Gabriel
33. Jade
34. Gabriel
35. Jade
36. Gabriel
37. Jade
38. Gabriel
39. Jade
40. Gabriel
41. Jade
42. Gabriel
43. Jade
44. Gabriel
45. Jade
46. Gabriel
47. Jade
48. Gabriel
49. Jade
50. Gabriel
51. Jade
52. Gabriel
53. Jade
54. Gabriel
55. Jade
56. Gabriel
57. Jade
58. Gabe
59. Jade
60. Gabe
61. Jade
62. Gabe
63. Jade

Gabe

Want More?
What’s Next for Elle Rivers?
Thank You
Also by Elle Rivers
About the Author

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A NOTE FROM ELLE

As You Wish contains mature and potentially triggering content some might find upsetting. Please be advised that the following content can be found on page in this book unless otherwise noted.

- explicit, open-door sexual content
- references to death caused by drunk driving
- discussions about abandonment

Please take care of yourself and your mental health while reading any novel.

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To anyone who fears the end—sometimes it's simply a new beginning.

For the final time, welcome back to Strawberry Springs.

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PLAYLIST

Wildest Dreams—Taylor Swift
California—beabadoobee
maggots for brains—Olivia Rodrigo
All Too Well—Taylor Swift
get him back!—Olivia Rodrigo
Come Over—BTS
Fallin'—Ateez
I CAN'T STOP ME—TWICE
Cruel Summer—Taylor Swift
Delicate—Taylor Swift
bad idea right?—Olivia Rodrigo
Back Then—Stray Kids
End of Beginning—Djo
I Knew It, I Knew You—Taylor Swift
You'll Always Find Your Way Back Home—Hannah Montana

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STRAWBERRY SPRINGS COMMUNITY GUIDE

Jackie Anne Tyler—Owner of Hair Haven salon
Kerry Winsor—Stay-at-home mom, resident gossip
Nicole Rudder—Teacher at Strawberry Springs Elementary School
Mollie Wilson—Owner of Bennie Grove Farm
Cain Smith—Farm Manager at Bennie Grove Farm
Tammy Jane and Ron*—Married owners of Center Point Diner
Hugh Jeffries—Retiree, resident grump
Marjorie and Henrietta Brown—Married librarians
Dr. Atticus Thompson, DVM—Veterinarian
Jade Clark—Owner of Jade's Goodies gift shop
Grace Day—Owner of Treasure Trove clothing store
Dean Briggs—General Contractor
Dale Garrett—Owner of Food 'n' Things grocery store
Mike Finch—Sheriff of Strawberry Springs
Mark Bell—Owner of Bell's Brews bar
Dr. Henry Connor, MD—Clinic doctor
Wren Hackett— General Contractor
Theo Murf—Owner of The Reserved Bean
Kelsey Marie*—Barista at The Reserved Bean
Piper Macmillian—Author

*Tammy, Ron, and their daughter, Kelsey have not consented to the inclusion of their last name in this guide at this time.

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GABRIEL

THIRTEEN YEARS AGO



Next week is finally the trip. Finally, I've saved enough money to take Gabriel to San Francisco. He can see my home and where I came from. He can see all the restaurants I spent all my money at as a teenager.

Atticus has been kind enough to let me save up for this. I've worked long hours and odd jobs. My goal is to save up enough to help Gabriel get into a college out here. I don't want him to lose the connection with where I came from. Sometimes it feels inevitable, being in a town like this one, where everything is so tightly knit. It feels like I've been washed away.

He'll have a different life from mine. I know it.

"YOU'RE READING THAT ONE AGAIN?"

The old letter fell out of my hands, and I turned to see my stepfather, Atticus, leaning on the doorframe. I was on the floor of Mom's office. Atticus never changed anything about the room, and I wasn't sure why.

Papers dotted the floor, all lined with Mom's neat handwriting. I hadn't meant to read this one, but I always ended up here.

"Yeah. It's the last one she wrote before . . ." I trailed off, thinking of the night before our trip, when police came to our house to tell us that she'd been hit by a drunk driver.

Mom had been full of life. She was loud, happy, and never failed to make me smile.

It never made sense that she was here one day and not the next.

Her letters were the only thing left. Just the handwriting of her wishes. Memories that I needed to fulfill.

Atticus's arms crossed and his eyes went distant. I knew he was thinking about her too. He wasn't a bad stepfather, and in a lot of ways, I'd gotten lucky with him. He didn't resent me, and once Mom was gone, he took me in without a second thought. Because of him, I didn't go to a distant cousin whom I didn't know.

But there were moments when I knew he was my stepfather and not my father.

Just like now. If he were my father, something would fill the silence. He could give me the same advice he gave Simone, his daughter. Even if I'd fight him on it, it would be nice to see that same man who coached my stepsister through her struggles in high school.

Atticus simply wasn't like that with me. One day, I'd accept that.

I waited for far too long, just like I always had.

"You should sleep," Atticus said. "You need as much rest as you can get."

I looked back at the letters, hoping that the ink would bleed from the paper into my soul, and it would feel like I was connected to her in the way she always wanted me to be.

When it didn't happen, I put them away. I got to my feet before going to my room.

"Night, Gabe." Atticus's voice was soft, and I waited for more.

It would never come.

"Good night," I replied as I shut my door. I waited for him to go down the hallway before opening my window. He took forever to go downstairs. I knew he thought I was in bed, but in reality, my ear was pressed to the door, and I was about to sneak out the window and go next door.

The only thing as important to me as Mom’s letters was the girl who lived there. Being in a small town meant my neighbor was quite far away, and I was in for a journey. I had to get to the yard and go through a line of trees. I nearly tripped and fell on my ass, but I made it just in time.

For a moment, it was just me and the late summer air. Frogs and crickets sang their tunes, and the humidity clung to my skin. I was in sweatpants and a T-shirt. I couldn’t wait to get back inside.

The front door opened, and my heart leaped into my throat.

Her bright hair was mussed from sleep. She stumbled down the front steps of her house and I rushed to catch her.

Jade wasn’t like anyone else in Strawberry Springs. When we were fifteen, she broke into my house with hair dye and told me she had a plan for the homecoming dance. It had looked so bad that the town’s hairstylist had fixed it for free, and she’s colored it ever since. It had been pink, green, blue, and bright red, all of which she looked incredible in.

But right now, it was my favorite color.

Purple.

It had been my favorite ever since the day she’d kissed me for the first time. She’d had this hair then too.

Despite the fact that she had walked out of her home, Jade wasn’t awake. Ever since I’d known her, she had a terrible habit of sleepwalking. We’d had many conversations to try to figure out how to stop it.

But I secretly enjoyed it.

Over the years, we had developed a pattern. Jade always had trouble sleeping, but in middle school, I caught her walking through the fields. I hadn’t known she was asleep and foolishly woke her up. She’d been confused and angry. Afterward, I’d read countless books on what to do.

Taking care of her was instinctive.

“Come on,” I said as she leaned her weight onto me. “Let’s get you to bed.”

Jade was never this pliable during the day. Normally, she was a tornado, tearing through the town like it was second nature. Her dad thought her medicine stopped her sleepwalking, but it only made her drowsy during the day. She’d managed to convince him she was fine.

Only I knew the truth.

Jade muttered something under her breath as I moved her. It would be far easier to put her in her own bed, but I knew it was no use.

There was only one place she'd want to go. If we got caught by either of our parents, we'd be in massive trouble.

But if she wanted to cuddle with me each night, I'd keep the secret.

Her softness was something she kept to herself. And in moments like this, I got to see it.

This week had been the longest stint of sleepwalking I'd ever seen from her. It had been getting worse lately, and I knew what it was leading up to.

We were at a crossroads. I wanted to leave. She wanted to stay. The conflict was making her lose sleep at night. Every time I thought about it, my heart clenched. I avoided it when I could, and so did she.

Both of us were paying the price.

We stumbled through the trees and the grass, making it to my house. My window was still open, and I guided her in first. By the time I was inside too, she was snuggled in my bed.

"I knew it. You're just with me for my bed."

If she were awake, she'd throw something at me.

Laughing at my own joke, I climbed into bed with her.

I used to try to sleep on the floor, but I quickly realized that she wasn't going to let that happen. If I were on the floor, she would follow. After too many nights of both of us complaining about sore backs, I got the message.

She was reaching out the second I lay down.

She curled into me, hands tight in my shirt as if I would float away at any moment. I let her cling, knowing I wouldn't mention it in the morning. Anytime I did, she would go red in the face and insist she take her medicine.

"I'll take care of you," I whispered. "I'll always take care of you."

She didn't respond, but I didn't need her to. Words didn't matter. Actions did, and even if she didn't need me, I was here.

Placing one kiss on her head, I closed my eyes and let sleep take me too.

THE DOOR to my room opened.

"Rise and shine," Atticus said.

I groaned and slowly opened my eyes.

Out of habit, I checked next to me. Jade must've woken up early and snuck out. Thank God. We'd been caught too many times together.

"It's way too early."

"Too bad. You have a guest."

I sat up straighter. "I do?"

"Yup. Jade. Who else would it be?"

He was right. While everyone in town knew me, no one *knew* me. Jade was the only exception.

I got dressed in my usual black clothes before coming downstairs, where she was already playing my PlayStation, chewing her lip while she looked at the screen.

"You beat my high score," she said in lieu of a greeting.

"Someone has to challenge you."

Jade looked down the hallway to see if Atticus was still around. As usual, he'd left us to our own devices. "When did you even find time after last night?"

"I spent all day yesterday on it." I sat on the couch. "It was a challenge, but I did it."

"How's this for a challenge?" She flipped me off.

I laughed. "The real challenge is if you can do it while I distract you."

"Don't you dare." Her voice was ice cold, and I was tempted to do it.

I settled for staring at her instead. Before we both realized our time was running out, I could look at her for hours and wonder how the fuck we were together.

It was heavier these days, weighed down by what was coming.

I knew what she wanted. She knew what I wanted.

Neither of us knew who would win.

I knew Jade more than anyone else in town, yet she was still a mystery to me sometimes. She kept her thoughts to herself so well that I wished I were a mind reader, just so she wouldn't throw me for a loop.

She always did, though.

I didn't know she'd thought of me as anything more until she took me by the collar of my shirt and kissed me. I didn't know she was into crystals until she shoved one in my hand to wish me luck on my exams.

And her plans for her future were no different.

"Stop staring at me, Gabe."

"Or what?"

Jade rolled her eyes and went back to the game.

I poked her in the side. “Hey. Don’t ignore me.”

“I’m trying to beat this thing.”

“You told me to stop and I won’t. You threatened me, so act on it.”

“You’re the only man I know who wants me to make true on my threats.”

“You’re cute when you’re mad.”

She huffed, cheeks red as she glared over at me.

“See? Cute.”

Her character fell off a cliff.

“I hate you.”

“No, you don’t.” I leaned in. “What are you gonna do? Hit me? Pinch me? Throw me off the couch?”

She eyed me, and I was hoping for the last one. I was stronger than her, but one of my favorite things to do was let her win in our little play fights.

Instead, she leaned forward and pressed her lips against mine.

I went rigid, and she pulled away with a grin. “That . . . wasn’t one of the options.”

“You know I’ll never do what you expect me to.”

“But I was gearing up for a fight,” I said.

“And you’ll complain about me kissing you?”

I considered it. “Not if you do it more.”

My lips moved against hers, and the living room fell away. All I could do was tug her closer. Jade took the initiative and climbed onto my lap.

She had no idea what she did to me. I’d been thinking of her since I realized I was into the opposite sex. I indulged on nights when I knew she wasn’t about to break through my window.

I never wanted to stop, but the sound of a clearing throat made Jade pull away.

She leaped off my lap when she saw Atticus.

“H-hey,” she said with a laugh.

“Make smart choices.” Atticus’s voice was flat. “And spare my eyes, please.”

Jade nodded, and I rubbed my neck as he walked away.

“Sorry,” I said under my breath.

“At least he didn’t react like my dad would,” she muttered. “Atticus is chill.”

Jade's dad had something negative to say about everything she did. I was sure she'd love a parent like mine.

I should have too, but there was always the hope for more.

It wouldn't happen, and I was determined to move out on my own anyway. Once I was out of Strawberry Springs, I wouldn't need anyone.

"You know where we should go?" she asked.

"Where?"

"The spring. No one will bother us there."

"And sit where? In the dirt?" I shook my head. "The last time we did that, the mud didn't come out of my favorite jeans."

"You're the one who wore them there." She rolled her eyes. "They're black. Black shows mud."

"Only when we sit in it."

"Whatever. You don't have to worry about it. I have a plan."

I blew out a breath. Jade loved hiking up to the spring, walking the streets of Strawberry Springs, and talking to the backwater people here.

I loved her. That was it. Nothing else about this place interested me.

The last thing I wanted to do was hike through the humidity and go to the spring, but I knew my answer immediately.

"Fine, but only for you."

She grinned. "Good. We'll take my car."

Technically, the spring was on private land, but Hugh hardly ever went to the woods. He knew we were here when he complained about Jade's car being on his grass, but he never outright told us to leave.

To get to the spring, we had to go through the town square. I was sure that long ago this place was the center of a thriving town—if Strawberry Springs had ever thrived at all. These days, the paint on the buildings had faded and cracks popped up out of nowhere.

This was how every small town ended up eventually.

"Damn, the decor shop closed," Jade muttered as she turned. "Another one bites the dust."

"They barely had any customers for years. I'm surprised they hung on that long."

"Do you ever wonder what this place looked like in its heyday?" she asked.

"I don't think this place had a heyday."

Jade looked over at me with a frown.

“I-I mean, I bet it was cool.”

“You’re so negative,” she muttered.

“It’s like every other small town.”

“And? It’s the one we grew up in. We met here.”

“And?”

“That makes it special.” She said it like she was talking to a child. She thought my love for Strawberry Springs should be obvious like hers was, but I never put this place on a pedestal like she did.

Mom wouldn’t want me to.

“Yeah, to some.” I shrugged. “There’s more out there.” Jade’s bottom lip poked out and I decided to press further. “You know, there’s this witchy shop out in San Francisco that’s hiring.”

Jade’s eyes slid over to me. “Really?”

“Yeah.”

“And what does it pay? I’d have to find a place to live.”

“I could sneak you into my dorm.”

She huffed out a laugh. “Yeah, right. We’re not subtle.”

That much was true. The second we got together, everyone knew about it just from the way we looked at each other. Rumors flew faster than the speed of light, and everyone watched us with knowing smiles.

I hated it. I didn’t want to be noticed. I wanted everyone to mind their own business.

“We could work on it,” I assured her. “And I won’t be in the dorms long. I plan on taking some coding classes to make up the gap so I can get my own place.”

“Are you gonna join a new band? Lucas will miss you.”

“He’s going to Nashville, and no. I’ll be too busy for a band.”

Jade’s lips tipped downward, and I wondered if we were heading for an argument again.

She was stubborn, but she was so much more than this place could handle. She’d be happy with me somewhere else. Once she saw that, we could make plans.

From the way she gripped the steering wheel tighter, I knew today wasn’t that day.

I was running out of time. I was leaving in three weeks. That wasn’t changing.

Jade didn’t answer as we pulled to the side of the road. She parked in the same place each time.

“You’ve been coming here a lot,” I said. “Hugh’s gonna complain about his grass.”

Jade rolled her eyes. “Whatever. He complains about everything.”

That much was true. I wondered how everyone dealt with it, but there must have been some patience I was missing. They put up with every weird thing Hugh did and still talked to him.

I didn’t understand.

She got out of the car, and I stared at her as she went to the trunk. If she was coming here a lot, then she had a lot on her mind.

Was I a part of that? Was our future worrying her?

By the time I was out of the passenger’s seat, she was shutting the trunk.

“Jade, I—”

“Come on,” she said. “I have a blanket for you.”

She went ahead, and I let out a sigh as I watched her go.

There was no future where the two of us weren’t together. We’d been by each other’s sides for nearly our whole lives. There was no end to that.

There was no way I was staying either.

I knew there was a big world out there. Mom’s letters had shown me that. The way she described the city with a fondness came through even in written word, but I also remembered the wistful smile that she would get when she thought about her life.

I’d never gotten that trip. I’d never seen anything outside of this tiny town.

I was determined to change that.

The hike was spent in near silence. Only the sounds of birds and nature surrounded us. I focused on Jade, hoping she would say something about our future.

She didn’t.

“Here we are.” She put the blanket down on the ground. “Finally.”

The spring looked like it always had. It was clear, coming from a rocky cliff face that was about twenty feet tall. The sound of running water always helped Jade find peace. She plopped onto the ground with a soft smile.

I followed suit.

“We’ll need to figure this out eventually.”

“I’d miss this place,” she murmured. “Wouldn’t you?”

I watched the water closely. This was one of the best parts of the town, but it wasn't somewhere we were supposed to be. Unlike everywhere else, this wasn't a park or anything the community could use.

"There are other places."

"But none that we spent our childhoods at. This is where we grew up. Does that really not mean anything to you?"

"That's not it. Sure, we grew up here, but we're adults now. Shouldn't we want more?"

Jade brought her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms tightly around herself. "I'm scared I'll regret it."

"You won't."

"It's really easy to do things we regret." She spoke softly. "Just look at my dad."

Her father had dedicated his life to being a firefighter, and his wife found someone else in the process. Now, Jackson Clark was a miserable man. He'd never dated. He'd never done anything but work for the next town over, driving long hours and keeping his distance from everyone in Strawberry Springs.

Jade used to wait for him. These days, she too was slowly drifting away. Sometimes it was with the people in town.

I wanted it to be for me.

"It's you and me. We'll never regret anything."

"I'm thinking about it," she said. "But that's all I can promise right now."

I nodded. "It's a big decision."

She was silent for a moment before her head fell onto my shoulder. I let our combined weight fall on my palms and looked at the trees above us. It was hot outside, but I didn't mind having Jade close. I could be on fire and still crave her warmth.

One day, we'd have a different view, but we would be together.

Jade was the one to move. She lifted herself up and pressed her lips to mine. I thought she would pull away and go back to thinking about the future. I needed her to. The sooner she decided to leave, the sooner we could make plans.

But she stayed, and even my thoughts melted away. Instead of the future, all I heard was the water of the spring. All I smelled was Jade.

My hand went to her cheek, and she deepened the kiss by swiping her tongue over mine.

My body thrummed in response. She clambered on top of me, making me lose my balance, and my back hit the ground hard.

“Here?” I asked. “Really? What if we get caught?”

“My dad’s home for the weekend and Atticus already caught us. It’s either here or my car.”

“Your car is tiny.”

She smiled. “Exactly.”

“But—”

“Gabriel, you think too much.”

I opened my mouth and then shut it. She wasn’t wrong. It felt like my mind never stopped these days.

“It’s just because you’re around.”

“Don’t flirt with me.” She rolled her eyes, but her cheeks turned pink.

“I’ll do what I want.” Tugging her mouth down to mine, I resumed our kiss. We didn’t waste time and picked up right where we had left off. Her tongue met mine and her hips angled downward. I knew what she wanted.

It was all I could think about now. There was something about her that no one else ever managed. Where I thought too much, she was free spirited. Where I wanted to plan every single thing, she was fine to go with the flow.

Together, we found some sort of balance.

My hands roamed. I cupped her breasts before sliding down to her ass. There was a time where I could only dream of touching these parts of her. Now I got to have it all the time, and it still wasn’t enough.

Jade was so fucking soft. Her hips had a curve I only ever dreamed of, and I loved the way her thighs could crush me if I wanted them to. I was all harsh edges in comparison.

As she ground down, I knew this was the kind of hard she wanted.

“God, this is the perfect place,” she said.

Even I could agree.

Our kissing took a turn when she used her teeth on my bottom lip, and I let out an embarrassing moan.

Jade pulled away to beam. “You liked that.”

“Whatever. Bite me again.”

“Only if you do it back.”

This opened a dangerous door, one that we were going to freely waltz through. We always did this ever since we lost our virginities with one another.

There was no one else I'd want to explore this with.

I nipped her skin once before her hands tightened on me. "I need your fucking shirt off."

That was the only warning I got before her hands went to the buttons of my black dress shirt. She stumbled with it for a second before she growled and ripped it.

"Jade!" I exclaimed. "What the—"

"Wear something easier for me to rip off next time."

I wanted to chastise her, but she quickly kissed me to shut me up. Her hands, somehow cool despite the heat, ran over my skin. Everywhere she touched erupted in gooseflesh.

One of her nails caught on my nipple and I shuddered.

"Oh." Jade's eyes lit up. "Do you like that, because I'll—"

"Keep doing that and I'll make a fool of myself again."

"I love it when you make a fool of yourself." Her hands moved to do it again and I caught her wrists in a tight grip.

"No."

"Fuck you."

"*No.*" I met her eyes. "You're such a brat."

"But you love it, right?"

I did. I couldn't even keep my face straight. "Whatever."

"Ha! You do. You love it so much that I—"

I had to shut her up with a kiss. She went for my nipple again, and I flipped us over to where I had more control.

"Should I rip your shirt like you did mine?" I asked as I peppered her neck with kisses.

"Don't you fucking dare," she growled. There was no playfulness in her tone, and I knew I would be in trouble if I didn't listen.

To be fair, her shirt was a black-lace blouse that she'd paid a lot of money for. It looked so good on her that it would be a crime to damage it.

"Fine. I'll be nice." I tugged it over her head and eyed her pale skin. "Fuck. Why are you wearing *that* bra?"

Jade smiled up at me. "The see-through one? Who knows?"

Her nipples were hard pebbles, and my mouth was dry just looking at them. I urged her to sit up before unhooking it and letting everything fall out.

God, she was gorgeous. No, she was more than that.

She was everything.

Jade didn't give me long to stare at her. She wanted movement, and I knew my limits. "Lie down. I've got you, Jade."

"You'll do that here?"

"No reason not to." I moved down her body, determined to get to her core. I'd never admit this out loud, but if she touched any part of me, I'd come. That's what she did to me. At least if I ate her out, I could focus on her.

And try not to listen to how fucking hot she was.

Even though we were on Hugh's property, both of us knew no one would find us. Hugh was more than likely at the diner, so Jade was free to be as loud as she wanted to.

When we were still figuring out each other's bodies, listening was the best way for me to learn. I wanted her to feel good, and I refused to think only of myself, so she told me exactly how I was doing.

Now, I didn't need pointers.

I just liked the sounds she made.

The second her underwear was off and my tongue crossed her clit, she let out a soft sigh. I licked her up and down, holding her hips so she was right where I wanted her.

God, she tasted incredible. Her gasps increased in pitch as I worked on her. She was arching into me, her head pressing against the blanket.

It was like her pleasure was mine. She was close, so I was too.

I pressed my nails into my palms. *No.* I was fucking her today. I wasn't going to let her get to me again.

It barely worked. Jade cried out, her orgasm hitting her hard. Her body shuddered as she released, and I kept moving. She finally went slack and I took a breath after coming up for air.

Goddamn, I was close. So close that if she asked me what I thought she was going to ask me, I was in trouble.

"Gabe," she said, her voice a mere breathless whisper. "Fuck me."

"Dammit," I said.

"Are you close?"

She *knew*. Of course she did.

“I had to listen to *that*. Of course I’m fucking close.”

Sitting back on my heels, I tried to wait for the pressure to get lighter, but one look at her naked body had my mouth dry and all of it came back.

“Then, should I—” Jade reached out, but I caught her hand.

“Don’t you dare,” I hissed.

“I love it when you come in your pants.”

“I don’t.”

She tried to fight me, but I wasn’t budging. I pushed back, and we battled for all of a minute before I had the upper hand.

I tried to throw her into the cold spring water. The smile was already on my face when I did it, but she must have seen it coming. She had an iron grip on my arm and took me with her.

Water got in my nose as I tried to figure out which way was up. When I broke the surface, she was laughing.

“Finally!” she said. “How’s that for cooling off?”

“What the hell?”

“Your face!” She splashed water in my direction and I returned the favor. “See? I bet you’re not close now.”

“There has to be some law against coming in a natural spring.”

“It’s on private land,” she replied. “We can do what we want.”

Jade’s smile was downright evil when she launched herself at me. Instead of an attack, she wrapped her legs around me and pulled me close to her. When her lips covered mine, my breath hitched.

I pulled away from her a little. “Here?” I couldn’t help but repeat my words from earlier.

“Don’t be a stick in the mud.”

“I’m in the water.”

“You know what I mean.” Her legs tightened and she brought me back to her. There were only hard rocks to lean on, but I found one space behind the waterfall to take her to. We were still mostly submerged, but the waterfall provided just a bit more privacy.

“Are you finally ready now?” she asked into my lips.

“I’m always ready. Too ready.”

“Good.”

“But you’ll have a hell of a time getting my pants off now that you threw me in.”

Her eyes sparkled. “I do love a challenge.”

It was a mess of wet clothes and muttered curses, but she finally had me naked a few minutes later. I enjoyed watching her suffer up until she’d thrown my pants on land.

“We could do this on the blanket.”

“Nah. I like it here.”

I swallowed as she lined herself up with me, pressing her entrance against the tip of my waiting cock. My jaw tightened at just the feel of her.

“You are . . . *fuck*.”

“You’re losing words again.”

I slipped in one more inch, and now her eyes fluttered shut. This wasn’t the most comfortable place, but it was one of the best.

When I was fully seated, both of us had to stop and breathe. All we could do was share the same air and feel how connected we were.

Jade’s gaze eventually met mine, and I knew what she was wanting.

I moved in small, short thrusts at first, trying to find my footing in the water. Then I fully pulled out before surging all the way inside of her again.

Jade was so tight, so hot.

“It’s like . . . like you’re made for me.”

“Maybe I am.”

The words hit me hard, and I slammed into her once more before I came. My vision went dark and my mouth fell open, even though no words came out.

“Good timing this time,” she said, but then tugged my hair. “I didn’t come again.”

As my own orgasm faded, I nodded. “Just . . . give me one second.”

“You get an orgasm in here, and then I do.” She hummed. “It’s only fair.”

I’d give her a hundred.

A thousand.

After I caught my breath.

THERE WASN’T much to do in a tiny town, and other than roaming the streets I’d seen far too many times, all that was left was the library.

It had once been the pride of Strawberry Springs, but nowadays, all that lined the shelves were old books I didn't care to read. When I walked in, the air was stale and thick. The AC must have gone out.

"They wouldn't," one of the librarians, Henrietta, said. She was facing her wife, Marjorie, with tightly crossed arms.

"I'm telling you what I heard from Rainwood and I'm putting the pieces together. They dropped our funding to basically nothing."

"They dropped it again? I had a list of new books I wanted to order."

"It's barely enough to cover the lost books."

Henrietta groaned and ran her hands through her hair. "Dammit. The library can't shut down. It just *can't*."

"Honey . . ." Marjorie was gravely serious, a rare sight. "We should prepare ourselves."

"What about Mayor Toby?" Henrietta asked. "He just won the special election."

"He said it's out of his hands," Marjorie said.

"It's not. We elected him even though he barely meets the criteria of living here—"

I turned away, heart sinking. The library was in trouble? *Fuck*. It was the last decent thing about this town.

I needed to get Jade out of here and fast. This place was going to ruin.

And I knew better than anyone else that no one would save it.

Sneaking past Marjorie and Henrietta, I went upstairs. I tried to put what I'd heard out of my mind, but I couldn't help but sigh and take in the library. I'd have to memorize it as it was now.

There was a high likelihood I'd never get to see it again.

The old shelves were worn and well loved and the rooms felt endless. Everything here was outdated, but there was so much information that could easily be lost.

This was why small towns were a terrible idea. They were forgotten about and abandoned.

Strawberry Springs was facing the same fate.

I made it halfway through the aisles when a hand grabbed me and pulled me into the bookshelves. I nearly toppled over but braced myself before I could.

Looking up at me was Jade.

A smile crossed my face. "Did you plan this?"

“We need to talk.” Her breath came out fast and her eyes were wild.

Any humor I had faded immediately. “What happened?”

“I missed it.”

“Missed what?”

“My period.”

All I could do was stare at her. I remembered when she came into school angrier than I’d ever seen her, and when I begged to know what I’d done, she told me it was her time of the month. Back then, I barely knew what that meant. These days, I knew when to give her chocolate and space.

So when I didn’t hear from her for a week, I figured that was what was going on.

“What do you mean it’s late?”

She glared. “Well, when a man sticks his dick inside a woman—”

“I mean, y-you said you were on birth control.”

“I am,” she hissed, cheeks pink. “But . . . it’s not one hundred percent.”

“But we didn’t use condoms. You said it wouldn’t happen!”

“I know what I said!” She crossed her arms tightly. “I just didn’t want to buy them and do birth control too. What would Dale say?”

“*Jade*.” I ran my hands through my hair. “What the—no. No way.”

“Yes *way*.”

I was an idiot. A complete and total idiot. That was the only reason I said what I did. “I can’t leave if you’re pregnant.”

Jade stared. “Is that what you’re worried about?”

“I-I mean, yes but—” She had it worse. She had to be more scared than I was. All of that was right at the tip of my tongue, but the terror made it sticky.

The damage was done.

“Glad you have your priorities straight,” she muttered as she turned to walk away.

I stopped her. “Have you taken a test?”

“I don’t know what to do,” she snapped. “Dale will tell everyone if I get one from Food ‘n’ Things.”

“Then we don’t go there.”

“And betray him?” She shook her head.

“Jade, we have to. We have to know.”

She frowned. “Fine. I’ll go on my own.”

“I’ll go with you.”

“And have to deal with the way you’re glaring at me? No, thank you.”

“I’m not. I didn’t—”

“You’re worried about your precious future.” She rolled her eyes. “I should’ve seen this coming.”

Jade stalked away, boots slamming on the ground. I watched her go, knowing she needed time to cool off.

And I needed time to panic about what was going on.

I TRIED TO IMAGINE IT. Really, I did.

When I got home, I slammed the door and hid in my room. I sat on my bed and thought of my future. Instead of the coding classes and being in San Francisco, I thought about what would happen if Jade were pregnant.

She’d be due in late spring, and I knew I’d need to be here. She would need family support, something she could only get in Strawberry Springs. Her dad might be pissed, but he had a stable job. People in town would volunteer to watch a baby, even if it wasn’t theirs.

The town was falling apart, but the people would help. Even I could admit that.

I wouldn’t let her do it on her own. I could travel for school, but I’d be splitting my time. I’d barely be able to finish my semester, and that was if I were lucky.

As I did the math, my foolish words hit me even harder.

I wouldn’t be able to leave. I’d have to stay here.

I tried to be okay with it. I tried to make peace with it.

But a thought sprang forth and I was out of my room, going back into Mom’s office. I went for the one letter on my mind, the very one I was never supposed to read.

Some days, I feel terrible. I look at Gabriel playing in the yard and I wonder what my life would look like if I didn’t have him. I was such a young fool when I met his

father. I jumped into something I wasn't ready for and then had to move to Tennessee when he did.

I'm lucky I have Atticus. He's been so good for me, but I jumped into things with Atticus in hopes of a partner. I love him and I'd never leave, but I cannot lie and say I didn't have ulterior motives. Gabriel needs Atticus. I know it more than anything.

But what if? What if I hadn't had a child and stayed home? Could I have gotten a degree? Could I have made more of myself?

I'll always wonder. I'll always think about this.

I'll also do my best to make sure Gabriel never knows about it either.

A tear escaped my eye as I read it over and over again. I'd found this when I was way too young and shouldn't have read it. I cried then too.

This time was worse.

This time, a new path lay in front of me. One where I was doomed to make her same mistakes. One where I was doomed to be trapped in a place that she didn't want to be, all because of a stupid decision I'd made.

I didn't want kids. Hell, I couldn't even say the right things when it came to Jade when she told me. She was still mad and I needed to apologize.

I wasn't cut out for this. I wasn't the kind of man who could be what Jade deserved either.

I was simply a fool who was just like his mother.

What a fucking joke.

TWO DAYS LATER, Jade found me at the diner.

"You're safe."

I looked around, making sure that the diner's owner, Tammy, wasn't anywhere she could listen. The last thing either of us needed was for her to find out.

That's when I recognized what she'd said. "Wait, what?"

"The test was negative."

"Aren't there false negatives sometimes?"

"I'm surprised you aren't taking the news and running with it."

"I'm . . . I wouldn't."

Jade crossed her arms and frowned at me.

It went straight to my soul.

"My period actually started. It was just late."

A painful relief hit me, making my head fall back. As I looked at the ceiling, all I could do was thank my lucky stars.

Then the guilt hit. It was like cold water down my back. I straightened and looked at her.

Her glower had only intensified.

"I'd support you no matter what," I rushed to say. "You know that."

"But you'd complain," she muttered. "You'd be miserable."

I opened my mouth to deny it, but I refused to lie to her. "I'd live with it."

"Would it really be so bad here?"

My answer was immediate. "Yes."

"I don't understand why you hate it here so much."

"And I don't get why you like it."

Jade huffed. "Guess we got lucky."

"I just want to make sure we have a good future."

"We? Or is it just you you're thinking of?"

I shook my head. "Of course it's not just me. I want us both—"

"I don't want to leave Strawberry Springs."

I blinked. "You should."

"You just think I should."

"There's nothing for you here."

"That's not for you to decide," she said, slamming her hand on the table. "Do you know what it's like for Dad to be gone all the time? It's miserable. It's lonely."

“You have me.”

“And you’re not always around. You know who helped me with my hair? Jackie. You know who took me to get my first pads? Tammy. The people here care. What if we leave and it’s not like that somewhere else?”

“We’d have each other.”

“I want more than just you. I want a community.”

I hated that I’d thought of this when she was worried she was pregnant. She was right—there was a community here.

And her being right made me dig my heels in even more.

“There are better people out there.”

“Yeah, right.”

“We can make new friends.”

“Maybe you can. But not me.”

I sighed. “Why are you fighting this so hard? I don’t want to leave you behind. What’s so bad about leaving a town that’s going downhill anyway?”

“Because I want to see it get better. I want to see it through.”

“See what through? There’s no hope here.”

“Strawberry Springs is special.”

Goddammit. “You’re wrong.”

“No, *you’re* wrong. Your head is so far up your ass that you’re ignoring the good here.”

The *good* here. Yeah, I’d heard about that. There was community. There were people who were kind. All of that had been told to me by everyone a hundred times.

I blew out a breath. “Then you’re just like the rest of the people here. You’re blinded by nostalgia.”

“And you’re like everyone else in the world. You only care about yourself.”

I felt like I’d been slapped. We’d fought, but never this viciously.

“Don’t talk like that to me. I’m not like the assholes you insulted in high school.”

“Maybe you are, with how you handled the scare.”

I scoffed. “I handled it fine, considering I don’t ever want kids.”

She blinked. “What?”

“Do you really think I’d make a good dad?”

“No.” She said it immediately and crossed her arms. “But I thought . . . maybe one day you could be.”

“You want them?” I huffed. “You, of all people?”

“Me, of all people? What does that mean?”

We were eighteen. We were way too young for it. I’d not given it a thought.

“I-I mean . . .” I gestured to her.

“You know what? I got your meaning.” She stood. “Got it loud and clear.”

“Jade, come on. You really thought about kids? Seriously?”

“I did, and thought . . .” She trailed off. “Never mind. I obviously thought wrong.”

She stormed out of the diner. I went to follow her, but Tammy peeked around the corner. “Don’t you dare leave without paying!”

“S-sorry!” I fished for cash and threw it on the table.

“You can bet I’m checking that!” she called after me as I ran off. If there was one thing I could depend on, it was Tammy never giving me a break.

Jade was already halfway across the square when I caught up to her. “Where are you going?” I yelled.

“Home.” Her voice was tight.

“We need to talk!”

“What is there to talk about?” she yelled.

“Us!” I snapped back.

“Us?” She laughed and shook her head. “You said what you needed to say.”

My heart clenched as I realized what she was doing. I’d seen it with people at school. I’d seen it with people she didn’t like.

Jade was upset. She was closing herself off.

To *me*.

“Don’t—”

“Don’t tell me what to do!” she snapped. “I’m going home, and you’re not stopping me.”

I barely listened to her before. I thought I could still push even now.

“Stop.” I grabbed her hand.

That was a mistake.

“Fuck you! Don’t try to apologize now. I don’t want to hear it!”

“Well, you will!”

“No! I heard you loud and clear. You’re leaving. You don’t care that I don’t want to, you just want me with you.”

“I . . . It’s what’s best.”

“You don’t get to decide that. You don’t get to make my choice for me.”

“It’s clearly the right one! You’re really gonna stay *here*?”

“I will. I’m staying here. I choose this town.”

Hearing her, my best friend, my first fucking love, choose the town over me hit me right in the center of my chest.

“This place?” I repeated. “*Here?*”

“Yeah! I am. Are you shocked?”

“Normally, you’re not this stupid.” The words escaped me before I could stop them, but once they were out, there was no taking them back.

My chest heaved. I felt like I was losing my mind. Everything hurt.

Jade was choosing *Strawberry Springs*. A town that Mom hated, the one that trapped her.

And she was choosing it over me.

“Excuse me?” She slowly turned. “Do you want me to murder you?”

“You’re all talk. You’ll go home and regret this.”

Tears brimmed in her eyes, but she shook her head anyway. “I won’t regret anything.”

“Wanna bet?”

She paused and I heard the whispers.

They’re fighting?

Those two?

Are they breaking up?

I didn’t care. I would never see these people again.

She stepped close, venom written across every one of her features.

“Yes, I do want to bet. One just for the man who’s too fucking good for this town. I bet that you’ll go out there and find whatever the fuck you’re looking for.” She poked her finger into my chest. “And I bet you’ll see that it fucking sucks, Gabriel.”

Jade using my full name made a mix of misery and anger flood my chest. I always wanted to be Gabe to her. Never Gabriel.

But did it even matter anymore?

“You’ll lose.”

“I’ll *win*. And when I do, I want you to live with it. Stay out there. Never come back. I don’t want to ever look at you again.”

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1

JADE



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Kerry Winsor: Did anyone else see the beautiful sunset this evening? I couldn't look away!

Comments:
SherriffMike Finch: Is that why you drove into the ditch?
Kerry Winsor: I didn't drive into it! I pulled over to watch the sunset! Geez!!! Can't we be normal for once and talk about the sky???
Jade Clark: Oh, Kerry. When are you gonna realize this is Strawberry Springs? We are NEVER normal about anything.

MY CHARACTER SAT at a bus stop, waiting for it to arrive. I stared at the screen for a long time before quitting the game.

It had been far too long for me to be still doing this.

The loading screen to Gabriel's game taunted me, and I stabbed at the remote to turn off the TV as well.

I'd played this a hundred times, but it always ended the same way. Every player had a choice: to stay in the small town or go to the city, where there were far more things to do. There were no advantages to staying. Gabriel made sure of that.

I stayed anyway.

And I kept playing.

“This is the last time,” I muttered to myself.

That would prove to be a lie.

Still, I’d tell myself it was true. I’d tell myself that the perfect man was waiting for me, and I’d forget all about the one who left.

I was over thirty years old, and I was still waiting.

My apartment was a mess, just like it always was when I would find myself deep in a playthrough of Sprout Creek.

His game had taken the world by storm. Millions of copies were sold, all because of the layers he put into the game. No playthrough was the same, and everyone loved all the twists and turns, especially in the city.

He’d made something of himself; that was for sure.

I was surrounded by old take-out containers. When I wasn’t rotting at home, I was running a shop selling the results of all the hobbies I had been convinced would fix me.

There were many bets I lost, but the one with Gabriel? Yeah, I lost it *hard*.

“Come on,” I moaned to the silence of my apartment. “You’ve got to get it together.”

I should pick up my apartment. I should do my dishes.

Yet, I’d played Sprout Creek again.

Like a loser.

My phone going off was the only thing that pulled me out of my misery.

GRACE

Hey. We’re at the library and ready when you are.

I blinked at the text and checked my calendar.

Fuck. I was supposed to meet up with the girls today. All my friends were gathered at the library waiting for me, and I was wallowing in my misery.

GRACE

I know this isn’t the best time of year for you. I can cover for you if you can’t make it.

Grace knew the most about Gabriel and me. She’d seen me fall apart right after he left and pulled me out of the depression that followed every fall after he was gone.

We were heading into that season again.

Summer was at its peak, and soon, August would come, meaning I would go through it all over again. Grace knew to expect me to disappear, and I would stay in my apartment either playing Sprout Creek or ruminating on the fading memories.

This year, I wanted to be different. I wanted to finally get over him and move on with my life.

I always had the same goal. Every year, I wanted to move on.

Whenever I tried, all I could see was the way he had taken care of me when I sleepwalked. The way he smiled the first time I held his hand. I would hear our inside jokes, or what was left of them after time had taken its toll.

I wish it had taken its toll on me. Time was supposed to heal all wounds. Yet, here I was, my heart still hurting just like the day he left.

We felt like a puzzle that was incomplete. I knew how good it felt to fit right where I was supposed to be. I knew real love.

And it was gone.

It walked out of town with its eyes on the horizon. I had been left behind hunting for crumbs ever since.

I had to stop. I had to move on.

There was a new goal on my mind anyway.

JADE

I'm fine. I'm heading out now.

Gathering the papers on my coffee table, I ran out the door. The library was a block away. I kept up my pace, waving at everyone who passed me by.

Dale, the owner of Food 'n' Things, huffed out a laugh when he saw me balancing all the papers delicately in my arms. Jackie asked if I needed help, and Kerry tried to ask if I was meeting up with my friends.

As much as I didn't need an interruption, I loved all of it.

Even though my heart had been broken, having people around made up for it. I didn't regret staying. I only regretted Gabriel.

At least I wasn't alone. At least I was a part of something.

And the town had done well too. Gabriel had been so convinced that we were heading for ruin, yet about seven years ago, things changed. It started

with the facade of the buildings getting repainted. Then lights appeared on the square. Flowers were in new pots. Then the library was funded again.

All of it had to do with one grant.

And that was why I was pulling myself out of my apartment today.

I stumbled into the meeting room where my four friends were waiting. Mollie sat in a corner, drawing what looked to be farming plots on a blank piece of paper.

“Planning for the next year?” I asked.

“Yep. You know me.” She smiled. “I’ve gotta get the farm back to where it was.”

She had been the first to move here after feeling run down out in Nashville. Her grandfather had left her Bennie Grove Farm. But she’d done more than her grandfather ever had.

I laughed. “I’m pretty sure you’ve gone way beyond that.”

“Still. I wanna keep going.”

Wren sat next to her. Once upon a time, she was the star of a Nashville-based renovation show. Then she’d fixed up the library and decided to stay here.

“Can I make a suggestion for your next project?” I asked Wren.

“You can try. What’s up?”

“It’s not a place to redo per se, just a suggestion on color scheme.”

“I’m not making a Gothic-themed house.”

I pouted. “But it would be perfect.”

Next to her, Grace laughed. I loved all of my friends equally, but she’d been here the longest.

“And *you*,” I said as I pointed at her sternly. “When do I get to see Sammy?”

“When Dean is tired of him. Which is never.” Grace shook her head. “He’s dad of the year.”

“And newbie of the year. Somehow, even Hugh likes him.” Our town grump tolerated everyone at best. Grace and Dean seemed to be the exceptions.

Piper was the newest addition to the group. She’d moved in a few months ago and hardly any of us saw her. Eventually, she told us she had a fear of touch. Even now, she sat at a distance from us, but she still tried.

“Hi,” Piper said.

“Up for a high five today?” I offered.

She considered it. “Yes, but a light one.” The group seemed to hold their collective breaths as she did it, and her hand lightly tapped mine. “Now,” she said. “How are *you*, Jade?”

“Did you high-five me to ask that?”

“She’s so smart,” Grace said with a grin.

“Yes and no. I do want an answer, though.”

“I’m here,” I said. “Which is good. Besides, we have something more important to talk about.” I slammed my papers on the table with a smile. “It’s time.”

“Do you have everything you need?” Grace asked. “That’s one hell of a stack.”

“It’s mostly emails from people. All from the grant.” I put them on the table. “Ready to figure out who runs it?”

“Yes!” Wren said. “I need to know who paid for the library.”

“And Cain’s lawyer fees,” Mollie added.

“How did that happen, by the way?” Piper asked.

“No idea. Eric, our oldest, is actually his nephew, and his shitty biological dad tried to take custody. Cain drained his savings to pay for it, then a check showed up in the mail.”

“Wow,” Piper said.

“The same thing happened to me,” Grace added. I nodded. “We didn’t ask for anything.”

“We can’t forget the random money that helped Theo pay for his expansion,” Piper mused. “He didn’t ask for that either.”

“Most of us didn’t.” I took a breath. “Does anyone know where to start?”

Then silence settled over us all.

One thing was for sure: Whoever ran this didn’t want to be found out.

“So, does anyone know what STM even stands for?” I asked.

The room lapsed back into silence.

“So, we don’t.” I sighed. “I have my guesses.”

“What are those?”

“Uh . . . Nothing useful.” I sighed. “My best one is Start Training Masses as if it were a conspiracy or something.”

“That sounds like something Hugh would say.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I pinched the bridge of my nose. “It’s not my best work.”

“What about Start the Making?” Grace asked. “Like they want us to be productive?”

“Strain the debt?” Wren added. “Wait, no, that doesn’t have the M.”

“I love you guys, but no. Anything else?”

Silence again.

“So, we have no clue what STM stands for. What do we know?”

“They knew about the custody battle,” Mollie said. “Which was only hinted at in the Facebook group.”

“And the drama with my sister,” Grace added. “That’s why they sent money.”

“Right. So that brings us to our first point.” I taped a piece of paper onto the wall. “They’re maybe in the Facebook group.”

“Plus, they have familiar handwriting,” Grace added.

“Hang on, *what*?” I nearly tripped over a chair turning to her. “You’ve seen their handwriting?”

“There was a note when they sent it to me. It was personalized.”

“Holy shit. Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Raising a child is busy work.” She shrugged.

I tried not to let anything show on my face. I was happy for Grace, and she’d let me have honorary auntie status with her son, Sammy. I’d helped her as much as I could, but it reminded me of my own goals that were sitting in a closet, collecting dust.

I knew that I needed to find love before ever thinking of kids, but something felt like it was missing. Many things did, actually.

“All right, fair. Do you still have it?”

Grace sighed. “No idea. After the renovations, my house was a mess. Hopefully Dean or his mom didn’t throw it away.”

“We’ll come back to that later then,” I said. “Back to the Facebook group. Do we think they’re in there?”

“It would make sense,” Mollie said.

“But it’s not . . . airtight.” Piper said it delicately. I knew all of them wanted to be supportive, but it would be next to impossible to find a person who didn’t want to be found.

I desperately needed the distraction.

“It’s a list of suspects,” I said. “It’s better than nothing.” I pulled out my phone and opened the group.

I went down the list of names, all of whom I'd interacted with dozens of times. Everyone was active in the group.

"There are a few random profiles," I mused. "I need to see if Kerry wants to delete those before we have more issues."

"Sorry," Piper said.

Not too long ago, her former best friend joined the group and spilled her boyfriend Theo's secrets to everyone. Since then, we'd upped the security on the group, but we clearly had more to do.

"It's okay. None of these seem to be active. They're probably people who stumbled in." I pulled them up, frowning as I saw the names. Ethel Raynor was no one I'd heard of. There was a blank account named G Singh, and a few others too. "Do you all think they'd be suspects?"

"If they're inactive?" Wren asked.

"Lurking can mean they know what's going on," Grace reminded. "It's worth a shot."

I hummed. "No idea who they are, but I'm friend requesting them."

"Wait," Wren said right before I pressed the button. "What if they know you're onto them?"

"I *am* onto them."

"But what if it scares them off? The last thing we want to do is hurt people who rely on the grant."

My finger hovered. "But what if it's one of these random profiles?"

"We should be subtle," she urged.

"I'm terrible at that."

"What if we start with who we know, and if we're out of suspects, we go deeper?" Piper offered. "Since Grace thinks the handwriting is familiar, it could be someone in town."

I was tempted to do it anyway, but Wren had gotten a lot done using the grant, and I didn't want to take that from her.

"Okay, so people we know. Let's start there." I went back to my list. I'd known these people my entire life. Could they be the ones hiding this from us?

"So, we treat the Facebook group like a list." I looked up at Mollie. "Is it you?"

She laughed. "Me? Absolutely not. The farm is doing well, but there's no way I have that kind of money."

"Are you sure?"

She rolled her eyes. “Jade. Wanna see my profit? I have nothing to hide.”

“Yes, but not just for this.” I pointed at her. “I need to see if there’s room in the budget for a slide.”

“A slide?” Her brow creased. “Where?”

“Anywhere. The farm is missing something.”

“And it’s a slide?”

“You have those great hills. Couldn’t you imagine kids screaming as they hurtle down them?”

“Jade, you have an odd obsession with children screaming,” she muttered. “But it’s not a bad idea.”

“My next person is you.” I turned to Wren.

“It’s not me either!” she immediately said.

“You had the show.”

“Which helped a lot, but I’m not made of money.”

Mollie hummed. “You did consider funding the library yourself.”

“What?” I gasped.

“Hey, whose side are you on?” Wren glared at Mollie, who shrugged.

“We may as well get it all out in the open.”

“Fine. I thought about funding it for a year or two, but that’s all I could do. I do have decent money, that’s true, but most of what I got from there I put into other projects.”

It would’ve been the con of the century to go through the grant while owning it. Wren was smart, but this had been funding the town long before she knew we existed. “Yeah, I can believe that. Sorry, I just have to check all the boxes.”

“I get it,” she said. “Keep going.”

I quickly passed over Grace and looked at Piper.

“Hang on,” Grace interrupted. “Aren’t you going to ask me?”

I shook my head. “No. Sorry, girl. I know your secrets, and there’s simply no way it’s you.”

“I don’t know whether to be offended or relieved.” She crossed her arms and said nothing else.

“I’ll get ahead of your question and say I’m not the grant owner either,” Piper said. “I didn’t even know about this place until the show.”

“You’re right. The timing doesn’t work. Good. Then I can trust you all.”

“I do have one other thing,” Grace said. “The handwriting. It was shaky, like maybe they were older.”

“Oh,” I said. “That narrows it down, and it makes sense. None of us has that kind of money.”

“Exactly,” Mollie said. “But also, fuck you.”

I waved my hand. “I’m just being honest.”

I taped up another piece of paper, one that said “older” in large letters.

“Can we tape things on these walls?” Piper asked.

“Probably not,” I answered. “This is just for today.”

“You should get one of those boards,” Wren said. “Like a real investigator.”

“Yes,” I replied. “I wanna lick your brain.”

Mollie laughed and Wren went red in the face. “Why would you say that?”

“It’s true! You all love me for being real.”

All of the women smiled. “Of course we do,” Grace said. “And we’ll figure this out together.”

I returned the smile and faced the wall. I was glad I’d gotten out of the house. There were times when I needed to be alone, and then times I needed to be reminded that I had friends. Things were tough and I missed Gabriel more than I could say, but my circle had grown. Once, I had only trusted him, but I’d replaced him with multiple others after he left.

My life wasn’t empty.

If I’d left, I’d have none of this, and Gabriel and I wouldn’t have worked out anyway. He’d always be looking ahead and never behind him. He’d always move on.

I believed I would have been included in that.

Or at least that was what I told myself every night when I couldn’t get to sleep.

“Are you gonna be okay looking into this?” Grace asked.

I paused before turning. “Yeah, of course.”

“You can always talk to us if anything else comes up,” Mollie added.

“I will,” I replied. “But this year, I don’t want anything to come up. I want to focus on this and nothing else.”

“All right then,” Wren said. “We’ll focus on this. No more men for Jade.”

“Nothing can knock me off course.”

At that moment, another smile crossed my face. I really believed that I had this.

I was about to be proven *so* wrong.

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2

GABRIEL



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Kerry Winsor: Does anyone else have those days where you feel like something has changed? Like something is just in the air?

Comments:
Tammy Jane: Kerry, you've posted the last six posts. Don't you have anything else to do?
Kerry Winsor: What? The group is quiet! I'm trying to keep the community alive.
Kerry Winsor: @Mollie Wilson @Wren Hackett @Grace Day @Piper M @Jade Clark One of you do something! I'm bored!
Mollie Wilson: Why are you asking us?
Kerry Winsor: You're the ones who have all the interesting things happen! Except maybe Jade.
Atticus Thompson: Oh, I think something will be happening very soon . . .

"So let me get this straight." Atticus's voice was measured as he tried to process what I'd just told him. "They've lived with you for one month, and they've gotten kicked out of four day cares, trashed two rental properties and four hotels, flushed five cell phones, and called the cops so much that you got fined?"

“You forgot the part where they set my apartment on fire,” I answered.

Atticus slowly nodded. “And you brought them here?”

I rolled my eyes and resumed pacing. Right now, Beatrice and Agnes were in the field with the horses. I had about ten minutes until the horses were in danger.

“What other choice do I have? My apartment isn’t habitable, they’re ruining anywhere we stay, and I clearly can’t find childcare for them.”

“Will it be any different here?”

“More eyes are better than just mine.”

“I’m afraid they’ll get arrested.”

“Can Mike even do that?”

Saying anyone’s name in Strawberry Springs felt odd. Hell, *being here* felt even odder. When I left all those years ago, I was determined to put this place in the past. But the past had a way of sticking around.

Strawberry Springs never quite became a place in the rearview mirror. It was on my mind even as I did other things. That was why my game had a small-town beginning. As much as I didn’t want it to, coming back here felt nostalgic in a way that I never thought it could.

Atticus blew out a breath and looked out the window. Agnes was boosting Beatrice to get on a horse. “We should stop them.”

“Try it. They know curse words and they bully people.”

“When you said you were coming back, I knew you were desperate, but not *this* desperate.”

“I’d have to be,” I muttered. “But I do have things to do for work. I can’t dedicate my life to making sure they’re not committing crimes. I need . . . I need help. If they run into some stranger here, they’re mostly safe.”

Atticus looked at me, mouth pressed thin. I knew he was having thoughts, but I also knew he wouldn’t share them.

Over the years, I’d gotten good at not needing help and advice. But gaining custody of the girls had pushed me further than ever before. I didn’t know what I was doing.

And I was afraid of hurting them more than I already had.

“Do you know why this is happening?” Atticus asked. “Kids act out for a reason.”

“You know why they’re acting out. Their mother only died two months ago.”

“That’s rough on kids.” His eyes met mine. I hadn’t been the best to him after my own mother had died. Still, he never yelled at me and cared when I didn’t deserve it.

“I’m hoping it’s temporary. That a reset can help.”

“A reset on them or you?”

“I . . . don’t know.” And that was the truth. I’d not known what I was doing for a month. It felt like I was drowning for far longer than that too.

“I have to do vet work, but I’ll do my best. The rest of the town will too. Mostly.”

“I bet the rest of the town doesn’t give two shits about me.” When I was young, I ignored all of them. I wouldn’t blame them if they held a lot of resentment.

“You’d be surprised. They asked about you a lot.”

An uneasy silence settled over the both of us. It was a known fact that me coming back here would be news. But with two kids in tow? This was a bombshell.

“Does Jade know I’m back?”

Even speaking her name made the wound in my chest ache once again. It had been this way since she told me to get out. I had done my best to follow what she asked of me and stayed away. Coming back meant breaking that rule.

He shook his head. “I certainly wasn’t telling her.”

“Atticus,” I hissed. “A warning would’ve helped.”

“Nothing is gonna make this easier. And I wasn’t sure you’d be here until you actually showed up.”

I crossed my arms and sighed. “This is going to be a disaster.”

“Some people missed you, at least,” he said, clapping his hand on my shoulder. “And most of us old folks would love to have kids to play with. Even if they’re little demons.” His gaze moved to the window and he stopped. “Shit. Agnes is getting carried off into the sunset by Emily.”

“The horse?”

“Who else? Dammit, she’s fast. It’ll take us hours to catch her!” My stepfather bolted out the door and I let out a long sigh. I was so tired that I couldn’t think straight, and it had gotten worse when Alice died and I’d taken in the girls.

This could easily be a massive mistake.

But the rest of my life had been one too, so this was no different than my usual.

"AGNES!" I yelled four hours later. "Get back here! And do *not* take your pants off!"

She didn't pay me any mind. She was too busy running down Main Street, grabbing at the button of her jeans.

This child needed suspenders.

And I needed a nap.

As much as I wanted to chase her, I had another kid to deal with as well, and she was the biggest danger.

"And get out of the tree, Beatrice!"

They'd whispered for all of two seconds before they started chaos. I didn't have time to realize what they were planning, much less stop it.

"You can't tell me what to do! You're not my dad!"

I had to hide the grimace I felt at her words. "I *am* your dad!"

"Fuck you!"

A blonde woman and a man with dark hair I'd nearly run into on the street gaped at my child's choice of words. At first, I would try to correct them, but I'd given up over time.

"I got one!" A woman caught Agnes in the street. She had long, golden-brown hair. She must have been a new addition to the town.

"Put me down, creepy stranger!" Agnes screamed, kicking.

"Oh my God," the woman said. "Why are you so violent?"

"Got the other!" a redhead yelled. Dimly, I recognized her as the TV star who had put Strawberry Springs back on the map with her renovation of the library. "Woo! Teamwork!"

"Let me go! I wanted to jump!" Beatrice said.

"That's more of a reason *not* to let you go then!"

They had been caught. Thank *God*. "Jesus *fuck*. I can never catch a break with those two."

"They're with safe people," the blonde woman said. "You seem to, uh, have your hands full."

"That's an understatement. Nice to meet you both." I waved.

“I’m Piper, and this is Theo. Are you new in town?” she asked.

I paused and looked around the square while not in a panic. My breath caught at the painted buildings and brightly colored flowers on nearly every corner. This had been what Jade had always wanted to see.

She had gotten what she wanted.

“Uh, no. Not new.”

“Are you from here then?”

“Yeah, I am. Name’s Gabriel. I used to live around here, but I’m sure you’ve not heard of me. It was a long time ago.”

Piper’s eyes widened. “And where are you living?” Clearly, she knew something I didn’t, and I didn’t like not knowing things.

“The new big apartment. That was good timing, huh?” I laughed. “Do you happen to know who lives in the unit next to me? I didn’t know it was even occupied.”

I didn’t know any of the apartments were occupied unless they’d been redone. Jade had the shop downstairs—that much I knew, but I didn’t know who would be brave enough to live above her.

Piper and Theo looked at each other with wide eyes, and I had a bad feeling I wouldn’t like whoever it was.

Maybe I should look into it. A lot of things in Strawberry Springs weren’t digitized, but anything that caused this kind of reaction wouldn’t mean anything good for me.

“I have a kid for you.” The woman with red hair walked up to me. “She’s yours, right?”

“I’m not!” Beatrice yelled.

“This stranger is stealing me!” Agnes yelled as the other woman walked toward me.

“My name’s Mollie,” she said as she put down Agnes right in front of me.

“So?” Agnes asked.

“So, I’m not a stranger anymore.” She put her hands on her hips with a proud smile on her face. I blinked and tried to remember the name.

Mollie. As in the one who took over Bennie Grove Farm.

“I’m Wren,” the other said.

“Right.” I nodded. “You had a TV show, didn’t you?”

“I did,” she said. “But I’m long past that. Who are you?”

“His name is Gabriel!” Piper replied. “Isn’t that great?”

Wren and Mollie froze.

Mollie was the first to recover. “Sorry, what did you say?”

I didn’t get a chance to answer because my kids darted. Apparently, they’d had enough of being near me.

“Shit,” I muttered under my breath. “Thank you both. I’ll make it up to you!”

They were heading to an alleyway, going faster than any five-year-old should have been capable of. They cut the corner as I got to the sidewalk in front of the building.

Then I ran into someone.

My scattered brain struggled to follow, but I managed to catch whoever it was before they fell.

I was torn between the kids and at least saying sorry to whoever I nearly knocked over.

Then I looked down.

Faded green hair, pale skin, and a shocked expression that matched my own.

My breath was knocked out of my lungs.

Jade. I’d run into Jade.

She wore a black shirt, which she more than likely cut up herself, and a long skirt that showed a pale leg.

My throat went dry when I saw her, just like it always did.

Then her shock wore off and she wrenched herself out of my arms faster than I could blink. I immediately felt cold despite the warm weather.

She absolutely hated me, and that would never change. I could accept that.

Just like I could accept the fact that I was still totally and madly in love with her.

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3

JADE



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Kerry Winsor: Did I see who I think I just saw???

Comments:
Grace Day: Who? What?
Jackie Anne: It was him. I saw him myself!
Mark Bell: Never thought I'd see the day . . .
Grace Day: What are we missing??? WHAT'S HAPPENING???

I HAD to have sleepwalked into my own personal hell. For a while, all I could do was stare. That tall form shouldn't have been here. I shouldn't have seen long, wavy black hair and thick glasses. Fuck, even his tan skin hadn't changed. I was hoping he'd at least look pale after becoming a cave-dwelling game developer.

No. He was still hot. Which made it all worse.

There was no way this was happening. This was impossible.

There was no way Gabriel Sinclair was back in Strawberry Springs. I was sure he hadn't so much as thought of any of us since he left.

"What the absolute *fuck*?" I asked. Time seemed to stop as I stared. I was sure people had seen him—how could they not? And they were waiting with bated breath for me to run into him.

Now it had happened, and I had no fucking idea what to do.

My breath came out in shaky heaves. I was still sure this was all fake.

He said he wouldn't come back. He hadn't dared to in almost thirteen years.

Yet, here he was. As I met his deep brown eyes, I knew it was him. Gabriel opened his mouth and then shut it. I stared. Did I kill him? Did I kiss him? Did I shove a crystal up his ass?

Would I go to jail if I did all three?

There was a *bang* behind us that seemed to knock Gabriel out of his thoughts. He blinked and then cursed, going past me and into the alleyway.

"Hey!" I said, immediately following him. "If you have the balls to be here, then you have the balls to face me!"

Gabriel held up a hand while a giggle made its way out of the dumpster. I blinked.

"Do the raccoons know how to laugh now?"

He paused. "The *what*?"

"Raccoons. Jackie keeps them as pets. They also live in the—hang on, why the fuck am I talking to you? You're an asshole!"

The dumpster opened and two children popped out. "He is!" one of them said.

"Really? There?" Gabriel sighed. "Now you both need baths."

"Let me live in filth, villain!"

Since when did Gabriel talk like that? Since when did he care about kids at all?

I took a closer look. She was five. Maybe a small six-year-old. She had wavy, dark brown hair and the same tan skin as Gabriel. The other girl looked strikingly similar, and I knew I'd have a hard time picking them out from one another in a police lineup. The only difference was that her hair was a touch straighter than her sister's.

"I can't believe this," he muttered before walking over to the dumpster. He grabbed one, who immediately started kicking.

"You can't do this to me!" the girl yelled, trying to escape. "I have rights, you know!"

"Agnes!" Gabriel snapped. "You cannot run naked through the streets and then hide in a dumpster."

I blinked. She wasn't wearing pants.

Quietly, I pinched my own skin, wincing when I felt pain. I was awake, so what the hell was happening?

"And you." He looked at the other one. "You can't climb trees either."

"I do what I want!" she yelled. "You're not my dad!"

I expected Gabriel to storm off or laugh. Of course he wasn't their dad. There was no way he could be.

Then he said the last thing I ever expected.

"I *am* your dad, whether you like it or not."

I felt like I'd been punched.

He had kids. With someone else.

I thought about what he was up to way more than I wanted to. I figured he was in a coding hole, making more games that I'd secretly obsess over. Or that he was out with other women every night.

This was worse. So much worse.

A shaky breath escaped me and I shook my head.

I had no words for him. I only needed to get the fuck out of here.

"Jade, wait—"

"Don't!" I yelled. "Don't say a fucking thing to me! Not now. Not ever."

I was gone before he could follow. Since one of the kids was still in the dumpster, I imagined that he was busy with them.

I lost it when I got to my apartment.

This was one of those times where I knew I wouldn't be leaving the house for a while. Everyone was used to it. I disappeared a lot, and anyone with a lick of sense knew not to bother me when I was like this.

So much for this being my year.

Now, Gabriel had the balls to come here.

He'd obviously done far better than me. He had everything I ever wanted. He had to have it all figured out. This felt like the night he'd left, but far worse. Back then, I thought the pain would end. That I'd move on and this would be a distant memory.

Now that I was older, I knew that it never fully went away.

It was easier when he was a mysterious person who'd left. At times, I could convince myself that he was as miserable as I was.

Now I knew the truth. He'd moved on. He was a father. And I'd been stuck in Strawberry Springs.

How long did I have until he would tell me he'd been right all along? How long did I have before I went to jail for murder?

I couldn't tell if I was hurt or angry. Maybe I was a mix of both. The shock could only dull this for so long. Eventually, I would crash.

Night fell with me sitting on the floor in front of the couch, staring at a wall.

Next to me, my phone blew up with people checking in. I was tempted to throw it across the room. I didn't want to admit this bothered me. I didn't want to let any part of this show.

It didn't help that my new neighbors weren't quiet.

The best part of living in a run-down upper floor of a shop was that no one would move in near me. When Wren told me she wanted to fix up the larger unit next door, I'd been cautiously optimistic.

I wished I had begged her to stop.

I was already in a terrible mood from earlier, and knowing Gabriel was back took it to another level.

Stumbling, I wiped at my face and stormed out the front door. Whoever I was about to meet would be horrified to see me.

I didn't care. Maybe they would quiet the fuck down.

My fist pounded on the door, and I waited with crossed arms.

I thought maybe it was some city asshole who didn't understand that they had neighbors.

I was right, but in the worst way.

As Gabriel opened the door, he did a double take when he saw me.

I wanted to fall through the floor.

"No." I shook my head. "This is a fucked-up nightmare. No way."

"Jade—"

"You moved *here*?"

"You moved to the square?" he asked back. "What happened to your dad's place?"

"He moved to be closer to his fire department. You had to know I would move to the square."

"Who is it?" a kid asked.

"I'm not doing this." I took a step back. "Quiet down. You're being rude."

"Wait—"

“Focus on your kids. They need you.” I went to turn, but he grabbed my hand.

“Jade, hang on a second.”

“Gabriel.” His full name left my mouth. “Let me go.”

His breath hitched. I only used that name when I was angry with him. And I had been angry for years.

He let me go and I wasted no time going back to my apartment and slamming the door.

My eyes went to the wall I shared with the next unit and I had to pull them away.

I was so angry I could scream. I wanted to cry and hit something.

Mainly Gabriel.

Mike was a great sheriff, but he promised one day he would break and actually get me in trouble for the shenanigans I got into. I didn’t have any doubt that murdering Gabriel would get me put in jail.

Despite the odds, I knew the people here would care about him. They’d asked how he was doing more times than I could count, as if I would ever know.

I grabbed my phone and dialed a number. Jackie picked up on the second ring.

“Honey, I heard what happened. Are you okay?”

My voice was level and I wiped away a tear. “I am. I actually wanted to schedule a hair appointment.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. It’s time for a refresh.”

“YOU LOOK GOOD,” Jackie said when I walked in. “Way better than I . . . You know what? Never mind.”

I gritted my teeth for a second before I smiled. “It was years ago. If anyone’s worried, it’s him. He looks worried, right?”

Jackie shrugged. “No one’s seen him after the day his kids terrorized the square.”

“What?”

“Yeah. He’s hiding out at home with his kids.” She huffed out a laugh and shook his head. “Gabriel with kids. Who would’ve thought.”

My throat felt thick, but I tried to push past it.

I couldn’t. Jackie eyed me in the mirror. A tight smile made its way to her face and she took pity on me.

“So, you’re here to get your dye redone. What were you thinking?”

“Purple this time.”

She paused and I tensed. I wondered if she remembered what purple meant to Gabriel and me.

If she did, she didn’t call me out on it.

“That color always looks so good on you.” She wrapped the cape around me. “You’ll look great.”

“Thank you.”

She stepped away to get the dye and I collected myself. As much as I was determined not to let my anger show, I had another reason for coming here specifically.

“So,” I asked when she was back. “How’ve things been?”

“You’re asking me? Aren’t you the one with the more interesting things going on?”

“I’ve got all of that handled.”

Jackie eyed the hair dye and then my falsely serene face. “I’m sure you do. And nothing interesting is going on with me.”

“Are you sure?” I promised myself I would be fine, but I would let a little bit show for the investigation. “I’d love a distraction.”

Jackie’s brow rose, but she nodded. “Well, I get to watch my grandkids this weekend.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes. Mollie and Cain deserve some time off. And I get to snuggle a newborn. Aren’t I lucky?”

My throat was tight. Usually, I could handle thoughts of families. This time, I thought about Gabriel’s.

Was he with the girls’ mom? Was she around?

Or, worse, were they alone?

“Jade?” Jackie gently pressed.

I forced myself out of my thoughts. “Sorry. Got a little lost there. That’s great.” I took a deep breath as she started putting the dye in my hair. “Anything else?”

“There’s not much with me. You know I’m either here or watching TV.”

“Really? You don’t have any secrets?”

“Me?” She laughed. “I mean, I was thinking about trying to go to the Treasure Trove, but I hate spending money.”

Finally.

“Why do you hate spending money?”

“I don’t have a lot of it, of course. My husband was broke when he died.” She rolled her eyes. “And I make just enough to live off of. If it weren’t for the STM grant, I’d be done for.”

“The STM grant, you say? You use it?”

“I do. It helped with rent for a while, though I don’t have to use it as much as I used to. I’m getting more customers since the show. Aren’t you?”

“A few. I have weird stuff, though.”

“We love your weird stuff,” Jackie said. “And your candles. I’ll buy you out of the orange honeysuckle one.”

“I’ll take it,” I said. “But it better not be out of pity.”

“Oh, I would never.” She shook her head. “Still, if you need us to jump in, we will.”

“I’m okay,” I replied. “I get regular business. I still have to use the grant, though.”

She hummed. “Don’t think too hard about a helping hand, okay? It’s not good for you.”

“But we don’t know who the helping hand is . . . right?”

I eyed her, watching for her to tense. Jackie wasn’t high on my list of suspects, but she was on it nonetheless.

But there was none of that.

All I got was a wistful sigh. “It can be, but I know whoever is behind it cares about us.”

“How do you know that?”

“Just look outside.” She pointed a gloved hand to the colorful buildings.

“Right.”

“Any reason you’re asking me?” Jackie asked. “You don’t think I have anything to do with it, do you?”

I blinked. “What? No!”

She shook her head. “Plenty of people have tried to lie to me in this chair. It’s okay if you did.”

“To be fair, I don’t think it’s really you.”

“If it was, you’d know.”

“You’d quit your job?”

“No, I’d still do hair sometimes. But I’d go to Hawaii. I’d probably try to buy more land for Mollie and Cain, or spoil my grandkids.”

“Are those your big aspirations?”

“I’m a simple woman.” She tilted her head to the side. “But the grant owner? Not so much.”

“They must get one hell of a tax write-off.”

“Sure, but they don’t do it for that.”

“You think so?”

“Oh, I *know* so.” Jackie’s smile was easygoing as she worked through my hair. “Whoever did this is going after not only what we need, but also what we want. That’s not someone who wants a write-off.”

“Then who do you think it is?”

“I couldn’t begin to guess. I think it’s someone who knows us very well. Someone who’s very special. And someone who’s very, *very* selfless.”

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4

GABRIEL



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Mark Bell: So . . . do we talk about it?

Comments:
Jade Clark: I will cut you.
Mark Bell: All right. Cool. There's nothing to talk about.
SherriffMike Finch: Jade . . .
Jade Clark: Do you wanna try me?
SherriffMike Finch: Carry on.

I NEARLY FELL over when Atticus walked through the door. "Oh," he said. "This is . . . something."

"It's not blood," I rushed to say. "It's ketchup."

He stared. "It's everywhere."

"I'm making a painting!" Agnes said as she slapped more onto Beatrice, who only laughed.

"I'm art."

"How long did you leave them alone for?" Atticus asked.

"I went to go pee. A minute, tops."

"Ah." Atticus slowly nodded. "You need help."

“I think I’m gonna explode,” I said quietly. My voice wavered. Seeing Jade twice already had me on edge, but knowing she was on the other side of the wall? I was a wreck.

The twins could fucking smell it. I knew they could.

“Let me help. Kids, it’s time for a bath.”

“And who are you?” Agnes asked, her eyes narrowed.

“You met him two days ago,” I reminded them. “And he came to visit when . . . you first came to live with me.”

“A stranger!” Beatrice said.

“I stopped by to give you two a bubble bath,” Atticus said.

Both girls cheered and ran for the bathroom.

“Yay! Thank you, stranger!”

“You’re welcome,” he said as he followed.

I noticed he was careful about not calling himself “grandpa” or anything like it.

That was for the best.

Agnes and Beatrice had issues with family names—especially where I was involved.

“Go,” Atticus said as he poked his head around the wall.

“Go where?” I asked.

“Anywhere. Get out for a minute.”

I grabbed his arm. “They’ll eat you alive.”

“There aren’t any horses here.”

“Anything is a weapon when they want it to be.”

“Gabriel. Go. I’ll call you if I need you.” He shoved me toward the door.

“Wait, but—”

He shut it in my face. I sighed and was tempted to go back into the apartment, but the exhaustion coursing through me made itself known. I needed the break, even if I didn’t want it.

Unfortunately, and inevitably, the girls would wear on him. I had maybe an hour.

My gaze went toward Jade’s door and I stared. Was she on the other side of it? Would she even answer if I knocked?

After she’d used my full name, I knew the answer. I’d been a hermit ever since I moved here. I was too busy with the girls, trying to hide everything in the apartment they could use to ruin my life.

I should’ve expected the ketchup.

This was needed. I’d never been one to always stay home, and I was curious to see how much Strawberry Springs had miraculously changed.

If the coffee shop was open this late, I could do some work. I had far too many emails to answer and I didn’t know where to begin. Night had snuck up on me, though; the shop was closed, and now my options were limited.

Gaining custody of the girls had me off kilter. Hell, I’d been messed up since Alice died.

When I stepped out onto the square, my eyes went upward. The entire square was lit up in fairy lights.

“Wow,” I muttered to myself. The last time I was here, everything had been dark, save for the dying streetlights illuminating random corners.

When the renovation show came here, I didn’t see why.

Now I did.

It was like a fever dream come to life, and it sat heavy in my chest. I stood there for far too long trying to decide what to do. I even did a few things on my phone before deciding to walk to Bell’s Brews.

I’d been too young to spend time here when I left, but Atticus had brought me in for sodas a few times. It was mostly the same, except with more signs and newer chairs.

Damn, this had gotten better too.

Mark nearly dropped a glass when I approached the bar. “Holy shit. You’re really here.”

“I’m sure you heard the news.”

“I did.”

I made myself smile as I sat in front of him.

“Hell has frozen over.”

“What do you drink?”

“I can’t drink tonight. Can you get me a club soda with cranberry juice?”

Mark paused and I knew he was shelving that information for later. Having to go home to two wild children meant that getting drunk was the last thing I needed to be doing.

He started on my order, and I took a second to rub my forehead. With a break from the two girls driving me over the edge, my thoughts shifted to Jade.

The thing I hated the most was the way she looked at me.

When she told me to never come back to town, all that was written on her face was anger. Years must have changed that for her. Now I could see a deep sadness that she only reserved for when she had been talking about her dad.

Somehow, I joined the same group as the man who never gave her any attention and worked all the time. That was a bitter pill to swallow.

It would have been better if I had bought a different house slightly out of town. Unfortunately, there were hardly any properties for sale because the people who lived here wanted to stay here.

Mark slid the drink to me. “You okay?”

“Are you not siding with Jade?”

“I could. I have a feeling neither of you feel great, though.”

I frowned. Jade was the one who’d stayed here. I would have expected her to talk so much shit about me that no one would take me back.

“We’ve all learned some lessons about judging people,” Mark continued. “Many lessons, really. But I doubt you care about those.”

“I’m mostly surprised you guys all collectively learned something.”

“It took a lot of mistakes.” Mark smiled. “We all make them.”

I huffed out a laugh. I’d been worried that everyone would have the same cold attitude that Jade had. I’d deserve it, if they did. “Thanks for not hating me.”

“It’s the least I can do. We were all curious on how things are going anyway.”

“Not great.”

“Is that what brought you back here?”

“Yeah. You heard about the twins in the square, I assume.”

“I did. In the Facebook group. Do you know about that? I think it started after you left.”

“I . . . do.”

“So you didn’t totally forget about us.”

We were treading toward a topic I didn’t want to discuss. I’d kept my interest in this town a secret. As far as I knew, not even Atticus was aware of it beyond the things he would tell me. I needed to change the subject. “Anyway, those kids are mine.”

“I hope you don’t take this the wrong way, but none of us saw that coming.”

“I didn’t either.”

“Still. Congrats. Or not. You seem a little . . . weird.”

“This is the first time you’ve seen me in thirteen years.”

“Yeah, but still. Most people smile when they talk about their kids.”

It was just another reminder of all the ways I’d failed as a parent. I got a lot of those.

“It’s been a long month.”

Mark hummed. “How’ve you been, kid?”

“I’m an adult now.”

“All of you are kids to me.”

I huffed, but thought about it.

It was different coming to a bar and talking to someone that I knew. If I wanted to do that back in the city, I had to ask someone to meet up. Over the years, I’d never found a friend as good as Jade was.

“I’ve been better.”

“Something big must have happened if it made you come back here. Plus, Atticus left not too long ago for a while. Usually, that’s for you.”

I had been lucky that Atticus was free. He put work on hold for me, which was a reminder that he did care, even if he did it in his own way. Hell, he’d shown me he cared tonight by showing up.

He’d shown up a lot.

At least when he came over for holidays, I got a little taste of home.

“Speaking of Atticus, is he giving you a break?”

“As much of one as he can. I estimate I have about an hour.”

“You couldn’t find a day care in the big city?”

“I hired four. They all quit on the first day.”

“Jesus.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, at least one of us can grab them if we need to. Mollie and Wren did a good job about that. Oh, I should tell you who they are. They moved here recently—”

“I know.” When Mark blinked, I knew I needed to explain. “I met them on my first day here. Plus, I kept loose tabs on things.”

He laughed. “What have you heard about me?”

“That I shouldn’t look at your closet with a black light.”

His smile faded immediately. “That’s not my fault. It’s the wild people in town, especially Jade—”

He realized what he said before he finished the sentence, and his face went pale. I sucked in an involuntary breath.

I wasn't a fool. There was no way she'd not found someone else. When my teenage brain finally wrapped around the fact that she did want kids someday, I knew she wouldn't delay the inevitable. She would want love. She would want a family. All with someone else.

Her relationship status, from what I could hunt down, never changed. So there was hope.

Or maybe I was fooling myself.

"Sorry," Mark said. "I really stepped in it there."

"No, I get it. She probably didn't stay single."

"Oh, she stayed single. No one lasts more than a night."

I wasn't sure if that was better or worse, but I gave him a tight smile anyway. Behind me, the bell above the door jingled, announcing someone else was walking in. I didn't turn because I wasn't sure that I could handle any more shock from the people in town.

"Oh, fuck." Mark's shoulders were tight.

And then I felt her.

Jade had walked in. Instead of the faded green hair she'd had yesterday, it was now bright purple. Her lips were bright red, and she wore a skirt with a high slit and fishnet tights underneath. What was worse was that she had on a leather harness over a fitted T-shirt, making her jaw-dropping.

Age had only made her sexier. Time had only made me want her more.

Just the sight of her made my body respond. I felt like that teenager again who couldn't wait to see her.

Her eyes met mine and I silently begged for her to come over. One corner of her lips turned up when she saw me, and suddenly, it felt like all of the past was erased. It was just the two of us, like always.

Then, she walked right up to someone else.

He was the complete opposite of me. Instead of dark clothes, he wore a polo and khakis. He smiled the second he saw her, and she leaned on the table in front of him.

My heart shattered and reality turned.

Of course she could do this. There was no way she would ever talk to me again. She wanted me to see this.

"So . . ." Mark said. "Want something stronger?"

"I can't."

“Need to leave?”

I blew out a breath. “No, I’ll stay until Atticus calls me home.”

“Seems a little like torture.”

It was. Then again, every time I saw her was torture.

“It’s what I deserve.”

I didn’t let myself look away, forcing me to see the consequences of my actions. The entire time I was here, this would continue.

And it wouldn’t be enough for what I’d told her and what I’d actually done with my life.

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5

JADE



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Jackie Anne: Just did this amazing hair!

Comments:
Atticus Thompson: Jackie, you never advertise.
Jackie Anne: This one's an exception!
Jade Clark: You can see it in person if you come to the bar right now. I'm running out the door as I type this!
Kerry Winsor: Dammit! I NEED childcare tonight. Any takers???
Grace Day: Do NOT stalk her.
Kerry Winsor: Don't tell me you wouldn't if you were in my position.
Kerry Winsor: @everyone PLEASE! I NEED HELP!!!

"I REALLY BELIEVE investments are the future." The man in front of me was talking and I was struggling to listen.

Investments? Really? *That's* what he was talking to me about?

It would be my luck that the random man I found for revenge turned out to be a dud.

Story of my fucking life.

Everything else tonight had gone to plan. I'd dolled myself up in record time the second I saw Gabriel leave his place, and my hair was still looking

incredible from when it was done by Jackie.

Gabriel was still here, and there was no way I was letting him know that this man wouldn't be touching me with a ten-foot pole.

The whole point was to make him jealous.

And it was working.

His tense posture was obvious from a mile away. I knew that expression he had when I walked in. He expected me to walk over to him. And I couldn't lie, it was tempting. I still wasn't sure whether or not I wanted to ask him what he'd been up to or if I should go straight for the balls, but I knew he wasn't getting a moment of my attention.

"So, do you always have your hair so . . ." The guy gestured. "Fun?"

I knew what this was code for. Sometimes, people meant *fun* as unusual. And I was. It was one of the things I would never let go of. Even if people in town were different, I knew I was accepted.

Sometimes, these guys couldn't hide their distaste for long.

It was just another tick in the *hell no* box on this guy.

Gabriel was still watching, so I gripped my drink tighter to prevent myself from dumping it over this idiot's head, and smiled.

I didn't even remember his name. With how this was going, I wouldn't need to.

"Always. I love being different."

He hummed and his eyes went to my roots. Just yesterday, the mousy brown had been showing, but Jackie was good at what she did. "What's your natural hair color?"

"Trust me, it's boring."

"I bet it looks good on you."

Motherfucker. Could he be any more obvious?

I flicked my gaze over to Gabriel. This shouldn't have lasted long.

Why wasn't he leaving? This should've pissed him off enough to storm out. The Gabriel I knew would never let me talk to anyone.

Then again, this wasn't the person I knew.

There were many things Gabriel told me he'd never do.

A knife slid into my heart at the thought, and I had to look down.

Here I was with big plans of revenge, and I couldn't even manage to keep a smile on my face.

I was such a loser.

“I should go,” I said with a tight smile. “Thank you for hanging out with me.”

“I didn’t mean anything by it.” The man grabbed my hand as I turned. “I think the purple is cool.”

“It’s fine,” I replied. “Don’t worry about it.”

His grip tightened. “Stay. We barely got to talk.”

My humor faded fast. “I don’t think I’m in the mood to talk. Sorry.”

“Really? You were in the mood earlier.”

My eyes narrowed. “I’m going to say this slowly so you understand. I changed my mind, and I want to go home. Goodbye.”

The man wasn’t bothered. He tried to tug me closer, but I dug in with the heels of my boots.

“I can work with someone playing hard to get.”

“Let go of me.”

“I know what that means. You want to fight it, huh?”

Bile rose to my throat. I hated men. I hated them so much.

I was about to deck him when a wall of black stepped in between us. “Keep your hands off of her.”

That was Gabe. *My* Gabe.

Coming to my rescue just like he used to.

I’d been getting myself out of situations for far too long that I forgot about a time where someone had my back. Sure, my friends did when I let them in. But after Gabriel left, I didn’t want anyone to get too close in case they left again.

The entire bar went quiet and anyone who was from here watched carefully.

The other man blinked, his head finally popping out of his ass. “What’s your deal, man?”

“She was clearly not into it. Back off.”

“You back off. You’ve stared at her all night.”

My heart made a traitorous leap. I knew he’d been watching me this whole time and I loved it.

Dammit. I was supposed to be over this. Over *him*.

It was time to lock in. No more of this.

“If this is gonna turn into a dick measuring contest, I’m leaving.” I stepped away, breaking the momentary spell I’d been under. “Have a terrible night, boys.”

I stormed out of the bar, my combat boots making each step louder. When I was in the hot summer air, I let out a shaky breath.

I was so angry, and I wasn't sure who'd taken first place on my shit list. Clearly, the man I picked was a complete idiot. A dangerous one, at that. It was obvious Gabriel didn't know I could take care of myself, so he stepped in.

Both of them deserved all my rage.

But I knew who this was directed at. *Me*. I was angry at myself. Why had I come here? Why hadn't I stayed away? Not only had I gotten my hair done in his favorite color, but I'd watched to see when he'd leave. I'd worn an outfit I knew would get his attention.

There was no reason to do this. Gabriel wouldn't stay in Strawberry Springs for long. He'd leave just like the first time.

And all of this would be a waste.

Behind me, the door opened.

"Are you all right?" It was a soft voice I knew all too well.

"Don't ask."

"Okay." He didn't react to my anger. "I won't."

I wanted to leave, but my legs wouldn't move. "Why are you here?" I finally asked.

"W-what?"

"I asked why you're here." I crossed my arms and turned to him. "I told you not to come back."

He considered his words for a long time. "I was out of options."

"Is that supposed to make me feel bad for you?"

"No. It's just a fact."

"How long are you staying?"

"A few weeks."

"You could have gotten a hotel," I said.

"You can trust that I exhausted all options before coming here."

"Still. It's too long."

"I know. And I know you'll hate me as long as I'm here. I deserve that."

I froze. "What did you say?"

"I said I deserve it. You told me to never come back. And yet, I'm here."

"That's not all you did."

"I know."

My throat felt like I'd swallowed a ball of cotton. I knew I didn't have long before I lost it. Gabriel's eyes widened and I had no doubt he knew what I was thinking.

"Just stay away from me," I managed to say. "Don't talk to me. Don't look at me. Got it?"

"Got it."

I hated that he agreed. I hated that I wanted him to fight it.

A dangerous swirl of misery rose within me, and I was out of time.

I ran home and slammed the door behind me. Next door, I could already hear the noise of Gabriel's girls. If I had to bet, Atticus was watching them.

There was a part of me that wanted to go knock on the door. I bet I could wrangle his kids. I bet I could do it better than anyone else.

Why? Why did I want to give so much of myself to a man who left? Why did I not learn my lesson? He was being clear. He was telling me what his plan was.

I must have ripped out my own heart all those years ago. Maybe he still had it because he held way too much of me. I'd survived since he left, but it wasn't the kind of living it had been when he was here.

If only he would have stayed. If only things could have been different.

A tear slid down my cheek the second I was alone. It turned into a hiccupping cry that took over my entire body. I sat on the other side of my door, foolishly hoping he would come and ask me one more time if I was okay. I'd tell him. I'd admit it all. I'd let myself sink into him again and fall apart once more when he walked away.

It was good that I told him to stay away.

Exhaustion made my eyelids heavy and I knew I was in for rough sleep. The stress meant I would definitely be sleepwalking, and while Gabriel was near, he couldn't know I still did this.

If I woke up in his bed, that would be a massive mistake.

With a sigh, I locked the door using the extra locks I'd installed myself. I shoved my table and couch in front of it, all in the hopes that my sleep self wouldn't let anyone see that I still desperately wanted Gabriel Sinclair.

At this point, I was sure it would never change.

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6

GABRIEL



Dad Company (But Sometimes Good Advice)
G Singh: I've left them at home with my stepfather, but I fear for his safety.

Comments:
Robert Colt: Is he good with kids? And patient?
G Singh: Yes and yes.
Robert Colt: Just don't let them burn another apartment down.
Oliver Brian: Is your stepfather educated in fire safety?

BEATRICE WAS HANGING off Atticus when I opened the door.

My stepfather looked haggard, and I was sure three of his buttons were missing from his dress shirt. He hadn't called, but after Jade left, I knew I couldn't go back into the bar.

I might have punched the idiot who'd refused to let go of her.

Just the thought of Jade made my legs tense. I knew where I'd go if I'd let myself. I'd either break her door down or throw rocks at her window until she yelled at me.

That wasn't what she'd asked for.

"Rough night?" I asked.

"Can you grab this child? My arm is tired."

"I'm a wart!" Beatrice yelled.

“Come here.”

“No!” she screamed.

“Beatrice. I’m home now. I’ll play with you.”

“Stranger!” she yelled and fought to get on the floor. Then she ran to the back room and slammed the door.

Atticus winced. “Jade is home. She’ll have opinions about that.”

I looked at the wall we shared. Jade had already been near tears. This would send her over the edge.

“Use my card and buy her something she likes.”

“Again?” he asked. “I’m pretty sure she thinks I’m interested in her. You get her way too many gifts and say they’re from me.”

“What else am I supposed to do?” I asked. “She told me to stay away from her tonight.”

“Are you gonna listen?”

“It’s what she wants.” A *thud* sounded from the girls’ room and I sighed. “Besides, I don’t have time.”

“I’ll need some time off before I do this again.” Atticus clapped me on the shoulder. “But I’ll do my best.”

“Thanks.”

Then I heard Agnes scream at Beatrice.

“Get Jade some noise-canceling headphones,” I said, and then walked to the girls’ room. I jolted when I saw Agnes hanging out the window. “Ag—what the hell?” I ran over and grabbed her. I didn’t even know these windows opened, but Wren must have been thorough when she renovated this place. “No jumping out of windows!”

“I want out!” she yelled.

“Agnes is mean!” Beatrice yelled. “I want private time!”

“Fine.” I picked up Agnes, ignoring the way she thrashed, and made my way to the living room.

“Put me down!” she screamed.

“We have neighbors!” I hissed. “Can’t you hate me a little quieter?”

“No!” she yelled. “And I don’t have to listen to you!”

“You do!”

“You’re not my dad!” It pained me every time she said it, but in her eyes, she was right.

“I know coming to live with me was a shock, and—”

“You’re just Mommy’s friend! Take me back to Mommy!”

How many hits could I take in one night? Between Jade and Agnes, they were going for whatever they could. I was going to crack in two.

“I *am* your dad. And your mother is . . . She’s gone.”

Agnes teared up just like she did every time. Then she let out a scream. I didn’t know what to do while her tiny fists hit my chest.

I held her through it. I was terrible at this. I was never meant for this.

And while my daughter yelled herself to sleep, all I could do was be there.

The door to their bedroom opened and Beatrice peeked out. I was surprised she hadn’t gone out the window too. She eyed Agnes and me. She was oddly quiet and I wasn’t sure what she was planning to do. Despite everything, I knew she loved her sister, so at least she wouldn’t try to find a knife again like the last time she stared at me like this.

She passed closer, eyes on us the whole time. Agnes let out a snore and put her face in my neck in her sleep. If she were awake, she’d never have done that.

Beatrice was in front of me and she slowly climbed on my lap. I didn’t know what she wanted, but I’d try.

“Wanna join?” I asked.

“No. I want Agnes in bed. Now.”

Right. She was here for her twin. Not me. Never me.

Why would they want to be with me anyway? I should’ve known better.

Nodding, I stood and carried Agnes to their room. When she was in her bed, Beatrice climbed in and curled around her.

I watched them, the familiar ache returning to my chest when I remembered just how little I knew about this, and then shut the door quietly.

Flopping onto the couch, I enjoyed the one moment of quiet I would get. It was dark and the moon was just rising.

I shifted to where I could look out the window. It was silent here, something I wasn’t used to anymore.

At least this was a better view.

My eyes moved toward the wall that I shared with Jade. I couldn’t help but wonder what she thought of this new version of Strawberry Springs.

Did she look at it all with wonder? Did she enjoy walking the streets again?

It was hard to think about her with a smile on her face. She seemed to be miserable now.

I was the cause of it, naturally. And I hated that.
Jade told me I'd regret leaving all those years ago.
As usual, she'd been right.

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7

JADE



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Jackie Anne: Did the power flicker?

Comments:
Jade Clark: No.
Kerry Winsor: I think we all know why it flickered. This time it's Jade blowing a fuse!
Jade Clark: You're on thin ice.
Kerry Winsor: Or it's just the wind! (wink wink)
Jade Clark: You're not subtle.
Jade Clark: And also fuck you.

I WOKE up on my kitchen counter. Unfortunately, this wasn't unusual for me. But the sound of someone knocking at my door was.

"Ugh," I said as I straightened. "Did I have to sleepwalk here?"

I slowly made my way to the door and moved the furniture, wondering who would bother me. Most of my friends knew that it was far better to text rather than showing up at my door unannounced. Yet, some people in town preferred to see me in person.

When I opened the door, there was no one there. Then I looked down.

One of Gabriel's kids was in front of me. She had a mean glare aimed in my direction.

"Do you have food?"

"Excuse me?"

"That *man* is starving me."

And with that, she pushed into my apartment.

So this was how things were going to go.

Cool.

"Welcome in, kid. I'm happy to have a guest."

"I'm a starving child."

"I highly doubt that." I shut my door and followed her. "Do you like cereal?"

"Yes. I also haven't eaten in days. Can you tell the police that?"

I crossed my arms and leaned down. Stuck on the kid's shirt was a grain of rice. "Then what's this?"

"It's from the scraps I took from the floor."

"Kid—"

"It's Agnes."

"Agnes," I said. "Unfortunately, I know your father, and I know he wouldn't starve anyone. He makes good rice too."

Agnes rolled her eyes. "I'm leaving."

"I thought you wanted food."

"I want someone to call the police."

I checked the time. It was eight in the morning. Gabriel used to sleep in, so I had no doubts he was still in bed.

"But I have the good cereal."

Agnes stopped. "If it's fucking basic, I'll riot."

I blinked at her curse words. Gabriel had never hid his words, but I thought he would try around his kids.

"It's not basic. It's sugary and brand name. I have standards, you know."

Agnes considered it. After a long pause, she plopped herself right at the table.

"Feed me then."

"You ever heard of the word please?"

"'Please' is for people who deserve it."

"Excuse me, I hold your life in my hands because I have the cereal you want."

“You haven’t shown me shit.”

With a roll of my eyes, I opened the cabinet and pulled out the sugary cereal that I’d promised. Agnes stared. I wondered if her mother was the kind of parent who never gave their kids sugar.

It wasn’t a great idea to shake this kid up so early, but she was angry and I wanted her to like me.

“Please.” It was all Agnes said, but I knew I’d won. I also knew it was better not to egg her on, so I silently got a bowl and set it in front of her. “Thanks.”

She dug in immediately and I gave her a few minutes to get through her bowl before I said anything else.

“Does your dad know you’re here?”

“Don’t call him that.”

“Fine. Then does Gabriel know you’re here?”

“No.”

“He’s asleep, isn’t he?”

“Yes.”

It wasn’t a good idea for me to know the inner workings of Gabriel’s relationship with his kids. I had no place there, and I was so angry with him that it was tempting to blow up everything.

But I also knew that this was a real child with real feelings.

Something was wrong, and while I wanted to throttle Gabriel and make him never see the light of day again, I was worried about this little girl who had run out of her home.

He had been so sure that he would be a terrible father. Looking at his daughter, it was hard not to agree with him. So, what changed? What made him decide to go for this?

I didn’t know, and that bothered me. Back when he lived here, there wasn’t anything that I didn’t know about him.

Agnes finished her bowl of cereal and stood. “I’m gonna go find someone else to ask to call the cops.”

“Unfortunately, your best option here is Sheriff Mike, and I don’t know if he would take you away from Gabriel.”

“Does he know him too?”

“Yes.”

Agnes muttered something under her breath, and I had a feeling it was a colorful string of curse words.

“Sorry, kid. Everyone in this town knows everyone.”

“I hate it here.”

“You and Gabriel have that in common. Wanna tell me why you ran away?”

“No.”

“Wanna go home?”

“No.”

“Then are you angry?”

“Yes.”

“I have an idea for you.”

“WHEN YOU SAID a five-year-old was gonna come dig a hole, I didn’t expect her to get so far in.” Mollie stood next to me, arms crossed. “Should I be worried about this turning into a pond?”

I sighed. “Maybe. I can fill it and find a new place for her to go.”

“Why are you having her dig a hole again?”

“It’s a good way to get out anger.”

“She must be *very* angry then.”

I blew out a breath. Mollie was right. Agnes was very angry.

I had no idea what was going on, nor should I.

But I was curious nonetheless.

Agnes poked her head out of the hole. “When do I get to the gold? I want to be rich!”

“I don’t know!” I called back. “Keep digging.”

“Wow,” Mollie said. “She’s precocious.”

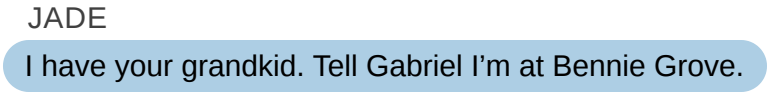
“I love it when you use big words that I don’t know.”

“Ahead. Very ahead,” Mollie explained. “Eric was too, but Jasmine isn’t. Although, I’d even say this one is ahead of Eric. The other girl too, if I go off of what I saw the day they moved here.”

I crossed my arms. I wondered if they were acting out because they were bored. Clearly, this one could focus on a task that interested her, even if it was simply digging a massive hole.

I could’ve stared at Agnes and thought about it all day, but I shook off my thoughts. Gabriel didn’t deserve me solving his problems. Instead, I

pulled out my phone and messaged Atticus.



Atticus responded with a thumbs-up.

Thirty minutes later, Gabriel's car was racing onto the farm.

"That's him," Mollie said.

"I know."

"So, how do we play this? Do you want me to glare?"

As funny as that would've been, I shook my head. "No, I've got this."

"But this is Gabriel."

"Yep." I crossed my arms. "Trust me, no one's more miserable than he is."

Gabriel stumbled out of the car. He ran halfway to me and then returned to the car for his other child.

God, he was so terrible at this.

What had he been thinking, having kids?

He probably didn't want to.

The thought hit me and I shook my head to dispel it. Even if he didn't want them, he didn't need to let it show this badly.

"She's here?" Gabriel asked, breath coming in heaves.

"Yep. In the hole."

"In the . . ." His gaze traveled from me to the pile of dirt. Deep inside, Agnes was still working away. "That works?"

"For now. She was really something this morning."

"How did she find you?"

"Does it matter? She snuck out. At *five*. What are you even doing?"

"I was asleep."

"Still."

Gabriel sighed and looked away, but his cheeks were dark.

Good. He could still feel shame.

A hand shoved in between us. "Hi. I'm Mollie, the new owner of Bennie Grove Farm."

"I know."

She blinked. "You know?"

"How?" I asked. "I thought you left this place in the rearview mirror."

Gabriel paused and I could practically see the gears in his head turning. “Atticus gave me an update.”

“That’s a lie.”

“I-it’s not.”

“Then look me in the eyes, Gabriel. It’s the least you can do considering I already saved your ass with your kid.”

Silence stretched between us.

It was finally broken by Mollie. “I’m gonna just . . . go inside.” That’s all we heard before footsteps ran from us. I’d apologize to her later.

I didn’t look away from Gabriel. His shoulders sank.

“I’ll go get her.” Gabriel said nothing else as he walked. I was tempted to stop him, but I forced my muscles to stay still.

I didn’t have to do anything. He’d left. Why would I jump in now?

Because it’s him. That’s why.

Would it always be like this? It had been over a decade since we last saw each other. There had to be some part of him that kept the pieces of my heart that I had given away. Why else would I care so much?

Agnes screamed when she saw Gabriel, and I almost stepped in. But instead, I stayed still again.

“You can’t sneak out!” Gabriel yelled.

“I can! You’re not my dad!”

I’d heard from the Facebook group that they’d said that before.

With a shake of my head, I let him handle his own kids. This wasn’t my fight. He wasn’t my man.

And I’d cry about that later.

THE SHOP WAS dead and so was I. After my regularly scheduled crying session, I had to open the store, and when no one came in, I was tempted to close it for the day.

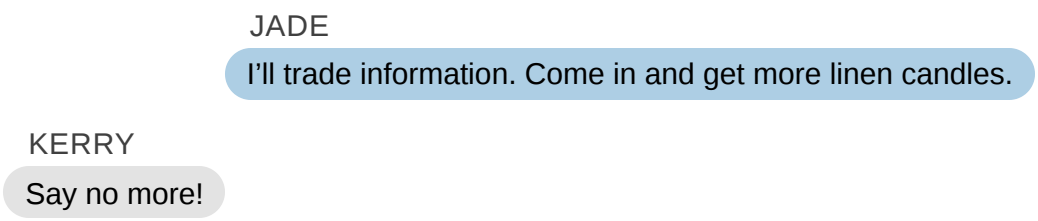
This would be another month I would have to depend on the STM grant. The money was regular, but it was hard to accept without a name attached to it.

Grabbing my phone, I ignored a text from Kerry begging for information about Gabriel and went to my email.

I'd put in my request for assistance. Months ago, it would have been answered immediately. Now, it was taking longer.

But rent was almost due and there was no response.

I bit my lip as I went back to Kerry.



I leaned against the counter and waited. Twenty minutes later, Kerry burst into the shop.

"Hello!" she called. "I'm here for my information."

"You better have something for me," I said. "I used the word 'trade.'"

She crossed her arms. "What do you wanna know?"

"Information on the STM grant."

Her eyes widened for half a second before she recovered. "Really? Well, I have a little. It depends on how good your update is."

"I met with Gabriel both last night and this morning."

Her jaw dropped. "I heard, but I didn't think . . . Are you back together?"

"You first," I urged.

Kerry sighed. "Well, there isn't too much I can tell you."

"Have you heard anything about the grant being slower?"

"I have. It's been really bad recently."

"Fuck," I said. "Are they finally stopping with their support?"

She shook her head. "Marjorie and Henrietta were worried about the library. Their email was never responded to, but the money arrived right on time."

"It did?"

"Yes. They have their usual funding. Now, new stuff? Not so much. Wren is still waiting on something from a week ago."

"Really? She didn't mention it when I saw her last."

"She only started worrying a few days after she sent it. And you've been busy with . . . you know who."

"You can say his name."

"Fine. Gabe."

“Gabriel,” I corrected. “*Gabe* left a long time ago.”

“So you’re still touchy about things.”

I crossed my arms. “Did you really think I’d just get over it?”

“No, but I knew you’d want to.”

She had me there, and she’d given me good information about the STM grant, so it was only fair I kept my end of the deal.

“Maybe, but I won’t. I’m holding out this time.”

“And yet, you saw him.”

“There was an . . . issue with his kid. She snuck out and found her way to my apartment.”

“She snuck out? Good Lord, how old is she?”

“Around five.”

Kerry shook her head. “Boy, those two are something else. He doesn’t have a handle on them.”

“He doesn’t,” I admitted. “But this is one of those things we don’t gossip about. He’s actually struggling.”

“If you were really mad, you’d spread that everywhere.”

“I’m not cruel.”

Kerry raised an eyebrow. “You once threatened to stab a man in the eye with his straw.”

“That was different.”

“Yeah, it’s him.”

My shoulders tensed. I knew I’d be obvious.

“I’ll be nice,” she said. “I know this has to be hard, with him moving on and all.”

“I moved on too.”

“At least there’s not a wedding ring.”

I paused. I’d been too scared to look. “There’s not?”

“Nope. I heard from Mark that there isn’t even a tan line.”

Was he with their mother? Or were they broken up?

I shook myself out of my thoughts. “I don’t care.”

“At least he’s not married. That means there’s some good in this.”

“I don’t think I can handle being positive right now. Let me be angry in peace.”

“Fine,” Kerry said. “But can you see the good in this? I’ll buy all the linen candles *and* the fall ones.”

I blinked. “Really?”

“Yes. I need them for self-care. I’m taking Tommy out of town for swim lessons and I’m *so* busy. A little pick-me-up for my nights would help.”

I knew what she was doing. She was trying to cheer me up. Many people in town did the same thing.

Normally, I’d call them out on it, but this time, I gave in.

“Thank you, Kerry.”

“I can be nice.” She winked. “Maybe I’ll even get a crystal while I’m at it. Why don’t you tell me about them?”

“You’ve never been interested in crystals before.” I narrowed my eyes.

“I’m turning over a new leaf.” She smiled. “Haven’t you been waiting for the chance to educate me about these things? Besides, I’ve been so busy with Tommy that I barely see anyone. I just need some girl time!”

This was once again out of pity. Usually, I would fight harder against these kinds of things. But Gabriel coming back was such a shock that I was willing to take what I usually wouldn’t.

“You have to actually listen.”

“I’ll do my best.”

With a shake of my head, I led her over to the crystal wall and explained what each one meant. She did a good job of nodding along, and I was tempted to believe she actually listened to me.

I talked to her for far too long, but by the time I was done, I felt more like myself and Kerry had way more than she intended to buy.

She took it all to the register with a smile on her face.

I’d just handed over her receipt when the door opened again.

Both of us turned to see Atticus.

“Don’t,” I hissed when Kerry’s eyes lit up.

“I bet he knows more!” she hissed back. “And it’s my gossip time!”

“You got information. Let me talk to him, please.”

“But—”

“You said you were being nice.”

Kerry whined, but slowly went to the door. She only gave Atticus a wave before she walked out. Through the windows, she was trying to look back inside.

“Can I get the vanilla candles?” he asked.

“Oh yeah. I just made more of them. Give me one second.”

I went to the back where my station was. It was a mess of different glass bottles of scents and wax. I had a massive wax heater shoved into a corner,

and the thing was on its last leg, but it worked. On top of that, I had incense and crystals in various boxes, all ready to go on the floor when I had the space.

"This place is a mess," I muttered before finding where I'd put the candles. Maybe when I needed to avoid everyone, I could blast music and get this place cleaned out. I knew I'd want to hide soon.

But for now, I needed to get what Atticus had asked for. I grabbed them and brought them out. "Here you go," I said.

Atticus nodded and walked over to the register. I opened my mouth to start a conversation, but shut it immediately. Was there anything else to talk about other than Gabriel?

He glanced at me and I wondered if he was waiting to see if I would snap at him. When I was young and stupid, I took out my anger over Gabriel leaving on him. After a while, I saw the light and apologized.

"I have something for you," he eventually said. "I hear your neighbors are loud."

I blinked when he pushed a set of noise-canceling headphones across the counter.

"Really?"

"Uh, yeah. Hopefully it helps." Atticus wasn't a man of many words, but I knew he felt bad for what went down between Gabriel and me.

"I'll be all right."

He shrugged. "Still. You need your beauty rest."

With a sigh, I took them. "Thank you, but you really didn't have to." He got his card out and that should've been the end of our conversation. I couldn't help but speak up. "So, how are things?" I asked with a tight smile.

"They're different. I'm sure you know why."

"I bet it's a lot. None of us knew you had grandkids." I wanted it to come out normally. But the bitterness crept in.

Atticus sighed. "Jade—"

"Sorry. I'm not trying to put you in the middle of it. But still. The grandkids? That seems like something we should have known."

"It's a . . . complicated situation."

I knew what that meant. Gabriel didn't want us to know.

He didn't want *me* to know. Not until I had to.

"Do you know why he came back? He said he was out of options."

"Will it change anything?"

“Please tell me.”

Atticus had the backbone of a jellyfish. He gave in with any kind of pushing.

“The kids started a fire, and he’s waiting for his apartment to be repaired.”

“I’m not surprised, that tracks for them.” I shook my head. “So, he’s going back when it’s done?”

“Yeah. He needs a bit to get things more settled with them and help for when they escape.”

“What is he gonna do when he’s alone again?”

Atticus only shrugged. “Hopefully, this is temporary.”

“Were they always like this?”

“I don’t know.”

I frowned. “But they’re your grandkids.”

“It’s complicated in a lot of ways. Ways that are not my story to tell.”

“But—”

“Jade, if you need to know this one, ask Gabriel.”

I huffed. “We both know that’s a bad idea.”

“It is, but this one is personal.”

I almost pushed him again. I knew I could get him to break if I tried hard enough.

But there was something else I needed to ask. I looked at the tip screen —something no one else ever used, and Atticus had added way too much for a tip. That and the gifts moved him higher on the list.

“You know, you always overpay. Are you made of money or something?”

“I have enough. Why?”

“You have enough to rejuvenate the town?”

Atticus immediately laughed. “No. Not that much. Whoever has done all of this has to be loaded.” He shook his head. “You don’t really think it’s me, do you?”

“Not really. But I had to ask.”

“I’m happy to answer. I do hope you find out who it is, though. Everyone owes them one hell of a thank-you.”

“We do.”

He gave me one last smile before walking out the door. I sighed and made a mental note to cross one more person off the list of suspects.

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8

GABRIEL



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Kerry Winsor: Did anyone hear that boom???

Comments:
Atticus Thompson: Gabe’s kids threw a chair out his window.
Kerry Winsor: Very funny. Can I get a real answer?
Kerry Winsor: Wait, why is there a CHAIR on the square?
Atticus Thompson: I just told you.
Kerry Winsor: They’re two tiny little girls! How much chaos could they cause?

“This is a terrible idea,” I muttered to myself.

Agnes was already hanging off the playground equipment across the street. Beatrice was by my side, but her eyes traced every corner of the square, possibly trying to find something else to get into.

I wasn’t sure what possessed me to get out of the house with them today. But confinement in the apartment was driving me and the girls up a wall. Agnes had already called me the spawn of Satan and tried to hit me in the balls.

The library was reopened, and I’d wanted to see it the second I came back into town. It had been shut down for a long time, until Wren renovated

it. I didn’t know what it was like on the inside, just that it was completely redone from top to bottom.

Maybe I should’ve had Atticus watch the girls.

“Come on, Agnes,” I called. “Let’s go in the library!”

“I hate reading!” she yelled.

“There’s . . . uh, other things in there?” I offered.

“I’m gonna jump!” Agnes said, and she launched off the swing. My heart stopped and I was halfway across the street when she landed.

“Fuck,” I muttered.

“Come on!” Beatrice called. “It’s so hot!”

“Fine!” Agnes ran to us, running in front of a car that had to slam on their brakes. I grabbed her and pulled her out of the way.

“Sorry!” I said to the driver. “Agnes, you need to look both ways before crossing.”

“They stopped!”

“Some people don’t pay attention.”

She flipped me off and ran inside the library.

“Son of a—” I stopped myself when Beatrice tugged away and followed.

I definitely should have left them at home.

Chasing after them, I expected one to be climbing on the shelves by now. Instead, I came face-to-face with a woman I hadn’t seen in years.

“Now who did the cat drag in?” Marjorie asked, hands on her hips. Both girls had stopped. Marjorie wasn’t a scary woman, usually, but this time, she had marker all over her face in different flowers.

Henrietta was behind her, laughing as she capped a pen.

“Are you a witch?” Agnes asked.

“Try that word with a B, kid. Then you’ll have it. I’m guessing you’re our temporary kiddos, right?”

“Hi, Marjorie,” I said.

The older woman looked up with a smile. “Gabriel Sinclair, is that you?”

“It is. You look great.”

“I look like my wife got to me while I dozed off in my chair.” She laughed. “Her art obviously shocked the girls into submission. Are they your kids?”

“No!” both of them yelled.

I nodded.

“All right. Well, welcome, not-Sinclair kids. This is the library.” She gestured inside and I followed her arm’s arc.

It was much different in here. Everything was brighter and there was a massive kids’ area that had Agnes and Beatrice already running. I remembered when this place was darker and barely functioning.

“Wow,” I said.

“Not like the last time you were here, huh?”

“Not at all.”

“You know we had a show here, right? And a grant pays for the books now. We have everything you can imagine.”

“Everything?”

“Oh, yes. Whatever’s out there, we have. Check it out. A lot of it is upstairs.”

My feet turned in that direction and I was about to go see it for myself.

I stopped, however. “I can’t. I need to watch Agnes and Beatrice.”

“So responsible. We’ve got it, kid.”

“No, you don’t. They’re a lot.”

“And I can watch them for an hour or so. Hell, Henrietta already went over there. We’ll trade off.”

“I can’t ask that of you. I’m not kidding when I say they will ruin your life.”

“You’re in Strawberry Springs, Gabriel. This isn’t a random place. We’ve got your back. Though, I might teach them a few curse words.”

A warmth filled me, something I hadn’t felt in years. “Thanks. And you can’t teach them anything new. You might actually learn one for once.”

“Ha! They’re my kind of kids. This’ll be fun!”

Marjorie headed in the direction of the kids’ area. I desperately wanted to go see the bookshelves, but I followed just in case they needed me.

Henrietta had a puppet show going. Marjorie snuck behind her and put on a giant comet costume.

They’d be just fine.

I couldn’t help the smile that formed on my face when I turned to go upstairs. That quickly faded when I got to the top and saw all the new books on all the shelves.

Holy shit. This was unreal. This was more than even the city libraries in San Francisco.

I had to swallow before going through all the shelves. True to Marjorie's word, everything was new. I remembered this space as I'd left it. Hot with no AC and barely hanging on.

This was a cornerstone. This was incredible.

I spent way too long wandering through the shelves. I was lost in books and all the change that had happened, so lost, that I ran right into someone as I came out of an aisle.

"Shit, sorry." I caught the person, noticing that they were Jade's height. "I wasn't paying attention."

"Comparing this place to the big city library?"

I blinked, realizing that this *was* Jade.

Again.

"Oh, uh. Hi. I didn't know you'd be here."

"I had a feeling I'd find you somewhere. There's two mini-yous taking over the first floor."

"Please tell me they haven't murdered Marjorie and Henrietta."

"Marjorie and Henrietta are tough. They're having the time of their lives."

I let out a sigh of relief before I looked around again. "This place is nice."

"Even by your standards?"

"Yes. Even by my high standards. Do you come here a lot?"

"All the time. I'm meeting my friends here."

"You have friends—ow!" I clutched my arm. "Did you just punch me?"

"I can have friends."

"I didn't mean it as an insult! It was just you and me for a while," I said. Jade frowned and I knew I had to correct myself. "I'm happy for you. It's good to have friends."

"So you *can* say something nice."

"Do you want me to be nice?"

One corner of Jade's mouth lifted, and I was *so* sure she would say yes. That we would have something similar to how we used to be.

"Jade!" someone called. "You coming?"

Both of us turned to see Grace come around a corner. Her gaze met mine and she paused.

"Hi, Gabriel."

Grace and I had never been close, but we knew each other. She'd always been kind, but my focus had always been on Jade.

There were no hard feelings on my part, but I wasn't sure if the same went for her.

"Grace," I said with a nod. "You look well."

"I'm doing pretty good. I hear the same doesn't go for you." I think she was intending to make casual conversation, but her words were laced with a bitterness that I expected.

I was about to agree with her when the last person I expected stepped in.

"Grace, stop. Don't be bitter with him because of me."

My eyes widened and I turned to Jade.

"What are you doing?" I asked. "She can hate me if she wants to."

Jade rolled her eyes. "You have to be the only person in the world who would complain that I just stuck up for you."

"I'm telling you, you don't have to."

"And I'm telling you, I don't do what I'm told."

"Wow," Grace interrupted. "Seems like nothing has changed. It was always weird being in the middle of your banter. At least I'm not single this time. It hurts less."

"That's right. You have a kid now, don't you?"

"Yes." Grace's brow furrowed. "How did you know that?"

Jade replied, "He says he's keeping loose tabs through Atticus. I feel like he's lying."

"Anyway," I said with a shake of my head. "I'm happy for you. Who are you seeing?"

"A guy named Dean. He's from a small town too, actually. He hated them for a while, but he saw the good in them eventually."

Dean's name sounded familiar in a way I couldn't place. I slowly nodded along, wondering when I would run into him. "I'll make sure to say hello and congratulate him when I see him."

Grace nodded. "You may be a little rusty at small-town life, but you do know what you're doing. He'd appreciate that." She looked at Jade. "We should get to our room, though."

For a split second, Jade looked over at me and I wondered if she would delay going to hang out with her other friends.

"Have fun," I said. "I have kids to wrangle."

"Good luck. You're gonna need it, considering what I've heard."

“Use the noise-canceling headphones you just got.”

I went to turn, but she grabbed my arm. “How did you know I just got noise-canceling headphones?”

“Uh . . . Atticus told me?”

“Is that a question, or are you telling me?”

“T-telling. I really gotta go. Bye!” I didn’t turn around and look at Jade, no matter how much I wanted to.

I swore I felt her eyes on me the entire time.

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9

JADE



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Kerry Winsor: @Hu Gh Did I just see you with a bunch of chicks???

Comments:
Wren Hackett: Like women or the birds?
Kerry Winsor: I can't believe I even have to clarify. Birds. They're birds!
Wren Hackett: Hey, with what Hugh's got, it's a possibility.
Atticus Thompson: Chickens are a big responsibility. Let me know if you need help.
Mollie Wilson: Cain knows a lot!
Marjorie Brown: I would pay to see Hugh trying to befriend chickens.
Hu Gh: I REFUSE TO LIVE UNDER PERCEPTION. TAKE THIS POST DOWN.

"DON'T START," I told Grace when I walked up to her.

"I won't start it," she said. "But I can't promise the others won't say anything."

"Oh, God. Is it too late to cancel?" I asked. She grabbed my arm and dragged me behind her. My cheeks were hot when she finally got me into the meeting room. The other women were at a table, all facing me. I laughed awkwardly. "W-why does this feel like an intervention?"

“Sit down,” Wren said.

“This *is* an intervention,” Mollie added.

Fuck. I was in so much trouble.

“I want to start this by saying I never intended for any of this to happen.”

“Yeah, they all say that.” Wren crossed her arms. “Sit.”

I finally did what I was told.

Wren opened her mouth and I had a feeling she was going to lecture me, but Piper held up a hand.

“Jade. Why don’t you tell us what’s happening?”

“We know what’s—” Wren started to hiss.

“We don’t know how she’s seeing it,” Piper reminded.

“She’s right,” Grace added. “Jade, tell us everything.”

“Oh, boy. Where do I even begin?”

“You’re stalling.” Wren said it with a flat voice.

“I am. Okay, from the top.” I took a deep breath and started from the beginning. I told them how angry I was, how I knew he was going to leave, and how his daughter came to my apartment.

They all listened intently.

Grace spoke first. “So, why were you defending him a minute ago?”

“What?” Mollie asked.

“She was defending him?” Wren asked.

Even Piper looked at me with wide eyes.

“Dammit, Grace,” I muttered.

“You were!” she said.

“I know, I know! I . . . shouldn’t want to talk to him at all.”

“But you do,” she urged.

“Yes! And I know it’s stupid.”

“From what we’ve heard about him, he’s an ass,” Wren said. “He left and didn’t look back.”

“He was also her friend since they were kids,” Grace added.

“It’s almost like he’s that now,” Mollie said. “When you were at my place, he was freaked out about his kid, but he talked to you so easily, even though he barely said hi to me.”

“He’s quiet.”

“Not with you, he’s not.”

I blushed. Even now, knowing how he was with me affected me.

“Do you know if he’s with the kids’ mom?” Piper asked.

And that brought me right out of it. “No idea. I kind of want to throw up when I think about it, though. Even if it’s not fair. I tried to move on. It’s fair that he did too.”

“But starting a family with someone . . . He was serious.”

I sighed. “Thanks for the reminder.”

“Jade.” Mollie spoke softly and grabbed my hand. “There’s a lot of history here, but we need to look at the facts.”

“One, he left,” Wren said.

“And he’s leaving again,” I added.

“Exactly,” Mollie replied. “And two, he has kids. There’s a lot that comes with that. If anything happens, it’s not just the two of you. That can be serious.”

“And if he’s leaving,” Piper continued, “there isn’t time for anything serious.”

“I know,” I admitted. “I’m telling myself this all the time. But I . . . I miss him. A lot. More than I should. Sometimes I give in. You all can judge me if you want.”

“We’re not judging you,” Grace said. “We’re worried about you.”

“I’ll be okay. I promise.” I gave them all a tight smile.

I had a feeling none of them believed me.

Silence continued for far too long and I knew I had to change the subject. I hated talking about myself this much.

“Hey, have any of you heard from the grant at all?” I asked. “Wren?”

“Did someone tell you I was waiting?”

“Yes. Did they approve your proposal yet?”

“No.” She blew out a breath. “No approval yet.”

“Mollie?”

“I don’t use it, but Jackie was worried. They did pay her for her monthly rent.”

“That’s what I heard from Kerry. It’s slower.”

“Maybe they’re running out of money,” Grace said. “They’re not taking anything new on.”

“They sent Marjorie and Henrietta on that cruise,” Piper said. “But things have been quieter for a while. They could be slowing it down.”

“That would be terrible,” I said. “But it makes sense. This is why I want to find out who’s behind it.”

“Wow, today is a bummer.” Wren sighed. “We need a pick-me-up.”

“There haven’t been any fun activities,” Mollie said with a sigh. “We could play Uno.”

“Did you bring the deck?” Grace asked.

“No.”

“Oh! Tammy has it! Can we go get food and hate each other?”

“I love you guys,” I said with a smile. “Until you plus-four me. Then we’ll have issues.”

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10

GABRIEL



Dad Company (But Sometimes Good Advice)
Howard Young: This is the year my kids are starting kindergarten. What all should they be able to do? I'm worried about mine struggling with full sentences.

Comments:
Robert Colt: In general, they don't have to be speaking in long or complex sentences, but they do need to be able to communicate needs. They grow a lot in that first year, so even if they're a little bit behind, they might catch up.
Howard Young: Good. I was worried we might need to see a speech therapist.
G Singh: Full sentences? Is it not normal to have debates with a five-year-old?
Howard Young: Debates? They argue coherently already???
Robert Colt: Don't worry about G. His kids are NOT normal and are causing him to go gray.

OVER THE NEXT TWO WEEKS, Jade made it an art form to avoid me, and I let her.

I was busy with the girls anyway.

It had been yet another tough night. Beatrice was silent, and Agnes fought with me on everything. After weeks of this, I wasn't sure if it would ever end.

When Alice was alive, she would always tell me how tired she was, even if she got eight hours of sleep. I never fully understood what she meant until now.

This was bone deep. It was emotional in a way I wasn't used to. I worked hard and tried my best at everything I did.

But this time, I felt like I was failing at something far more important than a video game. I was failing two *people*.

My life was on hold, and I didn't know how to restart it. When I wasn't with them, I worried about them. And when I was with them, I was messing everything up.

Every chore felt far more difficult than the last, and even something as simple as going to the store was a mess.

Storms rolled in, and the weather finally matched my mood.

The sun had set a long time ago and rain came down heavily. There were rumbles in the distance that had brought me to the window of the apartment, and I knew I needed to get to bed.

My dreams wouldn't be pleasant if I did, though.

I was content to watch people come and go. Hugh left the bar with his black umbrella that was older than I was. Shortly after, Atticus followed.

I wondered what they talked about in there. The taste of conversation I'd gotten since returning made me want more. Over the last two weeks, I hadn't had time to talk to anyone, and there were plenty of people that I'd grown up with that I hadn't said hello to.

The urge to join was tempting.

I stayed still.

Then the bar door opened one more time. The fairy lights illuminated everything just enough so I could see purple hair.

Jade used her hands to try and block the rain, but it was useless.

The best thing to do would be to stay here. She told me to stay away from her, and I tried my best to listen.

But it was pouring, and the late summer rain was unusually cold. It had to be miserable being out there.

I grabbed my own umbrella and ran over anyway.

Jade blinked when the rain stopped and she looked over at me. It wasn't big enough for the two of us, so I was getting pelted.

I didn't care.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Here, take this."

"Were you out? Where are Agnes and Beatrice?"

"Asleep," I said. "And no. I just saw you."

She scoffs. "So you ran over?"

"Yes."

For a second, her cheeks darkened. I wondered if I'd be lucky enough for her to take advantage of me. She could get whatever she wanted out of me, and I'd let her have it.

"Why?"

"You needed something." I shrugged. "I can't sit still if you need something."

Her eyebrows knitted and she looked at her feet for a long time.

When she finally looked back up, she went right for my heart.

"I needed *you*. Many times. You always stayed away then."

Her words hit their mark, and I let out a stuttering breath of air. I felt like I'd been punched.

Silence stretched out between us, broken only by the rumbles of thunder.

"Yeah, that's what I thought." Her voice was soft. I expected her to be mad at me. In fact, I think I preferred it.

Time had done a number on both of us, and I didn't know if we could fix this.

"I know how to function on my own." She stood up straighter. "I don't need you to solve my problems for me."

She didn't give me a second look as she turned and stepped back into the rain.

I was left staring after her, holding an umbrella for a woman who'd moved on.

I didn't drop it for a long time.

KNEES DIGGING into my ribs jolted me out of sleep.

"Ow, what the—"

Above me, brown eyes stared down. Beatrice's hair was a mess, and it looked like she'd just woken up.

A glance at my phone told me it was early.

"Hi," I said as I slowly moved her off me. "Good morning."

"Food. *Food.*"

"You're a child of many words this early." I sat up and rubbed my eyes. Beatrice huffed and jumped on me again. "All right, all right. I'm getting up."

As I ran a hand through my hair, I knew I also looked like a mess, and I'd have to deal with that later. Atticus had recently gone by Food 'n' Things, which meant I had eggs to make for the girls.

For a moment, I remembered when Mom would make eggs. They'd be spicier than Atticus could tolerate, but I loved them. I wondered if Agnes and Beatrice would like them too.

"Hungry!" Beatrice yelled.

"Sorry. I'm starting now."

It was better not to rock the boat. I was on thin ice anyway.

I started cooking, thinking of the recipe Alice had left scribbled down on paper. It had burned up with the kitchen, but I'd memorized it.

Beatrice was bouncing on her feet when I gave her the bowl of eggs.

Agnes had obviously been woken up by the smell, and her nose drew her to the kitchen.

My heart skipped a beat, and I waited for her to do something. Over time, I'd been trying my best to gain some kind of favor.

So far, I'd failed.

And I knew I had again when she scowled.

"Ew. Don't you have real food?"

"This is real food."

Agnes flipped me off.

"Where did you even learn to do that?" I asked.

"I'm going out."

"You can't go by yourself, you—"

The door slammed on me. I looked at Beatrice, who was eating happily. I tumbled out into the hallway after Agnes.

Jade’s door opened and shut. I almost reached for the knob, but pulled away as if it were on fire. I stared for a long time before Beatrice found me.

“Gabriel! I want more.”

“Shit,” I muttered under my breath. I followed her, torn between going back and getting Agnes and staying away from Jade like I promised.

After last night, I wasn’t sure which she would want.

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11

JADE



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Kerry Winsor: How has it been two weeks and I've STILL not said hello to Gabriel!

Comments:
Jackie Anne: If it makes you feel any better, I haven't seen him either.
Kerry Winsor: It doesn't. I'm so busy I'm hardly around, but I want to find him!!!
Atticus Thompson: He's been busy with the girls. I've heard directly from him that he has no hard feelings with any of you. But it'll be a while before he makes his rounds.
Kerry Winsor: I should offer to babysit when I have the time. I bet I could help.
Marjorie Brown: Hen and I barely survived. Those two would eat you ALIVE!

A KNOCK on my door jolted me out of my sleep and I sat up—only to smack my forehead on the bottom of the table.

"Ow, *fuck*." I covered my head and winced for a second before I looked around. Obviously, I'd sleepwalked again.

Gabriel being here was only making it worse.

Maybe I needed to stay with Grace. I'd not told her about it, but she'd help.

The knock only got louder and more desperate, so I got up and worked on moving my couch away from the door. The second everything was clear and I could see who had been knocking, Agnes bolted in and slammed the door behind her.

"I want more cereal," she demanded.

My head was still hurting, so it took me longer than usual to process that. "Have you heard of saying hello?"

She crossed her arms. "Yes, but I'm hungry."

"You can have cereal if you say hi."

Agnes pouted, but when I didn't give up, she gave in.

"Fine. Hi."

It was nowhere near polite, but it was progress.

I went to get a bowl and poured what she wanted. I waited until she was a few bites in before sitting next to her.

"So, any reason you haven't asked your da—I mean, Gabriel for cereal?"

"He only makes eggs."

I remembered that. He used his mom's special recipe, and I would beg him for them.

The memory hit me like a train and I had to shake it away.

Having him back meant I wanted to fall more and more into old patterns. I was so mad at him, but I used to simply show up and yell at him when I was pissed off.

Avoiding him was always harder.

I felt the urge to do it now. He was just next door. It would be so easy to get it all out.

But I refused to.

My friends had drilled it into my brain that I didn't need to get hurt. And I agreed with them. He didn't need any of my energy, especially since he was leaving at any time. Hell, I was sure that he was calling every single day, hoping for his apartment to be fixed.

My energy was better spent somewhere else.

My heart didn't agree. I'd woken up with bruises on my shins multiple times from where I would sleepwalk into the furniture I put in front of the

door. I knew that if I didn't barricade myself into my apartment, I would be in his bed the next morning.

"Hello?" Agnes asked, staring at me with a frown.

I pulled myself out of my thoughts. "That's even better than hi. Try it next time. Or try asking Gabriel for the cereal."

"I don't wanna ask him for anything."

"He has money, doesn't he? Use it."

"He won't spend it on me."

"I think you're wrong."

"No, *you're* wrong." Agnes had been rude to me before, but this was said with such fervor that I blinked.

I shouldn't have stepped in, but I did anyway. "Wow, you really have it out for your dad."

"He's not my dad!" she yelled.

One look at her told me she was Gabriel's, but telling her that wouldn't help.

"Did he . . . do something to you?" I asked.

"No."

"Seems like he did. People don't just hate their parents for no reason."

"I do." That was all she said before she took another bite. I stared, wondering what to say to a girl who had so much anger. It would be hard to get her to open up.

But not as hard for me to take the first step.

"I hated my dad too."

"You're not like me."

"Probably not, but I want to tell you a little about where I came from. Do you want to hear it?"

"No," Agnes said immediately.

Wow, okay. I nodded and kept my mouth shut.

"Actually," she said in a much quieter voice, "yes."

I tried not to perk up, but I felt like I'd won a prize to get this grumpy child to want to know about me. "My dad is a firefighter. He would spend half a week at the station, and someone in town would watch me."

"That sounds fun. No one could tell you not to do something."

"They did tell me that. A lot, actually. More so than my dad. At first, it was annoying. Then I realized they cared. They did more with me than he did."

Agnes blinked. “So being annoying means they care?”

“Sometimes. It was mostly that they tried. That’s what told me they cared.”

Agnes stared at her cereal. “Gabriel is trying.”

She was a smart kid. “Exactly.”

“I still hate him.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s not my dad. Or he wasn’t, until he had to be.”

I blinked. Was that a riddle?

“Did you ever feel like your dad didn’t want you?” she asked.

“I . . . did. Yes.”

“I *know* Gabriel didn’t want us.”

“You know that?” I repeated, my heart heavy in my chest.

“Yes. We’re just a chore for him.” She moved her spoon through her bowl, no longer interested in eating. “He’s not a dad. He’s just a man who’s around. He’s always been like that.”

I didn’t want to admit it. I didn’t want to think it. But her words *finally* matched what I knew about him. He told me he hadn’t wanted kids. He believed he would be a terrible father.

Agnes clearly agreed.

“Don’t feel bad for me. I’ll make him regret it.” She went back to eating, but the blush on her cheeks betrayed her. She was affected by this.

Hell, I would have been too.

As she ate, I did feel bad for her, but I tried not to let it show.

I never wanted someone else to feel like I did. Even though I’d moved on, there was something in me that would always be angry with Dad. The lonely nights and silent dinners added up. Eventually, I went for the people in town that cared. They smiled when they saw me. Dad didn’t.

Gabriel had *seen* how it had hurt me. He’d watched as I begged for Dad’s attention, only to realize I would never get it.

And he was doing the same thing to his daughters.

That hurt turned into something ugly.

There was another knock on the door, and I tried to keep myself calm.

When I saw Gabriel, I nearly lost it.

“Can I have Agnes back?”

“We need to talk,” I hissed, and shoved him out into the hallway.

“You really don’t wanna leave her in your apartment—”

“Stop,” I snapped. “Just stop.”

Gabriel blinked, finally recognizing that I was pissed off. He stared, his breath hitching.

“I’m sorry she bothered you. I’ll keep a better eye on her.”

“You think that’s what I’m mad at?”

“I’ll take her now, so you can—”

“Do you deserve to have her back?”

He blinked. “What?”

“She doesn’t trust you.”

“You think I don’t know that?” His voice was flat. “Trust me, I do. And she doesn’t ever let me forget it.”

“What are you even doing with her?”

“The best I can.”

“Well, your best sucks.”

My words landed and Gabriel finally scowled at me.

Good. I was tired of him sulking.

“Thanks. That’ll fix all of my problems.”

“You’re just accepting it?” I laughed humorlessly. “You’re not even trying to do better. Do you know what Agnes just told me?”

“What? That I’m terrible?”

“That you don’t want them.”

Gabriel pinched his nose. “Goddammit.”

“That’s all you have to say? You’re their father. Be one.”

“I’m trying.”

“Oh, I’ve heard that before.” I crossed my arms.

“I know I’ve said it, but—”

“Not from you. From my dad.”

The comparison hit him square in the chest and he went still. “You think I’m like him?”

“Maybe you are. Clearly, Agnes thinks you are.”

I wondered if he would snap at me. Or worse, yell. His fists were clenched. He was pissed at me.

Maybe a fight was what we both needed.

“I’m taking Agnes,” is what he said instead, and he brushed past me. I turned to follow, only to see him staring at the little girl eating.

“Am I in trouble?” she muttered.

“You never are,” he said softly. “What are you eating?”

“Hopes and dreams.”

“So, Lucky Charms. I’ll get you some.”

“Fuck you.”

“Beatrice misses you.”

That made Agnes look up. Her bottom lip poked out and she stormed out of the apartment.

Gabriel didn’t look at me as he left.

When I was alone, I let out a sigh and pressed my palm against my forehead. I’d felt so bad for Agnes that I punched my way into a situation I had no standing in, and it only seemed to make it worse.

In the old days, I would hold onto my anger. I’d refuse to feel bad. Were there similarities between Gabriel and Dad? From my perspective, yes.

But I was old enough now to know my perspective wasn’t everything.

Which meant I owed Gabriel an apology.

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12

GABRIEL



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Jackie Anne: @Wren Hackett When are you working on that old shack right outside of the square? I'm worried it's going to fall any day now!

Comments:
Wren Hackett: I want to, but I still haven't gotten the funding approval yet.
Jackie Anne: Still??? What's going on? They've never been late before!
Tammy Jane: Bet it finally ran out of money . . .

GABRIEL

I'm really struggling with the girls. I need help.

AFTER I SENT the message to Atticus, I regretted it. Was I about to lose my mind? Yes. Was I near either crying or yelling? Also yes.

Asking for help still seemed like a failure.

Atticus sent his usual thumbs-up, and I paced. Agnes and Beatrice had pulled the cushions from the couch and made a pillow fort. For once, they were talking with me, not fighting.

It took us four arguments to get here.

"Stop making noises," Agnes said. "You're disturbing our meeting."

“I was—” I stopped myself. “Sorry. Do you two remember Atticus?”

“Are you leaving us with him?” Agnes asked.

“M-maybe. If you want me to, I can—”

She shook her head. “He was cool.”

And then she was gone and back to whispering with Beatrice.

At least they liked someone.

My door opened a few minutes later, and my stepfather walked in. “You good?”

“Do I look good?”

“You look . . . Well, I’m here. I’ll watch them.”

I opened my mouth to ask what I should do, but then closed it. Would he answer? He’d never been like that before with me.

“I can be back in an hour.”

“Take longer than that,” he said with a shake of his head. “I’ll stay until morning.”

“Do you really think I need to be gone that long?”

“Yeah, I do.” He eyed me in the same way he had after Jade told me to never come back.

Then he went to join the girls.

Goddammit. I needed advice. I needed a hug. I needed to get out of here before I said something I would regret. It was enough that Atticus had even come.

With only a nod, I walked out of the apartment and down to the street. The swirl of negativity meant I didn’t notice anything other than my destination.

Mark’s eyes went wide when I walked into the bar.

“Rough day?” he asked.

“Rough month,” I murmured.

“Still not drinking?”

“No. This time I am. Can I take a table in the corner?”

“Uh, yeah. Sure. What do you want?”

“Whatever is the strongest.”

I WAS four drinks deep when a shadow crossed over my table. I was halfway out of it, and I realized I must've fallen asleep when I saw purple hair.

"So, you've gotten into my dreams again," I said.

"That's a weird way to say hello."

There was something so *real* about the way she said it. If I were sober, I'd think harder about it. But I'd come here with the sole purpose of not thinking at all, so I only took in the vision that was Dream Jade.

She leaned down to give me a better view.

"Wow, you are really sloshed."

"The word is *drunk*."

"Hm." She reached in front of me and took my glass. "Maybe I should cut you off."

"No, don't." I'd beg if I had to. "I'm finally feeling okay."

"That's concerning." She carefully studied the glass of whiskey in her hand. "Did I do this to you?"

"No. I did this to myself."

"You're here," another voice said. It took me far too long to realize it was Mark. "Thanks for coming to get him."

"I was looking for him anyway, though I doubt he'll remember this tomorrow."

"Did you two fight?"

"Yeah. I owe him an apology."

I laughed. "You never do that."

"You haven't been here in a long time. I do apologize now, but I'll wait for you to be sober." She handed the glass to Mark, who shuffled to the back. She grabbed my arm and put it around her shoulder. "Up you go."

"I need to pay," I said as I was dragged to my feet.

"I'll take care of it."

"I pay for myself."

"Yeah, I'm sure you do."

"Seriously. You should see all that I pay for."

"Yeah, yeah. Come on."

Jade helped me out of the bar, and my sluggish mind wondered why she felt so real. Why she was here when I'd obviously failed so miserably.

I needed to ask. I needed to separate dreams from reality.

But I was so tired.

When we got to the back of the building, I saw the stairs to my unit. I needed to be in my own bed, but I leaned heavier on Dream Jade.

“Gabriel,” she said. “You need rest.”

“I don’t wanna go back.”

“Don’t want to see your kids?” she asked.

“I’m sure you think that,” I muttered. “I don’t want to see them hate me.”

“Well, then you should’ve—no. Never mind.”

“Yell at me again. I deserve it.” My head fell onto her shoulder, and I got to take her in. I could accept her anger if I got this too.

“That would be kicking someone when they’re down. And you’re really down. And heavy.”

“You can say it. I’m a failure. I know it.” I sighed. “I wish I had someone to tell me what to do. Someone to be there for me. How can I be there for the girls when I never got that? I’m trying, but I’m bad at this.”

“Why did you have kids then?” she asked. “You always said you wouldn’t.”

The words hung thick in the air. This might be a dream, but getting the truth out would feel good.

“I wasn’t supposed to. It wasn’t supposed to be like this.”

“This is what I get for asking this when you’re drunk. Only you could be cryptic when wasted.”

“Jade, it wasn’t supposed to be me.” I repeated it uselessly.

“You said that already.” She rolled her eyes. “Repeating it doesn’t make me understand.”

“I know,” I muttered. “Some days, I don’t understand either.”

“So, they were a surprise?”

“No, they were Alice’s.”

She flinched. “And now I’m hearing about your ex. God, what am I doing?”

“Alice isn’t my ex.”

“Please don’t tell me you’re still with her. That would make this far worse.”

“No!” I nearly yelled it, but I needed her to understand. “I never dated Alice.”

“What?” She huffed. “Yet, you had kids with her? What, was it a one-night stand gone wrong?”

“No.”

“Then something doesn’t add up. Gabriel, they’re your kids. Anyone can see it.”

“They were Alice’s. Not mine.”

“They look exactly like you.”

“Yes, they’re mine biologically, but I was never supposed to be their dad.”

“What does that *mean*—”

“I was just the sperm donor. Literally. She was my assistant—no, friend—and I helped her out.”

Dream Jade used a hand to pull me off her shoulder. Our eyes met and she watched me closely.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Alice wanted kids by herself. She tried to go through a clinic, but couldn’t find someone good enough. Then she asked me. I never . . . They were *hers*.”

“She was raising them alone?”

“And I was her friend. A visitor, even. We had an agreement that they would never be mine because I knew I wasn’t cut out for this.”

Jade opened her mouth and then closed it. Then, her breath hitched. “Wait, what do you mean *was*?”

“She was hit by a drunk driver two and a half months ago. She died on impact.”

Jade’s eyes went wide. “Just like your mom.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s my curse. They went to foster care. I got them out.” My head fell back onto her shoulder. “I think I was the worse option.”

“I . . . You . . . Did they know who you were?”

“Not until I showed up. They still don’t believe me. And I’m just making it worse.”

She went quiet. I still felt her, but there were no more words.

Was my dream ending? Would reality hit soon?

I took her in for one more minute. I let myself pretend she was really here. Then I took a shaky breath and stood up straighter.

“Thank you for listening, Dream Jade.”

“You think this is a dream?”

“I ruined things in real life. You’d never come for me. In dreams, though? I always see you there.” I gave her a half smile before stumbling up

the stairs. I nearly fell through the door.

"You're back," Atticus said.

"I'm drunk."

"I can see that." He stood.

"The kids?" I asked.

"Asleep. Agnes wasn't too bad tonight. They did try to bring a live frog in, though." I laughed. I couldn't help it. "Go lie down. I'll bring you some water."

I stubbed my toe five times before making it to bed. When I finally did, I swore I still smelled Jade on me.

Hopefully, when I dozed off again, I would see her and we'd be able to finish our conversation.

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13

JADE



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Mark Bell: I saw that Gabriel left the bar pretty drunk . . . Can someone tell me if he got home okay?

Comments:
Kelsey Marie: Sentences I never thought I'd read for $200, Alex.
Hu Gh: Who's Alex? Did we have someone new move in?
Kelsey Marie: Oh, Hugh. Never change. Also, where's Jade? Wouldn't she be all over this?
Grace Day: Oh, I bet she is . . . and that's why she's not in the group yelling at all of us for mentioning him.

JADE

Do you all love me?

PIPER

Are you about to show us an ugly man from a dating app?

JADE

No . . . it's to do with Gabriel.

WREN

NO.

MOLLIE

Is this because you picked him up from the bar???

JADE

I'm not getting with him or anything! I'm just helping with his kids. Not sleeping with him! I wanted you all to know before you saw it through someone else.

My phone continued to buzz, but I put it away with a sigh. They weren't going to like this, but there was nothing that would stop me.

Raising a hand, I knocked on Gabriel's door.

There was no way he was awake, but there was also no way he'd left the girls alone. Atticus's car was still parked outside.

The same man opened the door.

"Jade, hi."

"I'm here to take over," I said. "You have to open the vet clinic in an hour."

"I do, but I was going to close it today."

"No need. I've got it."

"Don't you need to open your own shop?"

"My shop is way slower than your clinic. I'll just call this a much-needed day off."

Atticus narrowed his eyes. "Do I even wanna know why you're doing this?"

"Probably not, but I do know more now. And why you didn't tell us you were a grandfather."

"He told you?"

"While drunk, but yes." I crossed my arms. "You could've warned me."

"I didn't want to get involved. Plus, the girls don't need to be any more confused. It's been . . . a process."

"Did he not consider keeping who he is a secret?"

"I don't know."

"Atticus . . ."

"Jade, I'm not his dad. He doesn't want that from me."

There was a part of me that always wondered if that were true. But Atticus was just as stubborn as Gabriel. It was clear he cared about his

stepson deeply, but he was wary about overstepping.

"I still owe him an apology," I said. "Part of which I'll deliver today. Go get to work. Seriously."

Atticus's mouth tightened as he considered it. "Fine. Thank you."

I stepped inside while he gathered his things. The apartment was a mess, but I could see where he was working on picking it up. Everything was silent, which meant no one was awake.

I'd barely slept. I was too busy trying and failing to accept what Gabriel had drunkenly told me.

It changed everything.

The way he seemed so resigned made sense. He knew he was out of his element, but he was trying.

He just needed help.

One of the doors opened, and I watched a tiny figure with dark hair walking out. When she saw me, she stopped.

At first glance, I thought it was Agnes, but her cheeks were slightly rounder, her hair a touch wavier too.

"Hi," I said.

"Stranger," she said. "Are you here to kidnap me?"

"No. Your sister knows me. I'm Jade from next door."

Beatrice. Her name was Beatrice.

She tried to give me the same glare Agnes would, but she was far too cute for it. I made myself keep a straight face.

"How is your hair like that?" she asked.

"I dye it."

"You kill your hair?"

"In a way, yes. A lot of work goes into this."

"You look weird."

"I *am* weird."

Another figure came around the corner. She was carrying a blanket, but I knew this twin.

"Hi, Agnes."

Agnes blinked. "Did you break in? Where's the other guy?"

"Atticus just left. I took over."

Beatrice grabbed her sister's shoulder to get her attention. "Do you think she'll call the police?"

"I already tried. She's smart."

Beatrice's bottom lip poked out.

"I do have cereal," I offered, showing off the box I'd brought with me. "I have Agnes's favorite."

"Yes!" Agnes said. "I want some."

"What's the magic word?"

"Fuck you."

"Nope. Try again."

Agnes groaned. "Please."

"Thank you."

I went to get a bowl, but paused when I saw Beatrice frowning at me. "What? Do you not like cereal?"

"I want eggs."

Agnes scrunched her nose. "Ew."

"I can make eggs," I offered. "If you want me to."

"Yes."

"Wait," Agnes cut in. "She didn't say the magic word."

"It's my first impression. I'm being nice."

"You weren't nice to me!"

"You broke into my house."

"And?"

Agnes glowered. Behind us, Beatrice laughed. "You're funny."

"Yes. A good impression. Do you know how to say please?"

She nodded. "Please can I have eggs?"

Agnes stuck out her tongue at her sister.

"How do you like them?" I asked as I made Agnes's bowl of cereal.

"The way Mommy makes them."

I paused. She'd said *makes*.

Did she not know her mom was gone?

"Do you know how Mommy makes them?" Beatrice asked.

"Uh, I don't." I swallowed and made myself focus. "Do you?"

She nodded. "Yes. With butter and a secret ingredient."

Agnes rolled her eyes and shoved food in her mouth.

"What's the secret ingredient?" I asked.

"Love," Beatrice said.

"Salt," Agnes corrected.

"Got it. Butter, love, and salt. I can do that."

"Make them fluffy!"

Oh boy. I was terrible in the kitchen, but I'd make do.

Gabriel was great at cooking. He had been even at eighteen. I wondered if they'd tried his food. That would have to be a question for later.

I'd just made somewhat fluffy eggs and set them in front of Beatrice when another door opened. My heart slammed in my chest, but I made myself take a deep breath.

Gabriel was a mess. He was up way earlier than he used to be, plus he'd been drunk the night before. Judging by the way he winced at the light, he was hungover.

"You guys are up? Did Atticus—" He stopped, eyes on me. He froze, clearly not processing that I'd come here. Then he wiped his eyes and looked again. "What the fuck?"

"That would be where they learned curse words." I wiped my sweaty palms on my leggings. "Hi, by the way."

"She made eggs!" Beatrice called. "And look at her hair! She kills herself for it!"

"That's not what I said," I replied. "It's dye. D-y-e. I have someone put it on and it changes color."

"Like magic?" Beatrice asked.

"There are witches in this town?" Agnes asked.

"Kind of," I replied. "I'll show you later."

"What are you doing here?" Gabriel asked.

"I figured I'd give Atticus and you a break. You look like you're about to keel over." I turned to look at the counter, hoping my face wouldn't burst into flames at Gabriel's blatant shock at me being here.

"What are you doing?" His voice was way closer this time, and I nearly jumped out of my skin. Now he was inches away and I was reminded of last night when he held me close. I'd enjoyed it even when confused.

And I was enjoying having him close now.

"I'm being nice."

"I don't deserve that."

"You need help," I said. "Consider this my version of running out in the rain with the umbrella."

He stared. "Was . . . was last night real?"

"You seriously thought it was a dream? Jesus, man. You shouldn't drink."

Gabriel grabbed my arm. “Please don’t tell them. They’re confused enough as it is.”

“And they’ve heard you say you didn’t want kids. So, yeah. Lock in.”

“They *what*?” He went slack jawed. “But I didn’t . . . I never said that in front of them.”

“They heard it anyway. That’s why I was so mad.”

His eyes shut and he nearly buckled under the weight of the words. “I don’t know what to *do*.”

“Rest. I’ve got them today.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes, seriously. And I won’t take no for an answer.”

“Why are you doing this?” he asked softly.

I had to take a moment to consider it. “You need a break where you’re not drunk. Then you can figure out what to do.”

He raised an eyebrow. “So, you’re being nice?”

“And I have a feeling I can watch them better than you can. So let me prove myself right.”

THE ISSUE with giving Gabriel time to figure out what to do is that *I* had to figure out what to do with the kids. I figured my friends wouldn’t want to see me, so I took them to the park for a while.

Little did I know, they were planning on finding me.

I should have seen it coming when I saw Mollie’s adopted oldest son, Eric, join the two girls on the playground. But Mollie usually was on the farm.

Then I was grabbed and tugged against a tall body.

“Have you lost your mind?”

“What the—Wren?” I tried to get away, but she was ridiculously strong. “What are you doing?”

“This is an intervention you can’t run from.” Mollie stepped in front of me, arms crossed. “Don’t worry. Cain and Henry are watching all the kids.”

“You should worry about Cain and Henry,” I said before trying to get out of Wren’s hold again. “Goddamn, how does Henry hold you down?”

“He’s way stronger than he looks. And so am I. What are you doing, Jade?”

I stopped and huffed out a breath. Then I turned my head and licked Wren’s neck.

“Whoa!” She let me go and wiped at where I’d gotten her. “Did you lick me or bite me?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” I straightened my shirt. “I *will* play dirty. Do you want Henry to see?”

“You’re evil,” she said with a shake of her head.

“You ambushed me.”

“Hey!” Mollie said as she pushed in between us. “We’re here for a reason.”

“Yes, I know. An intervention.” I sighed and crossed my arms. “Where are Piper and Grace?”

“Grace is at work and Piper was worried a fight would break out.”

“For good reason,” Wren muttered. “Why was your lick so *wet*?”

“I’m just wasted lesbian potential.”

“Jade, don’t change the subject. We’re all worried, even if we’re not all here.”

“I know,” I said. “And I promise I’m not being an idiot.” Both women raised an eyebrow at me. “That much of one,” I clarified. “But I know more now. I can’t do nothing.”

“What could you possibly know?” Wren asked. “He’s a bad dad and he left you.”

“I won’t argue with the second one, but the first . . .” I sighed. “Sit down. I’ll tell you everything.”

We all sat on the ground. I checked on Agnes and Beatrice, only to find them chasing Cain with a stick. For the first time ever, he looked scared.

Jasmine, Mollie’s daughter, was hurriedly hunting for a stick to join in with.

“Uh, do you wanna step in?”

Mollie frowned and turned around. “Nah. A little fear will do him good.”

“I’m gonna guess Henry is about to follow and tell them to be careful.” Wren turned too.

Henry did exactly that.

“They’re fine. Probably. If they get injured, it builds character.” Mollie was unconcerned. I shrugged and turned back to them. “Plus, Henry’s a doctor. He can handle it.”

“All right then.”

“Are you finally gonna tell us everything?”

“He’s a sperm donor.”

Both of them only stared. “Huh?” Mollie asked.

“He wasn’t supposed to be their dad. A friend wanted kids alone. He helped.”

“So, an actual sperm donor?”

“Then how does he have custody?” Wren asked.

“The mom died. I don’t know many details, but the girls only know him as their mom’s friend. That’s why they’re so resistant to him.”

“But not as bad with other people,” Mollie finished. “Oh, *shit*.”

“I know that I could walk away and not do anything. I don’t have to help, but we were friends for a long time before he left. He’s exhausted and he’s lost. Plus, they like me.”

“Still,” Wren said.

“No, I get it,” Mollie added. “I’m guessing you’re still angry with him about leaving, but you feel bad for the rest of it.”

“Exactly,” I said. “He had to be desperate to come back here. Now I see why.”

Mollie and Wren looked at each other. I waited to receive whatever judgment they agreed on.

“This is a terrible idea, but I see your point.” Wren crossed her arms. “Do you even like kids?”

“I do. I’ve always wanted them.”

She opened her mouth, likely to ask if I was sure about that. Many people doubted how much I wanted kids, Gabriel included.

She didn’t get a chance to.

Out of my peripheral vision, I saw that the two girls had split off. Agnes was playing with Jasmine, but Beatrice was quietly walking toward something.

“Beatrice!” I said as I got to my feet. “Don’t you dare get into that tree.”

I didn’t even need to turn and look at her to know what she was doing.

“I like being tall!”

“Then get over here.” I turned back to my friends. “I hate to cut this short, but I have a child to distract.”

Beatrice huffed when she saw me. “What?”

I hauled her up and put her on my shoulders. She was heavy as fuck, but I’d deal.

She gasped. “I’m so tall!”

“Wanna go scare townspeople?”

“Yes!” she said. “Let’s scare everyone.”

“Oh, she’s got the instinct,” I heard Mollie say as I ran off.

“And she’s *way* too similar to them. Should we be worried?”

I was too far away to hear them. As I popped our faces into different windows, all I could hear was Beatrice’s cackles. Eventually, Agnes found us, demanding a turn as well. I alternated which girl was on my shoulders, slowly but surely ruining everyone else’s lives.

It was one of the best days I’d had in a while.

After about half an hour of messing with people, the girls were ready to go back and play on the playground. Mollie was still waiting with Wren, and I knew they’d been watching us the entire time.

“Wow, you entertained them,” Wren said.

“She did it with Agnes at the farm,” Mollie added.

I fell back onto the ground, rubbing my sore shoulders. “I probably pulled something for doing that, but at least I got back at Dale from making that rude comment in the Facebook group last month.” I eyed them both. “Now do you believe I like kids?”

“It’s not that we doubted you. You just never talked about them.”

“For the longest time, I thought it wouldn’t be an option.” My gaze landed on the girls playing. “My revolving door of terrible men squashed that dream pretty solidly. And I don’t want to talk about something I’m not sure is going to happen.”

“Did you always picture them with Gabriel?” Mollie asked.

“It’s way too early in the morning for a question like that.”

“Come on, at least help us understand.”

I sighed and knew I couldn’t lie to them. “Of course I did. But right before he left, he told me he never wanted kids.”

“He did? I bet you were pissed when you saw him with two.”

“I was, but I was also curious. I wanted to help with them, even when I was angry.”

“So knowing the past feels like you can give yourself permission,” Mollie said.

“Yeah. Even if the logic isn’t sound, I’m having fun.”

“You don’t have to do this, you know,” Wren said.

“I know. I want to.” I leaned forward. “I know I’m not their mother or anything, so I don’t need a lecture on that. I just want to help.”

“You’re kinder than he deserves,” Mollie said.

“Do you think he’ll take advantage of you?” Wren added.

I shook my head. “No, you guys should have seen his face this morning. He was so shocked to see me there. I have no doubt he’ll do something in return.”

“Tell us what it is. If he does start taking advantage of you, we’re stepping in.”

Gabriel wouldn’t, but I nodded anyway. This felt so different than last time, when it was just him and me. I had other friends backing me up now, and they could tell me if I was doing something even dumber than I already was.

“You guys are the best,” I said.

“We know. Reward us with siccing the girls on my enemies,” Mollie said.

“Mine too. I have a few people on my list that need the fear of God put into them. If anyone can do it, those twins can.”

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14

GABRIEL



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Tammy Jane: Whoever just blew up the diner's bathroom . . . you need Jesus.

Comments:
Kerry Winsor: It was blown up?!?! How did I not hear about this???
Jade Clark: Not that kind of explosion . . . It's more like taking the Browns to the Super Bowl.
Kerry Winsor: You watch football?
Jade Clark: Someone had a big poop. There. I said it.
Kerry Winsor: Jade!!! Have some class!!!
Grace Day: I'm sorry, okay? I'll never eat cheese again . . .

I MANAGED to get through all my emails throughout the day. Things felt odd with my apartment being so quiet, but I knew that Jade and the girls were just at the playground. If I needed to check in on them, I could look out the window.

So far, I'd seen them chase people around town. At one point, Jade was taking turns with them on her shoulders, scaring random people.

She'd been so right. She was far better at watching them than I was.

As much as I didn’t want to admit it, I needed this time away from them. My mind had been a mess and being hungover didn’t help. After food, ibuprofen, and quiet time, I felt much better.

I had no idea how long Jade’s kindness would last, but I did want to thank her.

It had been far too long since I cooked for an adult and not two picky kids. Even with one day off, I felt like I could conquer the world.

I was stirring a pot when the door opened. She and the girls walked in right on time.

“I was just about to come find you,” I said.

“What’s that smell?” Beatrice asked.

“It’s dinner for Jade and me. If you don’t want any, I have rice.”

“I want rice!” Beatrice said.

“It kind of smells . . .” Agnes lifted her nose and I waited for an insult. “Good.”

Good. She’d said it was good?

Hell had really frozen over.

My eyes finally moved to Jade, who was standing still in the entryway.

“Jade?” I asked. “Do you wanna stay for dinner?”

“You’re cooking?” she asked. “It’s been forever since I . . . I shouldn’t.”

I opened my mouth to suggest she take some with her, but Agnes beat me to it.

“Stay!” She ran to Jade and grabbed her hand. “Please?”

Jade looked down with wide eyes. “Did you just say please without me having to ask you to?”

“I really want you to stay.”

“Well . . .” Jade’s voice was low. “Who could say no to that?”

I was definitely giving Agnes ice cream tonight.

“What did you make?” Agnes asked, walking up to the stove.

“It’s simmering, so be careful.” I put a hand in front of her. “It’s butter chicken.”

“That doesn’t smell like butter and chicken.”

“It’s a recipe from India. My mom used to make it. Butter is in it, though.”

“Dale had everything you needed to make it?” Jade asked.

“You know there’s nowhere better to go in Strawberry Springs.”

“At least you won’t get in trouble.” Jade walked to the table and sat. I had to tear my eyes away from her. It felt like she belonged here. I knew I wouldn’t want her to leave if I let myself think that way.

“It’s ready,” I said. True to my word, I gave Beatrice rice and gave Agnes rice with the curry on top. I made Jade’s bowl, making sure to give her extra.

We all sat around the table. Agnes eyed the curry with a wary expression.

“Is it gonna be bad?” Agnes asked.

“I’ll try it first,” Jade offered.

Agnes nodded.

Jade got a spoonful and dipped it in rice. Then her eyes went wide. “Oh, *fuck*. It’s even better than I remember.”

I perked up immediately. “You like it?”

“Unfortunately, yes. You’re still an incredible chef.”

“It stinks,” Beatrice said.

“No, it smells good!” Agnes put some on her spoon. “It’s my turn.” She took a bite. I waited with bated breath. When it hit her tongue, she paused to consider it. Then she took another bite.

Then another.

“You can mix it with the rice,” I said.

“No rice. Just this.” She was shoveling it in now.

I’d never seen her eat like this before.

Beatrice, yes.

But not Agnes.

I couldn’t help but smile. I’d been worried about giving them anything other than what Alice made for them, and Agnes hated everything I offered. This was the first time she enjoyed it.

And it was *my* recipe.

A foot gently tapped mine and I looked up to see Jade gazing at me.

“A break did you good.”

“It did,” I said. “Thank you.”

“You better thank me by letting me take this home.”

“I made extra just for you.”

“Good,” was all Jade managed to say before she continued to dig in. For a moment, the only sounds were *clinks* of silverware on dishes. Everyone

was focused on eating, and I couldn't think of a time where I had handled dinner and it was going well.

Hope made my mouth open.

"So, who all do I need to apologize to after today?" I asked.

"No apologies!" Agnes and Beatrice yelled at the same time.

"The only person who might want one is Dale. Everyone else found it hilarious." Jade leveled me with a firm stare. "Don't apologize, though. Dale deserved it."

"What did he do?" I asked with a laugh.

"He's getting ruder as he gets older," she replied. "A few weeks ago, he implied my hair dye was making me dumb. I've had it out for him ever since."

A familiar feeling of anger filled me. There were many times I wanted to jump in and protect Jade, but I quickly realized she didn't need it.

She watched me closely and I had a feeling she knew what I was trying to hide from her.

"How many times has he apologized?"

A slow smile spread on her face. "About ten. I'll probably let it go someday."

"That's my girl."

Jade's smile fell and I knew she was going to correct me. Thankfully, Beatrice saved me.

"You're so cool," she said. "I wanna be you when I grow up."

"I am very cool," Jade said, but her smile didn't fully return. She was incredible, but I wondered if the years had worn her down like they did me. I wondered if me leaving had anything to do with it.

Guilt made my chest feel heavy. I wanted to tell her that I'd go back and change it all if I could.

But I knew what she would say.

It wouldn't change a damn thing.

INSTEAD OF FIGHTING ME, Agnes and Beatrice seemed exhausted after spending the day with Jade. Bedtime was an easy affair, and that left me time to check my email once more.

Summer was coming to a close, and I had to start thinking about what I was going to do about sending Agnes and Beatrice to school. Alice had had a plan for this. They'd been difficult even for her, so she found a prestigious private school for them to go to. They specialized in rigid routines and pushed a curriculum that was far ahead of any public school, even at that young of an age.

It was a perfect plan, and it was something I'd wanted to follow ever since I got custody of them. Then my apartment went up in flames.

There was no way that I'd be back in San Francisco in time, which meant I needed to start thinking about what all the options were. I could have them start somewhere else, or I could ask the private school to let them join late.

I had an empty email open and tried to figure out what to say. I could either tell them that the girls wouldn't be attending the private school or I could ask for a deferment.

I considered withdrawing them entirely, but then I remembered how excited Alice had been when she got word that they'd been accepted. I remembered emailing them myself when I took them in, ensuring that I would be following Alice's wishes.

There was no way that I was going to go against what she wanted. Not after the way she'd done everything for her daughters. If there was a way to send them to this school, I was going to take it.

With a sigh, I typed up an email asking if the girls could start late. With the way the school operated, I doubted they would accept this.

But I had to try.

Even if I'd just seen how much Strawberry Springs could help.

Even if there was a part of me that wondered how the elementary school had fared over the years. I still knew I couldn't go against a dead person's wishes.

I never had before, and I wouldn't start now.

As I typed the email, however, I was shocked at how difficult it felt asking for this. I didn't want to. I wanted to see just what Strawberry Springs could do if I stayed here long-term, but that was never an option for the girls.

It couldn't be if I were going to do the things that Alice wanted.

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15

JADE



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Wren Hackett: FINALLY! I GOT THE APPROVAL! Old shack, here I come!

Comments:
Mollie Wilson: Whew! Anyone else hear anything?
Tammy Jane: Got a yes on my new tables too! They're back, everyone!
Jackie Anne: I wonder where they went? I hope they're okay. **@Jade Clark** Do you know anything?
Jade Clark: I'm noting all of this down . . . but no. I don't know anything.

GRACE WAS WAITING outside my apartment door when I left Gabriel's place.

"Wow," I said with a laugh. "I've been visited a lot today. I must be popular."

"Is it true? About Gabriel?"

There was no point in denying it, and I had no doubts about how the news had gotten to them. "Wren and Mollie told you."

"They did." She crossed her arms. "I knew I should have joined. Leave it to me to miss massive news like this. So, they're his, but not his?"

"Yep. He was only supposed to be a sperm donor, and he got custody."

"How?"

“Their mom died. I haven’t asked for details, but it explains a lot.”

“Is he okay?” Grace asked.

“Does he *look* okay?”

“People say he doesn’t. He carries a weight he didn’t before. It looked a little better near you, though.”

“Don’t tell me that.”

“I shouldn’t. In fact, I should tell you to stay far away.”

“I feel like if you were in my situation, you’d do the same thing.”

She sighed. “I’m not going to pretend I wouldn’t. I care about people deeply, and that means doing things for them even when it’s not in my best interest. But I’ve been hurt by that before.”

“So have I,” I said. “Which is why I’m just helping. I’m not jumping into anything.”

“I’m not just talking about Gabriel.”

“Then who are you talking about?”

“You like those girls. I know you do.”

I wanted to deny it, but Grace knew me far too well. “A-and?”

“What happens when they leave?”

The words hit me hard. Grace had a good point. I’d been preparing myself for Gabriel’s departure. I also knew that it meant Agnes and Beatrice were going with him.

“I . . . I think it’s already too late to think like that. It’s a good point, though.” My gaze dropped to my feet. “Guess I’ll have to deal with that too when the time comes.”

Grace sighed and then stepped forward. She pulled me into a tight hug. “You care about people just as much as I do.”

My throat closed up and I had to fight myself not to cry. “I know.”

“You’re not gonna stop, are you?”

“No.”

“All right then.” She pulled away but locked her eyes with mine. “But it’ll be different this time.”

“Why do you say that?” I asked. “Do you think he’ll stay?”

“I don’t know about that. But you’ll have us. All of us.”

“I know. I’ve been thinking about that. At least when things go to shit, I won’t be alone.”

For a second, I wondered if she would argue with me. Maybe she would tell me that things wouldn’t go terribly this time. Instead, she only gave me

a sad smile. “Right.”

There was no point in hoping. The last time I did that, I’d gotten myself into a very bad situation. Gabriel had been so sure he would leave, and I had hoped that there was some way that I could stop him.

There wasn’t.

“You do know that whoever is meant for you is coming, right?”

“I think I already met him.”

Grace blinked. “You care about him that much?”

“It’s not just me. I know he cares as well. You should have been there at dinner. The entire thing felt so easy.”

“Did you ever consider going with him?”

My entire body flinched before she even finished her sentence. I knew my answer. “No, this is my home and I can’t imagine being anywhere else.”

“I’m sorry. For what it’s worth, I do hope that there’s someone else out there for you.”

I almost opened my mouth to say what had been on my mind for years. I wished he would stay in this town. Then he would be perfect. The words tried to claw their way out of my throat, but I gritted my teeth and nodded.

What I didn’t want to admit was that I’d had a full-body shudder when I imagined myself with anyone else. Seeing him again, even if I was determined to stay only friends, reminded me of how right we felt.

It was cursed, though. It would end, just like it had the first time.

Grace saw it all, and I had no doubts that she had thoughts about what she was seeing. But she knew me. Some of these things I wasn’t ready to say. Eventually, I would. But not now.

“Get some rest. I know how exhausting kids can be.”

“Don’t even get me started.” A yawn tried to escape me, but I kept it at bay. “I love you. And the rest of our friends. You all know that, right?”

“We do. And that’s why we care so much.”

I hugged her one last time before making my way into my apartment. The exhaustion hit me fully as I flopped on the couch.

Slowly, I looked over at my door. I needed to turn the extra locks. I needed to move everything I could in front of the door to ensure I wouldn’t sleepwalk to the last place on earth I needed to be.

But I was tired. So tired.

I wasn’t sure what I was tired of. Maybe it was the girls today, running me ragged as I took care of them. Maybe it was fighting my own need to

sleepwalk.

Maybe it was fighting my desire to go find Gabriel, just like I had always done.

My eyes slipped shut before I could get up and barricade myself in. Sleep claimed me almost immediately.

I'd regret this when I woke up.

But for now, I couldn't bring myself to care.

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16

GABRIEL



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Jackie Anne: How to use online menu

Comments:
Mollie Wilson: Uhh, Jacks. You meant to Google this, right?
Jackie Anne: Oh no! I still don't know how to delete!
Jade Clark: Reminds me of Hugh . . . Speaking of which, he's kind of been quiet lately. Has anyone done a welfare check?
Kerry Winsor: I heard his car backfire in the distance!!! He's alive! He must be as busy as I am . . .

I WAS in bed when I heard a *thump*.

Back before I had the girls, I would've ignored it. These days, I knew it meant more. I got up, going right to Agnes and Beatrice. I wasn't sure what I expected, but I had a feeling one of them was trying to sneak out again.

Instead, I found both girls in the same bed. Agnes was curled around Beatrice, hand tightly in her sister's.

That was when I heard the noise again.

Now that I was awake, I could better tell where it was coming from.

Slowly, I turned to the front door.

If I were at my other apartment, I'd be worried. I'd discovered how dangerous crime could be immediately after moving to the city.

But this was Strawberry Springs. There weren't a lot of things that went bump in the night.

Unless . . .

No. It couldn't be.

I threw open the door, thinking the noise had to be in my mind.

Then I saw a flash of purple stumble toward me.

Jade landed right in the middle of my chest.

"What the . . ." My breath hitched at the weight of her in my arms. I had to shake myself out of it and focus. "Hey, you okay?" I asked it without thinking.

I didn't get an answer.

Instead, Jade put her full weight on me, pushing her face into the crease of my neck.

I had to be dreaming. There was no way Jade *still* had this habit.

Or if she did, there was no way she would still come to me, of all people.

Yet here she was. The weight of her was so familiar, it felt like my own. The smell of her, a mix of so many scents that I couldn't pick out just one, even more so.

For just a second, I was whole. I had her and I was okay again.

Jade let out a contented sigh, holding me tighter.

She'd come to me. *Me.* Even after everything.

Emotion took over, and I held her tighter. I never thought I'd have this again. I thought I left all of this here and it had faded into dust.

A tear slipped out as I held her.

I shouldn't be doing this. She was asleep and she would never hug me like this.

The night before last when I was drunk flashed in my mind. The memories were blurry at best. I had a rough idea of what I'd told her, but I didn't remember the details.

But now I had a flash of leaning my weight on her. She'd accepted it and listened while I talked.

I didn't get a chance to dwell on it because one of her arms reached out, and I knew she was still hunting for something.

Maybe her destination hadn't changed.

“Come on,” I said, clearing my throat. “Let’s lie down.”

I led her to my bedroom, gently settling her onto my bed. She pressed her face into my pillows, clearly trying to get comfortable. I was tempted to make my way to the couch, but she groaned and reached out toward me.

I knew what she wanted.

She’d get anything she wanted.

“Okay, okay.” I lay in the bed next to her on the left side. When we were younger and would do this, she would always take the right.

Even when I had no hope of ever seeing her again, I always slept on the left. I left space for her, just in case she would magically appear.

It was a foolish and hopeless endeavor. Yet here I was, falling back into old habits as if I’d never left town.

Jade found me within seconds. She rested her head on my shoulder, and I pulled a blanket over us. She was so close and I felt that emotion again. The one that made me want to sob into her hair and beg her to forgive me.

If she were awake, she’d smack my shoulder and tell me that I was being dramatic. I could never be dramatic enough in my feelings for her.

But she wasn’t awake. This was her mind reaching out for me as a familiarity. This didn’t mean that she had forgiven me. As much as I was grateful that she was here, I wasn’t sure we’d ever be the way we had been before.

I’d have to be okay with that.

I grabbed my phone and set an early alarm. I’d get her back in her bed and she’d never know.

But for now, we both needed this.

TWO BROWN EYES stared at me when I woke up.

My alarm was going off, and I blindly tapped at my phone to stop it. When I looked over, the eyes were still on me. I could only see the top of her head, but I knew who it was.

“Hi, Beatrice,” I said. “I bet you want food.”

She slowly nodded. “Yes.”

“Just give me a minute.”

“Did you steal her?” Beatrice asked.

“No,” I said. “It’s not like that.”

“Sometimes she glares at you. I think she doesn’t like you.”

“Thanks,” I said flatly. “I know. I’m gonna get her back to her place. She’ll be mad if she wakes up here.”

Beatrice narrowed her eyes at me, and I was sure she was about to start screaming to purposely wake up Jade. Instead, she walked out of my room. Silence followed.

I could only handle one thing at a time, so I focused on slowly getting up. Jade grumbled but stayed asleep even when I picked her up. I got out to the living room, and Beatrice was by the door.

When I got close, she opened it.

“Are you helping me?”

“I help nice people.”

I almost dropped Jade, but I’d rather cut off my own toe, so I kept myself in check.

“Thank you,” I said. “Can you open the other one?”

“Will you get me a rock?”

“Will you eat it?”

Beatrice considered it, then shook her head.

“Then yes.”

She bounced over. I made sure Jade was tucked in her bed before taking a look around her apartment.

It was a mix of colors and candles. It was also a mess.

At least some things never changed.

“Don’t be weird,” Beatrice said.

“Right, sorry.” I walked out of Jade’s apartment and quietly shut the door behind me.

“Do you like her?” Beatrice asked.

“I do.”

“She’s cool. I like her hair.”

“Then we agree.”

Beatrice grimaced. “I want my rock.” Then she was gone.

I let out a long sigh. I was pretty sure she’d only negotiated with me so she’d get something to throw at a window.

But anything was better than her openly hating me.

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17

JADE



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Hu Gh: I can't believe how bad things have gotten. I finally made my way to the diner and how does Tammy thank me? Turning on the HEAT! I AM AN OLD MAN AND I HAVE A RIGHT TO AIR CONDITIONING!

Comments:
Tammy Jane: Hugh, I posted about the air being out a week ago! Now I know this group has been busy with Jade's ex returning, but come on now! Where the hell have you been anyway?
Hu Gh: I HAVE THE RIGHT TO REMAIN SILENT
Tammy Jane: Don't read me your Miranda rights . . .
Hu Gh: WHO IS MIRANDA??? IS SHE RELATED TO ALEX???

MY EYES SLOWLY OPENED. I was drooling hard, but I saw my bright purple sheets and made myself sit up.

"What the fuck," I said. "I'm home?"

I'd obviously sleepwalked. I'd fallen asleep on the couch and I was in my bed, but usually my sleepwalking included me trying to find someone else's.

It used to be Gabriel's.

It was never my own.

Last night had been a risk, but I'd been so tired that I couldn't bring myself to care.

I'd gotten lucky.

And apparently scored good sleep while I was at it.

Over the years, I'd become used to existing in a perpetual state of exhaustion. I carried it with me like a backpack and only felt it get lighter when Gabriel was here.

This was the first time since then that I felt somewhat rested.

"Fuck yeah," I said to myself. "Looks like I just need to wrangle children all day to sleep."

As I got up to open my shop, I realized I needed a treat for my good rest.

The best place to go was The Reserved Bean. Strawberry Springs hadn't had good coffee for as long as I could remember. The local diner's coffee was disgusting and we didn't have anywhere else to go. Now that it was open, we all loved it, and every single one of us did our best to make sure that Theo stayed in business.

Even without us, I had a feeling he would do well. Oftentimes, people stopped in Strawberry Springs purely for The Reserved Bean. Sometimes, people came from neighboring towns since there were no coffee shops close to them. With baked goods added to the menu, he was busy all hours of the day up until he closed.

Not too long ago, he'd suggested a lavender latte to me and that was all that I ever ordered. Even though I was rested, that was the treat I craved. Hell, if it hit like it usually did, I might have the energy to clean the back room of the shop.

When I walked in, Theo wasn't behind the counter, which wasn't much of a surprise. These days, he was so busy roasting his own blend of coffee that his other employees manned the front. Kelsey was his main barista, and he'd also hired a recent high school graduate. Both were great people.

Kelsey was frowning at the computer system when I walked up.

"Did Dale not stock your favorite ice cream again?" I asked in lieu of a greeting.

Kelsey was a few years older than me, and we'd been cordial back in high school, but we'd grown closer ever since she returned after getting a college degree. Although we'd love to have her stay, all of us knew that one day she would be leaving, purely because she wanted a job in marketing.

“No. It’s not that.” She shook her head and looked me in the eye. “What can I get you?”

“Are you sure you’re okay?” I asked. “I haven’t seen you this pissed off since you worked for your mom. Was it Theo?”

She blew out a breath. “It’s not him. He’s great as always. I think Mom is tired of me failing at getting a job. She’s taking matters into her own hands.”

“Really?”

“She’s suggesting I lower my standards. Maybe find a job in social media marketing around here.”

“It’s not a terrible idea.”

She sighed. “Technically, it’s in marketing, but it’s not what I want to do.”

“It’s something.”

“I don’t know if I want to stay in a small town. I always pictured myself packing up and going to the city.” She must have noticed me tense and quickly corrected herself. “Not that there’s anything wrong with staying in a small town. I know it’s perfect for you.”

“Don’t worry, I get it.” And I did. It hadn’t been fun letting Gabriel leave, but I knew it was what he wanted. Many people didn’t want to stay in the small town. All there was to do was gossip and mess with people.

“So, are you gonna look into it?”

“I don’t know. I have things pretty good here. I like my job, even though it’s not what I studied for, and I don’t know if it’s even worth quitting over.”

“You don’t have to decide right now.”

“I’ll think about it.” Her eyes went glassy for a second, then she shook her head. “After I get your order, of course. Lavender latte?”

“You know it.”

Kelsey smiled and put in my order while the barista behind her started making it. As I moved to the pickup counter, I tried to brace myself for Kelsey eventually leaving.

It probably wouldn’t hit as hard as when Gabriel did it, but it still wouldn’t feel great.

At least they were both being honest about it.

I felt someone come up behind me and I immediately tensed. There weren’t very many people in this town who didn’t understand the concept

of personal space, but there were a few.

Slowly, I turned, preparing to tell Dale that I needed him to back up. But I paused when I realized it wasn't the man who owned the town grocery store.

It was the man that I'd met in the bar.

I still didn't remember his name, but I'd figured there was no need to. I'd never see him again.

Obviously, I was wrong.

His gaze met mine.

"Fancy seeing you again," he said.

"What are you doing here?"

"I have things to do in town." He leaned in. "That still includes you, if you want it to."

My entire body shuddered. Hell fucking no. Absolutely not.

I should have picked some other dude that night when I was trying to make Gabriel jealous. Or maybe I should have stayed home and avoided him the whole time.

"I have to go to work."

"The candle and crystal shop, right? I should come check it out."

"It's different," I said. "No need to. Continue on with what you were doing."

"I have a new goal now."

"Didn't I say no last time?" I asked. "Because I'm pretty sure I did."

"And I said before that I'm pretty sure I know when a woman is playing hard to get."

"Nope. Not playing hard to get. This is just a no."

My coffee was done and I grabbed it without a second glance at him. All I wanted to do was get to my store and do my own thing.

Footsteps followed me.

"Come on. Don't be like that. Do you know how lucky I was to find someone as hot as you in a place like this?"

"Don't be like what?"

"Act like you don't want to be chased."

He was already grating on my nerves, but now he had gone too far.

"No, actually, I don't want to be chased. If I tell you no, that means leave me alone."

"You walked up to me last time."

“To make someone else jealous,” I snapped.

“That guy?”

“Yep. It worked. I don’t need you now.”

“I knew there was a reason he rescued you. It was all a part of your plan, right?”

“He didn’t *rescue me*.”

“He very much did.” He tilted his head and his smile grew. “Do you like being rescued, Jade? Do you need someone to take you out of this boring little town?”

There was something about the way he talked about Strawberry Springs. I wasn’t unfamiliar with people who came into town and looked down on it, but this was a new level. If he hated it so much, why did he come back?

“I’m going to tell you one last time. I don’t want you. I’m not interested in you. Back off.”

“And I’m seeing through your lie.”

“See through this.” I raised my fist to punch him right in the face, but then someone grabbed me. I tore my arm away from whoever was stupid enough to stop me and turned to see Gabriel.

“What the hell are you doing?” I yelled as I fought his grip. Since when was Gabriel so fucking strong?

Maybe I needed to work out.

“Mike is right around the corner,” Gabriel hissed.

“So? I’m doing him a service.”

“Just like when you were arrested in high school for punching someone?”

I was about to kick Gabriel’s ass too. But then the man behind me laughed.

“And here he is, once again. I knew you liked to be rescued. You’re the damsel in distress type.”

Gabriel blinked and then frowned. “What did you just say?” he asked.

“I had a good reason,” I hissed. “Let me go so I can finish the job.”

“Finish what? There’s no way you’ll land a hit on me.”

“Because I’m too weak?”

“Because you’re all talk.” He leaned forward. “I have a feeling you’re the bratty type. You want to be held down and told what to do. Come back to my hotel and I’ll show you what you need.”

My teeth ground and I turned to Gabriel, raising one eyebrow.

See? my look told him.

The war he was fighting was obvious in his eyes, and then he let me go.

"You know what? Do your worst."

"Like she can—" The idiot was too busy gloating.

I didn't waste any time. My fist landed right against his stupid smile. He jerked back and wiped his mouth. He turned to me with wide eyes.

"What the—"

"You said I couldn't land a hit."

"That was flirting!"

"Don't flirt with me when my pubes are thicker than your hairline! Fuck you!"

"Fucking small towns!" he snapped, wiping at his mouth again. "You're crazy! All of you!"

I felt a wall at my back. I knew it was Gabriel. He would let me fight this—I knew he would. But he was here as support too.

Solid, real support.

I wanted to shiver for a different reason now.

The man shook his head. "You'll regret this."

That was all he said before he ran to his car.

After he drove off, I laughed. "What's he gonna do, hit on me again?"

"I think he learned his lesson this time."

"Don't ever try to stop me again." I pointed at Gabriel.

"I just didn't want you to get in trouble."

"Were you worried about me?"

"I was worried about *him*." He spat out the last word, and I had a strong feeling he was lying.

He'd never admit it, though.

I opened my mouth to tell him he should've been worried because that was the least of what I could do, but I stopped myself.

Things were a slippery slope with Gabriel, and I'm glad I hadn't gotten back into the habit of sleepwalking to him. If I opened this door, I'd jump right back into bad habits just in time for him to leave.

"I . . . need to go to the shop."

Gabriel blinked. "Are you sure? I could get you breakfast as an apology for holding you back."

I wanted to say yes. I wanted to go with him so badly.

But I shook my head. “I’m fine. Really. You should go hang out with the girls. Things are getting better with them.”

I had to force my legs to move toward my shop. I had to force myself not to stay and beg him to take me to the diner anyway.

It was the right thing to do.

Yet, it felt so wrong.

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18

GABRIEL



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Kerry Winsor: Jade, you'll have to forgive me for this. But did y'all SEE that drama on the square???

Comments:
Mark Bell: We're all signing our death warrants, but yes. I don't like that guy that keeps hitting on her. He's fucking weird.
Kerry Winsor: Is that what happened? Was Gabriel jealous?
Mark Bell: He has been from the beginning. He also stepped in to save her when things went too far.
SherriffMike Finch: Jade doesn't need anyone saving her. I saw the whole thing.
Kerry Winsor: She's not going to get in trouble or anything, right?
SherriffMike Finch: Nah, if anyone else asks, I didn't see shit.

I LET JADE GO, my lips forming a frown.

I still held out hope that she would turn around and change her mind. I hadn't been to the diner since returning, but I could picture how it would go.

Jade would drag me in, and I would stop the girls from playing at the playground. We would all meet Tammy. Tammy would probably drop some

insult at how long I'd been gone, but would get along with the girls just fine.

Obviously, Jade had different plans. I was disappointed. No, more than that. Ever since she had sleepwalked to me, I wanted more time with her. I was desperate to get even a moment that was like how it used to be.

It seemed that wouldn't be happening today.

"Are you hungry?" I called as I turned to the girls. They seemed to really like the playground in Strawberry Springs. Every now and again, other kids would be near, and they would have someone else to play with. The ones in town seemed used to how wild Agnes and Beatrice could be, so they weren't scared off by them.

It had been complete luck that I was here to see Jade fight with the man she'd been flirting with.

Agnes said bye to another kid she'd met and ran over to me.

"Can you make me more food like last night?"

"I have my mom's recipe for eggs."

Agnes had never once said yes to eggs. She tilted her head as she considered it. "Fine. I'll try them if you make them spicy."

I called Beatrice over, offering the same option. I almost hoped that Beatrice would say no and that she wanted something different than usual. Instead, she nodded at regular eggs, and I walked them back to my apartment.

Agnes and Beatrice returned to their couch fort as I cooked. Instead of fighting me like they would in San Francisco, they seemed to be willing to give me space so I could make their food. I was pretty sure I heard Agnes plotting a murder, but it had nothing to do with me for once.

This felt far more doable than anything had before. Instead of living in fear of what the future held, I could see myself taking care of them.

It was the first time I'd ever gotten close to this feeling.

"So why was Jade here this morning?" Agnes asked the second we were all sitting around the table. They chose the same spots that they had the night before, leaving one chair open where Jade had sat.

"She has a habit called sleepwalking. She's had it as long as I've known her."

"So she walks while she's asleep?" Beatrice tilted her head to the side as she considered it. "That's kind of cool."

“It’s dangerous. She has no awareness of her surroundings. So, if she walks out into the road, she won’t look both ways and could get hit by a car.” I was trying to be calm, but just the thought of it made my chest squeeze. There had been many nights in my youth where I worried about what she would do when she sleepwalked. I didn’t know if she still had medicine or not.

I hated that I didn’t know.

“Can’t we just wake her up?” Agnes asked.

“Waking up someone who’s sleepwalking can be really alarming to them. Sometimes, they wake up angry or they’re very confused. I did it once when we were kids and she yelled at me for it.”

“Jade does seem like she could be very scary when she’s mad.”

“I saw her punch someone today!” Agnes exclaimed. “It was so cool.”

“You weren’t supposed to see that.” I sighed. “She got very lucky that she didn’t get in trouble with the sheriff.”

“But she knows the sheriff. Doesn’t she get to get out of trouble if she knows him?”

“She thinks she can, but there are limits to that. Just like you two could get in trouble if you follow her lead.”

“But that man was bothering her. He kept following her around.” Beatrice crossed her arms. “Can we not do anything if someone bothers us?”

“You can have me or someone else help. Any trusted adult will do.”

“How many people in Strawberry Springs are trusted adults?”

“Most of them are.”

“And how many are trusted back home?”

“A lot less.”

Both girls looked at each other, and I wondered if they were considering those numbers. It was true that Strawberry Springs had far more people that I could trust than anyone in the city. Yes, I’d met people, and yes, I’d made friends. But they weren’t the kind of friends like Strawberry Springs had.

Thankfully, Agnes commented on the eggs and didn’t call me out on it. If they asked why there were more people I trusted here, I wouldn’t know what to tell them.

Just like I didn’t know what to tell myself about this place.

MY GOOD LUCK with the girls didn't last. After a few hours, they were back to their usual chaotic selves. After they broke one of the plates, I knew I needed to distract them.

A year ago, Alice vented to me about their nap schedule. At the time, I had no idea why naps were so important to kids, but now I was glad she'd told me.

Apparently, neither of the girls liked napping. They wanted to be awake for everything. They clearly couldn't handle not having one, though, because they were terrors by the end of the day.

I saw that pattern even now.

It was late afternoon when I'd finally had enough. They were always good in the car, so I packed them up and took them out on the country roads, wondering if they would fall asleep. Beatrice drifted off first. Agnes was stubborn about it, but ten minutes later, she did the same thing. I decided to make my destination Rainwood, just to go through a town similar to Strawberry Springs.

I'd hardly ever come up here back when I lived in the area, but I knew of it.

It was in just as rough of shape, and I wondered how they were doing.

There was no way I could stop without risking waking up the girls, and I needed another hour of quiet time so they wouldn't be even worse as night fell. I thought about Rainwood as I headed back into Strawberry Springs. I took all the back roads I could, and eventually I wound up in a very familiar place.

As I passed by a wood fence with only one entrance, I couldn't help but stop. As curious as I was about Rainwood, I never spent enough time there to get attached. This was very different.

I was near Hugh's property, and on that property was the spring that Jade and I had spent most of our childhoods at. I'd done my best not to think about this place, but I'd checked in.

The tree line was still the same. The large field we would sneak into hadn't changed much either. It felt like I'd stepped into the past, and if it weren't for the two girls in the back seat, I would get out of the car.

"Why did we stop?"

The question jolted me out of my thoughts, and I turned to see that Agnes was awake.

"You could have slept longer."

“You stopped.” She shrugged.

Beatrice slowly opened her eyes. “Are we back home now?” Her voice was thick and she yawned. I had a feeling she was still tired, but I knew that once the girls were awake, they wouldn’t be going back to sleep anytime soon.

“I didn’t mean to stop.” I looked back out at the field. “It’s a place I used to come to. There’s this cool spring back there.”

“Really?” Agnes went for the harness of her car seat. “I want to see it.”

I didn’t know how this five-year-old was able to get out of her seat so quickly, but she bounded out of the car mere seconds later.

“Agnes!” I called, chasing after her.

“Wait!” Beatrice yelled. “I can’t get out of my seat.”

I cursed under my breath and went to her side of the car, getting her out as quickly as I could. The second her feet were on the ground, she was following after Agnes, who was already near the tree line.

“Girls! No!”

That word only urged them on. I had to jog to catch up to them and grabbed their wrists the second I could.

“But you said you used to come here!” Agnes yelled and tried to tug out of my grip.

“There’s a certain path you have to follow to get to where I used to go. And I don’t know if that’s still there anymore.”

“So let’s find out!” Beatrice said with a smile.

“No,” I repeated. “We’re going back to the apartment.”

Both girls frowned. Agnes kicked a rock. “You never do anything fun with us.”

“And I never got my rock,” Beatrice whined.

“There’s one right next to Agnes. She just kicked it.”

“That’s not cool enough. I want a better rock.”

I sighed and ran my hand through my hair. They really wanted to do this, and I did not. Coming back here would be like ripping open an old wound, but Agnes’s words stuck with me.

She was right. Oftentimes, I kept them in the apartment. Today was an exception when we went to the playground, and they’d really enjoyed that. The only time they acted out was when I brought them back home and didn’t give them enough to do.

I let out a long sigh. “Fine.” Both girls cheered. “But there are rules. We don’t own this land, so we have to be respectful.” They frowned and I knew they were about to argue. “I’m not kidding around here. I know you want to see this, but you have to understand that someone else owns this and they may not want us to come back if you guys mess it up.”

“We won’t mess anything up!” Beatrice huffed.

“You broke one of my plates.”

“That was Agnes!” she said, pointing to her sister.

It had really been both of them, but Agnes would never admit it. My body tightened, and I knew we were heading into a fight.

Then Agnes shocked me.

She looked up at me, eyes soft and eyebrows raised. “Please?” she asked quietly.

Beatrice stared at her with wide eyes. I was pretty sure I did the same thing.

“Will you be respectful?” I asked. “No dropping trash. No tearing things up.”

“I just want a rock!” Beatrice said.

“I won’t break anything.”

“Okay,” I said. “We’re also gonna be going through a forest without an official path. You have to stay with me.” My voice turned firm and there was a harsh tone that I didn’t often use with the girls.

Their eyes went wide as they heard it, and they nodded.

“Good. Then let’s see if the spring is still here.” I held out my hands to each of them in a foolish hope that they’d grab on. I fully expected them to roll their eyes and grab each other’s hands as they usually did. But being in the forest must have made them see things differently. Their smaller hands slid into mine, one on each side of me.

It was the first time either of them let me hold their hands. A strange emotion bubbled up in my chest, akin to what I felt for Jade, but not exactly like that.

Was this a version of parental love? Was this pride?

Maybe it was a mix of both.

Agnes turned to me, eyebrows furrowed and her bottom lip poking out, and I knew she was getting frustrated with how long it had taken me to process them grabbing my hands.

I shook myself out of my thoughts and guided them the way that I remembered. Since it was late summer, everything was overgrown, but there was a small dirt path that I knew like the back of my hand. Obviously, someone had been continuously walking here. I had a feeling that it was Jade.

I heard the spring before I saw it, and the temperature seemed to drop a few degrees. We came to the clearing with all the rocks and both girls gasped. It was exactly how I left it, though after living in a concrete jungle for too long, it was far more impressive.

There was so much greenery growing out of every part of the ground. The only part that didn't have plants was the sheer cliff face of gray rock. It was a perfect day to be here. The sun was low in the sky and there wasn't a single cloud. This was the kind of day that Jade and I would have agreed to meet up here. I was sure of it.

"Rocks!" Beatrice called. They let go of my hands and rushed to the edge of the water. I was about to call for them to slow down when they stopped and fell to their knees, looking at every rock they could get their hands on.

"Do you guys like it?" I called.

"Yes!" Beatrice said.

"We're never leaving!" Agnes added.

"We'll have to for dinner, but you guys have a little while before we have to go."

They whined for five seconds until they were distracted by a water bug in the distance. I laughed and walked over to the rock that Jade and I used to always sit next to. I didn't have a blanket, and this would mess up my pants, but I didn't care.

Agnes and Beatrice were content for one of the first times under my care. I was going to enjoy every second of it.

THE GIRLS PLAYED way later than I intended them to, and after I fed them, they both fell asleep easily.

I followed suit far earlier than I would have any other time.

Halfway in between consciousness and sleep, something brought me out of it once again.

It was the same *thump* as the night before.

Immediately, I was awake and getting out of bed, exhaustion be damned.

Opening the door, I immediately saw Jade and she did the same thing as the last time. She stumbled forward, landing right on my chest.

She was more restless tonight. She reached for my face, then my shoulder, before she pulled away. Unfortunately, she headed right for my coffee table and was about to run into it.

The only thing that stopped her was me shoving my hand in between her knee and the table.

Pain blossomed from my knuckles and shot up my arm. All I could do was wince and bear it. But at least she hadn't injured herself.

It wasn't as bad as the glass table at my previous place. Now that I had two kids with me, I did my best to buy furniture that was safe for them. Seemed I had a bit more work to do.

Seconds later, Jade was roaming around the apartment. I took a second to shake out my aching hand before following her.

"Are you wanting to find a bed?" I put my hands on her shoulders and led her to my room. As her fingers traced the sheets, she lay down immediately.

It was so tempting to climb into bed with her again, but when she'd said no to breakfast, it was obvious that she wanted distance.

I was torn in between giving her the space that she wanted and jumping right back into what I wanted her to be.

"Sleep," I said, brushing a bright purple strand of hair off her forehead. "I'll be on the couch."

That way I could stop her if she sleepwalked in the living room again. Or at least that was what I told myself to ensure I didn't cross any boundaries. Jade stilled, and I smiled before grabbing an extra blanket and going to the couch.

It wasn't comfortable, and I was tempted to buy something new if this was going to be a habit.

But I'd made the right choice.

Or so I thought.

Ten minutes later, I heard a *slam*, and it came from my room. I sat up, considering opening the door, but Jade figured it out herself. She stumbled through the living room before getting to the couch. When she felt me, she climbed on top of me and lay down.

My heart stuttered in my chest.

I'd given her an out. She could've had my bed, which was far more comfortable.

She'd chosen me instead.

I sighed.

"This isn't what you would want if you were awake."

She huffed and tightened her hold.

It took far too long to get her back into my bed. This time, I gave her a pillow to cuddle with and thought that would do it.

She found me again.

And again.

And again.

I could keep guiding her to bed, but I was exhausted.

Selfishly, I wanted her to myself, even if it was only while she was asleep.

"You're so fucking stubborn," I muttered. "Never change."

Wrapping my arms around her, I tugged her closer. I reached for my phone, which I'd put on the coffee table, and set my alarm.

Maybe all I would get were sleepy moments in the dark of the night, but I'd take them all the same.

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19

JADE



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Mollie Wilson: Growing season is gonna end soon! I still have some farm-fresh tomatoes left before the warm weather winds down . . .

Comments:
Hu Gh: It never cools off like it used to!!!
Dale Garrett: How much for a bushel?
Mollie Wilson: Isn't that for apples? Besides, they're weighed by the pound.
Dale Garrett: You know what I meant!
Hu Gh: I'll take an ass load.
Kerry Winsor: NO. Please don't mention asses. Please. I beg of you.
Hu Gh: Why are you all so dramatic? You act like I posted it here or something . . .

THURSDAY NIGHT, I walked into our girls' night with my head held high. I'd said no to Gabriel and I hadn't sleepwalked into someone else's bed. I was doing exactly what I should be.

"How are you doing?" Piper asked.

All the other women leaned forward, clearly curious.

I didn’t have to worry about their judgment. “Thanks to Mollie, Wren, and Grace, who all got me thinking straight. I’m doing the right thing. Yesterday, Gabriel invited me to breakfast and I said no.”

“Wow,” Piper said. “Good for you.”

“I helped with his daughters, and that’s the extent of what I’m doing. See? I don’t think you guys have to worry about me.”

What I didn’t need to mention was how much I regretted not going to breakfast. I thought about the diner for hours after I said no, and I wondered what it would have been like if we’d all gone.

“Maybe we can talk about other things then,” Wren said. “Like the fact that I finally got an answer from the STM grant.”

That made all thoughts of Gabriel vanish from my mind. “Yeah, I saw your post. Do you know why they finally started back up?”

She shook her head. “Nope. All they said was they were sorry for the delay.”

I hummed as I thought about it. I’d talked to Marjorie and Henrietta, but they were both duds too, so my list was even shorter.

Since summer was ending, plenty of people were busy.

I knew Kerry was running around to get Tommy’s school supplies bought as well as sending him to swim lessons. She’d been in the Facebook group, but not as much as normal.

Whoever it was would have to have a good cover.

And the town gossip? She would know everything.

“I know that look,” Grace said. “You’re thinking about something.”

“I have a weird connection about the STM grant. I don’t think it’s anything, though.”

“Tell us,” Piper urged.

“Kerry’s been really busy lately. She’s been driving out of town to take Tommy to swim lessons.”

“Did she finally go through with it?” Mollie asked. “I had talked to her about it a couple of months ago, right before school let out. She told me that Tommy couldn’t swim, and I wanted her to sign him up.”

“So, she’s not done them before,” I said slowly.

“There’s usually some time for parents to look at their phones, unless she’s determined to be involved in the swim lessons too.”

“Has Kerry ever not been involved in something?”

“I bet she’s doing those parent-child ones. With that long drive, there’s no time for anything else.”

“So, she is busy, which could explain why things suddenly changed.”

“Well, yes. But *Kerry*?” Mollie shook her head. “There’s no way she would be it.”

“She’d have to be rich, right? Very rich.”

Grace turned to me. “She does have that massive plot of land. Plus, her house is very nice. Far nicer than mine.”

“Yeah, I believe her husband bought it for her. That and the nice car she drives.” As I spoke, my mind was spinning.

“What does her husband do?” Piper asked.

“He’s in the military, I believe,” Grace said, tapping her chin as she thought about it. “But he’s old enough that he could have been discharged. Maybe he’s doing something else these days?”

“She’d have to have more than we expect, but her husband could be some rich dude. She could be stealing from him and giving back to the town,” I offered.

“I don’t know about stealing, though she is that powerful.” Mollie frowned.

“She’s definitely a suspect, then,” I said. “A top one, really.”

“Are you sure about this?” Grace asked.

“I’ve wondered why she’s so involved in everything,” Piper added.

“But she can’t keep a secret!” Grace said with a laugh. “There’s no way she would be able to hide the fact that she’s saving the town. She’d want to make it known. She’d—”

“Join the town committee and demand the square be perfect?” I asked.

“Well.” Grace frowned. “Yes, she would.”

“I need to talk to her. I have evidence and a motive. This is better than any of my other people.”

“Wow, so we really have a lead?” Piper asked. “I’ll be honest, I didn’t think we’d get this far.”

“Rude,” I huffed. “But neither did I.”

KERRY HAD POSTED ABOUT FINALLY HAVING a free day, and she was sitting in the back of the diner. I allowed myself one deep breath before I walked in. Her eyes went wide when she saw me, but then she settled for a smile. Tommy was next to her, and I waved at him.

"Jade," she said. "Have some updates for me?"

"Not really. I have questions for you this time."

"Are you willing to trade again?"

"Maybe," I said. "Can I sit?"

"Of course." She gestured for me to sit across from her. Tommy waved back as I did. "I hear you and Gabriel have had a few interactions."

I let out a long sigh. I knew she would want more information about him, but it felt like I'd finally gotten my head on straight. I didn't need to think about him at all.

"Is that my hint that things aren't going well?"

"He's just my neighbor."

"Oh, so we're on that one again? That went very well when you were a teenager."

"Whatever. I'm trying my best to keep my distance. He's leaving any day now."

"Are you okay?" Her words were softer this time, and they almost reminded me of my friends.

"I'm fine."

"I doubt that."

"I'm asking about you now. How's your husband?"

Her smile fell. "The same as always. Busy."

"Are you two okay?"

"I guess. He's here when he's here and when he's not . . ." She shrugged. "I do my own thing."

"That sucks."

"He supports me financially. He doesn't cheat. I can't complain."

"How much does he support you financially?"

Kerry blinked. "Just my living expenses. Why?"

"Is he really in the military? Did he maybe become an entrepreneur in the last few years?"

She stared for a long time and then laughed. "Very funny, Jade."

"Seriously. What if you were rich?"

“If I were rich, then I’d have a brand-new Jaguar, not the Volvo I currently have. Now, why are you asking? Are you on some hunt?”

“N-no.”

She leaned in. “You are, aren’t you?”

“Please don’t say anything,” I begged. “I’m trying to figure out who the STM grant owner is.”

“You are?” She gasped. “And *I* was an option?”

“The grant went quiet for a bit, and it coincided with you taking Tommy to swim lessons.”

At the mention of lessons, Kerry rolled her eyes. “Oh, those. They were rough. But you learned to swim, right?” She turned to Tommy.

“I sank to the bottom of the pool once, but I lived.” Tommy’s voice was flat.

“But I saved you. It’s not my fault you sank right when I was talking to the teacher.”

Tommy shrugged and started coloring again.

“Either way,” Kerry continued as she turned back to me, “that *is* a weird coincidence, I’ll admit. I heard a few rumblings about the grant going quiet. I couldn’t comment on Facebook posts because I was in the water all the time, but it was concerning.”

“As far as I can tell, it’s back online now.”

“Even weirder,” she said. “But it really isn’t me, Jade. Would I save the town if I could? Yes. But I would buy a new car first.”

I huffed out a breath. “Of course.”

“What ideas do you have?”

“So you can take my investigation from me?”

“So I can *help*. I won’t take it.”

“You’re lying.”

“I’m not!” The color on her cheeks gave her away. “Seriously, do you have any leads?”

“I thought I did.” I crossed my arms and leaned back. “They covered their tracks really well.”

“I’ve thought a lot about this too.”

“You have?”

“Money coming from nowhere? We all have. It’s too good to be true.”

“Did you find anything?”

“It’s all been made in the last seven years. It’s all been hidden behind a website with no information.”

“That doesn’t make me feel better.”

“We might just be lucky. And we should use every second of it to get back on our feet.”

“Just luck?” I sigh. “That’s not a very good ending.”

“We don’t always get exciting endings, Jade.”

“I know,” I muttered, looking out the window in the direction of Gabriel’s apartment.

“You’re thinking about him, aren’t you?”

“If I say no, will you believe me?”

“I’ll pretend to.” Kerry gave me a smile. “You should get some rest. You look tired.”

“It’s only six.”

“Yeah. But it’s been a tough few weeks for you.”

I knew that Kerry would tell everyone this, but it was nice to hear her be kind to me. I nodded and stood, numbly going to my apartment.

I STARED at the list of suspects and sighed. Kerry had been the first person that had any kind of potential evidence, but I believed her when she said she wasn’t behind the STM grant.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized I had no idea who could be doing all of this.

Yes, they were in the Facebook group. There was no way they would know everything they did without it. Unless someone was their informant.

And that took me back to step one.

Whoever was doing all of this was great at covering their tracks. They were smart and they didn’t want to be found.

But why? Why not own up to all the great things they’d done? Did they not want a thank-you?

I ran a hand through my messy hair. I’d been hoping that after another mysterious good night of sleep that I could crack this case, but I still couldn’t.

If only someone could spend a ton of money, then that would give me direction.

If only I knew just a little bit more about whoever this was.

I hated how out of control I felt these days. Ever since Gabriel had come back, my life had felt like it was on the brink of disaster. It didn't help that my apartment was no longer calm with the two chaos monsters next door.

There was so much going on in his head that I didn't understand. Even back when we were teenagers, it was always hard to read him.

Without thinking about it, my mind turned to the game that he made. It was clear what kind of mindset he was in when he made it. He hated small towns. He hated a lot of things.

I wasn't upset that he'd made what he had. It was a good game, and it had propelled him into a lifestyle that I would never understand.

It was how he was able to spend more time with his girls without a job stopping him.

The last thing I needed to do was play it again. I didn't need the reminder that he was so set on city life. I didn't need the pain that came with finishing the game the same way I always did.

I hadn't ever needed the pain he left for me. The game was a sore reminder of it all, and yet, I constantly returned to it.

Yesterday, I had gotten a ton of candles made, more so than would probably be ordered from the shop in a long time.

No one else needed me and I had nothing to do. So, I turned on the game console.

"You're so desperate." I muttered it to myself. "No one can ever know how desperate you are."

I was putting on a good face in front of the town. I was sure that they didn't fully believe I was okay, but they were believing me enough to leave me alone.

That was all I could ask for. But in the quiet of my own apartment, I could do what I wanted to. And I knew without a shadow of a doubt that I wanted Gabe back. I wanted him to stay.

I wanted just a piece of what we had when we were kids before everything fell apart.

The closest I could get was this stupid video game.

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20

GABRIEL



Dad Company (But Sometimes Good Advice)
Jim Miter: Sometimes I think my kids are the wildest things I've ever seen. Can anyone relate?

Comments:
Dean Briggs: Oh yeah, someone here can relate. Have they burnt down your house?
Robert Colt: Or thrown bees?
Jim Miter: What? No, they just ran into the road. What kinds of things are happening here?
G Singh: Evil, evil things.

A NICE PLACE like The Reserved Bean almost seemed out of place in Strawberry Springs. But maybe that was the Strawberry Springs I once knew.

These days, it made sense. Obviously, the people in town had a thirst for coffee. Plus, the interior matched the new and improved exterior of all the buildings in town.

I wasn't much of a coffee drinker, but I could go for anything if it meant getting the girls out of the apartment.

Agnes and Beatrice stood next to me as we waited in line. Both of them refused to stand still, and I had a feeling that they would soon be destroying something in this nice shop. The plan was to get us all drinks and go to the playground.

I was worried that we wouldn't get there before something was messed up.

"Why haven't I seen Jade for a while?" Agnes asked. "When she's awake, I mean."

I shook my head. They knew that Jade was making a habit of coming to see me at night, but they'd agreed to keep it a secret, and even mentioning it this one time was pushing it.

Beatrice elbowed her sister. They didn't have any loyalty to me, but for some reason, they didn't want Jade to be embarrassed.

"She's busy."

"It's been *two days*." Beatrice said it as if it had been weeks.

Just a few days felt like a lifetime to them. It didn't make sense to me. But then again, most of parenting didn't make sense either.

"I'll try to contact her." As I said it, someone in line turned around. It was Dale, and I knew that this would be hitting the Facebook group soon.

I gave him a tight smile and tried to focus.

That was when the door opened behind me.

I had bad luck, so I had an inkling of who would be walking in now. But when the girls reacted, it cemented exactly who it was.

"Jade!" Beatrice called. In an instant, she was away from my side and running. Agnes followed.

I sighed and turned. "Sorry about them."

Both girls were clinging to Jade, who looked at me with wide eyes. Obviously, she didn't expect them to hang off her like monkeys on a branch.

"It's cool." She then turned to the girls, asking how they were.

It was tempting to stare, but I forced myself to turn around.

Dale was watching again, and I wanted to take a page from Jade's book and flip him off. That wouldn't go well for me, though. I gritted my teeth and gave him a nod instead.

When I got to the front of the line, I was surprised to see Theo taking orders.

I also knew that he could guess anyone's drink, and I was interested to see what he would choose for me.

"Hey, nice to see you again."

"You too. Are those two still keeping you on your toes?"

My shoulders sank. "Obviously. I'm really lucky that Jade is entertaining them right now."

"They don't seem to hate her."

"Yeah, by some miracle." I turned to check on the girls, and they were still talking Jade's ear off. Then I looked back at Theo. "I hear you're good at guessing orders."

"That I am."

"Could you guess mine?"

Jade had been in the middle of a sentence, and I heard her trail off when I asked my question. I didn't blame her. My plan was to never get involved in Strawberry Springs, but I had to see what Theo was capable of.

"Earl Grey tea." Theo said it confidently.

I blinked in response. "That's exactly right. How did you know?"

"Most of the time, it's a lucky guess. But you scrunched your nose when you walked in here, which means you don't enjoy the smell of coffee. With two kids, however, I had a feeling you wouldn't be against the idea of caffeine. So black tea it is."

"And how did you pick Earl Grey?"

"You seem just a little bit fancy."

Damn. He was good.

"And for the kids?"

"Apple juice for one and milk for the other."

"How the hell did you get that right?"

"They're telling Jade about opposing things, which means they won't want the same drink. I have a feeling neither of them would be content with water, so one gets juice and one gets milk."

"You got it in one go. I'll take all of that. Oh. Do you have any pastries left? It looks like your cabinet is empty."

"We have a few blueberry scones in the back, plus some biscuits."

I managed to get the girls to focus on me long enough to tell me what they wanted, and Theo nodded as he rang me up. I pulled out a fifty. When he looked back up, he blinked in shock.

"That's way too much."

It was. “Oh, well. I’m bad at math.”

“The only people who get away with that are Marjorie and Henrietta.”

“And me.” The money was pulled out of my hands and put on the counter. Jade had stepped up. “If it makes you feel any better, Theo, you can add my usual onto there as well.”

Theo let out a long sigh. “I can’t get a reputation for letting people bulldoze me.”

“I’m not people.” She rolled her eyes. “And I’m Piper’s close friend, so she’ll take my side on this.”

“Don’t bring my girlfriend into this.”

“I can and will.”

He sighed and accepted the money. Jade smirked the entire time.

We all stepped to the side, and I couldn’t help but glance at Jade. She was in that damn slitted skirt again, but this time with a lacy top that I’d be seeing in my dreams.

“Take a picture,” she muttered. “It’ll last longer.”

My cheeks heated. “Sorry.”

She took a healthy step away from me while we waited for our drinks, and I knew I needed to make my escape once they were done.

“Okay, girls.” It wouldn’t be a popular suggestion, but I had to say it anyway. “Let’s leave Jade alone so she can get on with her day.”

They both groaned. I had a feeling we were headed straight toward a temper tantrum, and I had never fully mastered how to calm those down.

“It’s okay. I’ll eat with you guys.”

I shook my head. “That’s really not necessary.”

“It’s for them, not you.”

Then Beatrice grabbed my hand. “Please?”

Dammit. She’d learned that from Agnes.

And I knew it would work.

“Fine.”

“Yay!” Beatrice practically bounced across the room and Agnes dragged Jade with her.

Moments later, we were crowded around a small table.

“Did you know that Gabriel makes video games?” Jade asked the girls.

I could only stare. I wasn’t sure she knew what I did. I had thought she was done with me the second I left town.

“Yeah, I heard about them.” Agnes shrugged, looking far older than she really was. Beatrice blinked.

“Mom never lets us play video games,” Beatrice said.

“I found a way. She has it on her computer.”

“She’s gonna be so mad.”

Jade caught my eye and I saw the same sad expression that I felt. Sometimes, the girls referred to Alice in present tense as if she would come home at any time. We talked to therapists back in San Francisco about them not processing her death. They warned me it would take a long time, and that was another reason I needed to get back.

I was sure they needed a lot more therapy.

It was something I needed to handle, yet I had no idea what to do.

“Sneaking around is something I did a lot too,” Jade said. “When I was a kid, I would steal my dad’s video games and play them all the time. Then I would beat his high score and he would get so mad.”

“You would also beat my high score and I’d get mad,” I added.

Jade smiled. “Yeah, but you gave me a good run for my money.”

“So, you two knew each other?” Agnes asked. “Does that mean you’re both old?”

“Hey,” Jade said. “Thirty is not old.”

“Technically, we’re over thirty,” I reminded her.

“Shut up,” she hissed.

“Being over thirty means you’re a grandmother. Where are your gray hairs?” Agnes asked.

“That’s why her hair is cool colors. She’s doing it to stop from feeling how sad she is that she’s old!” Beatrice yelled. People turned and stared, but Jade glared at them all until they stopped.

“Or I’m way cooler than either of you and that’s why my hair is like this. What are you guys gonna do when you’re eventually over thirty? Are you gonna refer to yourselves as grandmothers?”

“That’s so sad.” Beatrice sniffed. “I’ll have a walker by then.”

“Do I have a walker?” Jade scoffed. “You two are lucky I like you or else I would be leaving.”

“You’re trying not to smile. You like this.” Beatrice stared at her.

I knew that Beatrice was right. Jade did like this. And it reminded me of how she and I used to be. We would always banter and throw jokes at one another, and it would never go too far.

“Do you guys wanna go play on the playground now?” I offered. “You finished your drinks.”

Both of them let out guttural screams and ran out the door. I winced and apologized to everyone around us.

“A walker? Really?” Jade stood and shook her head as she headed outside to watch the girls. It was so strange seeing how instinctual this was for her. Most days, I felt like I was treading water, trying to figure out what these two needed. She seemed to know automatically.

When she got what she wanted and found the right person, she would be a great mother.

I followed and said the most idiotic thing I could think of.

“So, you’ve heard of my game?”

She paused. “The entire town talked about it.”

“Did they find the cove?”

“The what?” She shook her head. “There isn’t a cove.”

“There is.”

“Nope,” she said. I wasn’t sure if she was pulling my leg or not.

“I promise you there is.”

“I promise you there’s not.”

“Jade, I know the game I made.”

“And I’ve put five thousand hours into that game,” she snapped. “I’ve played through the small-town area every time and I know it’s not there.”

I started to argue, but I stopped myself. “You’ve played in the small-town area for five thousand hours?”

The color drained from her cheeks. I knew how Jade was. She never wanted to appear weak. She’d avoided me up until I left, saying she didn’t want to see me ever again.

But if she played that many hours . . .

How many nights had she thought of me? How many nights did my stupid decision weigh her down?

I regretted it more than I could ever say. But I regretted it because I lost her.

I wondered if she’d missed me at all.

It was better not having an answer.

Jade realized it the same moment I did. Her breath came out quickly and she darted to the alleyway near her apartment.

One of the people staring was Jackie.

“Hi, it’s really nice to see you again,” I said in a rush. “But can you watch my two kids?”

“O-okay.”

That was all I needed before following Jade. I found her near the stairs to her apartment. “Jade—”

“Don’t!” she snapped. “Don’t say anything.”

I paused and put up my hands in mock defense. “Okay, I won’t. I just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“I’m fine.” The words were uttered through gritted teeth.

“We both know that’s a lie.”

And I did. Most people would let her process in silence, but I’d always refuse to.

“Oh, fuck off. You’re the one who left.”

“You told me not to come back.”

“And obviously I regretted it, okay? Is that what you want to hear?”

“Jade—”

“I overreacted. I shouldn’t have told you to stay away because—*fuck*—having nothing was way harder than you leaving.” I opened my mouth to say something, but she wasn’t having it. “Shut it. I’m crashing out and you’re gonna fucking listen!”

I sealed my lips as she stepped forward.

“You were my *person*, you know that, right? I’ve never felt as understood as when I was with you.”

My heart felt like it was breaking in my chest. She didn’t want me to talk, but I had so much to say.

“We’re supposed to stay away from each other. We’re not supposed to fall into old patterns. But I never broke the pattern, okay? I never have and I never will. Meanwhile, you made a life. Your game is the one thing I have, even if it just shows how little you regret leaving.”

I couldn’t stay quiet any longer. “I do regret leaving.”

Jade paused. “Wh-what?”

“I do regret leaving. I did miss you. A lot more than five thousand hours were spent thinking of you.”

That got Jade out of her anger. She looked at me with wide eyes, tears spilling down her cheeks.

“Then why didn’t you come back?”

“I didn’t think you’d want me to.”

“Then why doesn’t it change anything? Why are you leaving again?”

“There are some things out of my control.”

She scoffed. “That’s a cop-out answer.”

“It’s the only one I have.”

“Then we’re in the same place. I’m not getting my heart broken again. Not any more than I have to.”

“I don’t want to break your heart at all.”

She let out a humorless laugh. “It’s far too late for that one.”

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21

JADE



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Dale Garrett: So . . . play any good games lately?

Comments:
Kerry Winsor: DALE! Even I know not to post about this!!
Dale Garrett: What? I'm bored and want something to do!
Mark Bell: Come on, man. Jade is in a sensitive place. This isn't right.
Dale Garrett: What? Did something happen to Jade?
Dale Garrett: Did I miss something again?

THERE WERE downsides to living in a small town.

Admitting how often I played his game and then running off meant everyone knew I was upset. After too many concerned messages, I was content to sink into the floor and never be seen again.

The closest I could get was ice cream. I was deep in the freezer aisle getting whatever I could and thought I was alone.

Of course, when I shut the door, Dale was watching.

"So," he began.

"Watch it."

"What the hell is going on? I asked about games and everyone jumped down my throat."

“You don’t know?”

“Not this time.” He sighed. “You okay?”

“Not really.”

“Gabe?”

“Don’t call him that,” I hissed.

“So that’s a yes.” He said it slowly. “If you hit him with a bat, I wouldn’t tell anyone.”

I sighed. I wanted to be angry, I really did. In a way, it would be easier to, but I’d clung to that anger for years.

“Thanks,” I said.

“He really did a number on you, huh?”

“He didn’t do anything. This was all on me.”

“So, what’s gonna happen? Are you guys still on the outs?”

“What’s happening is I’m not doing the same thing I did all those years ago. He’s leaving, and I’m staying away.”

“That sucks,” Dale said and frowned. “I feel like I should say something inspirational here.”

I let out a humorless laugh. “Don’t strain yourself.”

“You know, when my wife was alive, she used to say that real love is when you look through the anger and feel what’s underneath.”

“Love doesn’t stop someone from leaving.”

Dale huffed. “True. Man, I miss her.”

I remembered when she passed. The funeral costs had been covered by the grant. It was one of the first things it did.

“You seem lost in thought,” Dale said. “Thinking about Gabriel again?”

I shook my head. “I’m thinking about the grant.”

“You kids jump from topic to topic way too fast for me.”

“Hey, when your wife died, did she have some massive estate? Maybe enough to save the town?”

“Would I be scanning your sad ice cream if I did?” Dale asked in a flat voice.

“All right, fair enough.”

“You’re trying to find them, aren’t you?”

“Am I that obvious?”

“Unfortunately. In many ways too. We all knew you were hiding how much you missed Gabriel, by the way. You running off upset was gonna happen eventually.”

My cheeks heated. “Can you finish ringing me up? I need to hide.”

“Jade, it’s okay. We’ve all had our moments.”

“I’ll just have mine in front of my TV, thanks.”

I paid and went home. I got through the door and considered eating my ice cream, but not even that was enough.

My gaze went to the wall I shared with Gabriel, and I had to force myself to look away. There was no way I could be here, not without losing my mind.

I needed somewhere that I could be calm.

Without thinking, I got in my car and drove out of the town square. The sun had mostly set, but the remaining light left one last glow in the sky while I pulled onto Hugh’s land. With my trusty flashlight, I made it to the spring and sat on my favorite rock.

All I could hear were frogs and bugs. It was quiet, and I needed that.

I set my phone on the rock and leaned back, trying to force myself to be calm.

I didn’t realize that I’d called someone until much later.

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22

GABRIEL



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Hu Gh: I’m telling all of you kids to STAY OFF MY LAND!!! DO YOU HEAR ME?!?!

Comments:
Mark Bell: None of us go to your spring, Hugh.
Kerry Winsor: Well . . . almost none of us. **@Grace Day** Is Jade hanging out there again?
Grace Day: I’m not answering that.
Kerry Winsor: So it’s a yes. I wonder if Gabriel is going with her.
Jade Clark: I will curse all of you.

I ALMOST MISSED THE CALL.

But I had one rule: If Jade called, I was answering.

“Hello?” I asked into the phone.

All I heard was the sound of frogs.

I frowned and checked the time. It was eight thirty, but she always had a habit of trying to go to sleep early when she’d had a bad day.

And if she’d gone to sleep and was now at the spring . . .

“Shit,” I said, nearly falling off the couch.

“What?” Agnes asked. “You almost made me drop my ice cream.”

“It’s Jade. Fuck, I think she’s in trouble.”

“Because of the sleepwalking thing she does?” Beatrice asked.

“Yes.”

“Where is she?” Agnes added, putting down her spoon.

“She’s out in the forest,” I said.

“We need to get her!” Beatrice called, tripping over herself to run to her shoes.

“What if she gets hurt?”

As we drove to Hugh’s land, I thought of all the things that could go wrong. What if she fell and called me? What if she slept there and an animal found her?

The girls were quiet, and it felt like they were serious for the first time in their lives. Apparently, they were like me. When it came to Jade, all bets were off.

“Okay, so she’s not going to be able to talk,” I told them again. I’d said this before, but I wasn’t sure if they would remember. “She’s asleep, but she’s walking.”

“We know,” Agnes said with a roll of her eyes.

“Still. I want to do this right.”

“You really care about her,” Beatrice said quietly.

“Of course I do.”

“So you *can* care about something.”

The words hit hard. “I’d do the same for you two.”

“Really?” Agnes asked.

“Yes. Without hesitation.”

And I had. Neither of them knew that I wasn’t in the will. Alice had no other family members who stepped up.

I was the only one who did.

The girls were quiet when we pulled in.

“Holy shit,” I said. “She drove here?” I let out a long sigh.

“Is that bad?” Beatrice asked in a small voice.

“Very bad,” I said. “What am I gonna do with her?”

“I know!” Agnes raised her hand. “She could live with us! We could keep an eye on her!”

I huffed out a laugh, but shook my head. “She wants to be here, and we’re going back to San Fran soon.”

Both girls went quiet, but they nodded.

This was the one thing they didn’t fight me on.

“Hold my hands and don’t run off. I’m really serious about this one. It’s different here at night.”

I could tell neither of them had been out in nature before. Both of them gripped my hands tightly as we hurried through the field.

“What’s that sound?” Beatrice whispered.

“That’s probably a raccoon,” I replied. I didn’t like hearing the sound either, but I had to be brave for them.

She gripped my hand tighter.

“Why is it kind of loud?” Agnes asked.

“A lot of animals are out. Do you need to wait in the car?”

“No! I wanna help Jade! If I’m scared, then she is too!”

“Me too!” Beatrice said.

“All right. It’s not much farther.”

I used the flashlight on my phone to illuminate the path as we walked to the spring. When we got there, I didn’t see her near the area. Where could she have gone? What was going on?

Then we saw another light.

Both girls screamed.

“It’s a ghost!” Agnes yelled.

“She’s here to get us for being bad!” Beatrice screamed. “I told you not to do that to the bees!”

“I told you not to be mean to Dad!”

They hid behind me while purple hair came into view.

“Gabriel?” Jade asked. “What the hell are you doing here?”

I blinked. She was awake. “Did you mean to call me?”

She stared. “I called you?”

The girls peeked out. “You’re okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. What’s he doing having you out here at night?”

“We thought you were in trouble,” I explained.

“We wanted to help!” Agnes said.

Jade blinked and then smiled. “That’s sweet, but I’m fine. I was here to think.”

“At night?”

“It’s not the first time, and it won’t be the last.”

I frowned. “There has to be a safer place than a spring at night. What about wild animals?”

“Bears!” Agnes said.

“Wolves!”

“Spiders!”

“What they said,” I echoed.

Jade opened her mouth and then shut it. “All right. You have me there. I can go home.”

I let out a long breath, finally feeling like I could relax. I had a lot to think about, but I was glad she was okay.

“This place is scary,” Beatrice said. “It was cool last time, but not this time!”

“Last time?” Jade asked. “You brought them here before?”

“Yes. They conned me into it.” I winced at how tightly they gripped my hands. “But I don’t know if they’ll want to come back.”

“I don’t even care how cool the rocks are,” Beatrice said, hiding behind me again. “This place is too freaky!”

Jade spoke up immediately. “Strawberry Springs is safe. There’s nothing to worry about.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“I promise it is.”

“People break promises,” Agnes muttered.

“Well, I don’t.”

“Mommy said the same thing.”

I tensed.

The last time they saw their mother, Alice held her pinky out and said she was coming home.

She never did.

“But—” I shook my head at her.

Jade looked at the girls, and then at me.

Beatrice tugged on my hand. “Are those drivers here?” she asked.

My heart was in my throat. “What drivers?”

“The ones that hit Mommy. If they hit you, we’ll have to go to the scary home again.”

Scary home. *Foster care.*

I didn’t know much about their time in the system, but I did know they weren’t happy with where they were. They’d always been a force of nature when Alice would ask me to watch them. When I picked them up, it was a new level of hell.

Jade was watching, and as much as I hated taking my eyes off her, I needed to focus on the girls. “They’re not here, but I know you guys were taken at night. Is that why you don’t sleep alone?”

Both nodded.

“We don’t like the night.” Agnes’s voice was small.

“At home, the lights help.”

I frowned. My apartment in San Francisco had hardly any lights at all. There were a few, but I didn’t even have a night-light.

Jade elbowed me. “The lights on the square.”

It hit me like a pile of bricks. They meant home *here*.

“Oh.” I’d have to figure out what to do about *that* later. “Yeah, let’s go home then.”

“I’m really sorry I scared you all,” Jade said. “I’ll make it up to you tomorrow.”

“Please don’t promise.” Agnes spoke again.

“How about plans? Are those better?” They nodded. “Then I *plan* on being there tomorrow.”

THE NEXT MORNING, I got up bright and early. Jade hadn’t sleepwalked, and I wondered if that was by design after how I showed up at the spring.

Still, I was changing my habits. I was getting up earlier than usual, which would help in case Agnes and Beatrice found something to get into.

When I came out of my room, I only saw Agnes on the couch.

She was staring at the TV, arms crossed.

It was off.

“Do you have something to ask me?” I asked.

“No.”

“The TV is off.”

“You won’t turn it on.”

“It’s not TV time,” I said with a nod. “So, what are you looking at?”

“I’m imagining stuff is on it.”

Normally, I would walk away, but there was a lingering curiosity I couldn’t shake. It made me sit next to her.

“What are you imagining?”

Agnes blinked. She was quiet for so long that I wondered if she would answer.

“I see Mommy coming home.”

My heart sank. “Oh.”

She was quiet for another long moment before she spoke again. “She’s not, is she?”

“No. I’m sorry.”

She looked down. “I miss her.”

“I do too.”

“Beatrice doesn’t understand. She thinks we’re on vacation.”

I scrubbed a hand across my face. Their therapist had tried to reason with them. Obviously, it hadn’t gone well for one of them.

When I finally stopped, Agnes was staring at me.

“Do you see anything on the TV?”

At first, I didn’t know what she meant. Then I realized this was her way of asking what’s on my mind.

“I’m lost, Agnes.”

“Use a GPS.”

“Not that kind of lost. I want to help Beatrice understand, but I don’t know how.”

Agnes looked down at her legs. “One time, I fell and my knee bled.”

“I remember. Your mom patched you up.”

“I kept asking when it would feel better. She said it took time.” She looked at me. “Beatrice needs time too.”

“You’re right,” I said. “How is a five-year-old smarter than I am?”

“It’s not hard.” She shrugged and looked back at the TV.

I huffed out a laugh. “I guess it’s not.”

“Are you really my dad?” Agnes asked.

“I am.”

“Then where were you?”

I paused, unsure of how to explain it. I didn’t want to hide anything from them, but Agnes was too young to understand some things. “Your mom wanted to do it all, and I was happy to let her. Technically, I wasn’t supposed to be your dad, but then I found out you were alone.”

Agnes nodded. “Okay.”

“Okay? Do you have any other feelings on that?”

She shrugged but shuffled closer to me. This was the closest she'd ever willingly gotten to me—save for the night before when she was scared.

I half expected her to return to her usual chaos any second now.

Instead, she stayed next to me. It reminded me of the rare times she would do this with Alice too.

I never thought I would get lucky enough for her to see me in the same light.

Maybe I was wrong.

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23

JADE



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Kerry Winsor: Cranking the hog!!! Lol.

Comments:
Jade Clark: Is this code for something?
Mollie Wilson: She definitely doesn't know what it means.
Wren Hackett: Are we gonna tell her?
Grace Day: I think we HAVE to.
Kerry Winsor: I know what it means. I'm just so glad you all commented on my post. 😊
Kerry Winsor: I may have reached a new level of desperation.

I'D BARELY BEEN able to sleep. Dialing Gabriel had been embarrassing yesterday. I had no doubts that he thought I was sleepwalking, and the result was fitful sleep while I kept thinking of how worried he'd been.

The best thing to do would be to stay home.

I was not doing that.

"This is fine. You can hang out with them without getting your heart stomped on." I told it to myself as I stared at the door.

I knew I was lying.

My knuckles rapped on the door anyway.

Gabriel opened it moments later, eyes widening when he saw me.

“Hi!” I said.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Yes. Just making sure we do our plans.”

“Our . . . plans?”

“For the girls to see more of Strawberry Springs.”

“Jade!” Agnes ran to me and nearly knocked me over with the force of her tight hug.

“You were serious about that?” Gabriel asked.

I gave him a flat look. “Do you think *not* being serious would be a good idea?”

“You’re right.”

“As usual,” I added.

“As usual,” he repeated with a sigh.

I couldn’t help the smirk that crossed my face. I wanted to push it, but I was here for them, not him.

“Have they eaten yet?”

“They haven’t.”

“Then we should take them to the diner.”

“We?” he repeated slowly.

I could turn around here. I could take the girls and keep some semblance of distance between us. It was the right thing to do. I’d been doing so well.

But after turning him down for breakfast once before, I regretted it. I was talking about him far too much for my own good, but that was going to happen whether I spent time with him or not. There was a deep part of me that wanted to catch up with him, and I couldn’t ignore it.

Consequences be damned.

“Yes. We.”

There was something about Gabriel that made me make terrible decisions. I knew that the town would be on fire with this news, yet I did it anyway.

I was sure he had more to say to me, but we were interrupted by the sound of tiny footsteps coming down the hallway.

Beatrice had just gotten up and was rubbing her eyes. Agnes had gone back to the couch and now looked alarmingly like Gabriel with a frown on

her face.

I had to stop myself from grinning at her. She was, without a doubt, fucking adorable.

If I said that, she would kill me.

“Morning,” I said to Beatrice.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“Are you both hungry?”

“Yes!” Agnes yelled. Beatrice frowned and covered her ears. She still nodded, though.

“Let’s experience the best breakfast in Strawberry Springs.”

“Technically, it’s the only breakfast in Strawberry Springs,” Gabriel said.

“Whatever. Even if it’s the only place, it’s still good.”

“That I’ll agree with.”

“I wanna go!” Agnes said.

“Fine,” Beatrice said. “Where are my shoes?”

“First, we should brush your hair. Come on, Beatrice, I’ll handle it.” Gabriel stepped forward, sounding so much like a dad that it almost gave me whiplash. It took me back to the times when I thought that this was the future we’d hold.

I had no idea it would happen like this.

Beatrice grumbled but followed him. Agnes bounced on the balls of her feet, seeming much lighter than she had just the day before.

“I guess the spring didn’t give you too many nightmares.”

“It was fine. Dad helped.” Her calling him “Dad” made me pause. Since when did that happen? “What?” Agnes asked.

I knew it was better not to call her out on it. “Nothing. Are you excited?”

“Yes.”

Gabriel shuffled Beatrice back down the hallway, her hair freshly brushed and her outfit different.

When we got down to the street, nerves made my skin rise in gooseflesh.

I walked into the diner anyway.

“Welcome, welc—” Tammy froze when she saw us. I gave her the best smile I could, and a wave.

“Been a long time.” Gabriel must have also been in a good mood. Back in the day, he would never talk to Tammy. It wasn’t that he hated her, but he had a strong personality that clashed with hers. I knew they both cared about one another, yet sometimes, it didn’t show.

“Yeah, no kidding.” Tammy crossed her arms. “I thought you’d forgotten about us.”

Gabriel blinked. “I was a little busy.”

She looked at the girls. “Obviously. They look just like you, by the way.”

“How dare you!” Beatrice snapped. “I look nothing like him.”

“Oh, she’s spicy.” Tammy laughed and looked at me. “Did you already imprint on her?”

I shook my head. “This one wasn’t from me. Though, it does sometimes feel like looking in a mirror.”

“I feel that way about Wren sometimes. Come on, I’ll lead you all to a table.”

We were guided to a booth, and both girls fought on who would sit with who. In the end, Agnes sat with Gabriel. He didn’t say anything—a rare smart choice for him. But I caught his eyes widen for a split second.

He recovered quickly.

“Wow,” he said when we’d settled and could look at the menus. “The menu hasn’t changed.”

“Now why would I change a good thing?” Tammy asked. “That menu has kept me open through some of the worst things this town has seen.”

“Have the recipes changed?”

Tammy glared. “Don’t insult me, boy. I’m trying to be nice because you’re back.”

“I’ll take it. And I’m also glad you didn’t change your recipes.”

“So, you *did* miss us.”

“I guess I did.”

With how he admitted it yesterday, I didn’t think Gabriel would say it to anyone else.

One corner of Tammy’s mouth curled upward. “Good. Then you won’t forget about us again after you’re gone.”

“What do you two like to eat?” I loudly asked the girls. I couldn’t handle a discussion of the future when I was obviously doing what I would have in the past.

“Spicy eggs!” Agnes yelled.

Tammy was still looking at Gabriel. “You used to get the same thing.”

“I still like them.”

“Now I know how to please two of you. What do you like, dear?” She looked at Beatrice.

“Normal eggs.”

“What about pancakes?”

“Yes!”

“Wait, I want pancakes too!” Agnes whined.

“So, two orders for you both.” Tammy smiled and wrote down their orders. I knew that she would remember what they wanted even after they left town.

As usual, the diner food was incredible, and the girls gobbled up everything. Once they were fed, they asked to play at the playground.

Gabriel couldn’t sit still and I figured something was on his mind.

“Do you need to handle something?”

“Some stuff with work. I rarely get time for it with the girls around.”

“I’ll watch them.” I waved a hand. “You go do what you have to.”

He opened his mouth, no doubt to ask me if I was sure. All I could do was roll my eyes and push him away.

He laughed and pulled out his phone.

“Thank you. I appreciate all that you’re doing for me.”

“Remember me when you make your next big game and get even richer.”

“Like I ever forgot you.” He muttered it under his breath, making my own hitch. My cheeks warmed as I turned to watch the girls.

If he kept saying things like that, I would make even more mistakes.

Or maybe I would make them anyway.

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24

GABRIEL



Dad Company (But Sometimes Good Advice)
Robert Colt: Sound off, men! Who all has kids going to school this year?

Comments:
Oliver Brian: I do, but it's my third. I'll be fine.
Robert Colt: Bets on Oliver crying again like he did with his second?
Oliver Brian: It was only a few tears!
Dean Briggs: You all are stronger than me. I can't imagine sending my Sammy to school yet. I get emotional just thinking about it.
Oliver Brian: I think **@G Singh** has the twins going in.
Robert Colt: Anyone heard from him? I bet he's the one person looking forward to it . . .

Hi, Mr. Sinclair,

Usually, we do not approve requests like this. Our curriculum is strict and we want our students to be here from day one. However, considering your story and the status you hold, we are willing to reconsider.

We would like to set up an in-person meeting to discuss timelines and what education the girls will need upon joining the school. When are you available?

Thank you,

Director Smith

I STARED at the email for a long time, trying not to feel disappointed. Breakfast had been great, and the longer I stayed in Strawberry Springs, the more it grew on me.

The school was willing to work with me, which was something I should have been happy about. Alice wanted this. She had worked so hard to get them in, and I knew I needed to follow what she wanted.

It also meant returning to San Francisco temporarily, which wouldn't be easy with Agnes and Beatrice in tow. My body was tense as I made my way back to Jade.

"Wow," she said as she bumped her shoulder with mine. "Must have been some bad emails."

"Yeah, they were."

"Wanna talk about it?"

"It's boring city stuff. I doubt you'll want to hear it."

"Contrary to popular belief, I can give good advice. Even if it's not something I'm too interested in."

She was offering more than she used to. The Jade I knew would have hidden away or tried to change the subject.

But we'd both changed. And I didn't want to keep it all in this time.

"I got an email from the girls' private school."

"Really?"

"My apartment isn't going to be ready by the time school starts. I need them to join in later, but the school is against that. They only want kids to come at the beginning of the school year because of their high standards."

"Wow, sounds pretentious."

"It'll be good for them," I said. "They need a lot of care."

"I guess I can't disagree there. So, you're going back soon?"

"I need to visit, yes. But the girls didn't handle the flight well last time, and I'm not eager to repeat that again."

Jade nodded and twisted her lips.

"I could watch them."

Her words nearly knocked me over.

"What did you say?"

"I said I could watch them."

So, I hadn’t imagined it. “That’s too much, even for you. Atticus only makes it a few hours.”

“I’m not like anyone else. They like me, so why wouldn’t I do it?”

“Why would you, is the better question.”

“I like them.” She said it as if it were simple.

“But—”

“Gabriel,” she said flatly. “I know how they work better than anyone else in town. It’s not a problem.”

“It very much could be.”

“Do you trust me?” she asked.

“With my life.”

“Then let me watch them.”

We sat in silence for a long time, and I had no idea what to say. She was right. She was the best option, but it felt wrong to ask this much of her.

It would be worse to take them with me right when we were getting along. One of them could easily blow up.

“That would be really helpful, Jade. I can pay you for your time.”

“What am I? Your nanny? No, that’s insulting.”

“Come on, I’m sure the shop could use the help.”

“The shop is perfectly fine. Thank you for asking. I have my methods.”

“Is it being a front for money laundering?”

Despite everything, she laughed. “You got me. Call the police.”

“Mike won’t do anything.” I rolled my eyes, but she was smiling when she looked at me.

“Thank you for telling me.”

“Thank you for asking.”

“Are we . . . communicating better this time?”

I nodded. “You know what? I think we are.”

Jade looked back at the girls and her smile faded. “So . . . they were in foster care.”

“Yes. For a month.”

“Do you ever talk about it?”

“Not usually,” I said. When Jade frowned, I continued. “But I will with you.”

“What happened?”

“It wasn’t planned, that much was for sure.” I crossed my arms as I thought back. “A lot wasn’t.”

“Did you even know them that well before taking them in?”

“Yeah, I knew them. I did watch them sometimes.”

“How did that go?”

“So horribly that I joined a dad group out of pure fear.”

“A dad group?” She laughed. “But you weren’t a dad then.”

“I wasn’t . . . or so I thought. Maybe I always had an inkling this would happen.”

“And when Alice passed?”

“I thought they went to family. It was pure chance that I saw both of them fighting their foster mother on the street.” He sighed. “She raised her hand at them and I knew I had to step in.”

“She *what*?”

“I got her removed from the foster system, don’t worry. And then I took them in right after.”

“You didn’t have to do that part,” she said.

“They’re my kids.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You said they weren’t supposed to be.”

“I know.” I let out a long breath. “But there was a connection there. It wasn’t nearly enough to be a father, but I cared about them. And now there’s no going back. A paternity test was done. No one’s fighting that.”

“You said they weren’t your kids and then you said you cared about them.” Jade elbowed me. “You’re full of conflict, Gabriel.”

The girls’ school popped into my mind again. “Yeah, I really am.”

“I can help with some of it.”

“You should hate me.”

“I do, but I also care about you. Guess I’m filled with conflict too.”

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25

JADE



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Jade Clark: The shop will be closed for a few days while I watch Agnes and Beatrice.

Comments:
Kerry Winsor: Oh my God, Jade!!! Will you be okay?
Atticus Thompson: I'm available for backup. Call me in at any time.
Jackie Anne: You're so brave.
Mark Bell: Don't join them in throwing anything, Jade. We're fragile. We can't handle anything else.
Jade Clark: Fuck you all!!! I'm a great role model!!

GABRIEL MOVED FAST, and I was determined to move faster.

The day he was set to leave, I knocked on his door and took a deep breath.

"Be there in a second!" he called. I set my bag on the ground and checked my phone.

WREN

Do you want us to do wellness checks?

GRACE

Bring them over if you need help!

MOLLIE

Do NOT show fear. Kids can smell it.

PIPER

I have no idea how to manage two kids, but if anyone can, it's you!

I could tell my friends were less than thrilled that I was diving so deep into things with Gabriel, but they were still doing their best to support me. Their texts were the first step.

JADE

I'll be fine, guys. I'll scream if I need help. I'm sure one of you will hear me.

The door opened just as I put my phone away.

"You're here early," Gabriel said. "And you have a bag."

"I'll stay here."

"Jade!" Agnes was bouncing on the couch. "Come over here! We should watch movies!"

"I'll be there in a second."

"You're staying here?" Gabriel asked.

"It would be best. My apartment is only one bedroom."

"I was thinking I could have them go with Atticus and—"

"No!" Beatrice said. "I don't like him as much as Jade!"

"Please no!" Agnes echoed.

I grinned, knowing Gabriel was weak the second either one of them said please. "Seems like they want me here."

Gabriel sighed. "Fine."

"Anything you don't want me to snoop through?"

"If I tell you, you'll definitely snoop through it."

"I will, but I'll try not to."

He laughed. "Luckily for my own sanity, I have nothing to hide here."

"So, you have something somewhere else to hide?"

"Not answering that."

"Damn. I'd love to learn all your little secrets."

“That’ll have to wait.” He gestured for me to come in. “You live next door, so you hear how wild they can be.”

“Yes, I do. I’m prepared for the most dramatic few days of my life, but that brings me to point one. Remind me how long you’re gone for.”

“Is it forever?” Beatrice asked.

“No,” he said. “Only two days.”

“Are you in a rush to get back or something?” I asked.

“I’m making sure you don’t lose your mind.”

“That seems like a challenge,” I said. “So now I’ll do even better.”

Gabriel eyed me, and I knew he was wondering if I was really up to this. A part of me wondered the same thing.

But I’d prepared for this. I would be tired, but I would do my best. Despite me not having kids of my own, I felt like I could do this.

These girls reminded me so much of myself. I was wild like they were, and oftentimes, Dad didn’t know what to do with me. I could remember the way I’d roll my eyes when he yelled at me, and then do whatever I’d been doing even harder.

Agnes and Beatrice were the same.

“Are you really sure about this?” he asked.

“I am. I’ve so got this.”

Gabriel slowly nodded. “All right. Then I’ll get the last of my things together.”

Agnes called me to the couch again, and I went over after setting down my bag. It didn’t take long for Gabriel to pack, and I was listening to a long lecture about rocks when he came back out.

Seeing him walk out of his room with a suitcase hit harder than I expected. We hadn’t been talking when he packed up and left the first time, but this reminded me of that all the same.

My throat went tight and I had to fight the urge to ask exactly when he was coming back. I almost needed reassurance that I’d see him again.

Luckily, Agnes did it for me.

“Two days?” she asked.

“That’s right. You’re free of me for two days and then things will be back to normal.”

“Can you stay a week?” Beatrice asked.

“No,” Agnes said. “A week is a really long time.”

“So? At least we’ll have someone fun here.”

Agnes had really changed in the last few days. While she was still strong-willed, I could see that she almost wanted to be near Gabriel. When she first came to town, she wanted to be anywhere but.

“I think this will go quicker than we expect,” I said. “It’s just two days to plan some things.”

“Right,” Gabriel said, and then he checked his watch. “I should get going if I’m going to get to the Knoxville airport on time.”

Gabriel looked at the two girls, and I could almost see the question he wanted to ask.

“I think it’s time for hugs,” I suggested.

“Ew.” Beatrice rolled her eyes. “No.”

Agnes surprised us all. She jumped up and gave Gabriel a hug with no questions asked. Gabriel went stiff for a second before he gently returned it. Beatrice watched the exchange closely.

“I’ll see you soon.” Agnes’s voice was small. “You’re coming back, right?”

“I’ll do my best to.” Gabriel looked at Beatrice. “Do you want a wave or a hug?”

Beatrice’s bottom lip poked out and she lifted one hand in a subtle wave. Gabriel nodded and waved back at her.

Then his gaze landed on me.

I stiffened. This was the first time we actually got a goodbye. All those years ago, I told him to leave and never come back. While that was a type of goodbye, it certainly wasn’t on good terms.

Standing, I wiped my sweaty palms on my leggings. “Be safe. I hear it can be really dangerous in the city.”

Gabriel leaned in and then stopped himself. I had no idea what was on his mind.

“Ah, screw it.”

I opened my mouth to ask him what he was thinking, but then he pulled me into a tight hug. If it were anyone else, I’d push them away and lecture them on not asking me. But this was Gabriel. As much as I didn’t want to admit it, I liked hugs like these.

It would have felt wrong if he left without it.

“Two days,” I said into his shirt. I wasn’t sure why I’d asked before. I knew it was two days.

“I’ll be back this time.”

Emotion clogged my throat, but I tried my best not to let it show. This time he was coming back, even if it was only temporarily.

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26

GABRIEL



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Jackie Anne: Hi, friends. Have any of you seen my lovely Ciabatta? He's a round raccoon in a pink tutu. He's missed his favorite treat!

Comments:
Marjorie Brown: Is that what tripped me this morning? I thought I'd done the shrooms again and was losing it.
SherriffMike Finch: Marjorie, I'm in this group.
Marjorie Brown: They're after me again!
Jackie Anne: I'll be on the hunt for my baby! If I do find him, can anyone help me catch him? He likes to run.

ON THE FLIGHT, I took my time to make sure that I responded to emails. What I should have done was catch up on sleep. Even though things were going better with Agnes, Beatrice, and me, I still lacked enough rest to fully function.

But the emails were more important. Even though it had only been a few days since I had time alone, they had already piled up again. It seemed like my life as a parent was being perpetually behind.

I wasn't sure how Alice did it. Not only did she help me out as my assistant, but she also raised Agnes and Beatrice the best she could. She

made it to work on time and she always did what she needed to. I felt like I was missing a part of my life without her.

It was tempting to get a hotel instead of doing what I needed to. Sleep wouldn't be a terrible idea, but the school had given me a list of things to prepare, and I hadn't checked in on my apartment in far too long.

The contractor who was working on my house knew that I was coming. When I prepared this trip, I made sure that they were aware that I wanted to see how things were going. The damage from the fire had been extensive, and it uncovered an electrical problem that I needed to get fixed.

The roads the taxi driver took me on were familiar, as was the lobby of my apartment. When I bought this place, I was a single man thinking only of myself. It barely had enough space for Agnes, Beatrice, and me, and was made more for a bachelor, not a father.

I felt out of place even walking into it.

Shaking it off, I made my way into the elevator.

I couldn't think this way. It would do me no good when I had to return.

My contractor was in the living room. I was pretty sure his name was Cody, but I couldn't remember for sure. My memory had suffered with all the lost sleep.

"Hi," I said, offering my hand. "It's good to see you in person."

"You too." He gave me a tight smile. "Progress is happening, even if it doesn't look like it."

The kitchen was still behind a sheet of plastic. Agnes and Beatrice had started a fire and hid it from me until I smelled smoke all the way across the unit. I walked to the sheet and pulled it to the side. Everything had been torn down and the kitchen was mostly bare.

Wiring was exposed from the extra work that had to be done.

Looking at it told me there was no way this would be finished before the school year. Not that I had any hope that it would.

"What's the timeline on finishing?"

Cody rubbed the back of his neck. "The cabinets are on back order, so that'll be at least a month. The electrician is slowly making his way through everything, but he had to tear apart more than originally anticipated, so there's still a lot of patching up left to do. Plus, all the stuff that's not in the kitchen. I'd say three more months?"

"That long?"

“Yeah. Normally, I try to be a lot quicker, but the universe seems to be against this one. I’ll see if I can make it go faster.”

“No need. I can make things work for three months.”

“Really? I thought you’d want to get back into your home sooner rather than later.”

I didn’t blame him for his confusion. A few months ago, that was exactly what I would’ve wanted. But things had changed ever since returning to Strawberry Springs.

Three months might completely decimate the plans for their school.

Three months meant that I had to pay rent at the new place for that long. But I wasn’t angry. In fact, I was relieved.

“I have somewhere else that I’m okay with being for now.”

THE SCHOOL ALICE picked out was fancier than even I expected. She worked for me, so I paid her salary, and I paid well.

But this seemed more in my budget, not hers.

I remembered the hoops she’d jumped through to get them into the school. It hardened my resolve to make sure I did everything I could to get them here.

Director Smith’s office was almost as nice as mine. I sat across from a man with a massive mahogany desk.

“It’s great to see you in person.” He shook my hand firmly. “What made you interested in our school?”

“The mother of my daughters got them in, actually. She unfortunately passed away about three months ago, so I’m here making sure that I honor what she wanted.”

“That’s very sweet. I think I remember her application. She had a handwritten note on how routine would be so good for her daughters.”

“It would be. They’re a challenge, but she was sure you could help.”

“We’ve dealt with plenty of challenges. When the admin team accepted her application, we had no idea you were their father.”

I knew my name carried some weight, mostly with software engineering.

“It’s a complicated situation. She wanted to raise them on her own, but now that she’s gone, I’ve stepped in.”

“We would love to work with you. And I think your daughters would be a good fit here. When do you think you’ll be back full-time?”

“Three months.”

Director Smith blew out a breath. “That’s a lot of time to be behind on schoolwork.”

“It is. The timing hasn’t been great, but I’m staying near some family out in Tennessee, and it’s helping them for now.”

“I would suggest that you find a hotel here. Then you can enroll them no problem.”

“We tried a hotel for a while, actually. When I say they’re wild, I’m not kidding. They destroyed a few rooms before I finally got smart enough to go be with family.”

“Interesting. They definitely need our routine then.” Director Smith’s lips pursed. “But three months. They might be too behind even for us.”

“I know my request is unconventional. There’s just no way my apartment will be done before the three months. And they need a space they know if they are to do well here.”

“Kids are very tricky.” Director Smith nodded as if he understood. “Especially ones with strong personalities. It seems that you have their best interests at heart. I’ll think about it and let you know via email if I approve or not.”

My jaw tightened. He’d wanted me to come all the way out here, and he wouldn’t give me an answer in person? I felt like I was in limbo. I *needed* an answer.

“I understand,” I lied. “How long will it take you to make a decision?”

“Well, the staff and I have this weekend off and then we have a meeting on Monday. I’ll bring it up then.”

Three more days of limbo. I could make it three more days.

“I’ll watch out for that email on Monday then. Thank you for meeting with me.”

“It was my pleasure.” Director Smith stood to shake my hand again. “I genuinely hope we can work together in the future.”

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27

JADE



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Mark Bell: Welfare check. Any explosions?

Comments:
Atticus Thompson: I haven't heard from Jade yet.
Kerry Winsor: Are her lights on? **@SherriffMike Finch** Did you get a call???
SherriffMike Finch: Guys. I bet they're fine.
SherriffMike Finch: @Jade Clark Do you want to chime in?
Kerry Winsor: SHE'S DEAD! NO! WE LOST OUR FAVORITE ROCK COLLECTOR!

"I DON'T LIKE these old movies!"

I gasped and pressed a hand to my chest. "Old? They're from my childhood!"

"Yeah." Agnes rolled her eyes. "Old."

"I like them." Beatrice smiled. "I'll watch more."

Agnes groaned.

After watching the two of them for over twenty-four hours, I quickly realized they argued more than I expected. When they were causing chaos,

they were determined to be a united front. However, in other parts of their lives, they seemed to love to argue.

I never had siblings, so I didn't understand it fully, but I watched carefully, making sure I worked with both of them.

"Listen, you watch my trash, I'll watch your trash. Finish the movie and we'll watch *Paw Patrol*."

Agnes scoffed. "I don't watch *Paw Patrol*!"

"Then what do you watch?"

"Murder. Guts."

She was so bluffing. "Name one murder and guts movie."

Agnes was silent.

"Yeah, I thought so."

"She likes dragons," Beatrice whispered.

"Now *that* I can work with. Next, we do dragons."

The three of us were on Gabriel's couch, cuddling under blankets. We were watching an old cartoon that I spent my entire childhood loving, and I couldn't be happier. Gabriel told me I could contact anyone if I needed help. So far, I hadn't needed it.

I'd kept them fed and alive. That was a win in my book.

Did I need to sleep for a week? Absolutely.

I now understood why Grace upped her caffeine intake after having Sammy. I was seriously considering doing the same. These two were a full-time job.

Eventually, Agnes dozed off and I watched her with a small smile on my face.

Beatrice was still awake.

"Do you know my mommy?"

I paused. I knew what Gabriel had told me about her, but I didn't know anything else.

"No, I don't."

"She's the best mommy." Beatrice frowned. "She went somewhere else, though. And she's not coming back."

"I'm sorry. People do that sometimes, in many different ways."

"I'm sad. I don't know what to do."

"Sometimes there isn't anything to do. Sometimes . . . life is just sad."

"Gabriel left us too."

My heart felt like it was beating out of rhythm. It took me back to the late nights when I was first accepting that Gabriel had left me.

“He’s coming back.”

“But he could go away again.”

My heart was cracking in two.

“He cares about you a lot,” is what I finally settled on. “So, he wouldn’t leave, if it were his choice.”

Beatrice was quiet. “I don’t know if I can like him.”

“Why not? He’s taking care of you.”

“Because he could leave. It’s not worth it to like him if he leaves.”

“It is,” I assured her. I knew, more than anyone, that I was speaking from experience. “I promise you it’s worth it, even if he leaves.”

THE WORST PART about staying at Gabriel’s was that his bed was ridiculously comfortable. Even though I had never slept here, I felt at home and got better sleep than I did in my own place.

The first night, I tried to avoid it and slept on the couch. Instead, I woke up face down right in the center of the mattress. The second night, I didn’t even try to fight it.

I planned to change the sheets today and pretend I never slept here. What Gabriel didn’t know wouldn’t hurt him.

The door slammed open, and Agnes and Beatrice jumped on the bed. A knee hit me right in the kidney and I thought I was going to die.

“There you are!” Agnes said.

“We saw a raccoon this morning!” Beatrice yelled.

I slowly sat up, still recovering from whoever decided to attack me with their knee.

“A raccoon?” I asked.

“It was in a tutu!”

I paused at her wording. Weirder things had happened in Strawberry Springs. But for my own sanity, I needed to believe that it was something of their imagination, and not an actual raccoon in a tutu.

If it was, I needed to have a talk with Jackie. She kept them as pets, which was something I would never understand.

“That sounds fun. How about we don’t play with random animals in our room?”

“It was in a tutu, so it was friendly.”

Gabriel definitely had his hands full with these two.

“All right then. How about we don’t argue about raccoons and go get breakfast?”

“Yes!” both of them yelled.

“Good. Let me put a bra on.”

“What’s a bra?”

“Evil, that’s what they are.”

“I want one!” Beatrice yelled.

“No, you do not.”

It didn’t take long for me to get all of us ready and to the diner.

Taking them to the diner was easier than I expected. Tammy remembered their orders. She gave us all coloring pages, and I entertained the girls by showing them how to properly color inside the lines.

We were halfway through our food when the door opened and a tall man with long, dark hair walked in.

I knew he was coming back today, but seeing Gabriel walk through the doors made me choke on my food.

Time slowed as I saw him. His hair was up today, and he looked messier than usual, but it was him. He was here and he was *real*.

I was standing before I could stop myself. The diner melted away, and I felt like that eighteen-year-old kid wanting him to come back. I ran over to him, launching myself into his arms.

The entire diner went silent. I didn’t care.

Gabriel stiffened for a second but recovered far faster than the last time. His arms wrapped around me, and it felt like something broken inside of me snapped back into place.

“You came back,” I said.

“I told you I would.”

I was torn between being snarky or begging him to never leave me again. Instead, I settled on silence.

Eventually, Agnes broke that silence.

“Dad!” she yelled as she joined us. “You’re back!”

“I am,” Gabriel said. I pulled away, content to go hide in my closet, but his hand stayed on the small of my back. Even to this day, it grounded me.

“Did you guys have fun?”

“Yes!” Agnes said.

“How were they?” he asked.

“There might have been a raccoon incident, but overall it was great.”

His eyebrows knit. “A raccoon? You know what? I don’t want to know. You’re free now. I got on the earliest flight I could.”

“You didn’t have to. I had this.”

Gabriel looked at both of his kids. They were in clean clothes and alive. Considering how wild they were, I was doing well.

“I guess you did.”

He didn’t need to know that I was on my third cup of coffee, or that I felt like I could fall over at any time. All things considered, this had gone well, and I would be happy to do it again.

“I’ll take them from here. Thank you.”

“Wait, is Jade leaving?” Beatrice asked. “I don’t want her to.”

“I’ll come by soon enough.” I gave her a smile. I didn’t want to admit it out loud, but I needed about four days of sleep. “Don’t you worry about it.”

“You don’t have to,” Gabriel said under his breath. “This was more than I deserved.”

“Remember, I’m not doing this for you. And I actually had a good time.” I went to say something else, but a yawn stopped me.

“You’re exhausted, aren’t you?”

“Shut up.” I shook my head. “But yes. They’re a lot.”

“You should sleep.”

“I’ll do my best. You know how it can be for me.”

“I’ll be here if you don’t.”

I paused. I knew that Gabriel wouldn’t have forgotten about my sleepwalking, but there was something about the way he said he’d be here that made my shoulders tense.

“I’ve grown out of that.”

Gabriel slowly nodded. “Right. But just in case.”

“Whatever,” I muttered. “I’ll see you after eight hours of sleep.”

He nodded again and I walked off.

I would be barricading my door.

And maybe taking my sleep medicine too.

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28

GABRIEL



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Hu Gh: Used toilet for sale. NO LOWBALLERS!!!

Comments:
Kerry Winsor: Hugh, PLEASE.
Atticus Thompson: Come on, man. We've seen your ass. We know what that thing has been through. Just put it out of its misery.
Wren Hackett: That's a vintage American Standard in the color Rain Forest! I want it!!!
Jade Clark: Wren, don't do this. I promise you don't need it.
Wren Hackett: IT'S A COLLECTIBLE. HUGH, LET ME BUY YOUR TOILET.

I WATCHED Jade until she disappeared from view. When I finally pulled myself from my thoughts, Tammy stared at me.

"Not much has changed, huh?"

I was too old to be embarrassed about anything with Jade, but my cheeks grew warm anyway. "I guess not."

Tammy huffed out a breath. "Should've seen this coming. What do you want for food?"

“You’re not gonna ask about . . . that?” I pointed to where Jade had stood.

She rolled her eyes. “You wouldn’t tell me if I did.”

“How do you know that?”

“Kid, you barely talked to me when you lived here. I doubt you want to now.”

“I . . .” I paused. I didn’t have to say a thing, but Tammy was right. Everyone else in town was doing a good job of starting conversations but not pushing it too far. I saw how they watched me. They expected me not to answer. “I’m not that same little jerk I was as a teen. I missed you guys.”

Tammy’s jaw fell open. “I’m sorry . . . *what?*”

“You heard me.”

“I just never thought I’d hear the words.” She shook her head.

“Are you gonna ask then?”

“Hm. No. I doubt either of you know what you’re doing anyway.”

“Wow.”

“Am I wrong?”

“No,” I muttered.

She laughed. “A few things have changed, but not everything. At least you’re entertaining.”

With a shake of my head, I went to sit in the booth. Out of habit, I sat alone.

Agnes followed.

“That’s some improvement,” Tammy said.

“He’s not that big of a turd,” Agnes muttered.

Tammy let out a loud laugh. “I love how spicy they are. I bet Jade does too. Who did they get it from?”

“Their mom.”

“Mommy is really funny!” Beatrice said.

Agnes looked down at her food with a frown.

“Was,” I mouthed at Tammy.

“Oh. Right.” Tammy smiled at Beatrice and then looked back at me. “That’s hard, kid.”

“They’re taking their time with it.”

“So you and their mom . . .”

“Jade didn’t tell everyone?” I asked.

“No. It seems pretty serious, and we try not to gossip about things like that.”

“That’s nice. And their mom and I were friends. Only friends.”

“Good for Jade then. No wonder she changed her tune so fast.” Tammy rapped her knuckles on the table. “Now, your order? My other customers can’t wait forever.”

I blinked. I didn’t mean to keep her from her other customers for so long, but it was nice to catch up.

“My usual.”

“Teen-you usual or what you got last time?”

“Surprise me.”

“I hate it when people do that,” she muttered with a shake of her head. “You’ll be lucky if I don’t bring you a pile of slop.”

“I wouldn’t complain.”

“Don’t challenge me,” Tammy said as she walked off.

That was when I focused on Agnes and Beatrice.

“How were the last few days?” I asked.

Beatrice looked up. “So much fun! I want to be left with Jade from now on.”

It would be so easy to get defensive, but I knew that was what Beatrice wanted. I remembered when Agnes told me she needed time. As I was by myself, I also realized she needed patience.

“What did she do with you guys?”

“Why?” Beatrice asked.

“Because I’m not the best at coming up with ideas and I’ve let you two get too bored. I wanna do better.”

Beatrice’s eyes went wide.

Agnes was the one who answered. “She had us watch old, boring movies.”

“Did you enjoy those?”

“No. I enjoyed the dragon ones, though.”

“I liked the old ones!” Beatrice argued. “I want those too!”

“So both. I can make that work.”

We lapsed into a somewhat comfortable silence that was broken only by Tammy bringing me my food.

Eventually, Agnes looked at me. “Where did you go?”

“Back to San Francisco,” I said. “To check out a school for you guys.”

“A school.” Agnes frowned.

“Mommy mentioned a school!” Beatrice said. “It was a pre . . . pro—”

“Private school,” I finished for her.

“That,” Beatrice said. “Are we going there?”

“In a few months,” I replied. “Remember my apartment there?”

“The one with the fire?”

I nodded. “Yes. They’re still working on it. It’ll take a few months because of the damage.”

“Oh.” Agnes frowned again. “Because of us?”

“Yes.”

“Are you mad?”

“I was,” I said slowly. “But I also know you two are going through a hard time.”

“Mommy would be mad,” Agnes said quietly.

“Yeah, probably.”

“I’m sorry we did that.”

“I’m not,” Beatrice said. Agnes met her with a harsh look. “Okay, I kind of am.”

I looked between the two of them. Never in my life did I think they would apologize, but it was just proof that things were finally getting better.

“Thank you for saying you’re sorry,” I replied. “And I know finding out who I am is a big change. It had to be scary, and I knew it would take time for you guys to adjust to it.”

They remained quiet and I gave them time to take it all in.

“Some of the kids here are going to school now,” Beatrice said. “Will we go too?”

“I’m working on that. There’s an elementary school here—”

“Yes!” Agnes said.

“I wanna go!”

“You . . . *want* to go to school?”

“The kids here are fun!”

I could only blink. Then I forced myself out of it. “I’ll look into it.”

“I wonder if Eric will be there!”

“Oh, will we have the same class too?”

They continued theorizing about school while I watched them in shock. It wasn’t lost on me that they were more excited about going to school in Strawberry Springs than they had been about the private school.

I shook myself out of my thoughts. I was still waiting for an answer from the private school, and I'd make sure they did what Alice planned for them. It would be good for them in the end.

But in the back of my mind, I wondered if they would miss Strawberry Springs as much as I would.

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29

JADE



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Grace Day: @Jackie Anne Dean caught you staring at him again. If you're really into cowboys, you should go to the Rainwood Exhibition next week for the ranch up there. I hear those men are FINE.

Comments:
Dean Briggs: I'll pretend I didn't read that.
Dean Briggs: They are really hot, though.
Kerry Winsor: Hot men? Jackie, take me with you.
Jackie Anne: I suddenly have an interest in horses . . .
Marjorie Brown: I knew we had bears around here. Didn't know we had cougars too.

"JACKIE, THIS IS A TERRIBLE IDEA."

Jackie wrung her hands together, hair wild as she stared up at the second floor of Hugh's antique shop.

In the window, a raccoon scratched the glass. Just like the girls and Jackie had said, it was in a pink tutu.

When I saw him this morning, I thought my sleeping medicine had caused hallucinations. Then I remembered Jackie's plea in the Facebook

group. She'd run over immediately, and now all we could do was figure out how to get this raccoon out of the most dangerous place in town.

"If Hugh finds him, he'll shoot Ciabatta! I can't let it happen."

I let out a sigh and rubbed my face. The things I did for this town . . .

"You keep watch, I'll go in."

"I owe you one!" she said. "Thank you!"

"Yell if Hugh comes. And I mean *yell*. He might shoot me if he sees me in there."

Jackie nodded and stood as a lookout in front of his shop. I got a bobby pin and kneeled.

"Come on, YouTube, don't fail me now."

I stuck the pin into the lock, hoping the video I watched ten years ago would do me good now. The second I did so, however, the door slid right open.

"It wasn't locked or latched," I muttered. "Goddammit, Hugh."

"It seems like something he would do," Jackie said. "Maybe we can get him a new lock later."

"We can get him a lock, but we can't get him any sense." I shook my head and walked into Hugh's Antique Shop.

As always, it was a mess. Random old dishes and pieces of furniture lined the walls. I didn't know how he came across all this stuff, but I did know that every one of us had bought a few things from here. Sometimes, among the mess, there were good items.

The second floor of the shop wasn't open to the public, and I'd never been up there. The stairs were in the back, and they were probably older than I was. They were blocked off by a sign that said "Keep Out."

I was used to doing wild things, but I was concerned that Hugh had something dangerous up here. I had to take a shaky breath before ascending the stairs.

At the top was the messiest room by far. Half the things up here were coated in such a thick layer of dust that I couldn't tell what anything was. It was far hotter too, and I had no doubts that there was no air conditioning.

Jackie so owed me one.

Slowly, I stepped on creaky wood floors until I found the window Ciabatta had been in. The raccoon was thankfully still there, but he hissed when he saw me.

“Whoa, hey. None of that. I’m friends with your mom!” Only a growl made its way back to me. “This isn’t gonna go well,” I said to myself, but I held out a hand anyway. “Come on, little Ciabatta. Let’s go home.”

He ran.

Chasing a raccoon wasn’t on my list of things to do today, but I knew Jackie didn’t want anything happening to him.

First, he went for the stairs. I nearly fell three times trying to dodge random shit in the pathways. Then Ciabatta went downstairs. When I followed, he hissed once more before running behind the counter.

He ran for one of the doors leading to the back, and I was determined to catch up. Except one of my shoes was untied and I tripped and fell right into the door.

The result was a *slam* that could be heard from miles away. Ciabatta screeched and ran out the entrance.

“My baby!” Jackie called. “I’ve got you, honey!”

I groaned and rubbed my forehead. That was definitely going to leave a mark.

I looked up, making sure I didn’t knock anything over that Hugh would notice. Almost everything was in place, but the door that I’d run into with my face was slightly ajar.

Forcing myself onto my feet, I went to shut it, only to lean on the handle as my head hurt. It opened ever so slightly, giving me a peek of what was inside.

At first, I thought it was a normal storeroom. There were notebooks and various papers scattered all over a desk. I didn’t think much of it until I turned to the side and saw a briefcase.

But it wasn’t a usual briefcase. It was filled to the brim with hundred dollar bills.

“What the fuck?” I muttered. My curiosity got the best of me and I fully entered the room. The briefcase sat open on the shelf. Above it was other stacks of cash.

It was multiple thousands of dollars at least. Maybe more if all of those were hundred dollar bills as well.

Since when did Hugh have this kind of money? Since when did he keep it in cash in his antique shop?

For a while, all I could do was stare. This didn’t match the version of him I knew.

A wild, near-irrational thought burst forth in my mind.

We knew the STM grant owner was in the Facebook group, and we knew they had money. Grace had mentioned the owner's handwriting likely meant they were older.

No. No way.

It couldn't be him.

He drove an old car that barely worked. He constantly complained about prices.

There was no way that he could be running the STM grant.

Or maybe that was what he wanted us to think.

Hugh had always been the kind of man that no one understood. He did what he wanted to, and never anything else.

One thing was for sure, though, he did care about the people in this town. Even if he argued with us, even if he didn't seem to like us, he would never leave this place, and he would never let it go to ruin either.

Suddenly, Kerry seemed like such a long shot. There was no way she could have pulled this off. But Hugh? Hugh could have done this. He could have easily pulled the wool over our eyes the entire time. I had a distinct feeling he was smarter than I gave him credit for.

The more the pieces came together, the more sense it made. Hugh was definitely in the Facebook group, even if he pranked us more often than he was serious.

He had also been quiet lately and no one knew why.

If he had money, then he could have done this.

Hope blossomed in my chest. So much so that I finally said words I never thought I could out loud.

"Oh my God, I think I finally figured out who runs the STM grant."

I didn't get to sit with my shock for long. I heard the familiar sound of Hugh's car backfiring and I jumped. I needed to get out of here, so I shut the door and hid behind an old hitch he was selling.

Hugh slowly walked in. "Damn Jackie and her damn raccoons. They better not make it in here."

This was the Hugh that I knew. I'd seen this man complain about Tammy raising her prices slightly. I'd seen him leave the store with the same amount of food every single week, determined to save every dollar he could.

Hugh walked fully inside before he stopped at the storeroom door. He looked both ways, almost as if he were worried someone was here before looking inside. I crouched, squeezing my eyes shut in the foolish hope I wouldn't be caught.

The door creaked open, and I heard a *click*.

"Don't shoot me!" I said. "It's Jade! Your lovable, quirky, rock-collecting woman!"

Hugh's eyes met mine. He didn't have a gun in his hand, and the door shut. His eyes were narrowed. "What are you doing?"

I looked at the money and then at him. "Uh, just hanging out?"

"Get the fuck out."

"Hang on!" I held up my hands. "I have a reason to be here! There was a raccoon in a tutu and I needed to save him."

Hugh scoffed. "I don't care. Just leave."

I let out a shaky breath and left the storeroom. Halfway to the front door, my shame faded and my curiosity grew. "Why do you have so much cash in there?"

"Jade—"

"Come on," I said. "You can't expect me not to ask. We have to talk about this!"

Hugh frowned and crossed his arms. "We have nothing to talk about."

"Yes, we do." I decided to be bold. "That much cash . . . You have a secret, don't you? One you don't want anyone to know."

I waited. This would be the moment that would change everything. For a second, he was still. Then his entire body tensed. This was the reaction of a man who had been caught.

My heart hammered in my chest. Every time I interviewed someone else, they all seemed like they had nothing to hide. This was different.

"And what do you want to know?"

My skin erupted in gooseflesh. Oh my God, had I done it? Did I really find the man who started the STM grant?

"Why'd you do it, Hugh?" I shook my head. "And why keep it a secret?"

He let out a long sigh and hobbled over to me. "You think people are going to react well? No way. I'm already the pariah of this town."

"You wouldn't be if the people knew."

"Have you lost your mind? I absolutely would be."

I let out a shocked laugh. “How? You’ve done more for us than anyone else!”

“That doesn’t mean they’re going to be thrilled that I sold the land.”

“Still, you—” I froze as his words finally registered. “I’m sorry. What did you say?”

“Me selling my land. That’s why you’re here, right? You somehow found out about it.”

“I—no. I thought you were related to the STM grant.”

“Me?” Hugh laughed loudly. “No way. I’m not rich.”

“But you . . .” My eyes went to the storeroom door. “Have money.”

He huffed. “Get out.”

“What?”

“Get. Out. I don’t want you asking any more questions.”

“And I don’t want to ask them either! But I feel like you’re lying to me. Tell me you run the grant. Tell me you didn’t sell that land.”

“I can’t!” he finally yelled. “I fucking can’t. I don’t run that damn grant. I could never. I do have cash, yes. But that’s my retirement fund. That’s all I have.”

“I . . . Why is it not in a bank?”

“I’m not trusting some stranger with my money! I keep it here where it’s safe.”

“Your door’s not even locked!”

“So?”

“Oh my God, Hugh.” I shook my head, trying to catch my breath. “This is a terrible idea.”

“Whatever! I didn’t ask you to come in here and audit me! So I ran out of money. So I sold my land. Who cares?”

“Goddammit. I thought—” I paused as his words registered in my mind. “Wait a second, what land did you sell? And who did you sell it to?”

Hugh rolled his eyes. “Now why did I have to go and say anything? You’re all panicked now.”

“Of course I am. You know we all talked about the offers we were getting to develop the land. All of us agreed not to.”

“And I wouldn’t have if I didn’t need the money. Plus, they were really convincing.”

“Hugh,” I said with a shake of my head. “Did you seriously—”

“No one’s going to move here.”

“Piper did. And Gabriel came back. People see potential here now. God, what if someone tries to develop what you sold? There would be whole neighborhoods! Do you know anything about who bought it?”

“I didn’t ask. I just sold what I had.”

“What you had? You mean even the spring?”

Hugh looked away. “Yes. Even that.”

“No. *No.* Tell me you’re kidding. This is just one of your cruel jokes, right?”

“Jade, I needed the money. This is why I didn’t want anyone to know. I’m sorry, but I have to make sure I have food on the table, especially since prices have been going up.”

“You could have applied for the grant.”

“The grant.” He scoffed and shook his head. “The grant that you’re investigating because you don’t trust it? I’m never using that thing. I don’t know who’s behind it and I never will. They own everything. What happens when they change their mind? What happens when they want to sell it?”

My shoulders went tight. These were many of the reasons I wanted to look into it myself. I thought I’d had it. I thought it was someone in Strawberry Springs and they would know to keep things safe.

The longer this stretched out, the more I wondered if they were in Strawberry Springs at all. What if this was some random person who had taken interest in us? What if this wasn’t someone who had our best interests at heart? What if this would all end poorly?

Hugh finally looked at me, and when he spoke, his voice was far softer. “Kid, I know you loved that land. I know you spent a lot of time there, and I’m sorry I had to sell it. I don’t feel great about it. I wish I hadn’t had to.”

I wanted to scream and cry. I wanted to tell him how unfair this was. I wanted to be mad.

But I could imagine myself in that same position. It was far too easy.

“I get it.” My voice was small. “If I wasn’t using the grant, I’d be in the same position.”

“You’ve used it?”

“Most of us have.”

“Let me give you some advice then. Money doesn’t flow forever.”

“Will you be okay now that you sold that land?”

“I think so, as long as I’m careful. No more overpaying people for electrical work.” He scoffed and rolled his eyes.

“And you’re sure you know nothing about who bought it?”

“I don’t know. They paid me pretty well for the land.”

“Is it to the owner of the STM grant?”

“I wouldn’t have sold it to those idiots.”

This meant nothing good for the town. “And you’re sure you’re not lying just to get me off your back or throw me off the trail?”

“Jade, come on. You’re barking up the wrong tree here. I think you’re barking up the wrong tree in general. This town is up each other’s asses at all given points. There’s absolutely no way that someone could be here and we don’t know about it.”

I looked away, my eyes squeezing shut. The worst part was knowing he was right.

“I’m sorry,” Hugh said. “I don’t mean to be rude to you. I think it’s just my default.”

“You’re saying what I probably need to hear.”

“There’s a better way for me to go about it. I’m sure there was a better way for me to go about getting money too. But I don’t trust someone I can’t meet in person.”

“Can we trust the person you sold the land to?”

Hugh paused and looked away. “I think you need to solve a different mystery now.”

That was all the answer I needed. He obviously felt he could trust them more than the STM grant, who hid behind smoke and mirrors, but this person didn’t mean anything good for us.

It felt so wrong to give up on the grant, but I’d not gotten anywhere in all this time. The one person I thought could be the owner was just like the rest of us.

“I guess I should hope that I win the lottery and I’m able to buy it from them.”

Hugh huffed. “Yeah, right.”

“A girl can dream.”

He stared at me. I was so sure he was going to give me a lecture on my wishful thinking. Instead, he nodded. “Keep dreaming, Jade. You’re the last of us with that kind of hope. Maybe one day it’ll do us some good.”

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30

GABRIEL



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Wren Hackett: So glad everything is back to normal with the grant. It feels like a sigh of relief!

Comments:
Jade Clark: To make it really normal, let's have **@Hu Gh** post his ass.
Kerry Winsor: NO.
Hu Gh: You rang? Here it is . . .
Mark Bell: OH GOD.
Kerry Winsor: IT'S MORE WRINKLY!!!1
Hu Gh: You freaking pansies. That's my ex-wife's ass. How could you think that was mine?

MARK

Got your number from Atticus. Jade's here. She looks a little down. Might wanna swing by.

ATTICUS

I'm heading to your place.

I STARED at my phone for a long time when the texts came in, trying to process how the residents of Strawberry Springs moved when they wanted

something done.

Jade was at the bar. Clearly, Mark thought I should be there too.

I was inclined to agree with him.

One hint that Jade was upset had me rushing to put my shoes on.

We'd parted on good terms. What the hell had happened?

"Where are you going?" Agnes asked from the couch.

"Jade might need me."

"Can we go?" Beatrice asked as she sat up straighter. They were both looking at me and not the movie I'd put on.

"This is a bar and it's not great for kids. Atticus is coming to watch you."

"Is Atticus our grandfather?" Agnes asked.

"Kind of. Yes."

"So, he's your dad."

"It's complicated." And it was. Atticus had taken care of me like a father would, but he'd never stepped into the emotional side of it.

Agnes frowned. Obviously, that wasn't the answer she wanted.

"Will you be good for him?" I asked. I doubted they would, but it was worth a try.

"If you want me to."

"I do. I want you both to be." I looked over at Beatrice too and she only glared.

"I'll try," Agnes said. She looked at her sister.

"No promises."

One was better than none.

Atticus arrived a few minutes later. Agnes said hello, but Beatrice only glared.

"Wow, this is a warm welcome." Atticus nodded.

"I'm trying."

"You're doing good. One actually spoke to me."

"Most of it is Jade."

Atticus hummed as he sat on the couch. "You should go. Mark's worried."

That was enough to get me to focus. I headed to the door.

"Wait!" Agnes said. "Bye."

Her tiny arms hugged me. Without thinking, I returned the hug. "I'll be back, Agnes."

“Okay.” She finally let me go and I turned to Beatrice, who still seemed to see me as her enemy.

“Bye, Beatrice.” She glared at me, and I wondered if she would push me out the door.

Then she ran and hugged me too.

“Come back,” she said before letting me go.

“I will.” I had to make myself say it through the cotton in my throat. I wanted to promise, but I knew how the girls felt about that word. “I plan on it.”

JADE WAS in the back of Bell’s Brews with one drink in hand. Her eyes were on the door the second I walked in, though I had a feeling it wasn’t for me.

I made my way over to her table, my eyebrows pinched.

“Hey,” I said.

She blinked. “What are you doing here?”

“Mark texted me.”

She blew out a breath.

I eyed her carefully. She was slouched over, chin pressed into her palm. Her beer was barely touched. “I’m fine.”

“Are you?” I challenged.

She sat up straighter. “Yes?” It came out more like a question.

I sat. “Need to talk?”

“Where are the kids?” she asked.

“Atticus is watching them,” I replied. “Don’t change the subject.”

“I have to do all my tricks to keep you on your toes.”

“Jade,” I said firmly. “Who hurt you?”

She blinked and color washed over her cheeks. “If you talk like that, people will think you care.”

“I do care. I missed movie night with the girls.”

“All because Mark texted?”

“And Atticus offered to watch them. All I heard was that you were here and seemed upset. That’s all I need to hear.”

“Are you following me around?”

“Yes.”

Jade raised her eyebrows.

“In a sweet way. Not a creepy one.”

She laughed. “It could be either at this point. I don’t care.”

“Are we going to keep dancing around the point?”

Jade blew out a breath. “Can I?”

“If it makes you feel better.”

She finally took a swig of her beer and tapped her chin. “Good. Then what would you do if I were here for a hookup? Would you be jealous if I was?”

“You’re hunting down the compliments, aren’t you?”

“Always.”

I huffed out a laugh. “Yes. I would be jealous. Very much so. Next question—”

“Hang on.” She held out a hand. “I wanna bask in the idea of you being jealous. Were you like this when I hit on that other guy?”

“You mean Kevin?” I asked.

“His name is Kevin? I didn’t even remember. How did you know?”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “I may have . . . looked him up.”

“You’re so cute when you’re jealous.”

“And you’re cute when you’re hiding something.”

“You’re really not letting that go, huh?”

“Nope.”

“Do you remember when I used to want to see the town in its heyday?” she asked.

“Yes, I do.”

“You know, it’s better than I imagined.”

“Good.”

“Most of us here don’t trust it to last.”

I paused. “But you have that grant thing, right?”

“Yeah, that. It came out of nowhere and suddenly paid for so much. A lot of us depend on it. That kind of money doesn’t stay.”

“You don’t know that.”

“There’s not a single other town it’s worked for. It’s just us. And none of us know why. For a while, I thought I could find them. Maybe understand why they did this and thank them. Now I’m worried it was all for development.”

“Didn’t they do nice things for people or something?” I asked.

“To earn our trust.”

It never occurred to me to think about it like that. Money was money. Why would they question it?

“Anyway, I had some ideas. It took me chasing Jackie’s raccoon to find some answers. Or what I thought were answers.”

I had to pause for a moment to take in what she said. “What is with Jackie and the raccoons? I keep hearing talk of them, but I don’t understand. Is it a euphemism for something?”

“No, it’s not. They’re literal raccoons that she keeps as pets. The one I chased down today is named Ciabatta. He’s in a pink tutu.”

“He?” I asked.

“Hey, don’t bring your gendered colors to the raccoons. They deserve better, you know. Male raccoons happen to love pink.”

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. This was one of the most ridiculous conversations I’d had in a while, but I was also having fun.

Jade leaned forward when I did, smiling softly.

“That cheers me up.”

“What does?”

“Making you laugh. I remember when we were in high school, I’d make the weirdest jokes just to get a chuckle out of you.”

“How many beers have you had?” I asked, trying to ignore the way my body warmed at the mention of our past.

“Why?”

“You seem a little drunk.”

“This is my first. It’s just been a weird day.”

“*You’re* saying it’s a weird day?” I asked. “What could have possibly happened?”

“I chased a racoon through Hugh’s Antiques.”

“That . . . would classify this as a weird day, yeah.”

“And that’s not even the half of it,” she muttered. I waited for her to elaborate. She never did. “How did your meeting go?”

Clearly, Jade was hunting for a distraction. I’d done my best to get what information out of her I could, but she would never say something she wasn’t ready to say.

I decided to let her have this one. If she wanted a distraction, that was what she would get.

“I still don’t know what’s happening. They’re considering letting the girls join late.”

“Wouldn’t they need to be enrolled in the meantime?”

“Maybe. Probably.”

“Truancy is a thing.”

I groaned.

“I have a solution for you.” She nudged me with a smile. “Enroll them here until your place is fixed.”

I shook my head. The second I got home from the diner this morning, I looked into it. “I can’t. Enrollment is closed.”

“So? You know the teacher. It’s Nicole.”

Back in high school, Nicole was a popular girl who hated all of us. I thought she would get out of here just like I had, but I heard she’d returned right after college. I’d seen her on Facebook a few times but never looked too deeply.

“She’s a teacher?”

“And a good one too. She could wrangle them.”

Thinking back to Nicole in our younger days, I seriously doubted that.

“She would kill them.”

“She’s come a long way since you knew her. She only hates adults now.”

I paused and thought about it. “You think she’d work with me?”

“She loves a challenge. And that’s exactly what your kids are.”

“They are.” My lips turned upward.

“Oh, a smile?” Jade asked. “You like them, don’t you?”

“I do. Just like I like this. Talking with you again, I mean.”

We could cut it off here. Jade was fine, and I could go home.

But neither of us moved.

“I do too,” she said. “Should we get another beer?”

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31

JADE



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Theo Murf: Kerry. You're on thin ice.

Comments:
Piper M: He means it. Be careful.
Tammy Jane: Ooooh, Kerry is in TROUBLE!
Jackie Anne: Imagine what you have to do to get in trouble with Theo. Kerry, fess up!!!
Kerry Winsor: NO. PLEASE. I just tried the one coffee place. It meant nothing!
Theo Murf: Hm.
Kerry Winsor: I'll buy baked goods for a year!

"YOU DIDN'T." Gabriel was trying to keep a straight face, but the corners of his mouth twitched.

"I did. I took one of the carts and raced through the square."

"Jade." The laugh finally escaped him and he rubbed his eyebrow. "That's ridiculous."

"It was so fun. I wanna do it again."

"Not in front of the girls."

"Definitely in front of the girls."

We were sitting close. Gabriel was fully turned toward me, and I was only a few inches from his chest.

This bar wasn't the loudest it had ever been, but we were acting like it was. Any time I couldn't hear him, I would get closer and stay there.

He did the same thing.

I wasn't sure if it was the alcohol or the company, but everything felt warm and fuzzy in a way I hadn't felt in years.

This reminded me of the day I threw caution to the wind and kissed him back when we were teenagers. It also reminded me of when we would find a single corner of the cafeteria and tell each other every part of our days.

It was healing something within me, telling Gabriel all I'd been up to.

Both of us had been through a few beers by now and neither showed signs of slowing down. Gabriel had checked his phone a few times, but Atticus seemed to be handling the girls well.

With nothing to stop us, we barreled forward.

"You know, you're gonna have to show me that cove sometime." I poked him in the chest. "I haven't forgotten about this area I've not found."

"Whenever you want to see it, I'll show it to you."

"Tomorrow?"

"You're wanting to spend that much time with me?"

"We're just catching up." I shrugged. "We've got a lot of years to make up for."

Gabriel looked down, and I realized I was still touching him. The logical thing to do would be to pull away.

Instead, I pressed my hand flat.

He always hid a surprising amount of strength, but the years had been good to him. I knew what his shoulder was like, but there were new muscles I hadn't felt before.

"What are you doing?" he murmured.

"No idea, but I missed this." My voice was soft, and he got closer to hear me. Now I was centimeters away from him, and I leaned in to press my lips against his cheek.

His whole body stiffened.

"Jade," he said.

"Just let me. I missed you."

"I have a feeling we'll both regret this if we keep it up."

“I’ve had a lot of those.” I angled his face to where he was looking at me. “What’s one more?”

Gabriel opened his mouth and then shut it. I took the chance to lean in fully. I only got the faintest breath of a kiss before he was pulling away.

His strong hand grabbed onto my wrist, and I was so sure he would drag me home. With a tug, I was out of my chair and moved.

But we didn’t end up out on the street. Nor did we head to my place.

Instead, we were in the hallway of Bell’s Brews, right near the supply closet.

“I don’t want people watching what I’m about to do.”

“What are you—” This time, he kissed me, and there was nothing light about this. His lips crashed against mine, and I swore he was making up for lost time.

My heart skipped a beat in my chest and I wrapped my arms around his neck to keep him closer.

I’d kissed a lot of men in my time. I’d tried so hard to forget Gabriel.

This showed me it would always be impossible to.

Our lips slotted together as if they were made for one another. I’d always felt that way, but I tried to tell myself that it was teenage love clouding my vision.

Now I knew it wasn’t.

“This closet is locked,” Gabriel groaned into my lips.

“Fucking Mark,” I said. “Hang on.”

I separated from Gabriel only to go into Mark’s office. He had a terrible memory, and the combination was written on a sticky note on his desk.

“What are you doing?” I looked up to see that Gabriel had followed me.

“Getting us into that closet.” Now that I knew the numbers, I went back to the closet and got us in.

“It’s hot how smart you are.”

The compliment made my cheeks grow warm. Gabriel hardly ever complimented anyone. It was only ever me. “After—”

I turned the same time he did, and both of us jumped when we saw a picture hanging from one of the shelves.

Not just any picture either.

Years ago, Hugh had sent a picture of his ass to the group when he had some sort of infection. It had scarred all of us.

I had it imprinted in my memory, but thought I'd never see it again with my own eyes.

I was very wrong.

"What the fuck?" Gabriel asked.

"Goddammit, Mark." I covered my eyes. "He's using this to ward off people."

"That would certainly work."

"Not on me." I stepped into the supply closet to rip down the photo. "We're safe now."

I expected Gabriel to ask what that was from. This had happened when he wasn't in town, but he must have remembered how weird Strawberry Springs could be. All he did was shake his head.

"Mark's playing dirty."

"I drew Hugh naked once. I'll get him back for this."

Gabriel's eyebrows creased, but I pulled him back to me. The mayo and mustard bottles were going to get traumatized today, but I didn't care.

I needed him.

"We shouldn't," he murmured into my lips.

He probably had a million reasons at the tip of his tongue. His hands were already on my shoulders, and I had no doubts that he was about to tell me all of them.

But I spoke first. "One time. One time we give in to it all."

"How is that going to change anything?"

"It'll get it out of our systems?" It came out as a question, and he raised an eyebrow. I rushed to continue. "Gabriel, nothing has ever compared to what we had. Please let me experience it again. Just once."

He let out a shaky breath. "Jade, it's such a bad idea."

"It is, but I need it. I need *you*."

He groaned. "But—"

"I know what I'm getting into. I know you're leaving, and I won't try to stop you. But *please* forget about it for just a moment."

He stared at me and I did my best to meet his gaze, despite my heart pounding in my chest. He could say no, and I'd walk away. It might break me, but I was sure that I'd eventually see logic.

But I didn't want logic right now. I wanted *him*.

"Okay." His voice was low. "One time."

He pulled me in for another kiss, and I knew I wouldn't waste time.

I scrambled to get his shirt off, determined to see his chest again. He mostly looked the same, but he was wider and more defined.

“Pretty good looking for a nerdy game designer,” I said with a laugh.

“I haven’t worked on a game in a long time. Can I even be called that?”

“Your game is still selling copies, so yes. And take the compliment, Gabriel.”

“Fine. Thank you. I used to work out. Now I’m staying in shape by chasing kids around.”

“It did you well.” I dragged my hands over his chest while he worked to get my shirt off. I would swear I didn’t plan it, but I had on a lacy bra that made him groan when he saw it.

“Did you wear this on purpose?” I only shrugged and he let out a shudder. “I’ll pay you back for that.”

I shamelessly ground against him as he kissed me. His body tightened and he pulled away.

I grinned. “Since it’s been a long time . . .”

“Shut up. I’m not letting this end early,” he said. My eyes narrowed and he shook his head. “Don’t even think about it.”

“I don’t like doing what I’m told.”

His hand, far larger than mine, wrapped around my wrists and pinned me against one of the shelves. His hips fully boxed me in.

My heart gave a jolt. If this were anyone else, I would try to kill them.

But this was Gabriel. I trusted him.

And now I found it incredibly hot.

“Not this time. Do what I say.”

“You’ll have to make me.”

“Continue to make you. I already did.”

I wanted to find a smart-ass retort, but his mouth covered mine and he resumed kissing me. Usually, everything felt like a performance with a man I didn’t know. Usually, I was trying to figure out how he ticked so I could use it against him.

But with Gabriel, I already knew. We’d done so much of this already, and I wasn’t sure I would ever be able to forget it.

I went pliant in his arms, and I let him move.

He didn’t go in immediately. His hands trailed down, slowly moving underneath my shirt and then lower. He went behind the waistband of my

pants and underwear. One finger traced along my slit, going right for my clit and then down to my pussy.

“You’re this wet already?”

“I want this,” I moaned. “I told you I did.”

“I prefer to feel it for myself,” he said, pushing his finger inside of me.

Another moan broke free. I would never admit it out loud, but just one digit felt better than most of the men I’d let fuck me.

He went deeper and I arched to get more. He got to his knees and removed every other layer. His mouth lowered and covered my slit, his tongue running up and down me.

Gabriel let out a moan and went in even harder, giving me more pressure right where I needed it.

“Fuck,” I said, my voice already high. I could explain the last time by pure need. I wanted him more than anything now too, but there was no rush.

He just did this to me. He always had.

His tongue went harder, his fingers deeper.

All of those other times felt like a man trying with the wrong tool. It felt like they were on a completely different planet.

This time, we were in sync. This was Gabriel, not some idiot who didn’t know what they were doing.

“G-Gabriel. I’m gonna—*fuck*, I’m gonna come!”

He sucked in a breath and his grip on me tightened. His other hand curved upward, going right for my G-spot.

My pleasure hit me like a bolt of lightning and I cried out. My vision went dark and pure pleasure took over me. It was an earth-shattering, all-encompassing orgasm.

It changed me.

My breath came out in heaves even after I finally came back into my own mind.

“Oh . . . my God.”

“Want more?”

“I need a minute.” My head hit the shelf with a thud. “I’m also out of practice.”

“At least it’s not just me,” he said before he covered his mouth with mine.

This time, our kiss was messy and wet, but I wouldn’t have it any other way. My hand trailed to his jeans, where I could feel how hard he was.

I’d had this before, but after over a decade of disappointments, feeling him again made my mouth go dry.

Another part of me nearly wept with anticipation.

“Just fuck me.” His head dropped to my shoulder. “What?” I asked. “Can’t deliver?”

“I’m just taking a minute.”

“Can’t even look at me?”

“You’re too fucking hot,” he groaned. “I wasn’t sure if I would survive coming back to Strawberry Springs, but now I’m not sure I’ll survive *this*.”

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32

GABRIEL



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
SherriffMike Finch: @Marjorie Brown You can’t keep running the stop sign on 3rd. You have to come to a full stop.

Comments:
Marjorie Brown: But I’ve been going through there for 30 years! Fine. I’ll stop.
Dean Briggs: This is the most small-town shit I’ve seen in my life.
Wren Hackett: Right??? **@SherriffMike Finch** You’re a saint, you could have given her a ticket.
Marjorie Brown: He could do that at his own risk.

I WAS ON THE EDGE. I’d been on it since she kissed me, and it was taking everything I had in me not to completely lose my mind.

“You’re so desperate.”

“Don’t bully me. I’ll come.”

Jade laughed loudly despite where we were, and I couldn’t help but join her. This wasn’t the first time I’d embarrassed myself in front of her, and it wouldn’t be the last. But this was Jade. Even now, she was the one who knew me better than anyone else.

She was still smiling when I felt like I wasn't going to blow my load at any second.

"I'm good now."

"Are you sure looking at me won't—"

I kissed her to shut her up. I waited until she kissed me back to pull away.

"Do you have condoms?" I asked.

She blinked. "Not with me. And mine might be, um, small."

"Small? Those things stretch—"

"I got the snug fit, okay?"

I pressed my lips together. "Okay."

"You're trying not to laugh," she accused.

"I'm . . . fine."

"After getting Vienna sausages, I had to be prepared!"

That made me lose it.

At least we were even in embarrassment.

"Sorry, sorry."

Jade glared. "Are you done?"

"Yes, I am."

"Good. I was gonna say we don't even need a condom."

I froze. There was no way I had heard her right. "I'm sorry, what?"

"I was tested not too long ago. I don't have any STIs."

"I've been tested too."

"And?"

"And I have nothing."

"I'm also on birth control. The implant specifically."

"You don't have to tell me—"

"One day I will. In graphic detail. If you get to benefit from it, you should know."

"I'll be happy to hear it when I'm *not* about to fuck you. Deal?"

"Deal." She smiled. "So . . . no condom?"

"No condom." My heart raced in anticipation. My cock was begging for attention, and I'd have to be careful not to lose it the second I felt her with nothing in between us.

"Then let's get this started." She grinned and moved out from under me. Jade returned for my pants, hands once again brushing over my cock.

I hissed.

“You are *so* not gonna last long.”

“I’d make a bet,” I said through gritted teeth. “But I’d lose this one.”

My jaw became impossibly tighter as she got my cock free from my pants and underwear. When she did, she paused and licked her lips.

“Don’t you dare.”

“Let me suck your cock,” she begged. “It’s *made* for that.”

“You wanted me to fuck you.”

“This also sounds so fucking good. Why can’t you do both?”

“Because of you,” I said.

Jade was still considering it when I grabbed her again, turned her against the shelf, and bent her over. Condiments fell everywhere, but I couldn’t care less.

“I’m fucking you,” I decided. “All of that talk of no condom means we’re not turning back now.”

“So bossy,” she huffed. “Fine. I’ll let you fuck me.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” I pressed a kiss to her shoulder before I lined myself up with her.

I had to stop almost immediately.

Somehow, she was wetter, like our banter was making her more ready for me.

It was the same for me.

“Gabriel,” she moaned.

“I know. I know.” I took another moment to get myself together before I pressed inside of her.

It felt like coming home. No, it felt better.

We both froze at the same time. There were no jokes, no banter that could change this moment.

I slid in another inch. She tightened around me.

“You okay?” I asked.

“It’s—*ah*—tight.”

“I know. I know.” I kissed the back of her neck. “We’ll take it slow.”

If she were thinking straight, she would have made a joke about me needing to go slow too, but she was focusing on breathing.

I ran my hand through her hair, feeling her breaths as if they were my own. Eventually, the tenseness faded.

“God, how did you fit before?” she asked.

“Patience.” Another kiss to her neck. “And the fact that you were made for me.”

“Don’t be right,” she moaned as I got deeper. “I fucking hate it when a man is right—*fuck!*”

I bottomed out and her ability to joke was gone. Her breaths were heavy.

“Still okay?”

“I feel so full.”

“In a good way? Or do I need to give you a minute?”

She let out another moan. “Don’t you fucking dare. I’m good. Great, even.”

I nodded and let myself bask in the feel of her. “We’ll have to do this again. There’s no way I’m lasting.” I pulled out just to be able to press inside of her again and she gasped.

“I-I don’t think I will either,” she said. “Move the right way and I’ll go with you.”

I knew what she meant. If I angled the right way, she could get pressure on her G-spot.

And that was how I moved. It felt just as good for me, and I went hard, barreling toward my own inevitable release.

“Yes! Yes!” she cried, arching back to get me deeper.

“I’m so close.”

“Me too,” she ground out. “Just come in me. I need it.”

It was going to happen either way. There was no stopping now that I’d started. Everything tightened, and pure heat spread through my cock and throughout my body.

Her pussy tightened and she moaned.

We both spent far too long trying to catch our breaths.

Reality slowly made its way through my pleasure.

Should I have said anything? Would this ruin the peace we’d found?

Jade slowly turned, and her eyes were wide. She was probably having the same thought.

Neither of us could voice anything because the door to the supply closet opened, and the light from the hallway filtered in. Jade gasped, and I tried to shield her.

That meant my entire ass was displayed for whoever it was.

“Now I know. Goddammit!” My mind dimly recognized Mark’s voice. “I knew you two couldn’t be trusted! And now I’ve seen ass! Get dressed! You two are in *so* much trouble!”

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33

JADE



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Kelsey Marie: I’m so sick of this. Anyone have a waxer who can do a Brazilian? I’m desperate.

Comments:
Tammy Jane: Could you not ask your friends first??? My eyes!!!
Kelsey Marie: They’re all natural! They’re no help!
Jade Clark: That’s right. Full bush over here.
Tammy Jane: Do you kids have no shame?
Jackie Anne: I’ve never waxed before, but I could probably figure it out!
Kelsey Marie: No one in this town is waxing my vagina. I draw the line there.
Jade Clark: Why draw the line there? I bet your vagina is better than Hugh’s ass! Show it off!

“LISTEN, if you think about it, it’s good that it was us. At least it wasn’t a stranger you saw!”

Beside me, Gabriel groaned and put his face in his hands. He’d not been able to look anyone in the eye since we were caught, and I didn’t blame him.

At least it wasn’t my ass caught by Mark.

Although Gabriel still being inside of me wasn't my *best* moment.

Mark glared at me. He'd caught me doing far too much in that closet, but it was never full-blown sex. I *would* feel ashamed if it had been anyone else.

There were too many things running through my mind. With Hugh selling his land and the fact that Gabriel and I had just fucked, and that it wouldn't happen again, I was a mess.

I was sure I looked it too.

"Nothing makes this better, Jade. You could have gone anywhere else—"

"So, it's just the location? Nothing else?"

"Oh, don't even get me started on that." He looked between us. "Like the town didn't get enough drama when this ended the first time."

Gabriel's head snapped up and I immediately frowned.

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me. I thought you were being smarter this time."

"I'm plenty smart!"

"Tell that to my traumatized mayo!"

"It was my idea," Gabriel immediately said. "Leave her out of it."

My jaw dropped as I looked at him. It was very much *not* his idea.

"And you're already covering for her," Mark grumbled. "It's like watching a second train wreck."

"And so what?" I asked. "It's not your train wreck."

"We care about you. Both of you. This is a terrible idea."

Mark wasn't wrong, and we both knew it. Gabriel had even tried to warn me.

The sex was great, but I was looking for a distraction.

"It won't happen again," I said.

"Don't lie—"

"I'm serious. Tonight was an exception."

Mark raised an eyebrow and looked at Gabriel, who sighed. "It was. We agreed before."

"Did you?" He raised a bottle of mayo. "Did they?"

"The mayo will agree, okay?" I shook my head. "And please hide this."

"Yet another hookup in *my* closet that I have to hide." Mark sighed and shook his head. "Defile some other poor room next time."

He walked away, leaving us alone in the hallway. I dragged my gaze over to Gabriel, who watched the direction that Mark went.

“Is he gonna keep it to himself?” Gabriel asked.

“Probably. He has before.”

He gave me a flat look, and I knew he was jealous again. I opened my mouth to make a joke, but he sighed.

“We should go,” he said. “Maybe take some time to think.”

Despite being caught, I was still in a post-orgasmic haze. But I wasn’t so lost that I couldn’t catch the tension in his voice.

I cursed and followed him. When we were on the square, I grabbed him.

Gabriel tugged himself out of my grip. He didn’t leave, but his fists were clenched and he couldn’t look me in the eye.

This was *not* what I wanted.

“Hang on,” I said. “Are you okay?”

“As good as I can be considering we were caught.”

“Right,” I said with a wince. “Sorry about that.”

“It’s fine.”

“Is it?” I asked. “You seem subdued. We had a good conversation earlier that we could go back to.”

Gabriel looked at the bar and then me. “No. I don’t think I can.”

“No?” I asked.

“I need to be home for a bit.”

I stepped back, chest feeling like it had been hit. “We can’t even talk?”

He ran a hand through his messy hair and my mind immediately flashed to the closet.

“Not right this moment.” He sighed. “I’m not . . . I could easily get confused. If we go back to talking and try to pretend that never happened, we’ll just do it again.”

“Oh well.”

“We said it was one time.”

“Rules can be broken.”

“Jade, no. Just give me a few days. We both need a break.”

I scoffed. “We’ve never needed those before.”

“And look at how things ended before. Is that really something you wanna repeat?”

That shocked me into silence, and my brain finally caught up with all that had happened. We'd had sex. We'd gotten *caught*.

And he was leaving.

"Yeah." My heart sank as I said it. "I get it."

"I'm sorry," he said. "We'll talk in a few days."

All I could do was nod and watch him walk away.

If I'd had more sense earlier, I'd have never done this.

But I'd never been praised for my great decision-making. Now all I could do was get my head on straight.

Then I could figure out everything else that had fallen apart today.

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34

GABRIEL



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Mark Bell: How does one store passwords?

Comments:
Atticus Thompson: I usually use my brain.
Kerry Winsor: Why are you asking? Did someone get into your closet again?
Mark Bell: Yes. I can't share details, but just know my BBC was VIOLATED!
Mark Bell: Any real advice?
Atticus Thompson: Is memorization not real?
Mark Bell: Who memorizes things these days???

I FOUND Nicole in an empty classroom. Technically, I wasn't supposed to be in the building. I didn't think they would let me in, but the front desk lady knew who I was and broke a rule for me. Nicole was standing on a chair, taping something to the wall. I cleared my throat and she turned around with a raised eyebrow.

"You came crawling back."

"Temporarily," I said.

“It still counts. I suppose I’d say welcome back, but I don’t know how long you’re staying.”

“Until after the school year starts.”

“So that’s why you’re here. It’s not a friendly hello.”

“Sorry. The only person I’m friendly with is still Jade.”

Back in high school, she had a crush on me and asked me out. I turned her down.

“It’s fine. I was hoping you’d come in anyway. I’ve heard stories about your kids.”

“They’re not for the faint of heart.”

“*I’m* not for the faint of heart. Are you enrolling them?”

“I need to. I’ll be here for another couple of months, and they need to start school. They have a private school out in San Francisco, but my apartment’s not done and I refuse to let them trash any more hotels.”

“Enrollment is closed.”

“Jade told me you might be able to work around it.”

“You’re asking for a favor?”

I winced. I had a feeling this wouldn’t go well. “A few favors, actually.”

Nicole raised an eyebrow. I pulled out the curriculum that Director Smith had sent out a few months ago.

“This is the private school plan for the year. I need you to follow it.”

“This is a public school. You don’t get to demand how I teach.”

“I know. That’s why it’s a favor.”

I was sure I would catch on fire with how Nicole glared at me, but she grabbed the papers from my hand and took a look at them.

“This isn’t all that different from what I teach.”

“This is advanced stuff.”

“We have good funding. Very good funding, even. In fact, I’d call this a private school as well. Have you heard of the STM grant?”

I paused. “I have. You’ve used it?”

“Most people have. It’s helped us get out of the hole we were in. At first, I just used it for supplies, but now I’m able to do way more than what my salary allows me to. I can easily meet this, and I can get your girls into my class so I can watch them myself.”

“And do you want anything in return?”

She was offering me a lot, and she could ask for anything. She could ask for dinner. Or worse, a date again.

My body recoiled at the mere thought.

“I was hoping they would come here anyway. I don’t need anything in return.”

“R-really?”

“Yep. Consider it a favor for an old high school friend, and a test for my patience.”

“You don’t owe me anything.”

“I don’t, but I’ll do it anyway. You’ve been in the city too long, Gabriel. You’ve forgotten that people can do nice things for no reason.”

For a long time, I stared. But then Nicole glared at me and I knew I needed to take my leave.

I thanked her once again before turning and walking out of the classroom. The second I was back out in the hot summer air, my thoughts returned to Jade. I pulled out my phone and sent an important text.

GABRIEL

You were right about Nicole.

My jaw tightened as I sent the message. It had been over twenty-four hours since we’d last talked. I wasn’t sure if my head was on straight, but I hated the silence.

JADE

Can we finally talk now?

I expected that reply. I stared at my phone, trying to figure out what to say.

JADE

That came out wrong. You were right to say we needed some time to chill out. I was asking if you’d had enough of it.

My chest loosened.

GABRIEL

I’m not sure, but I figured texting was safe. Plus, I was letting you know you were right.

JADE

Hm, that does help. Compliment me more.

But like in a friendly way.

I laughed. I knew she hadn’t wanted to see sense the other night, but if there was any hope for me not jumping her in a different closet, I needed distance.

It helped.

GABRIEL

You’re incredible. In a friendly way.

JADE

Yeah, that does it for me.

I was typing a reply when my phone rang. It was a number from San Francisco, and I immediately answered it.

“Hello?”

“Gabriel!” Director Smith said. “Thank you for answering your phone. Do you have a minute to talk about our meeting?”

My heart clenched in my chest. “I . . . do.”

“Good. We just got out of our own and made our decision.”

“Okay. What was it?” My heart kicked into high gear as I asked.

I wanted to do what Alice had planned for the girls so bad, but I also wanted to stay here in Strawberry Springs.

I was torn. And in just a moment, I would know what my future held. That would change everything.

“We’ve decided to approve your request. Your daughters are welcome here in three months’ time, and we ask that whatever school you enroll them in sends us their transcripts so we can catch them up.”

“The school I sent them to will follow yours, but I’ll send that along as well.”

“Interesting. Will they be attending private school there in Tennessee?”

“No, public.”

“Really? Color me surprised. When they join, we’ll still test them to make sure that they’re up to our standards. I’m so excited for you guys to move back.”

“Uh, yeah. Thank you.”

Director Smith said his goodbyes and hung up. I couldn’t help the groan that escaped me when it was over.

Whatever hope I had for staying in Strawberry Springs vanished. Alice wanted this, and I owed it to her to try to make it happen. When my

apartment was finished, I would be going back to San Francisco.

After a moment, I looked in the direction of Jade's apartment. She was right to walk away. If we both jumped into this with no regard for the future, we would only get hurt.

It would end the exact same way it had all those years ago.

My time in Strawberry Springs was temporary. I would have to enjoy it the best I could before going back home.

I'd been right to get some distance from Jade. Now that I had my answer, it was for the best.

I just had to keep my promise, even when she was in front of me.

That was always the hardest part.

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35

JADE



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Hu Gh: 005-54-9940

Comments:
Jade Clark: Hugh, is this what I think it is?
Kerry Winsor: DELETE THIS.
Hu Gh: What?
Kerry Winsor: That's private!! You can't share this.
Hu Gh: Who'd want to steal from an old man anyway???

"Oh, Jade, there you are. I have a bunch of new smutty books for you." Marjorie smiled when she saw me.

I gave her a tight smile back. "I'm not here for books. I actually need help with something."

Marjorie paused before leaning on the counter. "All right, you've got my attention. What's going on?"

"I need records for a sale of land. It's not on the internet. I already checked."

She hummed as she thought about it. "Something recent or old?"

"Recent."

She slowly raised an eyebrow. "Still looking into the STM grant?"

I shook my head. “I didn’t get anywhere with that. This is different.”

“What’s going on?”

“Hugh sold his land.”

Marjorie’s jaw dropped. “Wait, are you kidding me? Why would he sell it?”

“He needed the money, apparently.”

“No wonder he was doing jobs at the library. I mean, it makes sense. Property taxes have gone up because our stupid mayor always wants more money.”

I rolled my eyes at the mention of Mayor Toby. Nobody in Strawberry Springs ever saw him, mostly because he barely even lived here. Technically, he met the bare minimum for residency, but I had a feeling he was lying about how much time he spent in Strawberry Springs.

We didn’t have a choice on who to vote for. He was the only person on the ballot, and a lot of us avoided voting entirely because we didn’t like him. Even without our votes, he somehow still won.

Most of the time he had a hands-off attitude about us. He let us do what we wanted, and that included letting the STM grant basically take over.

He did, however, love raising property taxes, especially as Strawberry Springs had gotten better and better. He always claimed that the money went to schools and road repair. However, I knew for a fact that the STM grant fixed a lot of that for us.

“I’m hoping more official records are filed.”

“What did he say about the person he sold it to?”

“He didn’t give details, but it didn’t sound good.”

Marjorie cursed. “I can’t believe him! That grant would have been a better option than selling land.”

“He doesn’t trust the thing.”

“I do. It got our library back.”

“And it owns it. What happens if the money runs out?”

She paused, her eyebrows furrowing. It was obvious she hadn’t thought about this before. Either that, or she didn’t want to.

“You don’t think it would do that to us, do you?”

“No idea, but Hugh’s land takes precedence.”

Marjorie sighed and it turned into a groan. All of us cared so deeply about this town that we would never want something or someone coming in to ruin it. “The library doesn’t have anything brand-new. We do keep some

records, but most of that's over at town hall. We may have to sneak into the mayor's office in order to find it."

"Like that asshole ever uses it. Are you willing to commit a crime with me?"

She leaned in, glee in her features. "Absolutely, I am. Just don't tell my wife."

"Don't tell me what?" Henrietta came around the corner.

"If I tell you, you're an accomplice. We're about to break into somewhere."

"Marjorie . . ." Henrietta glared.

"It's for the good of the town!"

"Is it really?" Henrietta asked.

"Yes," I cut in. "It's important."

Her lips pursed, but she nodded. "When are you doing this?"

"Now?" Marjorie asked me.

"I dedicated my whole day to this."

"Then now."

"Fine. I'll keep an eye on the library. You go do whatever the hell you're about to do. I heard and saw nothing, by the way."

"Yes, ma'am!" Marjorie said. "Come on, Jade. Let's go do this."

The town hall was a massive building that had stood empty for longer than the library had. Wren had renovated it not too long ago in order to give the town a place to meet.

Today, it was empty, and it was the perfect time to sneak into the mayor's office.

Marjorie and I walked to the back of the building at the end of a large hallway. She kept an eye out for cameras, and we tried our best to stay out of the shots.

Neither of us had any idea if the things even worked, but we didn't want to get caught.

I immediately tried to pick the lock. Before I could even start, the door opened.

"People in this town have got to learn how to lock doors," I muttered.

"Why would we want them to do that? It benefits us more this way."

I laughed and walked in. The filing cabinets were all unlocked too, which made me concerned for the security of the town.

I'd think about that later. For now, I had one goal.

“Ooh, look at this one!” Marjorie was across the room. “It’s Kerry’s property taxes.”

“We shouldn’t—”

“What the fuck? She pays less than I do and has more land!”

“What?” I went over and looked.

“Take a picture. I wanna use this against her later.”

“Fine, fine.” I did what I was told. “We need to hurry. And consider making sure everyone is paying their fair share.”

“You’re so smart. And focused. Which is what I need to be.”

It took us another ten minutes to go through everything. We were about to give up when I glanced at his desk.

“There it is! Yes, finally.”

“Uh, Jade.” Marjorie was looking down the hallway. “We may have bigger problems.”

I looked up, hearing the echoing noise. From the footsteps alone, I could tell the shoes were fancy. I bet they were paired with a suit, and the only person who wore one was Mayor Toby himself.

“We gotta get out of here and cover ourselves.”

“The one time he decides to show up,” I groaned. “Let me just get a picture of this.”

I snapped a picture of who bought the land. Then I put everything back where it had been and hurried into the hallway with Marjorie. We ran into Mayor Toby as we walked out.

“People are here.” His thick eyebrows drew in tightly. “You know, when this town hall was redone, I didn’t think anyone would ever be in here. And look, you proved me wrong. Can I help you ladies with anything?”

“It’s Marjorie.” Her voice was flat. “Do you really not use names, or did you forget the tons of times I’ve told you mine?”

Mayor Toby’s face went blank. “Uh, I remember. I’ll use it next time.” He looked at me and gave an awkward smile. I knew without a shadow of a doubt that he didn’t know who the hell I was.

We watched him leave and disappear into his office before both of us tore out of the building and went to the library.

“That was close,” she said. “If it were anyone else, they might have pieced it together.”

“Good thing he’s an idiot.” I shook my head and got my phone back out. “It was too close, but we managed it.”

“Do you want to talk to your friends?”

“I should.”

“I’ll set something up, if you want.”

“Please and thank you.”

“I’ll do it for the low, low cost of you telling me who bought that land. The last thing I want is for someone to do something with it. The spring is on that, right?”

“Yeah, it is.”

I pulled up the photo and Marjorie got close to read it too.

The name was one I didn’t recognize.

“Shit,” Marjorie said. “That’s not the same one that bought the library.”

My shoulders tensed. I knew how the STM grant worked. Even if I didn’t know their intentions, for now, they were safe.

This was someone new. Someone none of us knew.

“I’m calling the girls.” Marjorie put a hand on my shoulder. “We’ll figure this out, kid.”

It would’ve helped more if she didn’t sound as panicked as I was.

Numbly, I made my way to one of the meeting rooms and sat, still staring at the document.

Wren was the first to arrive. “There you are. Marjorie made it seem like there was an emergency. Did you make a breakthrough with the grant?”

“No, this is unrelated, but no less important.”

Wren’s eyes widened and she sat. “Then we’ll figure it out. I know everyone else is on their way.”

My leg didn’t stop bouncing until all my friends were there. When the five of us were at a table, I finally spoke. “Hugh sold a bunch of land to someone we don’t know.”

“What?” Mollie asked.

“We all agreed not to!” Grace added.

“Was it the STM grant?” Wren asked.

“No. It wasn’t them.”

The entire room went silent as all the women took it in. This was terrible news. I pulled up the picture and showed them the buyer. Mollie got her phone out immediately and looked them up.

“Oh God, it’s a developer.”

“You found them?”

“Yes. They’re not a massive footprint, but they’re trying to be.”

“Fuck,” I said.

“Hang on.” She looked at the deed. “One of the good things is that this isn’t zoned for commercial, nor is it zoned for multiple single-family homes.”

“So, can they do anything with it?” I asked.

Mollie’s lips pressed together. “They could rezone. Considering their website, they definitely will try.”

“Their website?” Piper asked. “Does it say what they usually build?”

“Yes.” Mollie said it quietly. “They build data centers.”

I sucked in a breath. “There’s a spring on that land. The biggest and cleanest one in the area.”

“Wait, what?” Mollie asked. “There’s a spring in Strawberry Springs?”

“Yes. Would a data center use that?”

“A data center would use it until they destroyed it.”

Tears gathered in my eyes, and I looked at the picture I’d taken again, begging for any additional information. “Do you know anything else about the developer?”

“They don’t have much on their website.” She frowned. “Let me see if my dad can tell me anything.” She typed out a message.

“We have to stop this,” I said.

Strawberry Springs was a mixed bag of people, but we all agreed that we cared about this town, and we didn’t want it to turn into something it wasn’t. Even when the library was redone, and we opened the doors to nearly anyone in the neighboring towns, we still wanted Strawberry Springs to stay what it was.

“Dammit, Hugh,” Wren said with a shake of her head.

“He didn’t have control over who bought it,” Grace said. “Honestly, he was probably surprised it sold.”

The idea of losing that land *broke* me. I’d spent my childhood there. So many of my best moments with Gabriel were there. And now, I had moments with his daughters there too.

“We’ll figure this out,” Wren said. “I’m sure once the town hears about this, we’ll find a way to stop it.”

“Can we, without the grant?” I asked.

“Why wouldn’t we use the grant?” Wren asked.

“They own a lot of the town,” I said. “The apartments and the library are under their name. What’s their plan with all of that?”

“I . . . I don’t know,” Wren said. “I never thought about it like that.”

“Obviously,” I said, “We need to look into *this* more than I need to find out who’s behind the STM grant, but I still don’t feel great about not knowing who it is.”

“We can do our best without it,” Piper said.

I wanted to feel hopeful, but I was terrified. This was my home, where I’d spent my whole life.

“Yeah . . .” I made myself say, even though I didn’t believe it. “We will.”

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36

GABRIEL



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Kerry Winsor: Anyone heard from **@Jade Clark**? She's been quiet lately.

Comments:
Mollie Wilson: She's a little busy, but she's fine.
Kerry Winsor: I feel like that's code for you've barely heard from her but you're backing her up. What good friends . . .
Kerry Winsor: Tell me everything, though.
Kerry Winsor: @Mollie Wilson please? With a cherry on top? WHAT'S GOING ON I MUST KNOW!!!

"How could you?" Agnes moaned. "Do you hate us that much?"

The girls' first day at Strawberry Springs Elementary School came far too quickly, and all of us had gone back to arguing.

Agnes hadn't stopped all morning. I was worried she'd never stop.

"He said he had to," Beatrice said. "He's a traitor."

"Just when I trusted you!"

I was hanging on by a thread. I had dreaded the day I would send them to school when I should've looked forward to it. After all, I'd finally get some quiet time and could work throughout the day.

For some reason, my emotions didn’t get the memo. The longer we were on the road to the school, the more tense I grew. I felt like I was losing my mind and I didn’t understand why. I trusted Nicole. I knew she was good with kids and her record spoke for itself. She promised me that she would meet the curriculum of the private school.

So why was I so upset?

It didn’t help that they were upset too. Until now, they’d been excited about the concept of school. Once reality set in, they seemed to harden to the idea of it. Friends weren’t enough to justify the change to their free time.

Just me sending them to school made them see me as an enemy again, and I hated going back to this phase.

We’d figured out some semblance of peace in the last few weeks. Them hating me made me want to turn around and go right back home.

When we pulled into the school, I had to take a deep breath.

“I don’t want to!” Agnes cried.

I was tempted to snap, but it wouldn’t help. It didn’t matter that I was upset. I needed to get through this.

“Agnes,” I said. “You know I have to.”

“I don’t wanna go to school!”

“You said you wanted to hang out with the kids here.”

“No! I wanna be home!”

“I get it. I would take you if I could, but this is important too.”

“It looks boring.” Agnes frowned and looked out the window. Then her eyes went wide and she tumbled out of the car.

“Hang on!”

“Jade!” she yelled and ran toward the road. I thought she would try to cross it, but Jade caught her.

Beatrice gasped and followed.

“Hi!” she greeted them.

Beatrice got to her and tackled her with a hug.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“I thought you could use some help,” she replied.

“I’m . . .” I trailed off. She would see right through me if I tried to lie. “Yeah, thank you.”

“Can I introduce you to your teacher?” she asked the girls. “I knew her back in high school.”

Agnes frowned. “So, you’re not here to take us away?”

“Unfortunately, no. But I don’t think this will be as bad as you’re expecting it to be. Nicole runs a fun class.”

Agnes groaned, but Jade was able to pull her inside the school building. I followed, arms crossed tightly.

I owed Jade my life. I had a feeling with her help that the girls would handle going to school just fine. I was still upset for some reason, though.

Nicole welcomed the girls with open arms. They were hesitant at first, but eventually, Beatrice smiled and Agnes followed suit. They were led to a couple of seats and introduced to other kids in the classroom. Immediately, Agnes made one boy blush and Beatrice found a friend to be with.

Nicole pulled me aside and said she had done some research on twins and figured they would be best in the same class for now, but she would watch them closely and provide me with a plan after the day was over.

She informed me that if she felt it was better that they were in a separate class, she was going to move one of them. It was strange seeing someone like Nicole be so dedicated to children’s well-being.

It was better than I expected. Far better.

My feet refused to move for a long while. Agnes and Beatrice settled in, but I didn’t want to leave.

Jade linked her arms through mine and dragged me out.

I immediately wanted to run back in.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

I let out a long breath. “Nope. Are you?”

“Not at all.” She crossed her arms and her eyes went distant. I eyed her. I hated the idea that she was upset at all.

“Come here,” I said, tugging her to my body.

“Wha—*oof!*” She collided with my chest, and I wrapped my arms around her before she could pull away. I leaned my cheek on the top of her head. “Gabriel,” she whined. “Everyone will see.”

“I don’t care. We need this.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Then *I* need this.”

She huffed, but leaned in. I couldn’t resist the smile that crossed my face. This was dangerous. Each time we were together, we slid into old habits. The last thing I wanted to do was have this end the same way.

But as I held her in the middle of the school parking lot, I couldn't bring myself to care.

"AND THEN HE did a flip on the playground!"

"It was so cool!"

I stared at my daughters. When I'd asked them how their day went, I didn't expect to be hearing about another child doing flips. Soon, *they* would be doing flips, and I had a feeling I would wind up taking one of them to the ER.

"What was this kid's name again?" I asked.

They looked at each other. "I don't know," Agnes said. "He was just cool."

"Flips are dangerous," I said. "Don't try them."

"I wanna learn how to do them. Ms. Rudder was telling us how the library has a gymnastics class."

"A gymnastics class?" I repeated. "Wow, they really do everything."

"Can we go? We'd have so much fun!"

I pulled out my phone and checked the library's website. The class started in one month, but it was a multi-month-long program, and I didn't know how long we'd be here for.

"We can start it, but I don't know if we can finish it."

Agnes frowned. "Because we're going back?"

"Yes."

"I don't want to!" Beatrice said with a huff. "I want to learn how to do a flip."

"You might be able to," I rushed to say. The last thing I wanted to do was start a fight. "You both are really fast learners. You might figure it out in your first session."

Beatrice glared at me. Agnes joined in.

The sun had just set, and I could tell the girls were tired. They'd only been in school for two days, but it was taking a toll on them.

"It's bath time," I announced, hoping they would accept my distraction. "Then bed."

"It's early," Agnes said.

“Is Jade coming over?”

I blinked at the question. Jade had been somewhat in control of her sleepwalking, so I hadn’t seen her beyond the couple of times she’d arrived at my door. I knew she had medication that mostly stopped it, unless she was in a period of high stress.

My heart clenched as I wondered if she would be sleepwalking tonight and if she would come to me again.

Even though she wasn’t angry with me, neither of us were in our right minds. I couldn’t stop thinking about what had happened in the closet, and I wondered if she did the same.

“She’s not planning to,” I said. “I’m more worried about you guys. School seems to be exhausting you two.”

“Kind of,” Agnes said.

“I’m not tired,” Beatrice argued, but she broke out into a yawn. I knew better than to call her out on it.

“Let’s try to sleep then,” I said. “But we’ll do a bath first.”

I expected Beatrice to fight me on it. Instead, she slowly stood and walked toward the bathroom.

“Can we play with our toys in the bath tonight?” Agnes asked.

“Yes, of course.” I got the water running, staying close while they played in the tub. Eventually, they were yawning, and I put them in pajamas before laying them in their bed.

Even I was tired, and it was only just past nine.

I sat on the couch, hoping to enjoy a little more quiet time, but as always, my mind drifted back to Jade.

As much as I wanted my brain to stop thinking about her, this wouldn’t change. That much I knew.

It wasn’t long before I did hear a bump that made me jump to my feet, but it wasn’t from outside my door. I heard it through the wall, the one that I shared with Jade’s apartment. I paused and listened, even getting closer so I could hear better. It happened over and over again, and I knew that she was sleepwalking through her apartment.

My breath caught. Was she going to come here?

She shouldn’t, but I wanted her to.

Eventually, her door slammed and I went to my own, waiting for her to arrive.

Jade was more lost than usual, which was something that happened whenever she took her medicine during high-stress times. She wandered through the back part of the square for a while before going down the alley. My heart clenched and I was about to go get her. Eventually, she made her way to the back side of the square again, stumbling up the stairs to my own apartment.

“Thank God.” Jade only pressed her face into my chest. “Let’s sleep,” I murmured. “I won’t even try to go to the couch this time.”

As much as she needed this, I knew I needed it more.

So, I’d give in. Just this once.

I would never get over the way she fit into my life, slotting into place as if it were made for her. She did that with the kids and with me.

That was the worst part about leaving this time. It felt like we were perfect for one another, but forever doomed to lead different lives. We could meet once in a while and things would be incredible, but it felt destined to end.

The thought made me hold her tighter. I knew it’d be hard to get up early in the morning and let her go.

It was better that she didn’t know she sleepwalked into my apartment. It was better that I kept this to myself. But not for the first time, I hoped she was awake and that she could tell me it would all be okay.

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37

JADE



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Marjorie Brown: I have an urgent need for xl condoms. Don’t ask questions. Just give me the goods.

Comments:
Kerry Winsor: ???
Piper M: Wow, Hen must be packing.
Hu Gh: Those never fit me. I put it up the ass like a real man.
Jade Clark: HUGH???
Kerry Winsor: STOP! WE’RE GONNA BE BANNED!!!
Hu Gh: Only Ethel would let me do that. I miss her . . .

I WOKE up with my usual amount of confusion after taking my sleep medicine. I could tell that I had slept hard, but I wasn’t sure that I was lucky enough to avoid sleepwalking. I had random sore spots on my body, and with how stressed I had been the day before, I knew it was a possibility.

At least I’d ended up in my bed. Or so I thought.

My phone lit up with texts from my friends. I was hoping that they had found more information about the developer who’d bought the spring. I was very wrong.

WREN

So . . . I went on a walk with Henry late last night and saw the weirdest thing.

MOLLIE

Is it the raccoons again? Post in the Facebook group so Jackie can see.

WREN

Nope. It was Jade going into Gabriel's apartment.

When I read it, I nearly dropped my phone. I hadn't gone to Gabriel's apartment.

At least not consciously.

MOLLIE

WHAT

PIPER

Jade, do you have something to tell us?

JADE

I'm not doubting you, Wren, but are you sure you saw me go into his apartment?

WREN

Yep. Were you drunk? You stumbled a few times, but he opened the door like he was waiting for you.

"Oh God." I said it out loud.

That confirmed far too much. I'd not told a soul about my sleepwalking habit, mostly because I was so determined to handle it on my own. After depending on Gabriel for so long, it killed me when he left, and my habit got that much worse. The last thing I needed was to depend on someone else and have them get tired of me.

That was clearly biting me in the ass now. I'd gone outside to the point that I got caught by Wren.

I was so fucked.

Eventually, my mortification faded enough for me to reread the messages. I was trying to figure out a way to lie my ass off and appease their suspicions. But then I really took in their words.

Gabriel had opened the door as if he were waiting for me. How was Gabriel involved at all? How was that possible?

I'd woken up in my own room.

Unless he'd brought me back.

I needed to see him. If I'd randomly done this, he would lecture me about better safety. Then I could awkwardly apologize and promise it wouldn't happen again.

But first, I needed to explain this to my friends.

JADE

I wasn't drunk, but it's kind of close. First, I need to figure out what the fuck happened with Gabriel.

WREN

You really don't remember???

JADE

Nope, but if it's what I think it is, I'm in for an awkward conversation . . .

Then I flipped to my text chain with Gabriel. I took a deep breath before typing.

JADE

Do the girls need me for school today?

GABRIEL

They seem to be in a good mood, but they wouldn't say no to seeing you.

I'm also making eggs.

I stared at the message for a long time before sighing and getting dressed for the day.

It was time to face the music.

My hands shook as I knocked on the door. Gabriel opened it immediately.

"Morning. I just finished everything up." He gave me a smile and gestured for me to follow him. I could only stare.

Wren wouldn't lie to me, and I knew he'd seen me. Why was he playing it cool?

I said hello to Agnes and Beatrice, watching their reactions carefully. They had been arguing, but stopped to acknowledge me when I walked in, then returned to whatever they'd been yelling about.

Nothing was different.

Gabriel served me a plate of spicy eggs and sat next to me.

Was he hiding it from the girls?

I didn't mention it as I ate, nor did I mention it on the drive to school. Agnes and Beatrice were less angry this time, but they were hesitant about going in.

"Thank you for coming this morning," Gabriel said.

"Yeah. No problem."

He nodded, and I waited for him to mention it. He didn't say anything else until we pulled back out onto the road.

"You seem better today."

"I am. I got good sleep."

This was my in. This would be where he would mention it.

There was still nothing.

"Do you wanna go to the library?" he asked instead.

I stared. For some reason, he was hiding it.

It was so tempting to tell him I knew something was up, but Gabriel was also very good at hiding things. Far too good at it, actually.

And I was a petty bitch when I wanted to be.

I didn't like being lied to. And the only solution was to catch the lie in the act.

Or maybe I just wanted revenge.

"No, I have a few things to do."

"Really? Like what?"

Like figure out how to fake sleepwalking.

THINK SLEEPY THOUGHTS. You're sleeping right now.

With a shaky breath, I looked down and made myself run right into his door. Then I waited.

As seconds ticked by, I wondered if I had lost my mind. What if he was asleep? What if he didn't hear? How long did I wait to see if he responded?

Then the door swung open.

“There you are.”

I didn’t move.

Sleepy thoughts.

A gentle arm wrapped around me and led me into his apartment. I stumbled over my own feet, but Gabriel seemed to anticipate that.

“She’s here,” I heard from the direction of the girls’ room. That was Agnes.

“I knew she’d be back!”

Back?

Oh God. I’d definitely sleepwalked last night. And the girls had seen.

If only there was a hole I could sink into.

“You guys know the routine,” Gabriel said, his voice low.

Routine? Had I done this enough for there to be a *routine*?

How long had this been going on?

Gabriel gently guided me into his bedroom, and I kept my jaw clenched until he turned to slowly shut the door. I was a dangerous mix of embarrassed and pissed, which made me lose all control.

I grabbed my phone and turned on the flashlight, illuminating my face from the bottom.

Gabriel turned and yelled, falling right on his ass as he tried to get away from me.

“Hiding something?” I asked slowly.

The door burst open, and Agnes and Beatrice tumbled into the room. Their eyes were wide. I took pity on them and hid my phone.

“Jade? Are you awake?” Beatrice asked.

“I thought you weren’t supposed to wake her up! It makes her angry.”

“He’s trained you well,” I said. “Which is weird because I didn’t know I was here.”

Gabriel’s eyes went wide. “About that . . .”

“Yeah, where’s your explanation?” I crossed my arms tightly.

He laughed awkwardly. “You know, I did have a good reason, but facing you now, I don’t think it’s good enough anymore.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Would you believe me if I said I was trying to spare you the embarrassment?”

“If you did it only once, yes.”

“To be fair, I tried to go to the couch and you followed me.”

Oh *God*. Why was my sleepy brain like this?

“When was this?”

“Two weeks after I moved in?”

My jaw fell open. “Are you kidding me?”

“I really wish I was.”

“Are you gonna kill him?” Beatrice asked. “Can I watch?”

Her voice was a reminder that we weren’t alone. As mad as I was at Gabriel, I didn’t need to ruin things with the girls.

I gave him a sharp look that told him we would be talking about this later and smiled when I looked at the girls.

“We’ll work it out,” I said in the sweetest voice I could muster. “Isn’t it close to your guys’ bedtime? What if I help you braid your hair?”

They both yelled their agreement and ran to the bathroom.

“Jade—”

“Give me a second. I’ll spend time with them and we’ll talk after.”

I didn’t look at him as I followed the girls.

“Mine first!” Agnes begged.

“No, mine!” Beatrice argued.

“I’ll get to both of you,” I said calmly. “Or we can play a game for it.”

“Yes!” they shouted at the same time.

I wound up teaching them rock paper scissors. Beatrice won, and Agnes bemoaned how stupid it was that paper beat rock.

I was halfway through Beatrice’s hair when she finally quieted down. They both wanted French braids, and focusing on that gave me enough time to think. The space I’d created between Gabriel and me was good, and I knew I’d be ready to talk once they were in bed.

Gabriel was waiting and read a story without them asking. The girls sat on either side of him as he read while I watched in the doorway.

He was a good father. Not because he did everything right, but because he cared. He *tried*.

That went for me too.

I knew that. And it was why storming off wouldn’t have done any good for either of us.

Gabriel was quiet until the girls were fully in bed. He didn’t speak even when we were alone.

I took a breath and finally turned to him.

“I need to know when I sleepwalk,” I said. “I can’t make decisions about my health if I don’t know everything that’s going on.”

“You take it seriously?” I raised a single eyebrow and he tensed. “Wait, that came out wrong.” He squeezed his eyes shut and took a breath. It was tempting to react. Instead, I waited. “It’s good that you’re taking it seriously. You used to push it off. I guess that’s why it didn’t occur to me to tell you for that reason.”

“That’s less of an asshole reason,” I said. I let the anger fade a bit. “And you’re right. I didn’t take it that seriously. Sometimes I still don’t. But I should. I need to tell people so they can help me.”

“You should. As nice as it is to be the only one who knows, I’ve been worried about you.”

“Even more reason to tell me,” I said.

“I know.” He didn’t fight it, and the rest of the tension finally left my body.

“Why didn’t you?”

He looked away as he thought about it. “I don’t know if I have a good enough reason.”

“I want the truth, even if it was wrong.”

“When it started, we were barely talking. I . . . I missed you. I loved that you came to me, even after everything. So, I got up early each morning and took you back before you’d wake up. To be clear, I never tried anything.”

I shook my head. “I know you wouldn’t do that.”

“Still. The first time, you wouldn’t let me go. The second time, I tried to sleep on the couch, and then I figured out we were both in for a bad night of sleep.”

“Ugh,” I muttered. “I came after you?”

“Multiple times.”

“That’s mortifying.”

“Don’t pull away,” he rushed to say.

“Wh-what?”

“You do that when you’re embarrassed. And I hate it when you do.”

I blinked, thinking back to all the things I’d done when I was embarrassed.

I hid from my friends. I pretended I was fine. I did everything I could to hide it.

Or in Gabriel’s words: I pulled away.

I rubbed my hot cheeks. “All right, you have me there. But it’s miserable.”

“Sleepwalking?”

“Being weak. Needing someone.”

“I’m here,” he offered. “And when I’m not, you have your friends.”

“Already planning for the future?” I asked weakly. Deep down, I knew the truth. It was going to kill me when he left.

“It’s not good for you to depend on only me.” His voice was so low that I wondered if it pained him to say it.

“What if I want you? Just for now?”

His eyes finally met mine.

“Even though you’re mad?”

“I’m half mad. I do know it’s sweet that you took care of me. Now I know why my knees were bruised as hell.”

“I babyproofed the apartment.” He nodded at the coffee table and I followed his line of sight. There were protectors on every sharp edge.

“I thought that was for the girls.”

“Half of it was. I added more for you.”

“I’m not a child,” I muttered. “But my knees thank you.”

He laughed, looked at the door, and then at me. “Do you wanna stay? I can watch out for you.”

Instinctually, I went to say no. This was the same song and dance we always did. I would say no and then my sleepy mind would betray me.

But tonight was a night of breaking a lot of bad habits.

I needed to keep the streak.

“Yeah, that’s probably for the best.”

He stood up straighter. “Really?”

“Yes.” I pointed at him. “But only because your bed is comfy.”

“Understood.”

“And nothing is happening.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

With a satisfied smile, I walked to his bedroom and flopped down onto the bed. “Yep. Perfect.”

Gabriel laughed from behind me. “Where am I supposed to sleep?”

“Find a corner, bitch.”

“I could go to the couch.”

I looked up. “Don’t you fucking dare.”

He raised a single eyebrow and I slowly moved over. “Cover your eyes. I need to change,” he said.

“And you can’t do it in front of me?”

He huffed. “And make a bad decision?”

I frowned. He was right. Our one time was over.

I should have said I wanted it twice.

“Fine.” I covered my eyes and waited thirty seconds. Then I split my fingers and got a great view of Gabriel’s bare chest.

He caught me immediately. “Jade!”

“What? My eyes are covered.”

“I can see you peeking!”

“They’re covered in spirit.”

He sputtered something about smart choices before he threw on a shirt. I never moved.

“You’re a fucking menace,” he said as the bed dipped with his weight.

“But I’m *your* menace.”

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38

GABRIEL



Dad Company (But Sometimes Good Advice)
Robert Colt: First day of school megathread. Ask for advice, vent to us, do whatever as your kids go to school!

Comments:
Jason Mullins: I cried. My child did not.
Ryan Kim: We all do. It's very normal.
Oliver Brian: @G Singh You okay?
G Singh: I had a friend help me and she calmed them down. I almost cried.
Robert Colt: A friend did all that? Whoever she is, keep her.

JADE'S GOODIES had a mix of everything, but mainly candles and crystals. The air smelled like a rich concoction of scents that I couldn't place.

Atticus had once described it in detail to me, but he left out how this place was so very *her*.

I'd waited too long to come here.

"So, you can visit me." Jade came around a corner carrying a massive box.

I grabbed it for her. "I can. I've been meaning to. It's nice in here."

"It's a mess," she said. "I need more profit so I can hire someone to do the boring work for me."

“Or you could have me do it for free.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

“It’ll make up for how long it took me to come in.”

“Tempting.” She put a hand on her hip. “But I don’t take freebies. You can get free candles out of it.”

“I don’t need anything for free. I’ll do it to be nice.”

“Oh, fine. I’ll take advantage of you then. Just because you insisted.” She pointed to where the box went and led me to the wall of shelves holding crystals. They all had handwritten signs that described what each one was for.

“Jade for patience,” I said, looking at a crystal. “Does this mean you’re patient?”

“*Blue* jade for patience,” she corrected. “And my hair isn’t blue right now, so fuck you.”

I laughed. “You’re right. At least the crystal looks cool.”

“That’s why I’m so obsessed with them.” She laughed. “A few are mixed up from customers, plus I have more to put out. Think you can help me?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I’ll owe you one,” she said. “But I also need to work on the candles. Someone”—she gave me a hard look—“has kept me busy.”

“We’re definitely even,” I said. “You don’t owe me anything.”

She hummed. “You’re right. I did save your ass with Agnes and Beatrice.”

I wouldn’t disagree with her. I was about to tell her I would even treat her to food, but she was focused on putting candles out. Her brow was creased, and it was so rare I saw her so focused on something.

Turning, I started on what she’d asked me to do. We worked in a content silence for a long while, broken only by her bringing over a candle for me to smell.

Every one of them smelled incredible, and I’d always loved them when I burned them in my apartment in San Francisco. The girls had fought over one and nearly broken the glass container before I took it away.

I wondered if they knew that Jade was the one who made those. I wondered what they would think if they knew now. I needed to bring them in and let them pick out a few things.

“Done,” I said hours later. “What do you think?”

She looked up. “It looks great.” Then she frowned. “Did you reorganize them?”

“Guilty. I thought alphabetical order would be nice.”

“You nerd.”

“Want me to put it back?”

“No. It looks good.” She put two more candles on a shelf before standing fully. “And I’m done too. Now I can focus solely on selling. Speaking of which, do you need any candles?”

I had tons. Too many even. “What do you recommend?”

“Finally. I’ve been waiting for this moment.” She took a breath before going to the back shelves. I wasn’t sure if she even looked at the labels before she pulled them. She had a stack within a minute.

“These are for you.”

“Did you have this planned?”

She shook her head. “Only one of us can be a loser.”

“So, you didn’t?”

“I plead the fifth.”

I laughed and looked at what she’d brought over. I loved the idea that she thought of me as much as I thought of her. The first one I picked up was vanilla, which I didn’t expect. Atticus mostly got the woodsy scents for me. This wasn’t something my stepfather would grab, but it was something Jade would pick for me. Back when we first met, she had vanilla-scented shampoo. This reminded me of those times.

“This one’s good.”

“I knew you’d like it.” Her lips curved into a smile. “Try this one next.”

I grabbed the candle and inhaled. This one was a different scent. It was clean and fresh and took me back to my office in San Francisco.

“Alice would have loved this one.” I said it softly, and then wondered if I should have kept my mouth shut.

Jade was still smiling. “She had good taste.”

“She was a neat freak. Very organized. The detergent she used smelled like this.”

“I don’t know how, but I can see it. I have a feeling Beatrice will grow up to be just like her.” Her smile faded. “I wish I could have met her.”

“You two would have gotten along. I’m sure of it.”

“You should have brought her by.”

I let out a long breath. “She wanted me to. She always told me not to forget where I came from.”

“I like her even more.” Jade smiled. “You know, I did get to meet her in a way.”

“How so?”

“Through the girls. I see a lot of you in them, don’t get me wrong. But I also see someone else. That must be Alice.”

“Yeah. She was something.”

The last thing I wanted to do was push things with Jade. She’d taken everything to do with Alice in stride, but I couldn’t bear a fight with her.

“Is it time for me to pay?”

She rolled her eyes. “Put your money away. I don’t need to be paid for everything.”

“I’d love to spoil you.”

“Yeah, yeah.” She waved her hand before she finally stilled. Her eyes went distant and she was lost in thought again.

“Did you ever think about being more with her?” Jade asked.

I immediately shook my head and set down the candle. “I’m not answering that question.”

“I’m the one asking it. I’m prepared for it to be an answer I don’t like.”

“Still a no.”

“Gabriel, I’m not a jealous asshole. I’m mature now,” Jade said. “Plus, we handled last night just fine.”

“I still feel like an idiot,” I said with a sigh. “But you handled it well.”

“*You* also did. We both took a minute instead of blowing up. You know what that is?”

“Being tired?”

“Growth. We’ve grown.”

I’d been so worried about her that I’d not even thought about it, but she was right. We had grown. Jade was still the spitfire I’d always love, but last night was different.

A lot was.

“So have some faith in me,” she said. “And answer the question.”

I sighed. “There was one moment where I considered it.”

“When?”

“Five years ago.”

“And why didn’t you?”

“Because she wouldn’t measure up, so it wasn’t fair to her. No one would.”

Jade’s cheeks colored. “I bet your other exes weren’t happy to hear that.”

“There . . . weren’t other exes.”

Jade froze. “I’m sorry, what?”

I drummed my fingers on the table. “And this is where you think I’m a loser.”

“I don’t think anything other than a mess of exclamation points. What do you mean there weren’t other exes?”

“Jade, no one will ever be you.” I shook my head. “There was never any point in trying.”

Her breath hitched, and I waited for her reply. She could tell me I was an idiot and I would agree with her. Back then, there had been no point in waiting. There had been no point in getting close to anyone else.

I’d resigned myself to a lifetime alone if she wasn’t there.

“Stand up,” she ordered.

“Wh-what?”

“Stand the fuck up.” Her voice was so rough that I did it without thinking.

When she did the same, I closed my eyes in anticipation. She was going to punch me for being stupid. I knew she was.

Instead, she kissed me again.

With the last shred of my sanity, I put my hands on her shoulders and ended it.

“Jade, we said it was one time.”

“Fuck that.” She shook her head, and I realized her eyes were wet. “You waited for me. Like a fucking loser. What kind of guy does that?”

“You don’t owe me anything for that.”

“I don’t owe you for it. I just want you.” She sniffed and her eyes met mine. “Are you tired of fighting this too?”

I had to clench my fists to keep from reaching out to her. “Of course I am. But we’ve had our one time.”

“It wasn’t enough for me,” she said. “And I have a feeling it wasn’t enough for you either.”

Nothing would ever be enough. I could have her for every second of every day, and I’d still miss her.

And I missed her now, even though she was right in front of me.

“Jade,” I said.

“Just think about it,” she pleaded. “We can be better. I hate having to try to be friends.”

“I was gonna say—”

“I know what you’re gonna say. I really do. You’re using logic and reason, and I know it’s a bad idea, but I can’t—”

I had to cut her off. She was rambling and clearly thought I was about to tell her no. The only way to get her out of her own head was to prove it to her.

Grabbing her by the shoulders, I pulled her to me, answering her question with a searing kiss.

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39

JADE



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Kerry Winsor: Has anyone seen this chicken? I tried to pet her and she ATTACKED me.

Comments:
Mollie Wilson: That's Hennifer. She's at large. Watch your back.
Kerry Winsor: Is she a criminal or a chicken?
SherriffMike Finch: Criminal. She bit my toe.
Jade Clark: And why did you have your dogs out for her to bite?

THERE WEREN'T many times Gabriel surprised me. Usually, I was the one jumping him.

The second our lips met, my brain whited out, and I stiffened in his arms. I'd had a whole list of ways to convince him. My final move was to drag him to me.

He must have gotten there first.

My eyes were shut when he finally pulled away.

"Are you ready to listen now?"

"Never," was my immediate reply. "Or maybe I will this time."

His grip on my shoulders loosened as he laughed. "I was going to say you're right."

“Seriously?”

“Did I finally surprise you?” he asked.

“Shut up.” I rolled my eyes but then stared him down. “Are you really okay with this?”

His smile faded. “I am okay with it, but I’m nervous. Staying away is obviously impossible. I just don’t want to hurt you again.”

“We can’t go through life never hurting each other. Leaving is going to be rough. I can’t deny that, but I want to handle it all differently this time.”

“I do too.”

“So?”

“Fuck it,” he said. “Let’s do what we want while we can.”

My heart felt like it could melt. Instead, I melted into him, leaning my weight onto the man who’d come back into my life.

My eyes slipped shut as his lips moved against mine. How many times had I imagined this? I never thought it would happen because I was so sure Gabriel would never come back to Strawberry Springs. Yet, here I was, kissing him again and getting to relive my youth.

He pushed me against the checkout counter.

“You know people can see this, right?” he asked against my lips. I peeked around him and looked outside. My blinds were open and people were walking by. I even caught Jackie’s eye, but she went beet red and ran off.

This would be in the group in moments.

I didn’t care.

“They already knew this would happen.”

“We still don’t need an indecent exposure charge.”

I rolled my eyes. “You’ve been in the city too long. No one cares here.”

“With what I have planned? They’ll care.”

“You’re talking a big talk. Do you know how many times a man has done that and let me down?”

Gabriel’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t mention other men right now. I’ve lost sleep thinking about it.”

“I so like it when you get jealous.”

“I think you’ll have other things to like here in a moment.”

He was about to kiss me again when there was a *bang* on the door. His arm came up to shield me.

Only, it was Kerry pressing her face into the glass. “Jackie was right! Guys, Jackie was right!”

More shadows ran to the window.

Slowly, Gabriel turned to look at me.

“Okay, so you were right. They do care.”

“They always care.”

WE MEANT to make it to Gabriel’s bedroom.

We made it to the couch instead.

The second we were somewhere private, he was on me in a totally different way. Kissing him had been good, but now his hands were involved, and they went everywhere. I’d never forgotten what it was like when he finally lost control, and I took in the way he gripped me to him, never letting me pull away.

His lips were on my neck and he was right on the spot that always got me.

Next to me, my phone was blowing up with messages, probably from everyone telling me what a bad idea this was. They were right. I was heading toward heartbreak.

I’d be sad when he left, but I’d be sadder if I didn’t do this.

That was what kept me going.

We stumbled to the couch, neither of our holds loosening. I wound up on top of him, lips moving against his. My tongue swiped over his and he let me in without hesitation.

There was something freeing about this. This wasn’t a one-time thing. We could do it again. Sure, he’d leave in the end, but I couldn’t think about that. All I could think about was us.

Our kiss quickly grew messier. I took it all in now that I knew I was the only one he’d done this with. It was just me.

God, I didn’t know how much I needed to know that.

It was so much hotter now that I knew the reasons.

I needed more. I needed to touch him in all the ways I told myself I couldn’t. I needed him to be close to me and want me just as much as I did him.

Wanting isn't the issue, Jade.

I paused, my logic winning for one second.

"J-Jade?" he asked.

I forced myself out of it.

"I'm good. Just in shock that this is happening." It was a lie, but my voice was level enough that he believed me.

Or he appeared to.

I wasn't going to let him think too hard about me.

My hands went under his shirt, ghosting over his skin. Gabriel's eyes slipped shut.

"Fuck," Gabriel said.

"That's the goal." I grinned and worked on his shirt. I'd seen him before, but now I could touch all of it. I met his eyes and leaned down, touching his skin with my tongue.

He groaned. "Jade."

He was so sensitive. He always had been.

I wanted to push every button I could, but he stopped me. "Your turn," he said, his voice low.

My skin erupted in gooseflesh at the idea of me undressing. When we'd done this before, it was in a dark closet. I could see, but it wasn't in the light of day like this was.

I didn't want Gabriel to catch onto any of my hesitancy, so I rolled my eyes. "You're so determined to make this fair."

"I'm determined to see your tits. Fairness is just a bonus." Now his hands were under my top.

I could make fun of him for being sensitive all day, but I knew I was no better. My back arched and I let out an embarrassing moan.

My thoughts broke through my feelings the second he grabbed at the hem of my shirt.

"You know, the years can change a woman's body."

As much as I tried to deny it, there was a huge difference between the younger version of me in his mind and the woman I was now.

If I saw disappointment, I might break.

"So?"

"Just a warning."

His eyes traced over every inch of me. I watched for the judgment I'd grown far too used to.

“In hindsight, I should have worn a better bra,” I muttered. It wouldn’t fix it, but it would help.

“Trust me, I’ve not noticed the fucking bra,” he ground out. “But if you’re worried about it, I can fix that.”

He unhooked it with one movement.

His throat worked. “Holy shit.”

“I don’t need you to tell me they aren’t as perky as they once were. Gravity is a thing—”

“Jade.” He spoke firmly. “If you think for one second I’ll ever say anything negative about you, you’re wrong.”

“But I’m not the same as I once was.”

“Neither am I. You’re still hot as fuck, and I feel like I could come in my pants just from looking at you.”

God. I didn’t realize how much I’d missed this, how much I’d needed *him* and no one else. “Should we try?”

He hummed. “I have something different in mind, and it involves you taking your pants off.”

I was curious, but I was down for anything as long as it involved his hands on me. I stood and removed the rest of my clothes. When I turned, he was biting his knuckles.

“Your ass,” he moaned.

“Well? How is it in actual light?”

“You have to come here to see what I think.”

“Equality,” I said slowly. “I want to see all of you too.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said. He stood, getting out of his jeans.

Fuck. I’d dreamed of that dick, but it was better in person. It was better than any other man I’d ever seen.

His lips curved upward, and I had no doubts that he’d caught what I was looking at.

“Tell me,” he said. “What did you miss the most? What did those other men fail at?”

“Everything.”

“Then I’ll give you everything. Where do we start now?”

“Not a single man has gone down on me other than you.”

He froze. “They haven’t?”

“They all acted like my vagina was leaking poison or something.”

“Idiots.” He scoffed. “Let me make it up to you. Sit on my face.”

I was about to, I was. But I paused.

“One problem,” I said. “I’m way heavier than you remember.”

“So?”

“So, I could crush you. But I’ll hover.”

Gabriel glared at me.

“If you hover,” he said as he ripped off his glasses, “I’ll make you crush me. I want you to sit on my face with no reservations.”

“But—”

“Don’t make me find the idiots who made you feel this way. I’ll crush them in a very different way.”

Oh man. I was never going to be the same after this. “All right. It’s your funeral.”

“I’ll die a happy man.” He laid back and gestured for me to come over.

As brave as I tried to be, I was hesitant. So much so that I faced backward so I could stare at his dick to at least make myself feel better. I hovered for all of a second before his arms forced me all the way down. I gasped when his tongue ran over my clit.

Gabriel groaned. Not out of pain, but as if he were a man starved.

Fuck. This was such a good idea. Did I have reservations before? Suddenly, I didn’t remember.

My eyes almost shut, but then I caught what was in front of me.

Should I have been focusing on Gabriel eating me out? Yes.

Was I also reaping the rewards of my own decisions and watching his dick? Also yes.

It was *right* there. It was staring me down.

What else was I supposed to do?

I’d never been one to hold back, so I leaned down and covered the head of his cock with my mouth.

Gabriel immediately tensed and I swore he said my name into my pussy.

My eyes rolled to the back of my head. New favorite unlocked.

There was no way Gabriel’s massive cock was fitting into my mouth. All I could do was use my hands and hope for the best. I knew it was good when his own rhythm stuttered on my core.

So many men had demanded blow jobs out of me before, but I was never into them. But now, with Gabriel’s dick in my mouth? I was a changed woman. I’d blow him any day.

There was something about how open he was with how it felt. Even with his mouth occupied, he tensed under me. He cursed too.

I felt like a goddess when I was with him.

The years had worn on me in ways I didn't realize. The spark of insecurity I'd shown Gabriel was humbling.

He handled it exactly like I needed him to.

Now I was back to my usual self. And I wasn't sure if I wanted to push him to the edge, or if I wanted to drag this out forever.

My mind flashed to the last time we did this, where I wasn't sure if I wanted this to last forever or if I wanted my orgasm.

This time, I knew I'd have more. We might only have a few weeks, but I could make a lot happen in that time.

But he knew exactly where to put his tongue. The weight of his cock in my mouth pushed me further than I realized, and I was sensitive in ways I never had been before.

Or at least ways I hadn't been with anyone else.

I started grinding down just as Gabriel's hip started moving up. Thoughts vanished from my mind as my eyes slipped shut.

Make this last. I need to make this last.

There was no hope.

Gabriel gave my clit too much attention, and I did the same with his dick. It was like a competition, and both of us were top competitors.

I gave first. Heat rushed from my clit, brought forth by his tongue. It spread to my lower belly and made an involuntary moan escape me. I chased the feeling, wanting it to never end.

Gabriel said something to me, but I couldn't hear it. I was too lost.

"Jade, *Jade*—"

Soon, I realized why he was talking. Hot cum burst into my mouth, hitting the back of my throat. For a second, I thought I'd gag, but I was better than this.

I was swallowing every last drop of it.

"Jesus *fuck*," he said into my thigh. "What the hell was that?"

I was in too much of a daze to answer him.

"Did I make up for lost time?" he asked.

I hummed. "We might need a few more times to decide."

"I think I can make that happen." I could tell just from the sound of his voice that he was smiling. "I like the fact that only I've made you come."

“And I like the fact that you waited for me.”

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40

GABRIEL



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Jackie Anne: They're back together. I'm telling you all now. Brace yourselves.

Comments:
Kerry Winsor: I saw it myself!!! Who bet on this???
Tammy Jane: I bet on her having some sense, but I should've known.
Mollie Wilson: Wait, what did you see?
Jackie Anne: They were going AT IT at her shop just ten minutes ago! I need to bleach my eyes! But I'm so happy for them!

WHILE JADE WAS in the shower, her phone started going off. And it kept lighting up with notifications once she was done.

"Are you gonna answer that?"

She frowned at it. "No. I'm thinking of using it as a vibrator, though."

"*I* would use it as a vibrator on you," I corrected.

"Oh, really?" She raised an eyebrow. "You're not gonna tell me you're better than one?"

"I'm better *with* one." I leaned in.

"I kinda want to see that," she said with a smile. "This evening?"

A laugh escaped me. This was just like when both of us discovered sex. We couldn’t be stopped.

“I’ll do my best. Worst case, I’ll focus all my attention on you.”

“I like that idea.”

I was about to kiss her when her phone went off again. “Seriously, what’s going on?”

“The town probably knows about us.”

That knocked me out of my pure joy. *The town.* They would have opinions on this. “They all care about you. Are you going to listen to them?”

“Have I ever listened to anyone in my life? It’s not like we’re ignoring it this time. We’re talking, which is way more than we did when we were eighteen.”

“You’re right. It does feel different this time.”

“And you know, they may have things to say to you too. Are you prepared to be back on the small-town gossip train?”

“I’ll do my best.”

“You don’t seem to hate it as much this time.”

I was treading into dangerous territory here, but I nodded anyway. “After years of no one caring about anything that I did, it’s different. But these are still people that I grew up with. So, it’s not the end of the world.”

Jade gave me a soft smile. “I’m not the only one who changed, it seems.”

“You’re not.” My own smile faded when I thought about something else. “We have another thing to talk about, unfortunately.”

“What else is there?”

“Agnes and Beatrice.”

Jade’s eyes went wide and she immediately nodded. “You’re right. We need a game plan.”

“They’ve already been through a lot of change and obviously they’re not good at it.”

“And we don’t want them getting too attached here and making it worse for you when you have to leave. Do you want me to stay away from them?”

I immediately shook my head. “No, that’s a really bad idea. They’re already attached and there’s nothing we can do about it now.”

“We can always make calls when you’re back.”

“Exactly. But if they know we’re more . . . then it might change things.”

Jade’s lips pressed into a thin line. “So, we don’t tell them.”

“They already know a lot. It’s bad enough as it is.”

“The town might spoil it.” Her arms crossed. “Do we keep it from them too?”

“Not if you don’t want to.” I eyed her body language. “You already seem mad.”

“I’m not. I wish I could bask in the glow of sex a little longer, but we have to talk about this. It’s not as simple as it was when we were teens.” She let out a breath and her shoulders loosened. “We’ll keep it between us.”

“Really?”

“They’ve seen a little bit, but I can gaslight the fuck out of them.” She finally smiled. “It’s one of my favorite things to do.”

“And you’re sure you’re okay?”

I thought she would immediately say she was, but she paused to think about it. “I think I am. As much as I’d like to do what I want, we can’t. But I still have you. That’s all that matters.”

“Yeah.” I said it slowly. “That’s all that matters.”

THE NEXT FEW days of the girls’ school went better than the first. I was able to drop them off entirely on my own. Jade had texted to ask if I needed help. I was glad that I didn’t.

Once upon a time, I longed for this kind of quiet, but in the silence, thoughts of Jade took over my mind. I’d worked on all my emails. I’d even plotted out a new game. But it wasn’t enough.

The only other distraction I could find was at Atticus’s house. I pulled in, noting that he was at the vet clinic for the day, and went inside using my key.

Mom’s office was exactly like she left it when she died. I’d come in here many times when I was a kid and was planning on getting out of Strawberry Springs. Ever since I’d returned, I tried not to come in here. Reading her letters would be a reminder that I was back where I shouldn’t be.

I was living the life that she never wanted for me.

I needed that reminder now. Not even the memory of Alice wanting the girls to go to private school was enough right now.

Hopefully, Mom could convince me to do the right thing.

Her letters were in the same place, barely disturbed even though time had passed.

Atticus was determined to continue on with his life. I knew he loved Mom and missed her, but he didn't need to come in here the same way I did.

Even though I remembered her, it was from a youth that I had long since lost. Atticus was an adult who knew her fully. These reminders were important.

Feeling like a teenager again, I sat on the floor and went through her letters. I found one dated many years ago, back when I knew she was going through something similar to what I was now.

I sent Gabriel to Strawberry Springs Elementary School today. It was so hard to leave, not only because I knew that the school was so underfunded, but also because he's my baby. It feels wrong to leave him in a place where I know he's not going to get the best education he can.

With how the state is acting toward small towns these days, I'm not sure that he'll get the kind of learning that he deserves. I had to do it, though, and when I left, I cried in my car for what felt like an hour before coming home. Now, everything is far too quiet, and I can't wait to go get him.

I hope that when he has kids, things are different. I hope that they get the education that they deserve and he's somewhere else. While the people I love are in

Strawberry Springs, I know more than anyone else that there's more out there.

I sighed as I read the final words. I'd walked into the trap she hadn't wanted for me. The girls were also not where Alice wanted them. As much as I knew this was my best option, especially considering the state of my apartment back in San Francisco, it didn't feel like what was planned for them.

It felt like I was failing Mom, and it felt like I was failing Alice's wishes.

Worst of all, I didn't know if I would be able to leave this time. I didn't know if I'd be able to do what Mom and Alice wanted. Because despite everything that I thought was true, I enjoyed my time here far too much.

I used to consider myself my mother's child. Now, I didn't know who I was at all.

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41

JADE



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Jackie Anne: Call Cain.

Comments:
Mollie Wilson: You posted this on Facebook and never called him. He's worried you're mad. Might want to try again.
Jackie Anne: Dang it!!! Ever since they updated Facebook, I don't understand this app!
Jackie Anne: Call Cain.
Hu Gh: Let me give you a tip. It's the little green button.
Marjorie Brown: Call Hen.
Mollie Wilson: The chicken or the person?
Kerry Winsor: Obviously she means her wife!!!
Marjorie Brown: I meant the chicken. I have someone for her to peck.

I WAS HAVING FAR TOO much fun with Gabriel and the girls at dinner when I got a message from Marjorie.

MARJORIE

I'm not gonna mention what's going on, but I need to talk to you. Meet me at the library.

This was one of those rare times where she was being serious, and I knew she had information that I needed. Agnes and Beatrice seemed to love having me around, so excusing myself was a little difficult. But I ran to the library and met Marjorie out front.

“Hey, sorry it took me a minute to get away.”

“You better know I love you. I am so curious about the rumors going around town.”

“They’re not that interesting.”

“I know that you’re a good liar too.”

“Right. But it’s not only for my benefit. There are kids involved.”

Marjorie paused, then nodded. “Ah. Fair enough. I’ll just pretend that I have no idea that you’re lying then.”

I smiled at her. “Thank you very much.”

“Anyway, all these questions aren’t why I brought you out. I decided to talk to the mayor.”

“Oh my God, you’re brave. He was back in town again?”

“I was curious if he was following the law. That developer asshole will need to rezone the land. By local law, they have to hold public forums.”

“And is he?” My mind spun as I came up with ways to stop him. If he was breaking the law, that would make it easier.

“For now. It’s planned for tomorrow.”

I frowned. “Why has nothing been posted about it? He’s not in the Facebook group, but we could have easily added it.”

Marjorie crossed her arms. “Why do you think? Obviously, he doesn’t want people to know so people don’t oppose it.”

I groaned. “Fucking dick.”

“Look, whoever this is, he’s trying to make sure it’s happening.”

“Shit.”

“We need to make it clear that we oppose this.”

“We need this to be a surprise.” I bit my lip.

“The Facebook group is always a good option.”

I thought about it and then shook my head. “No. Not in the group. There are profiles in there that I don’t recognize. They could have connections to Toby.”

“We can’t even trust our group now?” She sighed. “We need to clean that thing out.”

“I’ll talk to Kerry about it. After I get through this. We want there to be a wave of people at this town forum so that they get alarmed.”

“Got it. I’ll round everyone up. That’s the best thing about being old, I know the old ways of communication.”

“And I’ll . . .” I paused, not sure what else I could do.

“Enjoy your man.”

“I . . . We’re not—”

“I know, but I’ll still say enjoy the time he’s here.” She smiled but then paused. “Does he know?”

I shook my head. “No, and I don’t want him to be dragged into this when he’s leaving soon.”

“Fair enough. He likes us, but he’s always had eyes for you and only you.”

I nodded. “I know. Hell would freeze over before he cared about this stuff. We’ll handle it.”

“We always have the STM grant.”

“I want to see what we can do before we bring them in.”

“Still nothing on that?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “One day I’ll figure it out, but the spring is more important.”

“You’re right. We can crack the STM grant code at some other point.”

“If it’s even possible.”

“We’ve got this.” Marjorie sounded so sure, but I wasn’t sure I was. The idea of losing something so close to me was terrifying.

I smiled and nodded anyway. It helped to have someone be somewhat calm around me. If they believed it, then maybe one day I would too.

“Also, don’t hate me for this, but they insisted.”

That got me out of my thoughts. “What?”

Marjorie pointed behind me.

I turned and my heart fell into my ass when I saw Mollie, Wren, Grace, and Piper staring at me.

“Fuck.” I turned back to Marjorie, only to find her running away.

How could such an old woman be so fast?

“Don’t you try to escape.” Wren crossed her arms.

“You have explaining to do,” Grace said.

I let out a sigh. “I know. I’m sorry.”

“Let’s get a room,” Piper said. “We can all talk there.”

“I’d love to, but the library is closed,” Grace said. “Plus, Marjorie just left. Should we find somewhere else?”

“No need. I bet she left it unlocked just like everyone else here.” I walked over to the door and pulled on the handle. It opened. I sighed. “Let’s go, ladies. Just remember as you yell at me that my genius got us into the room.”

I HADN’T EVEN SAT before they started in on me.

“So, you’re sleeping together.” Grace said it, and all the other women nodded.

“I mean . . . yeah,” I replied quietly.

“And you snuck into his place too.” Piper crossed her arms, her face set into an uncharacteristic frown. “You know, you could have just told us you were considering this.”

“To be fair, that was something different,” I said. “I didn’t sleep with him that time. Well, I did. But I didn’t know.”

All their eyes went wide, and I realized how it sounded.

“Wait, no! Just sleeping! Nothing like that! Consent is discussed all around!”

“I am . . . so lost,” Wren said. “Was this how they were the first time?”

“Kind of,” Grace answered. “This is worse than usual.”

None of them were happy with me, and I hated that my friends were so upset. This was the result of secrets. In trying to protect myself from being embarrassed, I was hurting them.

How long had I been doing that?

“I’m sorry, you guys. I know I tend to hide things, but I shouldn’t hide this.” I took a deep breath. “Gabriel and I are together, but we’re not telling anyone.”

All my friends let their shock show for a second.

Grace recovered first. “Is he wanting to hide it?”

“Kind of, but not because he’s ashamed.” I rubbed my hot cheeks. “We’re trying to play it cool because of the girls.”

“You might have to try a little harder.”

“This isn’t the first time they’ve done this.” Grace laughed and crossed her arms. “They tried to hide it when they were teenagers too. We all knew.”

“This is mortifying.”

“How do you think I felt as I fell in love with Dean?”

“There’s just a few differences.” My voice went quiet. “Like the leaving part.”

“Right,” Mollie said. “So, what happens when he leaves?”

I took a breath before saying the same thing that I’d been telling myself. “We haven’t fully talked about it, but it’s not going to be the same as last time. Neither of us want a massive argument, so we’re trying to discuss the future where it’s not so black-and-white. He’s gonna move back to San Francisco. That I know. I’m staying here. But he’s not cutting himself off from the town. We’ll talk after he goes.”

“And you’re fine with that?” Mollie asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe? It’s not ideal, but I’m willing to live with it for him.”

That nagging feeling returned. It told me I was missing something, that I needed to look deeper. I tried to push it away, knowing that encouraging him to stay was a recipe for a fight.

A silence settled over my friends. They’d all gotten their happily ever afters. They found people who worked for them. They all stayed in Strawberry Springs.

With me, it was different. I had a history of being with Gabriel. There was no falling back in love with him, because I’d never fallen out.

But we were two different people. There was something so important that we were not compatible on.

“And you’re sure that he’s the one?” Wren asked.

“I can say for sure that I’ve never felt this way about anyone else. No matter how much I’ve tried.”

“I mean, he followed her around when we were in high school.” Grace shrugged. “That’s all I know. Jade doesn’t talk about the rest.”

She was right. I didn’t. Right after Gabriel had left, it was far too difficult to. I had to put all of that into a box and hide it away. Over the years, those feelings never left, but all those memories turned sour. Now, the box was open again, and I was airing out those moments, making sure I didn’t fully close them off again.

“Have I told any of you that I sleepwalk?”

“I’m sorry, you what?” Grace’s jaw was on the floor. “How long have you done it? And how did I not know?”

“My entire life, basically.”

“Holy shit,” Mollie said. “How can we help?”

“Right now, I’m covered.”

“How so?” Grace asked.

“Recently, I was exhausted and didn’t barricade my door, and I thought everything was fine. It turns out I’ve been sleepwalking right into Gabriel’s apartment over the last few weeks.”

“Seriously?” Grace asked. “With the kids and all?”

“Yep, they saw it all. Even though I was angry at him, I still trusted him in some way.”

“That’s . . . Wow, you *really* like him,” Wren said.

“What did he do?” Piper asked.

“He took care of me. During the day, I was yelling at him. At night, he made sure I was safe and took me back every morning so I wouldn’t be embarrassed.”

“Oh that’s . . .” Wren trailed off. “Wow, we’re supposed to be mad at him.”

“Was he always like that?” Piper asked. “Taking care of you?”

“He would wait outside my window to make sure I didn’t sleepwalk. And when I did, he made sure I didn’t get hurt.”

“Damn. I need a pen.” Piper grabbed her bag. “I gotta write this down!”

“And he left?” Grace asked.

“He tried to get me to go with him. He really wanted to see the world. But I liked it here.”

“Oh . . . so he’s a good man with different goals.”

“Yeah. That’s the issue.”

All of them went silent.

Piper leaned forward. She still kept to herself, but would touch us if we needed her. “Are you okay?”

“I know what you’re all thinking. How could this be how it ends?” I sighed. “Maybe I’m asking myself the same thing.”

“You want him to stay,” Mollie said.

“Yeah, of course I do, but that’s a fever dream. We promised to listen. He’ll never love this town like I do, and if I were in his shoes . . . Well,

telling me to go with him wouldn’t work either.”

“I’m sorry, Jade,” Grace said. “I really am.”

“I’ll figure it out.” I looked away.

“You sound like you need a distraction,” she added. “Maybe we should plan on helping Marjorie spread the word about the town meeting tomorrow.”

“Yes.” I sat up straighter. “The more people there, the better.”

Propping my chin on my palm, we all made a plan. It was a good distraction, so much so that I was soon laughing like usual.

The future was going to come crashing down any moment now.

I’d take this small moment of peace for as long as I could.

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42

GABRIEL



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Marjorie Brown: So now you all know why I've needed a fucking pitchfork.

Comments:
Mark Bell: We need more than that.
Jade Clark: Guys, sh. This place isn't safe.
Kerry Winsor: Say it isn't so! I can't lose this group, I CAN'T. WHEN WILL THE ATROCITIES CEASE!!!

THE ENTIRE TOWN seemed tense out of nowhere. I wasn't sure what had changed overnight, but clearly, something had spread.

What was worse was that it wasn't in the Facebook group. For once, I had no idea what it could be.

That bothered me more than I expected.

Most people tried to smile at me and nod, but it was different than usual.

Was there a rumor about me?

Were they pissed about Jade and me?

I was at Food 'n' Things to get ingredients for dinner. The store was empty, but there was the sound of Dale loudly stocking something in the corner.

“Hey,” I said quietly.

Dale turned around, gave me a singular nod, and went back to slamming pasta on the shelf.

“Everything okay?”

He only waved me off, which made me wonder if it was me.

I got through my list before going to the front. Dale sighed and stopped what he was doing to come and check me out.

“Come on, tell me, what did I do?”

He looked up, shook his head, and looked back down.

“Wow, I must’ve really stepped in it.”

“Not everything in this damn world revolves around you. There’s other stuff going on.”

A younger me would have been mad at that, but I knew whatever was going on was serious.

“All right, message received.”

Dale was quiet. “Things are changing around here.”

I paused. “Aren’t they good changes, though?”

He huffed and I could only stare. On the outside, it seemed like Strawberry Springs was doing well.

Was it not like that on the inside?

He watched me stare at him and then shook his head. “You don’t have to pretend to care. We’re all up in arms about something here, not whatever you and Jade are doing.”

“We’re not doing anything.”

“Sure. Just like nothing happened the first time.”

I was tempted to argue with him, but his other words hit me.

“What else is going on?”

There was a second where I thought he would tell me. There was rarely news that I didn’t know about since I’d snuck into the Facebook group.

But then Dale shook his head. “Don’t worry about us, kid. We’ll figure it out.”

He handed me my bags and I took them numbly.

When I was out in the square, I looked back. I shook my head, knowing no amount of digging would ever make anyone in town reveal their secrets.

Instead, I went home and made food for the girls and got caught up on my email.

My frustration only got worse.

GABRIEL

Are you coming over tonight?

JADE

That’s a little presumptive. Do I HAVE to?

But yes. I need some sleep.

I typed a message, then deleted it. Then tried again.

Nothing came out.

“Can we stay up to see Jade?” Agnes popped up between my phone and me.

I had to take a second to process what Agnes had asked. “I don’t know when she’ll be here, and you have a bedtime.”

She blew a raspberry that wound up spraying me. I let out a long sigh and wiped my face.

“I hate school. I don’t need a bedtime.”

I looked over. Beatrice was asleep on top of the fridge.

“When did she get there?” I asked, shooting to my feet.

“We climbed there and jumped off a bunch. You weren’t listening.”

I was lucky Jade was my only neighbor, or there would be a noise complaint. I scrubbed a hand over my face. I knew better than to be on my phone while these two were awake.

“Why are you upset?” Agnes asked.

“I’m fine.”

“You’re not. You have that line in your eyebrows. And you ignored us all night.”

I deflated like a balloon. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that.”

She shrugged. “It’s okay. I dipped your toothbrush in the toilet.”

Another sigh escaped me. “Great. Thanks.”

“Watch me next time.”

“Your threat has done its job.” I walked over to get Beatrice from off the fridge. For once, she was pliant in my arms. When her head landed on my chest, she curled inward.

“You’re not forgetting us, are you?” Agnes asked.

“*No.*” The words flew out of me. “Not at all. I was worried about something else.”

“What is it?”

“Something to do with the town.”

“There’s something going on?” Her eyes went wide. “Want me to ask around?”

“You could?” I let out a laugh.

“Are you doubting me?”

“You’re five.”

“I set your house on fire.”

“I’m still mad at you for that.”

She stuck out her tongue and stared me down.

“All right, all right. Don’t look at me like that. You don’t have to solve my problems.”

“But I want you to like me.”

I blinked. “You don’t have to solve things for me to like you.”

“I want to.” She said it quietly and looked down.

It felt like I was listening to my own thoughts. I knew that Agnes and Beatrice looked like me, but I saw a lot of Alice in them, and somehow, Jade too.

This was something she’d gotten from me.

I had a terrible habit of solving others’ problems for them. I didn’t say it out loud. Sometimes I didn’t even think about it, at the risk of getting caught, but I was always moving in the shadows, fixing things even if they had nothing to do with me.

And it was always something I did for those who I’d felt like I’d wronged.

The town was the biggest example of it.

“Agnes, I’ll handle this. And I’ll like you whether you help me with it or not.”

She blinked. “You like me?”

I hated that she sounded so shocked.

“I do. I like that you’re smart, and that you keep me on my toes.”

“Don’t you get annoyed?”

“I do, but then I get over it. And I know you feel safe to act out with me. That means you trust me.”

She nodded and leaned in. I had no idea what she was planning.

But then she hugged me.

It was becoming natural at this point, and I had no idea how I’d managed this.

Maybe I was one of the luckiest men in the world.

“I kind of like you too, Dad.” The words were soft. “Beatrice needs time.”

“She can take all the time she needs.”

A yawn broke out of her. She tried to hide it, but she was tired.

“Let’s go to bed.”

“Will you read me a story?” she asked.

“Which one?”

“The one Mommy read.”

I tried not to let my shock show. I’d tried to read that one the first night when I’d brought them home.

They’d screamed for the whole thing.

“Of course.”

I led her to her room and put her in the second bed in hopes of not disturbing Beatrice. I got out the well-loved book and started reading.

Eventually, I felt a hand on my thigh.

Beatrice had woken up and was staring at me with narrowed eyes.

I was sure she would start screaming.

Instead, she climbed into the bed and settled in. There was a kid on either side of me, slowly falling asleep.

This was a peace I never thought I would get with them.

They were out by the time it was done, and I snuck out of their room. My heart hammered in my chest.

I couldn’t wait to offer to read this again tomorrow.

I was still staring in the direction of their room when a knock at the door brought me out of my thoughts.

Jade was on the other end of it.

“Were you waiting for me?” she asked. She walked in with a yawn. “Where are the demons?”

“Asleep.”

“You got them to bed?”

“It’s not impossible. Besides, I need to be able to.”

Her eyes went distant and she nodded. “We should sleep.”

“You seem off. And you’re not the only one.”

Jade raised an eyebrow. “Why are you asking?”

“Can I not ask?”

“Careful. Or I’ll start to think you care about the town.”

“I—” I paused. Was it worth saying anything?

“Before you left last time, you didn’t want to hear anything.” I knew if she caught any wind of me caring for Strawberry Springs, she wouldn’t hesitate to try to get me to stay.

It was better not to push for any more information.

As myself, anyway.

“You’re right. We should sleep.”

Jade nodded and went to my bedroom. I lay down first and I realized my sheets were starting to smell like her, and I wondered if it would ever come out.

I hoped it didn’t.

When she joined me, I didn’t hesitate to pull her into my arms.

She tensed.

“Are we okay?” I asked.

“Yeah, we are.” Her voice was quiet. “Long day.”

“Can I help?”

“As hot as you are, I’m not in the mood for anything else.”

“I’m not talking about that. I’m good for more, you know.”

Jade hummed. “That remains to be seen—hey!” she yelled as I pushed her onto her stomach. “What are you doing?”

“Just quiet down and let me help you.”

“I’m—*oh*.” She relaxed when I ran my hands over her shoulders. They were more tense than I’d ever felt them. “Okay, you are good for something.”

“I’m good for many things,” I said as I moved down her back. “Let me take care of you.”

“Fine,” she grumbled. “Do whatever you want.”

I laughed and focused on my work. I refused to miss a single tense muscle as I increased the pressure. Jade went silent, and I thought she was enjoying the massage.

Then a slight snore escaped her.

I leaned down to check in, only to find her fast asleep. Finally, her body was lax and all the tense lines in her face were gone.

With a soft smile, I brushed a piece of hair out of her face.

“Rest, Jade.” I said it softly, hoping my words would get through to her dreams. “And tomorrow, I’ll try to fix everything else.”

She’d hide it from me, just like she always did.

I’d do my best to see past it.

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43

JADE



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Hu Gh: Why is everyone grumpy with me? I’m the only grump in this town!!! FACE ME, YOU COWARDS!

Comments:
Jackie Anne: Hugh, you definitely know why we’re mad.
Tammy Jane: You betrayed us, old man!
Hu Gh: I did what I had to!
Marjorie Brown: Not even a sorry. Typical!
Hu Gh: Get over it. I’m your favorite old man!
Hu Gh: Guys?
Hu Gh: GUYS!!!!

THE MAYOR HAD CHOSEN a tiny room in town hall for this, and most of the town was packed in like sardines.

“I know there’s a better room for this,” Wren said from behind me. “I built it.”

“Will you hold me if I faint?” I whispered. “Maybe I’m claustrophobic.”

“You should’ve brought your man here for that.” She rolled her eyes. “But I’ll put an arm around you.”

“You’re my hero,” I said, fanning myself. “Toby obviously hoped we wouldn’t be here. I’m gonna kill him.”

“Join the club,” Wren said.

“None of it’s good for the spring,” I said. “They’ll ruin it.”

“Exactly,” she muttered. “This is why I do this responsibly.”

Next to us, Mollie took a deep breath. “I’m glad we told Piper to stay away. This is packed.”

“It’s good,” I replied. “That means they might take us seriously.”

I let out a long sigh as the door opened. I jumped, thinking it was the mayor, but it was someone else.

Hugh hobbled in front of us all.

“I see you’ve all gathered here,” he said.

“To fix *your* screwup!” Tammy snapped.

I thought Hugh would snap right back at her. That was what he always did.

Instead, his head hung low. “We need to talk about that.”

We were all pissed at Hugh, but seeing him remorseful was shocking. He did whatever he wanted and never cared. This should have been the same thing.

When we quieted down, he spoke. “I need to say one thing. You all better open your ears because I’m not doing it again.”

I swore I could hear a pin drop.

“I’m sorry . . . for selling that land. I could’ve done things differently, but they were very persuasive.” He lowered his head again.

My eyes went wide. I knew he hadn’t felt great about it, but to apologize to all of us?

“We get it,” Mark said. “We wish you’d used the grant, but it’s fine.”

Hugh scoffed. “You all have to stop depending on that. You realize we’ve basically signed the town over to whoever that is, right?”

Everyone looked at each other. I’d said it before, but now virtually the entire town was realizing what I had.

“They wouldn’t hurt us, right?” Jackie asked.

“Yes.”

“We don’t know!” I said instead. “And it’s not always great to live in mystery.”

“But we need them!” Jackie pleaded.

“I know, and I’m not saying we stop working with them entirely. Not working with them gets us in hot water.” I pointedly looked at Hugh. “But maybe we should be careful. Very careful.”

“I’m not selling any more,” Hugh mumbled. “I didn’t know they would make a damn data center.”

I glanced at him and sighed. I could imagine being where he was. My shop was barely running. If not for the grant, I’d be in trouble too.

“Let’s not dogpile on Hugh,” I told everyone. “We can be mad, but I’m sure he’ll help us fix this. Right, Hugh?”

“I will. I promise on my own ass.”

“Just don’t show us your ass,” Tammy said. “But Jade’s right. No need to hold a grudge as long as you’re with us now.”

“As sweet as this all is,” Mollie said as she checked her watch, “Hugh might want to move. It should be starting any second.”

Hugh nodded and I helped him down. We all returned to suffering in the crowd until the door opened and Toby walked in. At the sight of everyone, he nearly stumbled.

“O-oh, hello.”

We all glared in response.

“Such a big crowd.” He laughed awkwardly.

“We all need to talk!” Tammy yelled. The rest of us cheered.

Toby sighed and cursed under his breath.

I couldn’t help but smirk. This was perfect. It was exactly what I needed.

Then someone else walked in. Time seemed to slow as the door opened. I saw a fancy dress shoe, followed by a suit.

That was when I recognized who was walking in.

It was the man who’d hit on me. Who’d wanted to change me. The one I’d punched in the face.

Gabriel had called him Kevin.

“What the fuck?” I asked.

Mollie turned. “Do you know him?”

I couldn’t answer. It felt like there was a ball of cotton in my throat.

Today, Kevin had a folder in hand. I stared him down as he walked to the podium. He cleared his throat and addressed us all.

“Hello, I’m here on account of CDI Developers. We’re looking to rezone the acreage recently sold to us to commercial.”

“For what?” Dale yelled.

“We’re looking to build a data center.”

“No the hell you’re not!” Tammy yelled.

“I heard those things are loud!”

“They also add to electricity and water costs!” Mollie added.

“I have reviewed this myself,” Toby said. “The town is affluent enough to afford it.”

“And we plan to use the local spring there,” Kevin added. “It can provide the water.”

The crowd exploded again.

I thought I might kill him myself.

Of course he was a piece of shit. I wanted to slam my fist into his face again.

He was unbothered. “Settle down, everyone. This will be good for you.”

“It’ll put a strain on our community!” Kerry yelled. “We don’t want that!”

“We’ll be building up the community, not destroying it.”

“The spring is a part of it!” Tammy said.

“And yet, it was on private land. No one used it.”

“I did,” I said. “I used it all the time.”

Our eyes finally met and his smirk made me feel slimy.

“Well, things change. That is prime land, and this can provide temporary jobs to you.”

“How many jobs?” Wren asked. “Do you plan to hire local?”

“For this, we have preferred builders—”

“So where are the jobs?”

“We’ll be paying taxes.” His smile grew. “Which is what you all need. I’ve been to dozens of towns like this.”

“You’re destroying a spring to do it. You hounded a man who wasn’t going to sell,” I reminded him. “That’s not okay.”

The town grumbled in agreement.

“I did what any business would do.”

“This is a community. Not a business decision.”

“Everything is a business decision in the end.” The townsfolk exploded again. Kevin kept speaking. “Listen. The land is mine. This *will* happen when we’ve done what is legally required of us. There is no one coming to save you.”

“You’ll do it even though we obviously oppose it?” I asked.

“The mayor is on our side.”

Tammy turned to him. “You’re up for reelection, asshole.”

Toby put up his hands, clearly sweating Tammy’s words. “I want this to be aboveboard. That’s why I did this.”

I glared. None of this was aboveboard. None of this was right.

And I had to do something about it.

GABRIEL WALKED in while I was angrily typing.

“Have you ever heard of knocking?” I snapped.

“You’re late.”

“I’m busy.”

“Doing what?”

“Handling things.”

He went quiet and I paused.

“Does this have to do with what’s pissed off the town?”

That finally got me to stop. “You know the town is upset?”

“It’s hard not to.” He sat next to me. “What’s going on?”

I shook my head. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Don’t try to hide things from me.” Gabriel’s voice was flat. “We said we would be different this time.”

“We are. We’re communicating.”

“You’re upset about something and you’re keeping it to yourself. That’s what you’ve always done.”

I blinked. I wasn’t expecting to get called out, but he was right.

“Hugh sold his land.”

“Thank you, I—wait, he did what?” His voice was harsher now.

“Yeah. A developer approached him about it. He needed the money.”

“So he sold it to someone random? What about the grant? I’m sure they would have bought it!”

I sighed. “He doesn’t trust it. He never has.”

“It had to be better than this.”

“That grant owns most of the town. A *stranger* has managed to take over nearly all the upper apartments and the square. Yes, they seem nice

now, but will that always last?”

He paused. “I guess you guys aren’t sure about that.”

“Of course we’re not. What if this person gets the idea that they want to develop us? They can do it, no questions asked.”

“But they don’t seem interested, they—”

“Does it matter?” I shook my head. “They’re not involved in this. They don’t know about it and they won’t.”

“Then what are you doing?”

“What I can. I’m opposing this at every turn. I’m making a plan.”

“What plan?”

“To protest. To go to every town meeting and fuck this *up*.” I growled the last part. “This is an email planning to go to everyone in town.”

“Not the Facebook group?”

“I bet that fucker has spies in there,” I muttered. “It can’t be trusted until all the other accounts are removed.”

“You’re removing accounts?”

I blinked. My voice came out hard. “Why do you care?”

That seemed to get him out of his thoughts. “I . . . It’s the spring.”

“You care about it?” I asked.

“*You* do.”

I was tempted to push him. To get him to admit he also cared.

But I shoved myself out of it.

No. He would only push back. He’d deny it. We promised to be different.

“And the town does too.” I smiled. “We’ve got this. You don’t have to worry.”

He didn’t seem so sure.

And neither was I.

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44

GABRIEL



Dad Company (But Sometimes Good Advice)
Ryan Kim: Never underestimate a full papa bear moment. Don’t mess with my kid.

Comments:
G Singh: Yeah . . . I kind of get it. Does it ever go beyond your kids, though?
Dean Briggs: It does for me.
Robert Colt: I’ll do a lot for someone I care about.

THE NEW TOWN hall was far nicer than the crumbling remains of the old one. It, like the rest of Strawberry Springs, had come a long way with just a little bit of help. I stared at it, now knowing that some of the town didn’t trust the money that was coming in.

It didn’t matter if they didn’t trust it.

I wasn’t sure if it was the way Jade had hinted that she was removing unknown accounts from the Facebook group or if it was the way the town was shifting against the STM grant, but I felt desperate.

And I did stupid things when I was desperate.

Normally, I would throw my money around in private, making sure that both she and the town got whatever they wanted. I’d already reached out to

the developer, only to get the message that the land was not for sale.

I didn't do things in person, but this time I would.

Mayor Toby was in town today—a miracle, considering he didn't give a shit about this area. He'd been in power for far too long and had let things go to ruin while he lived in Nashville. Technically, he was supposed to live in the town, but he never had and could get away with it since he was the only one willing to do the job.

He kept the power, took the payment, and left Strawberry Springs to rot.

I hated Toby with every fiber of my being, but his lackadaisical approach to running the town benefited me in a way. It seemed like he knew Strawberry Springs could be something, and now that it was, he wanted to cash in on that.

I met him in the hallway.

"Oh, hi. It's you." He'd seen me before. He was mayor when I was a kid. By the way he stared, I could tell he recognized me. But he couldn't place a name. I highly doubted he could place a single person in this town.

"It's me. I'm Gabriel Sinclair."

"I think I've heard the name. My daughter plays your video game."

"I have a lot of fans. And a lot of interest in this town. Are you in charge of the rezoning of Hugh's land?"

"This again?" Toby rolled his eyes. "The town is making a big ol' fuss about nothing."

I was tempted to tell him that this was not nothing. This was the place that they lived. But I knew that wouldn't help anything.

"They want things to stay the same. They want that land to stay as it is. And I'm here to offer you a different solution."

"Really?"

"Block the permit, let the developer sit on it, and I'll buy it for full price. And make sure it stays as it is."

"You're asking a lot out of me."

"It's right before an election."

"There's no one else on the ballot."

"They could write someone in."

"The people around here don't team up for anything like that. A write-in is unheard of. I've got this in the bag."

"Yet, you're holding the forums according to code. You want this to be aboveboard so no one can stop you. And you're clinging to the idea that

you'll win this election. You *do* want some public favor."

"Some, but not all."

"This is a more than reasonable offer."

"Not for me. No thank you."

"And you're willing to let someone else own it and turn it into God knows what?" I leaned in and crossed my arms. "Are you benefiting from this?"

"That would be illegal."

"Or is someone close to you benefiting from it?"

He paused, then laughed. "O-of course not!"

"Seems like someone is, if not you."

"You're gonna give the old man a heart attack if you keep that up," a third voice chimed in. "Don't do that to my favorite uncle."

Son of a fucking bitch.

It was pure luck that they were both here on the same day. Still, I hated seeing his face, and had since the first time he spoke to Jade.

"Kevin."

"You know my name?" He carried a bag labeled with the developer's name.

"I looked you up the second you made a move on Jade." I put my hands in my pockets and stood to my full height. "And I had a feeling you would show up, since I found your job as well."

He laughed, seemingly unbothered. "Let me guess. You're here as a favor to Jade. She really wants that land."

"You seem to as well. Both of you."

"I'm not letting go of it for anything. It's mine."

"You're gonna piss off a whole town."

"And?"

I wanted to strangle him.

"No one is more dangerous than someone with a grudge."

"I'm not worried."

"You should be."

"Because you suddenly care? Let me guess, you're the one who got the grant to go after us."

"Sure." It was easier than the truth. "Let's go with that."

"Are you covering?" Kevin laughed. "They already reached out to me, even though I'm pretty sure the people in town don't trust it anymore. Only

an outsider would do that."

"You've been doing research," I said.

"We have. I figured this would be opposed. I'm used to that, really."

"And you run over them anyway?"

"They can protest. They can cry about it. I'll still win in the end."

"And have you ever gone up against something like the STM grant?"

"That's something I'll deal with. They've clearly had a reason to do this, and I bet they'll understand the power of a dollar."

"Or they'll be willing to come out of hiding to stop you." I said it slowly, a plan forming in my mind. "You should be worried about the one who's given everything for the town."

"It's clearly a business move. They want to own everything they can."

"It's not."

"How do you know?"

The words hung between us.

"Think about it," I said. "And then sell me the fucking land when you figure it out."

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45

JADE



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Mollie Wilson: The cows are camping on Main.

Comments:
Kerry Wilson: Oh well . . . what can you do in a town like this?
Marjorie Brown: I call cows nature's stoplights.
Henrietta Brown: And while you sit there, come by the library! We have lemonade!

THERE WERE many things I loved about Strawberry Springs, but one of the best was how annoying we could be when we wanted to be.

Two cows stood eating grass from greenery on the sidewalks. Two others had decided to lay right in the middle of Main Street. Despite the fact that it was hot, we all gathered outside, watching them in the sun.

A few days ago, Marjorie had spotted Kevin racing down the main drag with his loud-ass car. We decided to watch for him to be in town again.

There was no speeding happening today.

The poor idiot sat in traffic for almost an hour while we admired the scene.

"So, when he finally gets the sense to get out of his car, how are we playing this again?" Mollie asked.

“We’re waiting for the cows to come home,” I replied.

“You so stole that joke from the Facebook group.”

“I did, but it’s too funny not to say again.”

I gave a thumbs-up to all the townspeople waiting in traffic. Kerry had been the first in line, both figuratively and literally. She’d been doing a crossword, happy to help ruin this developer’s day. Behind her was Atticus, and behind him was Tammy, who was doing a great job of honking her horn so loudly that none of us could have a single thought.

Kevin must have had enough, because he finally got out of his car. Judging by how red his face was, he was pissed off.

“What the hell is the holdup?” He snapped his hands on his hips like an annoyed child.

“Oh, sorry. We’re just waiting for the cows to come home.” Mollie laughed, but yelped when I elbowed her.

Cain, her husband and caretaker of the cows, rolled his eyes. He was doing his best to pretend to be annoyed, but I knew he cared about this just as much as the rest of us.

“Some of us have places to be,” Kevin said.

“Oh well, what can you do when you’re out in the country?”

“Move the cow.” He tried to order Mollie around, but she wasn’t having it. She’d been like this when she first came to town too. Apparently, back in Nashville, she was the kind of person who went with what her fiancé said. Now, no one could stop her.

Not even her actual husband. Not that he wanted to.

“Sorry, we’re moving on the cows’ time. You could try to take another way.”

“This is the one road out of the square.”

“Wow, how inconvenient for you.” Molly took a sip of her iced tea and leaned back, offering no additional help. Kevin turned to me, his face even redder.

“I know what you’re doing.”

“Really?” I gasped theatrically. “I pride myself on being very mysterious, you know.”

“It’s not gonna work. You’re not gonna stop me.”

I looked at the line of traffic and then at him. “I think I already have, buddy.”

“For a few hours, maybe. But mark my words, I *am* building on that land.”

“First of all, Mark is in the bar and he could not care less about you. Second of all, no you’re not. And I think we’ve made that very clear.”

“Do your worst. I’m not afraid of a bunch of poor townspeople.”

“Oh, we will. And you should be. Though, watching you absolutely lose it will still be fun.”

He hesitated and then stormed off. He really was a petulant child and had been the entire time. All I could do was give Mollie a high five and laugh. This was exactly what he deserved.

“Is there a reason there were cows in the square? Or am I not allowed to ask about that?”

It was midday when I returned to my apartment. Gabriel must have been watching, because he knocked on my door right after.

“You’re allowed to ask,” I said. “I’m ruining Kevin’s life right now. We made good on our plans to piss him off. And Grace snuck into the mayor’s office and checked his email.”

Gabriel laughed. “Grace did that? Doesn’t she always follow the rules?”

“That all changed when she got pregnant. Besides, it’s for a good cause. Now I know when they’re planning meetings.”

“You’re making that man’s life a living hell, aren’t you?” he asked.

“That I am. The current plan is to make him think we’re absolutely nuts while stalling him.”

“And what about the forums?” he asked. “You’ll have to sway the planning commission.”

“You mean the one that fucking Toby put together?”

“Yes. They might be biased, but they have to listen to you.”

“Really?” I asked. “With the way Kevin talked, it was a done deal.”

“He might think it is, but there are ways.”

“How do you know all of this? Did you get into zoning laws at some point?”

He went silent and I swore his face turned a shade paler.

“It’s just a passing interest.”

I knew he was lying and my lips tightened as I stared at him. Now that we were spending more time together, I was catching this more often. It was so tempting to press in, to figure out what exactly he was doing.

“Should I show you the cove?” he asked.

It was a diversion, and I knew it. No matter how good it was, I knew something was up.

But we were still delicate. The town had come between us before, and I refused to let it happen again.

Pushing him could lead us down the same path.

“Yeah. Show me. I’d love to see it.”

His shoulders fell in what had to be relief. “You have the game, right?”

I rolled my eyes. “No. I put five thousand hours in it just in my mind.”

“You did miss a major piece of it.”

I elbowed him. “Watch it.”

He chuckled and rubbed his ribs as I turned on the TV and started the game. I had dozens of save files, but I opened the most recent one.

Gabriel stared at me with a soft look on his face. I took one look and wanted to hide.

“Anyway,” I said as I shoved the controller at him, “show me.”

He moved my character around before going to the in-game bus stop. Then, he frowned.

“You’ve not gone to the city yet.”

“I’m playing the best part of the game.” I shrugged. “I don’t need to.”

“That’s how you unlock the cove.”

I narrowed my eyes. “You put the cove in the city?”

“Moving is a part of the journey. More opens up when you come back.”

My skin erupted in gooseflesh. “You can come back?”

“Yes. Did you not look it up?”

“I saw everyone talking about how you *have* to leave to get anywhere. It pissed me off.”

“So, you played the same part over and over again?”

I huffed. “Yes. I didn’t think you’d ever mean for the player to come back. Looks like I was wrong.” My voice was quiet and I couldn’t meet his eyes. I’d spent so many years assuming what he was thinking. How much time had I wasted?

“I could’ve let the character stay too.” He admitted it softly.

“We could’ve done a lot differently, huh?”

“Yeah. We could’ve.”

“I’ll start now.” I took a breath. “Wanna help me get my character to the city?”

Gabriel slowly smiled. “I would love nothing more.”

“To be clear, I’m coming back.”

“You should. That’s when the game gets really good.”

GABRIEL and I spent most of the day together. I did get my character to the big city, but I found it so frustrating that I had to take multiple breaks. He didn’t seem to mind, as long as I didn’t take out my frustration on him.

Some moments felt like walking on eggshells, but as we figured out how each other worked, it got easier as the day went on.

It went so well that I offered to go get Agnes and Beatrice with him. When we returned, I hung out with the girls while he made dinner.

Things felt so peaceful and so right. It would kill me when this ended.

Night fell and it took both of us to get the two kids to bed. Even though I hadn’t done much today, I was exhausted.

“So, I might sleepwalk tonight,” I said.

“You might?”

“As fun as pissing off Kevin is, it is a little stressful. Mind watching me?”

“I think I can make that happen,” he said. “Only if you ask nicely, though.”

“Never mind. I’ll leave.” I made my way toward the door. Gabriel grabbed me before I could.

“You win. Please stay.”

“I love it when a man begs.” I let him pull me to him.

“Is that the secret? Begging you?”

“Some days. It’s working today.”

He gave me one kiss before pulling away. “What else can I beg for?”

“You could beg to give me an orgasm.” I said it under my breath.

“Do you have the energy for that? You’re exhausted.”

I rolled my eyes. “I only yawned twice.”

“Three times.”

“Don’t count.” I huffed. “I am tired, but I do have energy for some things.”

Our moments felt few and far between. We wanted to be together, but with everything going on with the town and the girls, it didn’t happen as often as we liked. If I wanted things to go my way tonight, we would need to make use of what time we had.

He must have had the same thought I did because he brushed the shell of my ear with his nose.

“Please,” he whispered. “Let me make you feel good.”

My skin was already warmer. It was such a good idea to spend time with him today. “I’m considering it.”

“Should I get on my knees?” His voice was low. “Should I prove it to you by starting?”

I didn’t get another word in because he dropped down, eyes gazing up at me. I was already about to give in, but I wanted to see how far I could push it.

“What else will you do?”

“Let me touch you, Jade. Please let me do anything to you.”

I had to hike my leg up, but I put it on his shoulder. I was in a black skirt today, and I didn’t regret pulling it out from the back of my closet.

“Even if I step on you?”

“Please step on me,” he said.

“You are such a loser.”

“Only for you.” His mouth kissed my ankle, then my calf. I already felt like I was on fire when he finally made it to my thigh.

Then he stopped and looked at me.

“Fine,” I said. My voice shook. “You can touch me.”

Gabriel didn’t waste time. He tugged aside my underwear and pressed an open-mouth kiss to my labia.

“That’s not where your mouth goes.”

“It’s called suspense.” His words vibrated against my clit, and I had to resist a shudder. He went to the other labia.

“What if you don’t know where it is?”

“You know better,” he muttered. He rewarded me with one lick right on it. My teeth sank into my lip.

Then he pulled away.

I frowned, wondering if he planned on teasing me until I lost it. With how I felt now, it wouldn't take very long.

Then his tongue went right to my entrance and he pressed just inside.

"*Oh*," I said.

"Do you like that, Jade?" he asked, his voice rough.

"I'm not sure. Try it again."

His tongue entered me again, but he went deeper. I nearly fell over.

"Yes," I said. "I like it."

"Still want me to find the clit?" He was smirking up at me. I didn't even have to look down to know.

I was so ready that I didn't care.

"Fuck me," I whined. "I need it."

"You'll have to be quiet," he said. "Or else we'll have a lot of explaining to do."

"I can be quiet, just for fuck's sake—*ah!*" He pulled out and went back in with a flourish that also grazed my clit.

It was rare that I came from penetration, and only when I was in the perfect mood while alone, but with the way Gabriel moved now, I knew he would make it happen again. He moved his tongue like a promise, one that I knew he would keep.

My legs turned to jelly after only a minute, and I nearly fell over.

"Time to move."

I could barely breathe. "Wh-where?"

He stood and picked me up. I had to resist the urge to yelp and clamped my mouth shut. He put me on the kitchen counter.

"The bedroom was closer," I said.

"Yes, but I want you here." He moved my chin to make me look him in the eyes. "That way every time I cook here, I think of the best meal I've ever had."

I had to cover my mouth to stop myself from moaning.

Gabriel went back in, fucking me hard with his tongue. My eyes rolled into the back of my head as I surrendered myself to what he had planned for me.

I was a mess within minutes, and heat rose from low in my belly. I bit my fist to keep from crying out as I got closer and closer to a high that would forever change me. His tongue increased in rhythm, and I wondered how any of this was even possible.

My orgasm wrecked me. It took over my body and shot fire through my core and to my fingertips. As I peaked, a finger brushed over my clit, which made the fire burn impossibly hotter.

"Oh . . . my . . . God," I managed to say when the feeling finally rescinded. "Where did you learn to do that?"

"It's called research."

"You are *so* hot."

"I try." He kissed my pussy once more and then went for my clit again. I hissed and jerked away. "Sensitive?"

"After that? Yes."

"Good." He stood. "I need a bed for what I'm about to do to you."

"Yes, please." I put up my hands, hoping he would carry me. I didn't trust my legs. Gabriel got the message, and I was gently set onto his soft bed. "What are you about to do to me?"

"I ordered something."

I blinked. "What did you order?"

Gabriel went to his nightstand and pulled out a purple bullet. I sat up. "Are you serious?"

"I very much am."

"I'm sensitive."

"Want me to put it away?"

I swallowed as I thought about it. Then, I shook my head.

"That's what I thought you would say." He kissed me again, running his tongue over my bottom lip. Our kisses turned messy, and my body was warming up, ready to go all over again.

"Use it," I eventually said against his mouth.

"Yes, ma'am."

He pressed a button and it turned on. He applied gentle pressure and my toes curled immediately.

I was no stranger to what a vibrator could do. I used them all the time on myself, but this time, it felt different.

This time, the man I'd dreamed about for years was using it on me.

Gabriel remembered that I was sensitive, so he didn't go too hard. He was careful and loving, just like he always was.

My body knew this. My body was ready for more. As he moved up and down against my clit, my breaths sped up.

"G-Gabriel," I managed to say. "I'm . . . I'm—"

“Let go,” he said. “Come for me, Jade.”

That was all it took. I shattered once again, and it was somehow even better than the first one. I arched into the bed, a cry escaping me as my vision went dark. The heat, now a full-blown fire, took over me, reigniting every nerve ending that I thought was spent.

It lasted far longer than I expected. I lost track of time, awash in a sea of pleasure.

It took me a long time before I could think straight.

“Good?”

“G . . . great.” I tugged him upward to kiss me again. “Your turn.”

“We don’t have to take turns. I can just focus on you.”

“I want you to fuck me again,” I said. “That’ll be what makes me feel good.”

Gabriel nodded and I reached for his pants. He was hard, so hard and so ready.

“Ah,” he said the second I touched him. “Remember what happened last time?”

“Where you were on the edge from barely anything?”

“Tasting you is *not* nothing,” he corrected. “But yes. We’ll need to go slow—”

“Fuck that.” I cupped him harder. “Get naked. I want you to feel as good as I did.”

He groaned but took off his jeans and boxers. I helped him with his shirt and took off my own before he was on top of me again.

One touch and his face was tight. “Fuck,” he said.

“You’re like one of those inexperienced high schoolers.”

“Remember what I said about bullying me?”

“I do. I’m gonna do it anyway.”

Gabriel huffed out a laugh and kissed me once again. Then he pressed inside of me.

My mouth snapped shut. God, he felt so good. Only he could stretch me like this. There was no better feeling.

His jaw was clenched and his gaze met mine. He raised his brow, silently asking if I was okay. All I could do was nod and bring him down to kiss me.

He slowly worked me open, my body letting him in by small increments. By the time he was fully seated, I was worried about his

molars, but still felt like I was on top of the world.

“God, you’re—” He stopped when I shifted my hips, changing the angle to make things feel deeper. My legs wrapped around him, pulling him tightly to me. His whole body shuddered. “*Fuck.*”

His cock twitched inside me and I knew what had happened. He’d come.

“Whoops,” I said.

“I told you I was close.”

“You came that quickly and *you’re* giving me an ‘I told you so’?” I laughed. “Bold.”

“Only with you.” His head fell to my shoulder, his cheeks hot. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine. I take it as a compliment. Plus, you already made me see God, so I’m good.”

“Happy to be of service.” He kissed my neck and I arched into it. “Can I also interest you in cuddles?”

My body almost melted. “If you beg.”

“Let me get some water. Then I can beg.”

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46

GABRIEL



Dad Company (But Sometimes Good Advice)
G Singh: I’m alive. Kids are decent these days. No more fires.

Comments:
Robert Colt: Really? I thought they’d done you in.
Oliver Brian: We told you parenting would come over time!
G Singh: It’s more like I have help. I went back home for a bit.
Dean Briggs: Sometimes being home is where you need to be.
G Singh: Yeah.

My eyes shot open. For a moment, I had no idea why I was awake. Then my mind caught up to all that I was feeling.

After I’d come way too early with Jade the night before, we’d cleaned up and went right to bed. She was wearing my shirt, just in case the girls ran in, and nothing else. I was still overheated from the moment, so I took the risk of sleeping naked, hoping the girls wouldn’t barge in and catch me.

Jade’s back was to my front, her body tightly pressed against me. Normally, it would have been cute. Adorable, even.

But now, I was halfway inside of her. My cock was rock hard and I wasn’t sure who had moved in the night.

“Jade, what are you—” I was cut off with a groan when she pressed her hips back, swallowing another inch of my cock. “*Fuck.* Jade, are you awake?”

No answer.

Holy shit. She wasn’t sleepwalking tonight. She was sleepfucking me.

I wanted it. I wanted it so badly, but her not being awake made this a line I refused to cross. She was asleep and I wasn’t. There was no way I could let this continue.

I tried to pull away, but her hands tightened on my arms and her pussy went tight. She let out a gasp in her sleep.

“Goddammit,” I said through gritted teeth. I tried to get her to let go of me, but she was holding on for dear life.

Then her head jerked up and her eyes opened. “What? What happened?”

“Jade.” I tried to keep my voice calm, but I was failing. “Can you please let go of me?”

“What the—what happened?”

“I have no idea. I woke up like this.”

“Did I . . .”

“I don’t know, but you’ve gotta let go of me or we’re not stopping.”

Jade went silent for a long time, then her hands went lax.

I tried to pull away and out of her.

But her voice stopped me. “Don’t.” It was small.

“What?”

“Don’t stop. Fuck me.”

“It’s the middle of the night.”

“So? I wanted it so bad that I went after it in my sleep.” Her hand went to the base of my cock, the part not inside of her, and she pumped it once. “You’re so hard already.”

I sucked in a breath. “I was trying not to wake you up.”

“And just leave? No.” She moved in the same way she had moments ago when she’d been asleep. She captured more of my cock.

“I wanna make you come first.”

“And that’s resulted in you not lasting,” she said. “Fuck me now and make me come. You’re a good multitasker, right?”

I had no idea. At least, I had no idea if I could focus on two things.

But I wanted to.

With a groan, I rolled her onto her front, finally pulling fully out of her. I grabbed the vibrator and put it between her legs, earning a sharp gasp. Once it was settled on her clit, I let the head of my cock press against her opening.

"Oh my God," she said.

I was so turned on, but it was nothing like when I'd worked myself up making her come. I still had a shred of sense, and this time, I didn't have to fight not to orgasm.

This time, I would last.

I pushed all the way in before pulling out and ramming back inside of her. Jade let out a squeak, quickly followed by a moan.

"Hold the vibrator," I said. "This might get wild."

She could only nod and adjust herself.

That was when I finally started. I found a rhythm of strokes, getting as deep as I could. The bed rocked with every movement, and Jade's back was rising and falling quickly. This was the one time she was quiet.

She enjoyed this.

I kept it up as long as I could, but the tight, wet heat of her would bring any man to his knees. I rammed into her one last time before I bottomed out, barely able to move as I came. My cock exploded inside of her, and my entire body was lost to a sea of perfection.

When it was done, I slumped over, all my energy spent.

"I think I came twice," she said through gasping breaths. "Or maybe it was one long one? Holy *shit*."

I wanted to make a quip, but there were no words.

"Tired?" she asked with a laugh.

"Sleep," I said. "Then we're doing that again."

Jade got up to use the bathroom before returning to my arms. I pulled her to me, eager to stay as close to her as I could.

I didn't even regret it the next morning when we had to hide under the covers as the girls demanded breakfast.

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47

JADE



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Hu Gh: Whose damn chickens are these???

Comments:
Kerry Winsor: Didn't you get chickens a few weeks ago???
Jade Clark: Yeah, I think they're yours . . .
Hu Gh: I would never get chickens! Have you guys lost your minds?
Hu Gh: What's this coop doing here???

"I'LL HAVE YOU KNOW, never in my thirty years as a sheriff have I seen this." Mike stood in front of me, arms crossed tightly over his chest.

"You're the one who caught me buggy racing the first time."

"But a whole tournament for it?" He scoffed. "Where did you even get the carts?"

"A woman has her ways," I said as I flipped my hair over my shoulder.

I'd stolen them.

But I definitely wouldn't say that out loud.

There was a meeting today between Toby and Kevin. The plan was to delay it, and then be so loud that they couldn't focus.

And I'd wanted to do this for a long time.

Apparently, sexually satisfied me was way too smart for my own good.

All of the square was blocked off. Every guy in town brought in their truck to help make sure there was no traffic. Buggies from Food ‘n’ Stuff were in the middle of the road, as well as the five of us brave enough to do this.

“Are we stupid?” Mollie asked as she turned to us.

Wren was putting on a helmet. “What? This seems fun.”

“You might die,” Grace said. She handed me one too. “But it’s a worthy sacrifice.”

“I’m gonna beat your ass!” Tammy shouted.

“You’d have to catch it first!” Hugh countered.

“But what does it say about us to have Hugh in our company?” Mollie asked.

“He’s wearing clothes,” I said. “No asses today.”

“The race hasn’t even started yet,” Wren reminded us. “Oh, here comes Henry to tell us the rules. Everyone smile and nod and pretend this is safe.”

Henry walked up, his face in a tight smile. I did what Wren told us and pretended to pay attention. To be fair, we would be running down the road to get speed and then hopping in. As far as ideas went, this was stupid.

But it would go down in history.

All of us wore helmets and kneepads and had signed a waiver. Henry still looked green at the thought of it.

“Hey,” Hugh said. “If I bust my knee, you can fix it, right?”

Henry sighed. “I don’t know why you even signed up for this. You can’t run.”

“I can! Or I used to.”

“Is this seriously the best way to delay things?” Henry asked.

“Look over there,” I said with a smile. “Kevin’s stupid-ass car is stuck.”

“We’ll be fine, Henry,” Wren said, putting a hand on his shoulder. “This is also something to cross off Jade’s bucket list.”

“Yeah!” I said. “Just this once too.”

“I know,” he said. “I’ll be near the first aid kit.” He sighed and moved to the sidewalk.

Kelsey walked out into the road holding a flag.

“You got this!” Grace said. “I’m rooting for you.”

“Thank you,” I said. “A kiss for luck?”

“You have Gabriel for that.”

I rolled my eyes. “Gabriel isn’t here.”

“Think again.”

She pointed to the crowd of townspeople. Right in the front was the very man we were talking about, and my heart skipped a beat. He was in an old band T-shirt and his hair was up. Like this, he looked so much like the teen that had grown up here.

Next to him were Agnes and Beatrice. Both girls cheered when they saw me.

“Kick their ass, Jade!” Agnes yelled.

“Break your leg!”

Gabriel’s eyes went wide and he called, “She means break a leg!”

“No leg breaking!” Henry yelled.

“I’ll do my best!” I waved at them, marveling at how they fit in with everything.

God, I wanted more of this. If Gabriel liked this place just a bit more, then—

“Are you guys ready?” Kelsey asked.

I shook myself out of my thoughts. Why was I even thinking this way? Why was I giving myself hope when it would only hurt me?

“Jade?” Kelsey asked. “You good?”

I gripped my cart and forced myself to smile. “Yes! More than good. I get to live my dream today.”

“This was not one of my dreams,” Wren added. “But I’m still happy to be here.”

“Same!” Mollie added.

“You all are something else,” Kelsey said with a laugh. “I’ll always remember this.” She raised the flag. “On your mark!”

I gripped my cart tighter and leaned down.

“Get set!”

I took a breath. I was so going to win.

“Go!”

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48

GABRIEL



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Dale Garrett: All this hubbub is ruining my business! What the hell is going on anyway?

Comments:
Mollie Wilson: It’s for the greater good! Deal with it!
Jade Clark: Yeah, and I’ll kick all your asses.
Dale Garrett: We don’t HAVE to do this. The man I voted for wouldn’t completely screw us over. I think we should hear him out.
Tammy Jane: The man you WHAT
Kerry Winsor: It’s your fault we’re stuck with him! Don’t you know erections have consequences?
Kerry Winsor: ELECTIONS! I MEANT ELECTIONS!!!

THE RACE BEGAN with Tammy in front. I’d never seen her run so fast, but clearly, working in the diner served her well. Everyone in town screamed, and Beatrice shuffled close, obviously bothered by the noise. I covered her ears and tugged her to me.

Next to us, Agnes was screaming her head off. “Jade! Run faster, Jade! Use your legs!”

I couldn’t help but laugh. This was ridiculous.

But it was so very Jade.

Whatever speed Tammy had, she couldn't keep up. Slowly, Mollie caught up, following right behind Jade. They only had to keep up the speed around the three turns of the square. On the last, they would hop in and ride to the finish line.

I was terrified for that part.

Jade kept her speed and Wren gained. All three of them were in the running for the lead. I tensed as they got to the third turn.

It was obvious that no one got to practice. Mollie slowed down when it was time to jump in, and Wren missed the jump at first. The only one who got it on the first try was Jade.

And she *flew* toward the finish line.

Agnes was screaming as loud as she could, and Beatrice pulled away to join.

The entire town seemed to yell at the same time.

Jade was in the lead. She was going to win this.

Kelsey waved the flag right as she passed and Jade raised her arms to celebrate.

That was when her cart suddenly lurched and she flew onto the ground.

The entire crowd went silent.

My heart fell.

"Stay here," I told the girls before I ran. My legs carried me as fast as I could go, and somehow, I beat Henry there.

"Jade! Jade? Are you okay?" I couldn't think. I couldn't *breathe*. If she was hurt, I'd lose my mind. I'd get her the best care. I'd do anything—

Jade burst into laughter and sat up.

"I won, bitches!"

Henry skidded to a stop as Jade hopped to her feet and jumped in the air. He looked as panicked as I felt. I sat on my heels and caught my breath, watching closely. I'd heard that Henry had forced them all to wear protective gear, and that had saved her.

But she didn't fully extend her elbow.

"Can you check her arm?" I asked Henry. He stared at me for a second and I realized he had earplugs in. Instead, I pointed to my arm then at her. His eyes went wide, he gave me a nod, and was about to stop Jade, but I put my arm out. "Let her celebrate." I nearly yelled it. "She won't listen until she's done."

Henry nodded. Once the crowd had died down, he went over and I followed.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

“Like I won the race.” Then her smile fell. “And a rock got under the cart. Can you believe this? I was betrayed by what I love.”

“Let me take you to the clinic,” Henry said. “You need an X-ray.”

“Yeah, yeah. If I fight you, Wren, Mollie, *and* Gabriel are gonna kick my ass.”

Jade was about to go with him when something distracted her. I followed her line of sight and saw Kevin going into town hall.

He left his car in the road.

“Any chance we could have another race?” Jade weakly asked. “We need to be loud.”

“My heart can’t take another one,” Henry said. “We’ll need another distraction.”

“I’ve got this.” Hugh had finally finished. His cart barely petered along, but he puffed up his chest as he rolled to a stop. Slowly, he hobbled out of the cart.

“What is he doing?” Mollie asked.

“I have no idea,” Jade said as she held her arm.

“I can’t believe he even got out of the cart,” Henry muttered.

Hugh slowly made his way to the nearest window of town hall. He slammed his hand on the glass.

“Have a meeting about *this*, asshole!” Then he dropped his pants.

The entire town screamed and tried to cover their eyes.

JADE WOUND up only having a sprain. She was told not to buggy race again, but that she would be okay. It was only then that I was able to breathe.

I got her home to nap before I had a meeting request from the last person I expected.

Kevin was reaching out.

And he wanted to talk immediately.

I made a weak excuse to Jade before I went to town hall. There was a delicate hope in my chest that this would be a productive meeting, but the

second Kevin opened his mouth, my hopes were dashed.

"Call them off."

I crossed my arms. "And what do you propose I do? Tell them all that this is worthless? I'm not going to do that."

"You have a lot more power here than you think you do."

"Why should I use it? Are you going to work with them?"

"I was going to work with them. Now I won't."

I let out a humorless laugh. "Work with them? You push someone to sell the land to you. You got snarky at the town meeting and pissed them all off. There's no way you're working with them."

"This is how business goes. I thought a successful man like you would understand."

"I see past dollar signs. Let me know when you see reason."

"You have your head up your ass just like them."

"Maybe I do. Or maybe I care about what they want."

"And you hide. Did you forget about that part? They don't trust you."

He was going for what hurt, and I had to resist the urge to give in. "I have a plan for that," I lied. "Just like I have a plan for you."

"I'm not backing down. The more you people push, the harder I'll push back."

Dammit. I had no doubts this was how he'd gotten so many data centers built before. He was aggressive and wanted to grow his company as quickly as possible.

I hated that he'd chosen here to do it.

"The next time you request a meeting with me, it had better be to give up. Have the day you deserve, Kevin."

I walked out of the office without another word. My jaw was tight when I left, but I had a text waiting for me.

JADE

Where the hell did you go? I heard that Atticus came over to watch the kids.

GABRIEL

I had an errand to run. Did they wake you up?

JADE

They always wake me up, but I couldn't sleep after all that excitement anyway. What kind of errand? It better not be trying out the buggy races. I hear we're all banned from ever doing it again.

GABRIEL

Just an annoying work thing. I'm heading back now.

By the time I returned to my own apartment, Jade had come over. She was sitting at the table with Atticus, and they were discussing the race.

"We should get real buggies or maybe some kind of go-karts. The race was super successful."

Atticus only shook his head. "You're going to have a hard time convincing Henry to let that ever happen again. Then again, I bet Simone would enjoy it while she's in town. Gabriel seemed to as well."

"It was something," I said as I walked into the kitchen. "I think my heart almost stopped when you flipped over, though."

"That was just me keeping you on your toes."

"How do you feel?"

"Much better after I took some ibuprofen. I'll have to be careful with this, though." She lifted her arm, which was in a temporary sling.

"It was still so cool." Agnes popped up from behind Jade.

"Were you watching?"

"We were!" Agnes said. "Though, Beatrice got scared."

"I wasn't scared. It was just loud!"

"Still. You missed out on half the fun when you were hiding behind Dad."

Atticus blinked when he heard what Agnes now referred to me as. Slowly, he turned to me with raised eyebrows. My cheeks heated and I shrugged.

"How about I get you some earplugs, Beatrice? Our town doctor, Henry, seems to have some sensory issues too. I saw that he had some today."

"Yes, please." Beatrice nodded.

"I was wondering how Henry was around so many people," Jade said. "Then again, he saved my ass. So, I can't be mad that he was there."

"At least you seemed to successfully piss off Kevin. If you didn't, then he's probably scarred for life from Hugh."

“We all are. Yet, everyone acts like it’s the first time we’ve seen it with him.” Jade rolled her eyes. “It’s not a rare occurrence.”

“I didn’t see anything. What happened?” Agnes tilted her head to the side.

“Yeah,” Beatrice added. “Someone covered our eyes.”

“That would’ve been me and Jackie,” Atticus said. “We had quick reflexes.”

“But I wanted to see!” Agnes pouted.

“Trust me, kid,” Jade said. “You did not want to see that.”

“At least everyone is using their powers for good this time,” I said.

“It only took us losing something like the spring. I wish it would have been turned into a park a long time ago. I bet it would have been a great one.”

I nodded. That certainly would have protected it from being sold like it was. But the only park in town was the one at the square. It had been there a long time, but had fallen into disarray until I paid to have it redone.

“Can we get go-karts and do the race next time?” Agnes asked Jade.

I cut in. “Nope.”

She groaned. “Dad is boring. He only wants us to be safe.”

“As much as it would be fun, I have to agree with him. You can join when we have the safety things figured out.”

“That’s a smart decision,” Atticus said.

“I can have them every once in a while.” She then turned to me. “What do you think, Gabriel? What would make our new race tradition safer?”

I blew out a long breath. “Not doing it.”

“Maybe Agnes is right. You *are* boring.”

“What about a hamster ball? Do they make them big enough for people?”

Jade’s eyes went wide in the way that they always did whenever she had a terrible idea.

“I think they do.” Atticus was not on the correct side. “But they might be hard to find.”

“Send me on a mission. I’ll make sure they’re here.”

“Not to burst your bubble—”

“Literally,” Jade muttered.

“But you’d have to get through Henry.”

“Wren could convince him,” Jade said. “I bet the other guys could too.”

“The other guys?”

“Cain, Henry, Dean, and Theo. They all hang out sometimes. I bet they’d let you join!”

I’d heard about them hanging out. They were all friends through their partners and often helped with each others’ kids too.

It was tempting to join.

“I should be careful, with me leaving and all.”

Tension hung thick in the air. Agnes and Beatrice looked down, and I wondered what they were thinking about our impending return to San Francisco. Atticus looked between the two of us, clearly nervous that we would start a fight.

Jade physically deflated, which broke my heart. Her shoulders hunched as she remembered what was coming.

“You’re right,” she said. “Good idea. Sorry for killing the mood by bringing that up.”

It was a better response than she would have had years ago, that was for sure. But I still hated how sad she looked.

“Don’t worry about it.” I made myself say it. “Should we have ice cream? I feel like ice cream always gets a mood back.”

Agnes and Beatrice jumped up, excited for the idea of a dessert after dinner. Jade made herself smile, but I knew it was fake.

Mine was too.

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49

JADE



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
K Smith: Thanks for the add! I promise to be a good and upstanding member of this group.

Comments:
Kerry Winsor: AN IMPOSTER!!!
Jade Clark: State your name and purpose.
Grace Day: Look at the name!!! I bet it's Kevin!
Kerry Winsor: DELETE. DELETE.

A SLOW DAY at Jade's Goodies meant I had far too much time to think. I'd made candles, sold a few of them, and then couldn't stop thinking about the impending doom with Gabriel.

He was thinking about it too. I saw it on his face.

It weighed on me heavily, and I wasn't sure what to do about it.

I only got relief in the form of an angel walking through my door. And by angel, I meant Grace.

Since she'd had a baby and I'd gotten busy with my investigation, we hadn't had a lot of time to hang out one-on-one. I missed her, and I nearly jumped over the counter when she walked in.

"Hi!" I said. "I'm so happy you came!"

“I wanted to get this one out of the house.” She tugged Sammy forward, who watched everything with wide eyes. “He shouldn’t destroy anything.”

“I don’t care if he does.” I waved my hand and leaned down. “He’s too cute to be mad at.”

Sammy gave me a smile and did his own version of waving. I gave him a crystal that was sealed and too big to swallow.

“How’s the elbow?” Grace asked me while Sammy was occupied.

I hummed and moved it around. “Not too bad. It hurts a little bit when I wake up, but nothing was broken, so I got lucky.”

“Good. I’m glad it wasn’t serious.”

“Me too. Henry would’ve lost it.”

“Gabriel too,” Grace said with a smile.

“Did he look heroic when he ran to me? I bet he looked heroic.”

“He looked panicked,” she said. “Which I bet you enjoyed.”

“Kind of. Could’ve done without the pain, though.”

“It was fun. Even if Henry almost passed out.”

“Right?” I checked on Sammy, who was still enjoying his crystal, before turning back to Grace. “Is this a social visit or do you want a candle?”

“I’ll buy that since Sammy loves it, but it’s kind of a social visit.”

“Please don’t lecture me about Gabriel.”

She put up her hands. “I’m not. I promise. But I do have something for you. I almost forgot about it. Are you still looking into the STM grant?”

“Not really.” I shook my head. “Why?”

“I found that paper with the handwritten note.”

I blinked. “You did?”

She nodded and brought out the piece of paper. It was slightly wrinkled from being stored, but I unfolded it. Just like she’d said, the handwriting was shaky, but it was definitely familiar.

I shouldn’t look into this anymore. But I also couldn’t deny how curious I was. Who’d been the one to save the town? Who’d been the one to take us from nothing to something?

Who cared that much?

My mind turned. I *knew* this handwriting.

“Jade? You okay?”

“Yeah, I . . . definitely have seen this before.”

She hummed. “We could have the town write something. I bet you could match it up.”

“The town has other issues,” I said with a sigh. “Let me solve those, but I’ll come back to this. Thank you for finding it.”

Grace grabbed my hands. “You can use it as a distraction later.”

“You said you weren’t gonna lecture me.”

“And I’m not. But it’s weighing on you.”

“It is. There was a reason I stayed in Strawberry Springs, though. Even though it was hard, I still had people around me. And that includes you.”

She pulled me into a tight hug, and I was sure I’d suffocate, but I refused to complain.

So many things were going wrong in my life. I was worried about Gabriel leaving. I was worried about the spring.

And I was worried about myself.

But I wasn’t alone. If everything fell apart, I’d have a group of people to help pick me up. That was the thing I’d learned over the years, even in the dark moments.

I’d be okay.

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50

GABRIEL



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Kerry Winsor: This THING is in my walls! I fear for my life!!!

Comments:
Atticus Thompson: That would be an opossum, Kerry.
Kerry Winsor: It's an invasion! **@SherriffMike Finch**, please help!
SherriffMike Finch: I am NOT animal control, Kerry! Set a trap. Move it somewhere else!
Kerry Winsor: I hear it scratching! It never stops! Why have my friends abandoned me at a time like this?

"YOU'RE LATE AGAIN." I pushed open Jade's front door. "And you didn't lock your door."

"It was for you." She didn't even turn around. "I figured you'd come here."

"What are you staring at?"

"Something Grace gave me."

I followed her line of sight and nearly choked on my own spit.

My own handwriting stared back at me.

My heart nearly stopped in my chest. I remembered the day that I'd sent that note. I'd gone back and forth about it. But I did know Grace Day better

than most.

When I heard about what had happened with her sister, I wasn't surprised. Brooke had always been the cause of drama in Strawberry Springs. She thought she was better than the town, and even though I hadn't been a fan of it myself, I knew how to be respectful. I'd also seen her getting into fights back when we were in school.

It was only a matter of time before that was turned around on Grace. What I didn't expect was for it to happen when she was nine months pregnant.

Grace wasn't going to reach out to the grant more than she had to, so I knew that I had to be careful with this.

I didn't know Dean, but I did know that Grace had always been kind. I knew that she had inherited her mom's house, and many of the townspeople had talked about how it was falling apart under her care. They all wanted to help, but she didn't seem to want to accept it.

Alice had brought the grant idea to me and had always helped me with it. I could send money for legal fees, saying that I somehow knew about it. All I had to do was approve the check, and I did. But right before Alice mailed it off, I wondered if Grace would ever cash it.

That was when I'd written the note.

I'd been nervous as hell, worried I would be caught. Worried that the town would turn away from help, knowing it was me. Or worse, that they would figure out just how much I cared and how much I'd messed things up before leaving.

But Jade would know my handwriting. We had passed notes back and forth through class many times. She always made fun of how I wrote my A's and D's in uppercase and how it looked like an old man's scrawl.

Of course, that had been years ago, back when we were in school.

"You don't recognize this handwriting, do you?" She turned to me with raised eyebrows. "I feel like it's familiar, but I can't place it."

I opened my mouth, but no words came out.

I could say yes, but the idea was terrifying. Admitting it meant I'd have to come to terms with all I'd done for her and this town, and all I'd do for the future.

The mystery of who ran the STM grant *had* to stay a secret.

But being here made it so difficult.

"Who am I kidding," she muttered. "I really need to let this go."

“Let what go?”

“Hunting down the grant owner.” She shook her head. “I highly doubt they wanna be found anyway.”

“You were hunting them down?”

“I was, but I shouldn’t be. Why would I mess up a good thing?” She checked her phone and stood. “I need to get my mind off this and school’s gonna let out soon. Can I go with you to get Agnes and Beatrice?”

I was too busy processing what she’d said to answer. If Jade was looking into this, then I was in trouble. I’d already revealed far too much, even if I hadn’t said directly who I was. When I started this whole thing, I thought that I would never return to Strawberry Springs. No one would ever know it was me, nor would they need to.

Obviously, the town didn’t have the same thought. They wanted to know who I was, and I’d never considered telling them.

“Gabriel?” Jade asked. “Are you okay?”

I forced myself out of my thoughts. Continuing to stare wouldn’t help. “I’m fine,” I said. “Of course you can join.”

With the way my heart was beating, I was worried that I would need her help anyway.

I was determined not to let anything show, but Jade knew something was wrong as we drove to the school. She was far smarter than anyone ever gave her credit for. If I gave any sort of hint of what I’d done, she would figure it out.

We had a few minutes to wait before the girls were out, and we sat in a somewhat uncomfortable silence. I had no idea what to say.

Jade didn’t share that sentiment. “Are you going back soon?”

“What?”

“You’re quiet, and you’ve not sat still, which means you’re probably guilty of something. You can tell me if you’ve got an update on the apartment. I’ll be able to handle it.”

I hadn’t given any thought to my old place, nor had I been given any updates.

“It’s not that. And I’m not guilty about anything.”

“Don’t lie to me. I know you.” Her voice went tight, and I knew that continuing to deny it would only lead us to an argument.

“Feels like I’m leading you on, I guess.” It was mostly true. I was feeling guilty about that, but it took a back seat compared to what I had

done as the STM grant owner. “Kind of like pretending we’re living a life we won’t have.”

Jade’s single-word reply hit me in the center of the chest. “Yeah.”

“We could stop if we think it would be easier.”

“Nothing about this is going to be easier.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her glance at me. It was a similar expression to what she’d had the first time I left, when she would watch me when she thought I wasn’t looking. It had that same hope that I’d wound up having to crush.

It felt worse this time, though. Back then, I’d been sure the city was for me. Now, I knew better. I had other things that made it so that I couldn’t stay. I could still hear Alice’s excitement when she told me about the private school she’d gotten the girls into.

It seemed the guilt would eat me alive either way.

“I’m sorry. I almost wish I hadn’t made a move.”

“Don’t say that.”

“Hey, I said almost. I don’t fully regret it. This is just hard.”

All I could do was nod. There were far too many things running through my mind. All of which I wondered if Jade would catch.

We were saved by all the kids coming out of the school at the same time. Whatever we were talking about before was put on hold as we waited for the girls to see my car.

Agnes and Beatrice both ran to us with smiles on their faces. They had a project in hand that they’d done with Nicole, and they were proud of it.

It wasn’t lost on me that both of them were doing well here.

Things really had changed ever since I offered to help.

It only added to the guilt.

I managed to be brave up until it was time for bed. I thought that I would get lucky and Jade would lie down without question.

I should have known better.

“If you sleepwalked like me, you’d be exploring all of the town.”

“I know.”

“Wanna talk?”

There was a part of me that wanted to crack open every secret I kept. To get it all out in the open and say everything I’d done and everything I was thinking of.

Would it blow things up right before I had to go? Would it end the same way that I left the first time?

I was terrified of making the same mistakes, but it almost felt like I was trapped. Forced to play it safe or risk messing it all up once again.

“I don’t think there’s anything left to say.” I settled for being safe.

Jade’s smile was tight, and I knew she was hoping that I would say more.

“I get it. Want to sleep on it?”

“Yeah. That would be good.”

I pulled her into my arms, trying to let go of all my thoughts. Jade fell asleep quickly, but I lay awake in the dark room, wondering if I was playing it safe, or if I was being a coward.

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51

JADE



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Marjorie Brown: Where the FUCK is Jade???

Comments:
Kerry Winsor: @Jade Clark Wake up!!! You'll want to see this!
Mollie Wilson: She's gonna crash out. This is bad.

WHEN I WOKE up to ten texts on my phone, I thought the town had finally decided to call out Gabriel and me.

What I saw was much worse.

"Shit." I tumbled out of bed. "I need to go."

Gabriel blearily sat up and looked at me. "What's wrong?"

"The land. Something about the land. I'll see you later."

"Wait, I'll—"

"Take care of the girls!"

I didn't even put on a bra as I ran out the door. I was so determined to get to the spring and see what everyone was freaking out about.

My heart was pounding in my chest.

When I got to the land, a crowd had formed around the entryway. Everyone I knew was there, and they all had worry on their faces.

I found Kerry, who would have the best information.

“I’m here,” I said. “What happened?”

“Oh, dear.” She eyed me up and down. “Did you even change? Where did you get that black shirt?”

I looked down. I was wearing an old band tee that wasn’t mine.

It was Gabriel’s.

God, I was an idiot.

“Can you pretend you didn’t see this?”

She smiled. “Is that even yours?”

“Kerry,” I whined. “Focus. What happened here?”

Her smile fell. “Oh, boy. Prepare yourself.”

“I’m prepared.”

She guided me to the front of the crowd.

A gasp made its way out of me. The fence that lined the land was gone. It was crumpled into dust by trucks that were now sitting there, crushing the grass that I had run through a million and one times.

“No,” I said.

“Those bastards did this while we were all sleeping!” Tammy yelled. “What the hell is wrong with them?”

“The fence! The beautiful fence!” Hugh yelled. “I built that with my bare hands for my ex-wife! She left me, but the fence was supposed to stay!”

Beautiful was a strong word, but it had been here longer than I had been alive. Hugh sounded genuinely upset.

I was too.

Tears gathered in my eyes. We knew we were fighting a mountain, but I was terrified that they would win, that something so dear to me would be destroyed simply for profit.

A hand landed on my shoulder, and I turned around to see Mike. His lips were pursed, which meant he wasn’t happy about whatever he had to tell us.

“You all can’t be here,” he said. “I’ve already got a complaint about anyone gathering here!”

“We can protest!”

A thought popped in my head. “The land isn’t even commercial yet!”

“But it is private,” Mike said. “He can do what he wants with it.”

“What’s the plan?”

“The trees. He’s taking those down.”

I gasped. The crowd didn’t. They all watched me closely.

“Is there nothing we could do?” I asked.

“It’s his land.” Mike only shrugged.

“There has to be something. When is he starting?”

“Tomorrow. He wants you all gone by then.”

“I’ll handle this!” Hugh yelled.

“No!” everyone yelled at the same time.

“We don’t need your ass right now,” I said.

Hugh crossed his arms. “Fine. Your loss.”

I wanted to scream. “I have to figure something out.”

“Jade—”

“No.” I shook my head. Mike would try to stop me, but I couldn’t let him. “Just give me time.”

All I could do was go to the library. I tore through every book I could get my hands on, determined to find anything I could use.

I only grew angrier.

The more I found, the more it told me that he could do whatever he wanted to that land. Selling it meant he had control over something that I cared so much about.

I slammed one last book shut, feeling tears brim. I was lost. I was so angry that things had gotten this far. A part of me wanted to smack Hugh over the head. Another part of me wanted to tie myself to the trees so he couldn’t take them down.

I knew people were worried. Many people had come upstairs, glanced at me, and then left. Halfway through my research, I was sure that Gabriel was going to join them. He’d sit next to me and ask me what happened.

He’d tell me that there wasn’t anything I could do, but would at least give me a hug when I finally gave up.

But he didn’t show up. It made me wonder if he’d finally hit his limit with things in this town. It wasn’t fair of me to want him here anyway. He was leaving.

When I tried to find anything else on land ownership, something stopped me. There was a sticky note on the spine of one of the books, and I frowned as I picked it up.

CHECK TO SEE IF ANY OF THE TREES ARE REGISTERED AS HISTORICAL.

My jaw dropped. I knew that handwriting. It was the STM grant owner. I nearly dropped the note while looking around, trying to see if there was anyone out of the ordinary in the library. There wasn't. In fact, everyone in town had left me alone to do my bidding.

With a shaky breath, I tried to remember all the people who had checked on me, but I'd been so focused that I hadn't given them a second thought.

I should have.

I wanted to run downstairs and go through everyone who was in this library. I wanted to find that owner and understand why they were doing what they were doing.

Then what the sticky note said hit me.

"Historical trees. I need to see if the trees are registered!"

All thoughts of finding the owner vanished from my mind.

I ran to a computer, first to find out how to see if trees were historical, then to look up everything I could on that property.

Eventually, I found exactly what I was looking for.

There *were* historical trees. They'd been registered many years ago for witnessing multiple divorces.

"Hugh, you beautiful, petty man," I said to myself. "You somehow doomed and saved us."

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52

GABRIEL



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Hu Gh: Goggle, where am I?

Comments:
Kerry Winsor: Hugh, are you okay?
Hu Gh: TAKE M E HOM
Kerry Winsor: @SherriffMike Finch Can you check on him?
SherriffMike Finch: Dammit. I had just sat down.
Jackie Anne: Is Hugh okay???
Hu Gh: Yeah, I'm fine. Thanks for the ride.
SherriffMike Finch: Fucker played drunk to get a free ride. I hate this town.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?" I nearly jumped ten feet in the air when a voice asked me that out of nowhere. My shoulders tensed when I recognized who it belonged to.

"Hi, Kerry. Long time no see." This was the worst person who could have found me hiding behind a bookshelf. I'd been watching Jade for a while, hoping she would come to the conclusion that I needed her to. She had just run out of the library, a book in hand.

I was trying to be so careful, but inevitably, I had to take this risk and step in.

“Yeah, long time no see. You’ve been busy with Jade. Watching her too, it seems.”

“Please don’t tell her you saw me here.”

Kerry laughed. “There are a lot of people asking me to forget a lot of things. That’s not usually what I do.”

“Trust me, I know. But her knowing I’m staring at her wouldn’t go well.”

“I’m sure it wouldn’t be that shocking.”

“Just this time. I don’t want her to know that I was at the library.”

“That kind of secret will cost you.”

I hesitated. There weren’t a lot of secrets I knew that I could offer her. I’d done my best to stay away from any information about the town.

Kerry took advantage of my silence and stepped forward. Her eyes narrowed. “Why are you here?”

“I heard about the land.”

“How?” she asked. “None of us told you.”

“You posted about trying to find Jade this morning.”

Kerry’s face went lax. “In our Facebook group. Don’t tell me you’re in it.”

There it was. Information I shouldn’t have given out. But it might work if I played this right. “Yes.”

She gasped. “No way. How long have you been in it?”

“Since it started.”

She covered her mouth, a smile blooming. “I can’t believe this.”

“This is another one of those things that we shouldn’t be putting in Facebook groups. I know Mollie had a conversation with you about that a few years ago.”

“Oh, you *have* been in there.”

“Kerry,” I said. “Please.”

“What? You don’t want Jade knowing that you care about us? Do you think she’ll want you to stay?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“I think it does. I see you watch us. It’s not the same way a lot of people who’ve left do. It’s like you’re hunting for something. It’s like you care.

And I keep thinking to myself, why would someone who cares want to leave so much?"

"I have my reasons."

"Will they hold up to Jade?"

"Don't," I said.

"So, they won't. You know, I like Jade a lot. Even if we argue in our group, I care about her. If this is gonna make her happy, I'm gonna do it."

"Kerry—"

"Give me one good reason not to look into this."

"Because I *can't* stay." I finally let it out. "No matter how much I want to."

"Why not?" Her brow creased. "Is it us? Did we do something to you?"

"None of you have done a thing. It's the girls' mother."

"Is she out in San Francisco? I'm sure she would like it here if she came. Or they could split their time."

"It's not anything like that. Their mother is dead. Her last wish was for them to go to a private school out in San Francisco."

Kerry's eyes went wide. "Oh."

"Yeah."

"I didn't . . . Are they going?"

"As soon as my apartment is fixed."

"I see. Does Jade know?"

"She knows about the school . . . but not the reason why it's so important. I don't want to make this any harder than I have to."

Kerry slowly nodded.

"I know you love gossiping, but this will make it so much worse if we fight over this. I don't want things to end the way they did last time. I'm trusting you, Kerry. Please don't tell anyone."

Her face crumpled and she looked like I was holding her at knifepoint in order to keep a secret.

But she nodded. "Okay, but this is going to kill me. You know that, right?"

"I'll find a way to pay you back."

"It better be good."

"Trust me." I gave her a tight smile. "I'm really good at paying people back."

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53

JADE



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Marjorie Brown: Listen to me. Don’t trust the birds. They’re listening too.

Comments:
Kerry Winsor: What??? I don’t understand this code.
Jade Clark: Uhh, me either. Marjorie, what?
Marjorie Brown: DIDN’T YOU HEAR ME? DON’T TRUST THE BIRDS!!!

IT WASN’T hard finding both Kevin and Toby. Ever since they discovered they could sell us out, they were surprisingly present.

Kevin’s car was parked in front of town hall and he was still sitting inside it. I darted across the street and slapped the printed-out email I’d received from the county clerk’s office onto his windshield.

“Eat this, asshole!” I yelled.

Kevin jumped out of his skin and nearly dropped his phone. When he realized what had just happened, he frowned and slowly got out of his car.

“Excuse me?” he asked.

“You can’t take those trees down,” I said. “They’re historical.”

Kevin rolled his eyes and took the paper. He read it once. Twice. Then three times.

“Are you serious? They’re historical for witnessing a *divorce*?” he hissed.

“Yes, they are.”

“This is bullshit.”

“Even if it is, it’s on file.”

“Son of a . . .” He trailed off and sighed. “I’ll contest this.”

“Have fun,” I said.

“And this won’t fully stop me,” he added. “I can still rezone the land.”

My smile faded. “Can you?”

I was hoping he hadn’t known that.

“So, you’ve slowed down something, but not everything.”

“I’ll find a way to fully stop you.”

“Of course. Not only do I have to deal with the damn grant owner, but I have to deal with you too.”

“It must be so hard being an asshole.” I rolled my eyes, determined to stay calm, but what he said finally registered. “Wait a second. The grant owner is trying to stop this too?”

“He met with me in person and everything.”

I paused. “Met with in person” meant that Kevin knew who he was.

He. It was a man.

My shock must have registered because a slow smile spread on his face.

“I heard you were looking into him. I’m guessing you didn’t find anything.”

I had to collect myself. Was I shocked over this? Yes. But still. He couldn’t sense weakness. “It doesn’t matter.”

“You must all really want to know. I can help you with that.”

“Your help comes with a price.”

“It does, but it would be good for you. You’d finally know who runs that grant.”

This must have been how he’d torn down communities before. He found what they wanted and used it to his advantage. I couldn’t lie and say that I wasn’t tempted. The grant owner had been a mystery for a long time, and I’d gotten so close to figuring out who it was.

Hell, I’d seen his handwriting.

But I knew my answer immediately.

“You can take your offer and shove it up your ass. I want nothing from you. And if it means I never figure out who that grant owner is, I’ll live.”

“This is a town full of fools. Even the damn owner is one too.”

“You can call us fools all you want to. I still stopped you from taking those trees down, and I’ll do it again.”

“And I’ll continue to know things you don’t.” Kevin smiled. “Have the day you deserve, Jade!”

“Have the hairline you deserve!” I snapped back. When he disappeared into the building, I huffed and crossed my arms.

I was about to go to my apartment when something across the square caught my eye. Dale was rolling a cart of drinks, and he was struggling up the sidewalk. The cart tipped sideways, and disaster was imminent.

“Shit,” I said, darting to catch it. My hands landed on the drinks just in time.

“What the . . . Oh, Jade. Thank you.” Dale sighed. “These sidewalks are so uneven.”

“I’ll help you,” I said as I pushed. “This thing is heavy as fuck.”

“It’s the fancy glass bottles. I thought I was stronger than I am.”

We made it to the store and got the bottles inside. Both of us were out of breath, and he gave me a drink to cool off.

“I need to work out more,” I said.

“That was flat. Why was it so hard?” he groaned. I shook my head and took a sip. “Are you still mad at me for being rude?”

“A little, but I’ll get over it.”

“You could’ve let me suffer then.”

“Come on, Dale. I’m not cruel.”

He laughed. “You’re a good kid. A little wild, but good. All of us think that.”

“Thanks,” I said. “You know, you all could tell me a little more.”

“Yeah, right. You’ll get a big-ass head.”

I rolled my eyes and was about to argue, but my eyes caught on movement outside.

Gabriel was walking down the sidewalk. I frowned. What was he up to?

“Hey, Dale,” I said. “I need to go.”

“Oh, you’ve got that look. I bet it’s Gabriel related.”

I waved him off and went outside, watching to see where Gabriel went.

He disappeared inside town hall, and I couldn’t help but wonder what the hell he was doing there. He had no business with anything to do with Strawberry Springs, or at least that’s what I’d told myself.

I went in, trying my best to keep quiet. He was heading down the hallway toward the mayor's office, and I wound up having to hide behind a plant.

"So, you showed up," Toby said. "I thought you said you wouldn't."

"I'm hoping both of you have seen sense. I hear some historical trees have stopped you."

"Those historical records are bullshit and you know it." That was Kevin's voice. Holy shit, Gabriel had a meeting with both of them.

"They worked for now."

"You told her about those. I don't know how, but you did."

"Jade may have found some interesting information at the library."

He knew about the note? *How?*

"You're playing a dangerous game. You do realize I could tell her who you are."

"And you'd want her to leave you alone. She's not gonna take a deal like that."

My heartbeat pounded in my ears. There was something deep inside of me that told me I needed to listen.

"I don't understand why you're spending your fortune on this stupid little town. Or why you're fighting us." Toby scoffed. "Is it that important to you?"

My world tilted as I waited for the answer. "It is."

"You've spent years doing this. I looked up this grant. The second you had money, you started it."

"And it's not ending. Even if I'm gone, I'll find a way to save that spring. And you should let go of it before it gets messy."

"It's not going to. Someone will give in."

Gabriel laughed. "That's one of my favorite things about Strawberry Springs. They never give up."

At the most shocking words I'd ever heard in my life, I fell over. A *clang* echoed down the hallway and their conversation paused. I crab walked toward the front door, still staying out of sight, and then ran back to my apartment.

I was heaving by the time I shut and locked my door.

Everything he'd said hit me all at once.

Everything he'd done hit me too.

I had to take in air as I tried to make sense of what I'd just realized.

All my conclusions before were circumstances I'd tied together. I wanted my suspicions to be true. I wanted to know who it was.

This was different. This was a cold, hard truth hitting me like a pile of bricks.

The Post-it note sat in front of me on my desk as well as the note to Grace.

I looked at the handwriting again, heart kicking into high gear. It had been years since I'd seen Gabriel's handwriting, and I never gave it a second thought. Now that it was on my mind, though, he always had written certain letters oddly. He capitalized his A's and D's, and I always used to joke that his handwriting was like an old man's.

I tore through my shelves until I found my yearbook. Gabriel had left me a note in there a long time ago. The book was buried under mountains of things that I needed to go through. But when I found it, I opened it up to the front page.



There it was. The capitalized D. The weird A. I look from my sticky note to Grace's note to this one.

That was the same fucking handwriting.

None of this made sense. He didn't like the town. Why would he go so above and beyond to do things?

He'd paid for a cruise for Marjorie and Henrietta.

He'd never met Cain, yet paid for his lawyer fees.

He'd helped Grace too.

If he did all of that, then that meant . . .

I shook my head, still unable to wrap my mind around it.

"The group." I was barely able to say it. "He's not in the group, right?"

That was the one last thing that I didn't understand. With shaky hands, I pulled out my phone.

I navigated to the Facebook group, looking through every single person in it.

There was only one that made sense.

G Singh.

His mother's name.

How had I been so blind? How had I not seen this?

Gabriel was the grant owner.

There was no doubt about it.

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54

GABRIEL



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Mollie Wilson: Hey, Hugh. Out of curiosity, how many divorces have you had?

Comments:
Hu Gh: I lost count after the fourth. Why?
Wren Hackett: How did you have four divorces???
Marjorie Brown: Do you really need him to answer that?
Hu Gh: They only wanted me for my body.

KEVIN AND TOBY were still holding out, and I was in a bad mood when I went to pick up Agnes and Beatrice from school. I'd hoped Jade would have asked if she could go with me to get them, but she hadn't. So, I tried to put on a good show for the girls by myself.

When Jade didn't come by the apartment after we got home, I figured maybe she had opened the store today, and she'd stop in after she closed. But that didn't happen either.

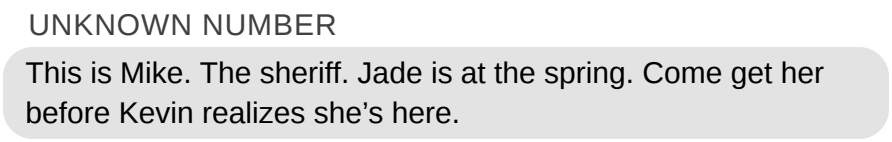
There was absolute silence from her. There was no noise coming from her apartment and there was nothing about or from her in the Facebook group.

I started to get nervous as the sun set.

Had Kevin done something to her? I knew that I'd pushed him today, but he had to break eventually.

But what if I'd gone too far and put her at risk?

It was near the girls' bedtime when I got a text. I thought it would be Jade, but it was something even more shocking.



I sat up. "She's *what*?" I yelled.

"You're so loud!" Agnes yelled back. She was far louder than I had been.

I immediately called Atticus, begging him to rush over. He agreed to come, but I knew he would have questions.

The second my stepfather was in my apartment, I was running. How long had she been there? How had I missed that she was going to the spring?

It wasn't owned by someone we knew anymore. If she was caught, she could be in massive trouble.

As much as Jade loved to joke around, she wouldn't do something if she actually thought she would get in trouble. She wasn't stupid, but she wasn't always in her right mind when she was upset.

The spring was something she cared about so much, and it was in danger now.

Kevin could have easily done something to push her over the edge.

I kicked up dirt as I parked my car on the side of the road. My heart gave a squeeze as I saw Sheriff Mike patrolling the area. He gave me a nod as I ran into the forest. Armed with only a flashlight and my own panicked mind, I took the path I knew by heart.

I found her on her usual rock.

"Jade," I said. "What the hell are you doing?"

I put my hands on my knees and tried to catch my breath. I remembered that she could have been sleepwalking, and I didn't need to wake her up.

"How did you know I was here?" she asked.

"You're awake?"

"I hide my keys from myself. I'd never drive while asleep."

“Then you know you shouldn’t be here. We need to go.” I reached for her, only for her to tug her hand out of my grip.

“Don’t take care of me right now.” She said it lowly.

“What?”

“I said don’t take care of me right now.” It was louder.

“Wh-what”

“You always do this. You always jump in. I should have known—I should have *seen*—” She cut herself off.

“What did I do?” I asked. “What upset you?”

“You! You always being here.”

I blinked. “Do you want me to leave then?”

“Did you ever leave, Gabriel?”

“What?”

“Or should I ask through the STM email? You get that too, right?”

“The . . . what?”

No. *No.*

I forced myself to laugh, knowing I needed to play this off if I was going to keep my cover. “That’s wild, Jade. I know you’ve been looking into who it is, but it’s definitely not me.”

She hit my chest. Or rather, she put something on my chest. When she took it away, it was my note to Grace. Behind it was the sticky note I’d left for her in the library.

“That’s your handwriting. I’m not stupid.”

“I-it’s not.”

“Should I bring out the yearbook where you wrote me a note? Should I have you write me something right now?”

I went silent.

She filled it.

“You know, I always thought that the STM grant owner was somebody from Strawberry Springs. I was right, I guess. God, and then the profile named G Singh? That’s your mother’s maiden name, right?”

Fuck. “Jade. I—”

“And the money. You know, you don’t live like a man who’s a millionaire. Maybe all of your money is going somewhere else.”

“It’s not . . . Jade—”

“I know, Gabe. I know it’s you.”

That got me out of my denial. She hadn't used my nickname since I came back into town. In fact, I thought she never would. My gaze fell to my feet. I never once imagined her finding out that I was the owner of the STM grant. In fact, I had dreamed she would never find out. There were no words that came to mind to say to her.

"Why?" she asked.

"Do you have to know why?"

"You know I do."

"Is it not obvious?"

"No! It's not!" she snapped. I finally looked at her. Tears streamed down her face, and it felt like my heart was cracking into two pieces. "You left! You were done with me!"

"I wasn't!" I snapped back. My heart pounded. "I tried to be. God, I tried. I even put out that game, thinking it would be the end of me dreaming about this place, dreaming about *you*, but it only made it worse! I couldn't give you me. I couldn't come back, but I could give you the town. I could make it what you wanted it to be. I was never enough, but this was as close as I could come."

"You did all of this . . . for me?" she asked.

"I did. And I'll keep doing it. I'm saving this land. I'm making sure this belongs to the town, okay? So be mad at me for doing all this. Hate me if you need to, but you once wished to see this town in its heyday. And I'm making it happen. No matter what you say."

"And you're still leaving?"

"I . . . have to."

"Because you hate it so much? Tell me, would a man who hates this town do all of this? Would he save all of us with every dollar he had?"

"It was—"

"Don't lie," she snapped. "I heard everything you said to Toby and Kevin today."

"You were there?"

"You admitted you cared about the town."

My eyes shut. "I do care, but I can't stay."

"Of course you can't." She scoffed. "Because that would be too easy, right?"

"Jade, you don't get it."

“And you won’t tell me! You’re keeping everything to yourself and leaving me out of it!”

“You’re mad.” I said it like a fact. “Because of the grant?”

“Because of *you*.” She shook her head.

“So, tell me.”

She laughed, but it held no humor. “Why should I? Will it change anything? Does it ever? I always try with *everyone*. And yet, I’m still here, and you’re going to leave. And you know what’s the worst part?”

“What?” The word barely came out.

“You said you did all of this to give me everything. And yet, you never gave me *you*.”

She was right. It killed me that she was. “I know.”

“I regret this.”

My head shot up. *No.* Anything but this. “What do you regret?”

“Everything!” she snapped. “Making that stupid bet twelve years ago—the one I lost, by the way. Forgiving you this time. Telling myself that I would be okay with you leaving.” She let out a harsh sob. “I’ll never be okay with it.”

“You regret us?”

“I do. We should end this before it gets any worse.” She wiped away tears but faced me head-on. “Let’s have the same ending as before.”

“D-don’t say that. Please don’t say that.”

“I am. I have to.” Another tear fell and she looked at her feet. “Otherwise, we’re just living in denial.”

It felt like I was falling apart all over again. I was eighteen, about to leave for the first time, and she was pulling away from me.

“Jade, no.” I reached out a hand, but she took a step back.

“I wish you the best, Gabe.” I’d wanted to hear the nickname for years. But not like this. Never like this.

She walked around me and went back into the forest. She was practically running. Away from me. Away from what I’d done.

My own tears fell when I was alone.

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55

JADE



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Kerry Winsor: I feel that shift in the air again . . .

Comments:
Marjorie Brown: Kerry, are you doing drugs again?
Kerry Winsor: It’s just a feeling I have . . . and I don’t do drugs.
Marjorie Brown: Are you sure . . .
SherriffMike Finch: Marjorie, leave her alone.
Marjorie Brown: Shit, the cops are here! We gotta run!
SherriffMike Finch: I’m not gonna arrest you!
Marjorie Brown: That’s what they all say!
SherriffMike Finch: I hate this town.

MOLLIE

Hey, I heard that you were at the spring last night. I hate that they got those trucks on there. Do you need to talk?

WREN

Hey, your shop is closed. Is everything okay?

PIPER

Did something happen?

GRACE

Don’t make me come over there.

TEXTS WENT unanswered on my phone as I sat on my bed. I hadn’t gotten a wink of sleep since I was too terrified of what I might do after I passed out for the night.

Even if I wanted to, my brain was too big of a mess. I had no idea how long I was going to sit here, but it would be until I could have a single thought other than *what the fuck?*

There was a knock on the door that I ignored. Then it grew more insistent, and I had to answer it.

My friends were all on the other side.

“Finally,” Grace said. She walked in without an invitation. Piper gave an awkward laugh and followed. Wren and Mollie came in too. “This is a wellness check.”

“Oh God, she’s pale.” Wren got close to my face.

“Did you sleep?” Piper asked.

“Obviously not. She looks worse than me after working on the farm.” Mollie bit her lip.

“I’m fi—” The words wouldn’t come out. All of us had our moments like this, and it looked like it was my turn.

I fought it. I didn’t want to lose it in front of them.

But this was big. This was life-changing.

And I didn’t know what to do.

One tear fell. Then another. Soon, I couldn’t stop and I was collapsing onto the floor.

Wren, Mollie, and Grace all caught me.

“Did he do this? Do I have to kill him?” Wren asked. “I don’t care if he’s rich, I’ll do it!”

“What happened? What did he do?” Mollie asked.

“Hang on,” Piper said softly. She was nearby, closer than usual. “Let her talk.”

I didn’t know if I could say it. I didn’t know if I *should*.

I only shook my head.

“Is it the land?” Grace asked. “You’ve been going there since you were a kid.”

“What about the investigation about the grant owner?”

I only sobbed harder at the mention of the grant owner.

Or should I call him Gabriel?

“Did . . . something happen with the grant?” Piper asked.

The rest of the women went quiet.

I took in a shaky breath, then nodded.

“Oh, God,” Mollie said.

“Are they pulling funding?” Wren asked in a panic.

“What happened?” Piper cut in.

“It’s Gabriel. He’s running the grant.”

The entire room went silent again.

“I’m sorry,” Mollie said. “Could you repeat that?”

“Gabriel started the grant after he got rich from his video game. He did it. He’s been it the entire time.”

“What?” Grace shook her head. “No way.”

“He sent you that note. He was probably nervous that he would get caught, which is why the handwriting was shaky. Go look at my yearbook at the note he left me. It’s the same handwriting.”

“He barely would have known Cain then,” Mollie said as Grace went to the yearbook. “Why would he pay his legal fees?”

Piper added, “Theo came after Gabriel left. Why would he help him?”

“To cover for himself,” Wren offered. “Maybe he knew he couldn’t pick favorites, so he had to be nice to us all.”

“Maybe, but his actions don’t match that.” Piper crossed her arms. “One of the main things I’ve learned is to watch people’s actions, not their words.”

“That’s what I do,” Grace added. “It’s how I help people.”

“Right,” Piper said. “So, these actions are him watching closely and jumping in where people need it. He’s not asking for glamour. The STM grant barely wants to be named.”

“He cares.” I said it quietly. “That’s why.”

“So why is he leaving?” Mollie asked.

“That’s the part I can’t figure out,” I said. “And he won’t tell me either.”

“Why did he leave the first time again?”

“He said it was because he hated small towns and he wanted to explore what was out there.” I shrugged. “And then he changed his mind once he was out there. I don’t know. This whole thing is why I haven’t slept.”

“Does anyone else know him? Is there anyone else you could ask?”

“Is it worth it to?” Wren asked.

“Something is going on here,” Grace said. “There’s a mystery, and if anyone can figure it out, it’s Jade.”

“Should I?” I asked. “I broke up with him.”

They all stared at me.

“You . . . broke up with him?” Piper asked.

“I did.”

“Why?” Wren asked.

“You were hesitant before,” Jade said.

“I was. I *am*.” Wren sighed. “I’m conflicted.”

“How do you think I feel?” I asked and buried my head in my hands. “God, I didn’t *want* to break up with him, but if he did all of *this* and is still planning on leaving? It doesn’t make any fucking sense.”

“You’re right,” Grace said. “It doesn’t. He’s different this time. I’ve barely talked to him, but I can see it. I bet others do too.”

“He is?” Mollie asked.

“Yeah. When we were all eighteen, he avoided everyone but Jade. It’s like he didn’t want to get attached. But this time, he doesn’t seem to care. He says hi. He’s friendly.”

I let out a groan. “Why can’t this make sense?”

“He’s your person,” Piper said simply. “It makes sense that you’d want to figure him out.”

“I dumped him. I shouldn’t want anything.”

“Jade, that’s not how feelings work.”

“Yeah, it’s not.” Mollie shook her head. “You’re gonna care about him either way.”

I let out a breath, shutting my eyes. “I’m worried he’s making a mistake. I’m worried he’s leaving when he really doesn’t want to. He’s always said he would leave, but his actions . . .”

“They don’t match,” Grace finished. She gave me a small smile. “And you love a good mystery.”

“Would it be ridiculous if I tried to figure this out?” I asked. For a moment, I wondered if they would say yes.

“Ridiculous?” Wren laughed. “Yes. But you love being ridiculous.”

“True. But would it be a mistake?”

They all looked between each other.

“The only mistake you could ever make is not trusting your gut,” Grace said. “We’ll support you either way.”

I thought about it. I weighed both options. I could let it go and accept him leaving.

Or I could look into it more.

I knew what I wanted immediately.

“I need to figure this out. I need answers.”

“Okay,” Mollie said. “Then that’s what we’ll help you with.”

“So, what do we know about Gabriel?” Wren asked. “What can you look into?”

“Usually, I’d start with asking him, but he’s going to keep it from me.”

“Is there anyone else?”

I glanced out the window. For the longest time, it had just been him and me. Gabriel had long since broken connection with Lucas, and Lucas was in Nashville these days.

The only person left was Atticus.

“I think I’ve got a lead.”

“Good,” Grace said. “Now go figure out what the hell is wrong with him.”

IT TOOK me a long time to knock on the door in front of me. I had come to this house many times, and I was still close with Atticus even to this day. In a way, he was far better than my own father ever was. He was distant, but also caring.

He’d been the same with Gabriel, but maybe I’d gotten more of Atticus’s kindness over the years.

He opened the door, blinking when he saw me.

“Is Gabriel leaving again?” he asked.

“Can I come in?”

He sighed, but opened the door wider to let me in. His house was familiar in a way that was comfortable.

“Did you two fight again?”

I wanted to say no, but I couldn’t lie. “Yes.”

“My policy stays the same: I’m not getting in the middle of it.”

He'd told me this last time. I'd snapped and said I didn't need his help anyway.

This time, I took a different path. "Why?"

"It's not any of my business."

I frowned. "Is it not?"

Atticus sighed and then shook his head. "You two can work it out."

"You know him," I said. "Is there anything you can tell me?"

"I know as little as you."

"I don't need an immediate answer, just a hint. Is there a habit he has? Or something that made him want to leave?"

Atticus opened his mouth, probably to say no once again, but then he paused.

"There is something. Gabriel will be mad if he knows you saw this, though."

"I won't tell him."

It won't be the first secret between us.

"Are you okay?" Atticus asked. He was usually so quiet and reserved. His question shocked me.

"I'm . . . trying to figure something out," I said. "That's all."

"This will only make it worse."

"I don't care," I said. "I just want to understand."

"Fine. Follow me."

Atticus led me to the back room of the house. It had always been shut and locked, and Gabriel always distracted me when I would try to sneak in.

It was a simple room with art and shelving.

"What is this?"

"This was his mom's office."

My eyes went wide. I'd been around when Gabriel lost his mom, but he didn't tell me much. He'd retreated into a shell, hiding away from everyone.

Still, to this day, he barely talked about her.

"I thought he'd mostly forgotten about her."

Atticus looked down. "I'm sure that's what he wants us to think. I used to catch him in here all the time, especially right before he went to college."

"What was he doing in here?"

He slowly walked to the desk and pulled out a stack of papers.

"He would read these," Atticus said.

I looked at them. They were handwritten notes, all signed from the same woman.

Were these . . .? I looked up, only to find Atticus had left me alone.

With a sigh, I focused on the letters.

I'd met Gabriel's mom in passing the same way every kid meets their friends' parents. She was nice and took care of me when I was over, but my memories were fuzzy at best.

But reading these, I could almost hear a soft voice talking to me. I could faintly see her smile and her outline.

She told me where she was from and how worried she was for Gabriel's future. She didn't think he was getting the best education, and that she wanted him to see where she was from. How she didn't want him to feel disconnected from her roots.

I got to a letter where she was planning a trip. She was so excited for it, but when I went to the next one, there was nothing there.

"What?" I asked. "That's it?" With a long sigh, I put them back in the drawer before going outside. "Atticus! What was that?"

He jumped. "I showed you the letters. I thought—"

"When did she take him to San Franscisco?" I asked.

"She didn't." He said it quietly. "She died the night before."

My heart thudded in my chest. "Oh, fuck. So, he read those to feel connected to her."

"Yes."

"And he moved to where she was from."

"That's what I think."

"Do you think that's still why he wants to leave?"

Atticus's lips pursed as he considered it. "He hasn't been here to read them, not that I've seen at least. It doesn't seem like it was the first time."

"He seems to be determined about going back," I said with a shake of my head. "But I know he cares about things here."

"Maybe he feels guilty for leaving. He's doing nice things to feel better."

It was possible. With a sigh, I looked out to the fields, thinking through everything I'd seen.

"That doesn't feel like it's it." I shook my head. "Do you think that's what it is?"

Atticus considered. "No. I don't."

“Then what do you think it is?” I sifted through all I knew, wondering if there was something in San Francisco that would make him go back. He’d said it was because of the girls’ schooling, but they were getting a great education here, so it didn’t make sense to me. What was so important about this private school? “Wait, do you think it’s Alice? Did she have anything to do with the school?”

Atticus was quiet for a moment. “I believe she’s the one who found it.”

I gasped. “That’s it! He’s going back because *she* wanted the girls to go to school there. Not because he wants to.”

“I’ll admit, I had a feeling he was doing that, but—”

“Wait, you had a feeling?” I frowned.

“Yes. I’ve seen how he is in San Francisco, and I see how he is here. Even the girls are happier here.”

“Then why would you not say anything?”

“Like I said, it’s not my place.”

“It *is* your place.”

“No, it’s not.”

I shook my head. “You’re the closest thing he has to a dad.”

“No, I’m not.” He said it with such finality that anyone else would’ve backed off.

But not me. “Yes, you are.”

“He doesn’t see me that way.”

I laughed. “Now I see why he said what he did.”

“What did he say?”

“When he was drunk. He said he wished he had someone to tell him what to do. Someone to be there for him. At the time, I was confused. Now I get it. He meant *you*.”

Atticus went rigid. He’d always been a quiet and controlled man, but now, his bottom lip shook.

“I’m trying something different,” I said. “Maybe you should too.”

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56

GABRIEL



Dad Company (But Sometimes Good Advice)
Aaron Walsh: How does one be a father when I have my own daddy issues?

Comments:
Robert Colt: Daddy issues do not make a bad dad. Choose your own daddy path.
Ryan Kim: I tried to read that and now my eyes are crossed.
Oliver Brian: Rob, are you drunk again?
Robert Colt: No!
Robert Colt: (yes)

WHEN A KNOCK CAME at the door after the girls went to bed, I nearly tripped over myself to answer it. I was so sure that Jade had finally come to talk.

Instead, Atticus stood outside.

"O-oh, hi. Do you need something?" I asked.

"Just to talk. Can I come in?"

I nodded and stepped to the side.

I was a mess, and it wasn't getting any better. Atticus wasn't what I needed, and I knew better than to hope he'd be anything but what he had been.

The bitterness always stayed, however.

I was in a delicate place. Jade finding out terrified me. Her keeping her distance made me want to find her.

We could fight it out. I'd take her yelling at me. I'd take her hating me.

I just needed to see her.

"So, what's the plan for heading back to San Francisco?" he asked.

My shoulders slumped. This was the last thing I wanted to talk about. "I'm waiting for my apartment to be done, and then I'll be gone, just like last time."

Atticus hummed and then watched me carefully. "How do you feel about that?"

I paused. "What?"

"I asked how you feel about it."

"Since when do you care about how I feel?" The words came out harsher than I meant them to, but I didn't have it in me to rein it in.

Atticus didn't take the bait. Instead, he took a deep breath. "You're upset."

For a long moment, I only stared. Had I fallen asleep and woken up in a different world where Atticus cared about me?

No. I was awake. I wasn't sure what was going on, but I was awake.

I still needed to be the Gabriel he knew. "I'm . . . fine."

"What do you need?" he asked.

My entire body tightened. "I-I don't need anything."

"I think you do." He crossed his arms.

"Why are you pushing me? Usually, you let me do whatever I want."

"You're right. I do." He sighed. "But I don't think that's what you need this time. I don't think I've been what you need for a while."

I blinked. "W-what?"

"You're conflicted." I didn't like how right he was. "Is it about leaving?"

Something churned in my gut. I'd been trying not to think about it. Even the thought of packing triggered hives. Jade had been right. I *was* upset by it, but I didn't want to talk about it.

"Why are you here?"

"To talk."

"No! Why are you here? You've never been my dad before. Why are you trying now?"

“Because I care.”

I scoffed. I shouldn’t have been like this, but the resentment I’d held onto all these years spilled over. He was here now . . . for what? He’d never felt bad before. “Do you?”

“Yes. You know I do.”

I closed my eyes. I knew he’d done a lot for me. He’d always been there when I asked him to be. But nothing more. “On your terms, yeah. I know.”

“No, on yours.”

“On mine?” I let out a humorless laugh. “No, it’s not on my terms.”

“What do you want, Gabriel?”

“Nothing.”

“I don’t think that’s true.”

He was pushing, something he never did. It was so shocking that I almost gave in.

“You’ll never do it.”

“Try me.”

“No.”

“Gabriel.” His voice was firm and he stepped forward. My eyes went wide. This was a voice he’d only ever used on Simone. There were a lot of things he’d only done for her.

“I need a dad!” I finally snapped. “I need . . . *someone*. But clearly, you’re not here!”

Atticus stepped back like I’d hit him. “I . . . That’s what you want?”

“Of course it is! Do you think I love seeing you give Simone advice and never me? Do you think I’ve loved not having any kind of parent in my adult life?”

He took it all in. He could tell me all the things he’d done for me, and he’d be right. He could remind me that he wasn’t my dad, and he’d also be right.

He did neither of those things.

“Okay. Then that’s what you get.”

“What?”

“You’re right.” He let out another long breath and put his hands on his hips. “I’ve kept my distance, and obviously I was wrong to do that.”

I could only blink in shock. This had been the one thing I’d needed for years. I’d tamped down the disappointment of not having it and accepted my fate.

I never once considered that he would change.

My anger popped like a bubble.

“But you’re not gonna like what I’m about to tell you.”

“What are you gonna tell me?”

“That you’re making a big mistake.”

“A big mistake? No, I’m not.”

“You don’t want to go back to San Francisco.”

I froze. My skin crawled. I’d wanted this fatherly advice, but I didn’t expect him to be so right.

“I have to.”

“Why? Because of Alice?”

A shocked noise escaped me. “How the fuck did you know that?”

“I’ve seen things.”

“You’ve seen things and you just kept it to yourself?”

“I didn’t think you’d ever want me to step in.”

“I have no one, Atticus! Of course I wanted you to step in! You could have done it the second you met me. Or even better, thirteen years ago when I was leaving the first time!”

“You’re right, but neither of us asked. We were content to assume and make things worse. But it ends now. I know you, Gabriel. I know you live for everyone else.”

“Y-you don’t know that.”

“Yes, I do. You moved to San Francisco because of your mother’s letters, and I have a feeling you’re going back because of Alice’s plans for the girls. I’m sure there’s more. More that you’ve hidden.”

My stomach churned. The STM grant.

The biggest thing I’d ever done.

“And you don’t do it for praise. In fact, you hate praise. You’re doing it because you think it’s right, even if it’s to your own detriment.”

“S-so? I can take it!”

“But you’re hurting others in the process. How do you think Jade feels?”

My jaw tightened. “Don’t bring her into this.”

“Even Agnes and Beatrice. They’ve grown so much here. They like it here.”

“This isn’t what Alice wanted for them.”

“Alice isn’t the one here right now. You are. And sometimes being a parent is going against everything you know in hopes of doing the thing that’s *right*. You’re their father. What do *you* want?”

I shook my head, still fighting a losing battle. “I . . . It doesn’t matter.”

“It does! Are you gonna waste more time in hopes of following what *others* want? Or are you going to finally admit what *you* want?”

“It’s not easy!”

“I know. I know more than anyone. I’ve wanted to tell you all of this for a long time, but I didn’t. I thought it would keep the peace, and look at how much time I’ve wasted.”

I let out a heaving breath. “You . . . wanted this?”

“I did. And I regret not doing it sooner. Are you gonna add more regret to *your* pile? Or are you finally going to change things?”

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57

JADE



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Kerry Winsor: @Jade Clark PLEASE put me out of my misery and tell me what's going on with Gabe!!! Don't think I haven't seen you sulking!!!

Comments:
Jade Clark: No.
Kerry Winsor: I'll do what you want!!! Name your terms!!!
Mollie Wilson: This is a dangerous thing to offer . . .
Marjorie Brown: You better tell her, she's desperate!
Kerry Winsor: I am!!! I'M BEGGING!!!

"GIVE ME PATIENCE AND SERENITY." The words came out calm, and I hoped the crystal in my hands would make me feel it.

It didn't work.

With a sigh, I leaned back on the park bench I'd taken over, gaze set on the trees. The air still held a lingering warmth, but the leaves were slowly changing colors.

Time was passing, whether I wanted it to or not.

I was glad I went to Atticus for answers, but that had only reinforced my belief that Gabriel's head was up his ass.

He was an idiot. So much of one that I wasn't sure what to do.

I was so angry. So angry and something else.

It was a distinct hell to find out the man I loved did everything he could for me and this town. I wanted to be grateful. I wanted to cry out of relief that the grant was run by him and not someone else.

But I also wanted to punch him in the face.

I could tie him down. I could make him admit it. I could use every weapon in my arsenal. I could beg Atticus to step in, but I was terrified that none of it would be enough.

He could still leave.

This wasn't the first time I'd put my all into something and it didn't pan out. It was common knowledge that I was stubborn, but Gabriel was far worse. When he made a decision, it stuck.

The last time, I'd hoped I would be enough. I wasn't.

We were heading toward the same ending now.

People passed me by, giving me a wide berth. They'd seen I was in a bad mood, and I was ignoring every question they had.

There was no point in telling them.

If I had one wish—just one—I'd want a different ending. One where our future was here.

Too bad I was old enough to know wishes didn't come true.

A single leaf fell and I sighed. If only it were an eyelash. A shooting star.

Maybe my wish would have a chance of coming true.

"Whoa! Where are you running to?" I heard it before I sat up. Someone had run straight into Kerry. I was content to stay in my misery.

Then I heard the other voice echo through the square.

"Where's Jade?"

Slowly, I looked behind me.

Gabriel was running toward me.

Time slowed. He looked like a mess. His hair was down and splayed everywhere. His eyes were tinged red.

I stood without thinking. I met him halfway before realizing what I was doing.

"Gabriel?" I asked.

He was out of breath, like he'd run a marathon. People gathered around, watching with wide eyes.

I blinked, a wash of déjà vu hitting me. Slowly, I turned to see the same square where I'd broken both of our hearts. One heartbeat, I could see the cracked facades. The next, I was back in the present.

We were standing in the same place.

Time was repeating itself.

"J-Jade," he said. "I—"

He let out another breath, his eyes tracing over every inch of my face. I stared him down, slowly taking in the wrinkles that weren't there before. The color around us.

This was the present. Not the past.

Silence stretched out between us. I thought he'd tell me he was leaving. His apartment was done, and I'd have my final answer.

Everything would click together like a broken puzzle.

"I hear your neighbors are terrible," he said. "They're rude, loud. You've even had to step in."

My throat felt thick. "Yeah, they are."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I hear it's not going to get any better."

"What about when their lease is up?" I asked. "They have a different home, don't they?"

"No. They don't."

I blinked. "Excuse me?"

"I'm not leaving this time."

"Why?"

"Because I don't fucking want to." The words were so shocking that whatever I was going to say next evaporated in a puff of smoke. At the threat of silence, Gabriel continued. "I get why you'd regret things. I get why you're mad. I tried to give you everything, but I was a coward where it matters most. I should've given you me. I should've done that the first fucking time. I've lived for what ghosts want, not what *I* wanted. I don't even know how to begin living for myself . . . but I know it starts with staying where my home is."

I could barely speak. My heartbeat was pounding in my ears, but I managed to ask, "Wh-what are you saying?"

"I'm saying that I listened. It took you and Atticus to do it, but I see it now. I see that I'm hurting you by choosing what others want. I want to be here. In Strawberry Springs. Wherever you are."

I let out a sob. It was all I could do. "Wh-what?"

Gabriel ran a hand through his hair, but his eyes were on mine. “I know I have a lot of time to prove that to you, and I’m happy to do that. But I’m not going back. I’m staying here.”

I wasn’t sure who moved first, but suddenly, I was sobbing in his arms. They were ugly, heart-wrenching cries, and I had no idea where they came from.

Relief poured through me. Never in my life did I expect to hear those words, but they’d been spoken. I wasn’t sure if it was a good idea to have hope yet, but it blossomed in my chest anyway. The future I barely dared to dream of was fuzzy and in black and white.

Now it burst forth in technicolor. It was so real and right in front of me.

“P-please don’t take it back,” I managed to say. “Please stay.”

“I will. I promise. I plan on it. Whatever you need to hear to believe it. But there’s just one other thing.”

I sobbed again. “Fucking what, Gabriel?”

“Maybe we should get off the street before Kerry jumps us.”

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58

GABE



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Kerry Winsor: Uh . . . y’all saw that, right?

Comments:
Marjorie Brown: WE’RE POPPING BEERS TONIGHT, BITCHES!!!
Hu Gh: I didn’t hear shit. What happened?
Jackie Anne: I’m pretty sure there was just a romantic moment in the square. It was so cute!
Kerry Winsor: Yes!!! WHO BET HE WAS STAYING??? I DID. PAY UP!!!

WE FOUND solace in Jade’s Goodies. She was still a mess when I shut and locked the door, and she went right back to hugging me.

It took a long time for her to stop crying. It tore at my soul, but I had it coming. I’d spent too long doing the wrong thing.

Atticus had warned me it would feel worse than I expected.

He was right. I had a feeling he would be right about a lot of other things too.

When Jade quieted down, I stayed. I held her, rubbing her back until she was ready to talk. Eventually she pulled away, still wiping at her puffy eyes.

“What changed your mind?”

“I was already feeling conflicted. Very much so. Then Atticus came by.”

Her eyes lit up. “He did? Me yelling at him worked!”

“You yelled at him?”

“I didn’t get why you were so set on leaving, so I investigated. I saw your mom’s letters. Sorry, by the way.”

I shook my head. “Not that it fixes it, but I was going to tell you.”

“It doesn’t, but it led me to seeing how Atticus was with you.”

“Hands off?”

“Yes, which isn’t what you need. Sometimes, you need sense beaten into your head.”

“I do. But I’ll work on it. I don’t need to depend on others for decisions.”

Jade’s eyes widened. “He *really* talked some sense into you.”

“Not just that, but I’ve seen who it hurts. I can’t keep doing this. I *am* happy I saw where Mom was from, but I could’ve done it in a different way. In trying to avoid her mistakes, I almost lost everything I needed. Everything the girls needed too.”

“They’re happy here,” I said.

“Staying might be the one thing they *won’t* fight me on.” I laughed. “I bet the school will be mad.”

“You were sending them there for Alice, right?”

“How much did you figure out?”

“I can figure out almost anything.”

“I should have known.” With a shake of my head, I continued. “Nicole is doing well with them. Even if it feels wrong to go against what Alice and Mom would’ve wanted, they’re happy here. This town isn’t what it used to be.”

“Because of *you*,” she said.

“R-right. It’s still weird to talk about it out loud.”

“It’s still weird to think it. I can’t believe it’s you.” She scoffed. “What does STM stand for?”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “Save the Magic.”

“You’re kidding.”

“You always saw the magic in this place. I wanted you to have that.”

“You also wanted it,” she reminded. “Remember all the things you did?”

“I do. As much as I’d like to lie and say it was for a cover, I didn’t want people to suffer.”

She smiled. “That’s the man I love.”

“Love?”

“I never stopped loving you, Gabe.” Her voice was soft. “I just tried to forget it.”

“I would’ve deserved it if you did.”

She only shrugged. “It’s out of my control.”

“Mine too. But I *can* control one thing.” I pulled her close. “Staying. I can do that.”

“Thank God.” Her entire body loosened in my hold, and I supported her without a second thought. Her head fell to my shoulder. “I need a ten-year nap for what you did to me.”

“Take all the time you need.”

Jade pulled away. “Actually, I need coffee.” She pointed at me. “I have questions about the grant, and you’re gonna answer them.”

JADE HAD a cup of steaming coffee in her hand when she went into interrogation mode. Her brow pulled low and she leaned in.

It was both hot and terrifying.

“What are your plans for what you own?”

I blinked. “My plans? I don’t have any.”

“Are you going to sell it off? Will you develop?”

“Jade—”

“I need to ask. I need to know.”

“All right, all right. Don’t move so much, you’ll burn yourself.” I pointed to her coffee, which was about to spill over her hand. She gasped and took a sip before resuming her glare. “And I’ll be honest, I don’t have any plans for them. I might own things, but whoever rents it gets to call the shots.”

“So, if Jackie decided she wanted to turn her salon into a raccoon sanctuary?”

I blew out a breath. “I’d be confused, but I’d help her.”

“And the money? Are you out of it?”

“You’re really underestimating how much money that game made me. I’m fine. Eventually, I want to make more, but for now, I’m good for the foreseeable future.”

Jade hummed. “And G Singh? Is that your spy account?”

“One of them,” I said.

“One of?” she asked.

“Yeah. I have a few.”

“Wow,” she replied. “Multiple spies.”

“For a good cause. One of them is even an admin.”

“You’re an admin?” Her eyes went wide. “And you never deleted anything?”

“People need to wear their shame. And Hugh’s hilarious.” I laughed.

“So, you saw everything! What was your favorite moment?”

“Him selling the slightly used casket, for sure.”

“That one was so good. My personal favorite was when he wanted to eat the electrified squirrel.”

I shook my head. “This town is so fucking ridiculous.”

“But you love it,” she said, leaning in. She was smiling, but it faded ever so slightly.

Jade was worried I’d deny it.

“I do,” I said. “I’ve seen it all and nowhere else is like it is here.”

Tears gathered in her eyes. “*Fuck.* I need to stop crying.”

“You can show me it all, you know.” I reached out and wiped her cheeks for her. “The sadness. The anger. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Stop,” she said, her voice thicker. “You can’t make me cry twice today. You just can’t.”

“Don’t make me try—ow!” I rubbed my chest where she’d hit me. “You’re so violent.”

“You pushed it.” She tried to blink her tears away. “I’m just so happy you’re staying.”

“Me too.”

“So, does this mean I get to be like a stepmother to Agnes and Beatrice?”

I blinked. Her stepping in felt so natural that I’d not given it any thought.

“Uh, yeah. I guess so. I’m sure they’d be happy with it.”

“Good.” She took a sip of coffee. “Number one, I will be teaching them buggy riding.”

“Oh, no.”

“And I want to teach them the art of trolling people. The town won’t know what hit them.”

“They’re already good at that, but I’m sure they’ll do even better under you.”

“Exactly.” Jade flipped her hair over her shoulder before her smile faded. “And, most importantly, we should visit San Francisco.”

“W-wait, really?”

“For a trip, yes. Or an annual visit. Not to live there, but reading those letters . . . I see why you went. The last thing I’d ever want to do is replace Alice. They loved her, so they should know where they came from.”

“That’s . . . Yeah, we should. That’s surprisingly mature of you.”

“Surprisingly?” She raised an eyebrow.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t be surprised. You’re smart. Way smarter than me.”

“About some things.” She paused. “If I ever step in too far, let me know. You’re their father. You should make the decisions.”

“I know,” I said. “And I will. I just have to practice doing what I want.”

“And what do you want now?”

I considered it. “I . . . want to save that spring. If I buy it, I’ll turn it into a park.”

“Well, there’s a town hall about it tomorrow.” She smiled. “If you’re really part of the town, you should join me.”

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59

JADE



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Marjorie Brown: @Tammy Jane Got that smutty book about doors for you.

Comments:
Tammy Jane: Now why would you go and put that in here???
Marjorie Brown: I didn’t say what it was about!!! You’re the one acting embarrassed!
Mollie Wilson: Doors?
Wren Hackett: Doors?!?!?!

BEFORE WE COULD DO anything else, Gabe and I agreed that we needed to tell the girls about them staying, and about us.

It was going to have to be planned because neither of them handled change well. I knew they liked me and they also liked Strawberry Springs. That didn’t mean that they would be thrilled about all the changes happening at once.

We’d talked about it before taking the girls to school, but we agreed we needed a plan first. So much had gone down in the last forty-eight hours that our conversations were choppy and unproductive.

We needed time.

Unfortunately, that all went out the window when Beatrice came out of her room and immediately burst into tears.

Gabe cursed and rushed to her side. I had never seen either of the girls cry, and I needed a moment to process seeing her lose it.

“Hey,” Gabe said in a soft voice. “What happened? Did you have a bad dream?”

Beatrice only shook her head.

Agnes ran out of the room, her eyes wide. I raised an eyebrow at her, silently asking if she was the cause of Beatrice’s sudden emotion.

Agnes crossed her arms and glared at me.

Oh boy. It looked like I was in the doghouse too.

“Are you not happy with rice for dinner?” he offered. “I can make something else.”

Beatrice shook her head again. Her cries were getting louder, and he pulled her into a hug.

Agnes then sniffed and burst into tears too.

I was entirely baffled, but I hurried over to help. I had one twin and Gabe had the other. While we held them, we met each other’s eyes. We had no idea what this was about.

Agnes finally spoke. “We’re leaving, aren’t we?” She asked it in a quiet voice. It was so muffled by my shirt that I almost missed it.

“Leaving?” I repeated so he could hear. “Where did you get that idea from?”

“You both are acting weird and you keep looking at each other.”

“I don’t wanna go to the fancy school!” Beatrice yelled. “Don’t make me!”

“Please!” Agnes gripped me tighter. “I like it here! I like Jade! I wanna be here.”

My gaze snapped up to Gabe’s. His eyes were wide, and I had no doubt he was realizing just how close he’d come to making a terrible decision for the two of them.

He would hold the guilt of wanting to leave for a very long time, both for me and for Agnes and Beatrice. Later, when it was just the two of us, I’d pull him into my arms and tell him that we would work on this together, that he could feel guilty, but we’d be okay. The girls would too, eventually.

“Don’t do it, Daddy.” Beatrice’s voice was small and she curled into Gabe. “Don’t make us leave.”

“I’m not,” he rushed to say. “We’re not leaving. I promise.”

That only made it worse. “Don’t promise!” Beatrice said.

“No! Promises don’t stay!”

“Girls,” he said. He gestured for me to bring over Agnes, and I picked her up to join him. “I know promises have been broken before, but this one won’t be. I decided this morning we were staying in Strawberry Springs. We’ll live here.”

Agnes looked up, her eyes bigger than I’d ever seen them. “Really?”

“Yes. The only reason I was quiet was because I wasn’t sure if you’d want to, but I want to live here. I really like it here.”

“Me too!” Beatrice said, pulling away. “I like my friends and my teacher! I like Jade and the playground.”

“Good,” he said with a small smile. “Then we’re here. For good.”

Both girls jumped into his arms, and I couldn’t resist the smile that spread on my face.

For once, everything felt right, and I was whole.

And judging by the look on Gabe’s face, he had the same feeling.

WHEN MY WAKE-UP call was two screaming children jumping on me, my first thought was to make sure that I had a shirt on.

Thank God, I did.

“Good morning,” I said to Beatrice.

Next to me, Gabe groaned under Agnes.

“Is it already time for food?”

Both of them looked at us.

“Are we really staying?” Agnes asked.

“For real?” Beatrice echoed.

“Yes,” Gabe finally said. “We talked about this yesterday. You two are happy about it, right?”

“Yes,” Agnes said slowly. “But sometimes happy things only happen in dreams.”

Gabe let out a sound like he’d been punched.

I felt the same way.

“It is real,” I said, taking both girls in my arms. “I pr—”

I paused and glanced at Gabe.

“You promise?” Agnes asked.

Beatrice burrowed deeper.

“It’s a force of habit.”

“You’re not Mommy.”

I only stared. I wasn’t sure who the reminder was for.

“Does that mean she’ll keep them?” Beatrice asked.

Agnes turned to me. “Will you keep your promises?”

“I’ll do my best. Sometimes, plans change, but this one won’t.” I leaned in. “Let me tell you something. It’s a secret.”

Both girls leaned in, eyes wide.

“If your dad breaks the promise, I’ll hunt him down and make him regret it.”

They burst into giggles.

“I would regret it,” Gabe said with a frown. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Yay!” Agnes said, jumping over to Gabe. Beatrice followed, and I couldn’t help but smile at the sight.

Gabe embraced them both, then eyed me. I had no idea what he wanted, but then he reached over to drag me to him too.

“Okay, okay. Family—” I paused. *Was* I a part of this family? I knew I wasn’t Alice. I didn’t want to be, but they were kids I cared so much about.

“Family hug,” Gabe confirmed.

“Yes!” Agnes said.

“I like family hugs!” Beatrice added.

My heart felt like it had melted. Just twenty-four hours ago, I wasn’t sure Gabe was staying, much less that I would be a part of something like this.

But it felt right. It felt like what I’d been missing. Maybe it didn’t happen the way I expected it to, but this was exactly what I’d dreamed of.

My greatest wish had come true.

“LISTEN.” I was on my tiptoes to get my hands on Gabe’s shoulders. “You’re my watchdog.”

“I’m the watchdog,” he repeated dutifully.

“Neither Kevin nor Toby know about this meeting. If you get one whiff, you pull the excuse.”

“Right. We’re all gathering about Dale’s rudeness.”

“Perfect.” I smiled. “I’ve trained you so well.”

“Woof,” he said.

I grinned like an idiot.

Today was a serious day, but I’d been on cloud nine ever since Gabe told the girls we were staying. The rest of the town didn’t know yet, but the four of us were making plans.

Agnes and Beatrice immediately started asking when I was moving in, and Gabe, in true idiot fashion, suggested breaking down the wall between our apartments a week after we officially started dating. I had to remind him about the absolute mess that would make, especially with the girls eager to get into *everything*, so we agreed to move in together first.

For now, we were outside of town hall. Everyone had agreed that we all needed to meet up to discuss strategy for making sure Kevin didn’t get away with anything else.

This was the first time Gabe was joining.

I was content to stay on cloud nine until I saw a shadow behind me. I turned to see my four friends staring at us with slack jaws.

“You need to meet my friends.”

“Right.” He said it quietly. “How much do they hate me?”

“Only a little bit. They do know that you paid for everything in the town, though, so that’s earned you massive value points.”

Gabe’s hand grew tighter in mine. “That’s almost worse.”

“Why?”

“I don’t want them to like me just for what I did as the person running the STM grant. I want them to like me for me.”

“Have a little faith. Come say hello and we’ll see where it goes.”

He took a deep breath before nodding and letting me lead him over.

“Hey, guys,” I said. “So, I have an update for you.”

“Did you get your head out of your ass?” Grace asked as she crossed her arms.

Wren winced. It was obvious that knowing who he was had affected her opinion of him.

“I did,” Gabe said. “It took way more convincing than it should have, but I’m staying. Which means I need to officially meet all of you. Again. I

hear you know about my alter ego."

"Yeah, I'm still coming to terms with that one," Wren muttered. "You left my friend, which makes me want to hate you, but you also paid for me to renovate the library, so I can't fully hate you. Could you just be a little bit mean? Then I can pick a side."

"Wren," I said with a laugh. "He's not a mean person. He's just a little dumb sometimes."

"I am," Gabe replied. "But you should judge me on what you see. Don't worry about the STM grant stuff. Judge me for me."

"Damn, that was actually kind of good."

"She'll be conflicted for a while," Mollie said. "I, for one, am happy for Jade."

"Me too!" Piper said. "I love a good romantic ending."

"It's rare that they happen in real life. I've read all your books, by the way," Gabe said.

Piper blinked. "You have?"

"Once I knew you'd joined the town, I wanted to support you. I've also seen the show Wren was on, even if you hated that. And I have Atticus buy all kinds of things from your farm, Mollie."

"Oh, so he's not eating fifteen pounds of berries?"

"That would be me." Gabe turned to Grace. "I also—"

"Had Atticus buy for you too?" She laughed. "Yeah, I figured that out when he bought an entire black outfit in the wrong size."

"Wait, when was this?" Jade asked.

"A year or two ago? I didn't say anything because I knew it would upset you. Although maybe I should have. Might have saved us all some time."

"There were a lot of things I could have done to save us time," Gabe said. "I know you guys have to have reservations and I completely understand."

"Not as many as you would think." Wren sighed. "I've never seen Jade happier than when she's with you. And you're not a total dick, so I guess we have to support you."

"And your kids are hilarious," Mollie said. "Even if they taught Jasmine the word 'fuck.'"

"I'm sorry, I tried to stop them."

Mollie waved her hand. "Don't worry too much about it. She was gonna learn it from me eventually."

“Out of curiosity, are you here to just say hello or are you joining for the meeting?” Piper gestured at the door to the town hall. “This one’s pretty important. Usually, I miss them because they’re crowded, but I’m gonna find a safe corner to hang out in.”

“Oh, our partners are going to be there too!” Grace said. “You should say hello to all of them as well.”

“I was coming,” he answered. “It’s time to fully be a member of Strawberry Springs.”

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60

GABE



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Tammy Jane: Since Kerry is rich now, can she come to the diner more often?

Comments:
Kerry Winsor: I'm too busy counting my money as you all pay me!
Mollie Wilson: She's never gonna let anyone live this down, is she?
Kerry Winsor: You should have believed in love, Mollie!
Mollie Wilson: At least I got to participate in this one.
Wren Hackett: Same. It wasn't us this time.
Jackie Anne: Does this mean Kerry is gonna run the grant now? I bet she would be good at it!
Kerry Winsor: Haha, very funny! We still don't know anything about that!
@Jade Clark Do you have any updates?
Kerry Winsor: Jade???

"HEY." Cain held out a hand, his face set into a frown. "Name's Cain. I think we met in passing."

"We did." I met his handshake, eyeing him carefully.

His jaw was tense and his grip was a touch too tight.

"Mollie told you, didn't she?"

“Yes,” he said. “I was gonna try to keep it quiet since none of us guys are supposed to know.”

I looked behind him at Henry, Dean, and Theo. None of them were sitting still.

That familiar wave of discomfort washed over me at the idea of people knowing, but I pushed past it.

“No one else does. So, we’ll have to be careful that people don’t overhear this.” I looked around the room. Everyone else in town was watching me out of the corner of their eyes, but they weren’t close enough to hear. Still, I wanted to be careful.

“Got it.” Cain nodded. “But I did wanna say thank you.”

“Yeah, thank you.” Dean rushed forward, holding his hand out too. “We haven’t met officially, but I’m—”

“Dean Briggs. You own your own electrical company and are with Grace. I’ve been in the Facebook group, so I know everything that’s happened.”

“Everything?” Henry asked. “I . . . I mean, hi. It’s nice to meet you in calmer circumstances.”

“You too. And yes, everything. Even what Hugh did.”

“And you still did all that?” Cain asked. “You’re a better man than me.”

“And me,” Theo added. “But there’s a lot I couldn’t have done. So, I do owe you one.”

“More than one,” Cain said.

“Don’t worry about a thing. I really didn’t do any of this to get praise or anything back.”

“Really?” Henry asked. “You own so much of the town.”

“That’s only on paper. I would never sell it or develop it.”

Their shoulders all sank in relief. I could tell this had been weighing heavily on them. Was it weighing heavily on the rest of the town too?

“Okay, boys,” Jade said. “Your emotional circle jerk is over. The meeting is starting.”

Cain blinked. “Emotional . . . what?”

“You heard me. Now pair off.”

Our group dissipated. I stood next to Jade while Cain went with Mollie. Henry found Wren and put in earplugs. And Theo made sure no one would get too close to Piper.

“Settle down, everyone!” Kerry walked to the front of the room. “We need to get started on our meeting.”

“You of all people are telling us to stop talking?” From the crowd, Tammy laughed.

“We need to plan!” Kerry said. “We have to save the spring.”

That got everyone to focus. Jade bit her lip, clearly lost in thought. I knew that she cared about this more than anyone.

“Do we have any updates?”

Jade spoke up first. “Kevin is questioning the validity of the historical trees.”

“Fucker!” Hugh yelled.

“That’s going to take a while. There’s a hearing process. But he’s definitely wanting to take those down to develop the land. He can’t use the spring without it cleared.”

“So, we need a backup plan for when he finally gets past that registration,” Kerry said with a sigh.

“Yep,” Jade said. “If we bother him enough, hopefully he’ll sell to the right buyer.”

Jade didn’t look at me, but I knew she was thinking of my offer. I was the best person to purchase that land.

“We don’t even know if anyone will buy it!” Tammy scoffed. “And besides, where there’s one, there’s more.”

“None of us are going to sell again!” Kerry exclaimed. “It was such a betrayal the first time!”

“Until things get tight,” Hugh said. “I didn’t trust the grant. I pulled away to do my own thing, and then in my desperation, sold. And you see where that’s gotten the town. You’re all starting to doubt the grant now too.”

This time, Jade glanced at me. I had to grit my teeth to keep my mouth shut. One of these days, I was going to have to work on the town’s trust with the STM grant.

For now, we had bigger problems.

“The main issue is Toby,” Jade said. “He’s run this town for far too long and has never cared about us. Now he’s cashing in.”

Everyone mumbled their agreement.

“What are we supposed to do?” Kerry asked. “He’s the only one on the ballot once again.”

Jade blew out a breath.

I already had an idea. When I first confronted Toby, I mentioned a write-in candidate as a threat. Something like that would take far more planning than Strawberry Springs was capable of. Or so I thought.

“Write someone in,” I said. “If everyone who’s eligible to vote can back one person, then you might have a chance.”

“Writing someone in?” Kerry repeated. “Can we even do that?”

“Yeah,” Jade said. “How would that work?”

“In Tennessee, you have to register as a write-in candidate. And we’re right before the deadline, before the election. If we all agree on someone now, register them and everyone votes for that person.”

The entire town fell into silence as I thought about it.

“What if they get to the land before the next mayor is in office?” Jade asked.

“Then you can stop it from ever happening again.”

She frowned but nodded. We could all agree that this would come up.

Toby couldn’t win this next election.

“So, then who should be our mayor?” Mark asked.

“I can do it!” Hugh yelled. “I’m old enough for it.”

The crowd burst to life.

“Oh no!” Tammy yelled over the crowd. “I’m not voting for a man who doesn’t know what Google is!”

“I’m still smarter than that idiot!”

“You forgot your left shoe!”

“Ha!” He laughed loudly. “This is my right shoe.”

“Oh God. He doesn’t even know his left from his right.”

“What about me?” Kerry asked. “I’d be good at this!”

“The last thing you need is power,” Mollie said. “You’d never leave us alone!”

“I will never leave you alone now.”

Everything grew louder. Henry winced and Piper hid behind Theo. This was getting out of hand, and quickly.

Jade stepped up onto a chair. “Hey! Idiots!” At her sharp tone, everyone quieted. “Fighting among ourselves isn’t gonna get us anywhere. We need someone who has no problem taking charge and will fight for this town.”

Tammy threw her name into the ring, only to be argued with by Hugh. While more names flew through the air, I had an idea.

I stepped up on a chair too. “It should be Jade.”

“*What?*” Jade yelled.

“Oh, of course you would say that!” Tammy said.

“She just set up a buggy tournament and nearly died in it.” Kerry shook her head. “Is this a good idea?”

“No! Wait!” Mollie said. “He might be biased, but he’s also right.”

“No one has spent more time on this than she has,” Wren said. “She’s planned it all, even closed her shop to make sure this spring stays a spring.”

“And no one can stop her,” Grace said. “She’s from here. She’s not gonna take shit. And she cares.”

“She wouldn’t sell the town out,” Mark said. “And you could pass a law protecting my BBC.”

“BBC protection is one of my top concerns,” Jade said. Her friends all had to cover their laughs.

“And she barely works at the candle shop.” Hugh laughed.

“Watch it,” Jade hissed. “Or I’ll ban ass pictures.”

“Why aren’t they already banned?” Kerry asked.

“I’m merciful.”

“But it’s not just us,” Tammy said. “We have to get other people to vote for you too. We need to campaign, and I know you don’t have the money to.”

I opened my mouth to offer up my own, but Kerry cut me off.

“The grant! Use that!”

“No!” Hugh yelled. “I keep telling you all to stop depending on that thing. If they agree to fund an election, who knows what they’ll ask for in return.”

“But they would say yes!” Kerry said. “If we’re doing this, we need all the help we can get.”

“I’m not voting for anyone who uses it!” Hugh said. “I’m telling you, it’s evil.”

Defensiveness rose in me. My chest tightened, and I spoke before I could stop myself.

“It’s not evil, it’s here to help.”

Everyone turned to me.

“And how do you know?” Tammy asked.

“Yeah, do you know something we don’t?” Mark asked.

It was tempting to walk it back. I could make up some excuse about believing in this town. I could say I knew them if I really wanted to lie.

But Jade was watching me. So were all her friends, and the men that I could potentially be friends with. I was sure that they would cover for me if I wanted them to, but the town had lost trust in something that I'd done for them, and I wasn't sure I could live with that.

I took a breath and stood up straighter. "Because I run the grant."

Silence took over the room as everyone processed my words. I tensed, waiting for them to explode.

"I . . . What?" Kerry laughed. "You? *What?*"

"You're kidding, right?" Tammy asked slowly. "You?"

"Goddammit," Hugh said. "It makes sense."

"How?" Kerry asked.

"He's got money!"

"But he's not in the Facebook group!"

"I am. Under a different name."

"No way," Jackie said. "You haven't lived here for years."

"Jackie, you request your rent every single month." I turned to Kerry. "And you wanted the playground to be redone four years ago."

Kerry gasped and covered her mouth. "I never told anyone about that."

"No, you didn't. Sorry to bring it up now, but I know all the requests. I replaced Dale's shopping carts with new ones. I made sure Henry had the money for the lights and the flowers."

"Holy shit," Tammy said. "Why the hell did you do all of that?"

"At first . . . it was for Jade. She always dreamed of seeing this town in its heyday. But over time, I realized it was a cover. I grew up here. You all were patient with me even when I didn't deserve it. But in the end, it was for you."

Every single person in the meeting room stared at me. Most of their jaws were agape. My skin crawled, but I met their gazes.

"I'm not going to sell what I own. I'm not going to use this to hurt you. I did it because it was the right thing to do." I took a breath before continuing. "And I'll keep doing it. I want there to be a mayor in this town who actually fights for things. Jade is that person."

"I . . . Wow, I can't wrap my head around this," Kerry said quietly. "But if the person who saves the town is backing Jade, then I guess I am too. Where do we start?"

“Can a mayor legalize buggy races? Oh! What about banning leopard print?”

Jade hadn’t sat since we got back, since the town had voiced their support. She was a ball of energy.

Nervous energy.

“Yes and yes, but you’ll piss off Kerry.”

“So worth it.”

“You haven’t even been elected yet and you’re already letting the power go to your head.” I laughed. “This is very you.”

“I’m just theorizing. You know the second I get in there I’ll actually do a good job.”

“You will. And you’ll have more power to throw around once you’re in there.”

Jade continued pacing. I caught her by the arm.

“You’ll sleepwalk if you keep this up.”

“At least I have you to take care of me,” she replied. “But I’ll sit. The last thing you need is to spend your twin-free night handling me.”

I only shook my head. Now that Atticus had named himself their grandfather, the girls were more interested in him than ever. Even with Alice, they didn’t have grandparents, so this was new and fun to them. I was sure they were making his life a living hell tonight, but they were enjoying themselves, and that was what mattered most.

“You didn’t have to tell everyone who you were, by the way.”

“I know, but it was good for backing you up. And I think they took it well.”

“They’re in shock,” Jade said. “Just wait.”

“I helped a lot, but I’m still just Gabriel. I left. I have a feeling the disappointment will hit soon.”

She hummed. “Wanna bet?”

“Bet what?”

“A car.”

“Really? You’re going there?”

“Hey, I’m still driving my shitty one from high school. This is an easy bet I’ll win.”

I laughed and rolled my eyes.

“Fine, but you’ll lose.”

“I love it when you’re falsely confident.” She laughed and kissed me. “Now, what do we do with all this free time?” Her voice lowered. “I have a new idea for your child-free night.”

“Joke’s on you. I had this idea the second they wanted to stay with Atticus.”

“I had the idea first.”

“No, I did.”

“Stop arguing and kiss me. Mayor’s orders.”

“You’re so gonna abuse that.” I rolled my eyes again but did what I was told. Her kiss was soft at first, but she quickly dove in for more.

There was something about this that was so different. Every kiss, every touch had been tinged with the feeling of sadness that this was going to end. Even when we were teenagers, we always worried we would drift apart.

Now there was nowhere to go except for back to each other.

I’d accepted this already, but having her in my arms proved to me that this was my future. There were no more lonely nights. I had her and I was keeping her.

There was no better ending for me.

“I love you,” I said into her lips.

She blinked and pulled away. “Fucking finally.”

“Excuse me?”

“You could’ve had a sappy moment if you didn’t wait so long to tell me.”

“Sorry, sorry. I did take way too long.”

“Do you have a good excuse?”

“I was too busy saying goodbye.”

She huffed out a laugh. “You are so stupid.”

“I’ll make up for lost time.” I pulled her back to me, savoring the way she felt in my lap. No more goodbyes. Only I love yous.

I couldn’t ask for more.

Her tongue darted across my lip and her kiss quickly turned heated. The warmth I felt from her love quickly turned into a fire.

I wanted her. *No.* I needed her.

Jade squeaked as I picked her up, but she locked her legs around me and let me carry her. Our mouths were still tangled as I tossed her on the bed.

“Is that any way to treat your next mayor?” she asked.

“You’re on a power trip.” I kissed her again, caging her in with my arms. “But I’ll play along. What does my future mayor want?”

“Orgasms. Lots and lots of orgasms.”

“That I can do.”

I took my time in taking off all her clothes before aiming downward.

“Not tonight.”

I frowned. “I’m sorry, what? You don’t want me to eat you out?”

“Your mouth is too good at this. It’ll be easy. I want it to be a challenge.”

“A challenge,” I repeated.

“That’s what I want.” She shrugged. “If it’s too much, you can admit defeat.”

“No fucking way.”

I took off my shirt, watching her bite her lip as she looked at every inch of me. My boxers and jeans were left in a pile on the floor. I got up to grab one other thing before I made my next move.

“Wait, where are you going?” Jade asked.

“Hang on.” I grabbed her phone. “What’s your passcode?”

She huffed. “I’m not telling you that.”

I made a guess. A ridiculous one, but I wanted to try.

I punched in the date of our first kiss.

It unlocked instantly.

“Hey, how did you—”

“Really? *That’s* your passcode?”

“Give me that!” She fought for her phone, but I pinned her down.

“You never changed it?”

“Whatever,” she said. “I know you changed yours.”

“No, I didn’t.” I pressed a kiss to her lips. “Mine’s the same thing.”

Her cheeks grew pink. “We’re both losers then.”

“We are, but I love it.”

I pulled up the Facebook group page on her phone. Jade watched me as I typed something out.

“If you just embarrassed me, I’ll make you regret it.”

“I think you’ll enjoy what I have planned.”

The second I hit post, her phone went off.

Then it went off again.

And again.

And again.

Jade's eyes went wide as my goal dawned on her. "No way."

"Yep. Lean back, Jade."

She propped up on her hands. "Will this even work?"

"Who knows? But you put the idea in my mind." I pressed her phone right to her clit and she jolted.

"Ah!" she yelped.

"Is it good enough for you?" I pressed an open-mouth kiss to her neck, dragging my teeth over her sensitive skin.

"For now." Her voice was breathy and her eyes slipped shut. "What the hell did you say?"

"You can find out later." I whispered it right into her ear and grabbed her hips, making her move. She threw her head back.

"P-points to you for creativity."

"Just trying to be your favorite."

Jade went quiet, her face lost in a sea of bliss. She wasn't able to form words, but her mouth formed a perfect O. She was close.

That was when her phone stopped going off.

"No," she moaned. "This was a bad idea."

"How dare everyone respect your privacy?"

"I wonder if they had a sixth sense that their worry was going straight into my pussy," she said with a breathy laugh.

"Still want me to be creative?"

"Yes, but you have to make me fucking come this time."

"All right." I sat on the bed and brought her back to my lap. This time, she was facing outward. I angled my cock right at her pussy. "Work me into you." I leaned forward and put my hand on her clit. "While I use my hand."

"Now this is what I'm talking about. But what if you come too soon?"

It was a risk, but I refused to let it show. "Not tonight, Jade."

She applied just enough pressure for the head of my cock to slide inside of her, and we both sucked in air. I pressed the pad of my index finger to her clit and gently moved up and down.

"Ah, this angle." She leaned back and put her head on my shoulder. "This might take a little longer than I thought."

"Take all night," I said lowly. "We have the time."

Jade moved up and down, slowly swallowing more of my cock into her tight pussy. The lower she got, the quicker my hand moved.

“Fuck, both feel so good.” She gasped as I moved again. “You’re too good at this.”

“It’s just for you. Only you.”

She moaned and pushed my cock halfway inside of her. I had to bite my cheek to stay focused. Jade needed time to adjust, but goddammit, she felt so good.

We were both breathing heavily by the time she was fully seated, but I could tell by the way she went lax that she was close. I arched my hips, getting just a little deeper, and added pressure.

“Oh my God,” she moaned. “Yes. *Yes*.”

I kept up the tempo, making sure she got what she needed. Moving inside of her nearly sent me over the edge, but I kept it together as she tightened around me, coming once again with tiny little pulses radiating throughout her body.

“Want more?” I asked into her ear.

Jade was still panting as she shook her head. “N-no. I think I need to sleep.”

I frowned as she lay down. “Really?”

“I’m tired. And still a little horny.” She opened one eye and smirked at me. “Who knows what I’ll do once we go to sleep.”

“So that’s your game?”

“I’m being creative this time.”

“You’re evil,” I said with a laugh. My cock was painfully hard, but I liked the idea of waking up inside of her even more. “But I love it.”

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61

JADE



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Jade Clark: Does anyone have a good recommendation for khaki slacks? It's time to change up my style.

Comments:
Mollie Wilson: WHO ARE YOU AND WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WITH JADE???
Kerry Winsor: Do we need to do a wellness check?
Grace Day: There's no way. NO WAY.
Marjorie Brown: We've lost a baddie . . .
Kerry Winsor: Can you get into contact with her??? We need answers!!
Hu Gh: Something smells fishy about this . . .

I DIDN'T WAKE up with Gabe inside of me, but that was mostly because I couldn't go to sleep. Lesson learned: I'd never stop mid-session again.

After hours of trying, I was frustrated. Gabe didn't have the same issue, and he was out like a light.

Then again, he needed the rest.

After things cooled off, I was content to let him sleep and plan out the morning where we'd both lose our minds. Even without sleep, I could make sure we both felt good.

But sometime early in the morning, things shifted.

Gabe must have been having a good dream because he tugged me tighter to him. His cock was half hard, but as he moved, it grew and pressed against my ass insistently.

I bit back a moan. Back when I'd woken up with him inside of me, I'd loved it, but I had no idea how it had happened.

Now, I saw it all.

Gabe's hand moved from my stomach up to my breast. I leaned into him, turning to see if he was awake.

His eyes were closed.

"G-Gabe," I said. "Gabe, wake up."

His eyes shot open and it took him a second to register what was happening. "Shit, Jade. I'm sorry." He tried to pull away, but I stopped him.

"I didn't wake you up to stop. I woke you up because we should both be conscious for this."

"Oh." He moved to where he was pressed into me again. "That makes a lot of sense. Are you gonna stop me this time and go to sleep?"

"You're not allowed to make fun of me for this, but I regret it."

Gabe went silent, and I turned to see him smirking.

"Hey," I chastised. "Wipe that grin off your face."

"Sorry." He managed to get himself under control.

"I like it when you do what I say."

"There're those control issues again." He pressed a kiss to my hot cheek. "Keep telling me what to do. I like it."

"I want you to fuck me. How's that for an order?"

"You don't want anything before that?"

"Just you. I prefer to come on your cock again."

"Yes, ma'am."

Gabe changed his angle, easily slipping inside of me. Even though it had just been hours, he stretched me once again and my eyes rolled back in pure pleasure.

I'd been thinking about this for far too long, and my body was ready for him. He was able to slide into me from behind, hitting my G-spot expertly.

"God," I said, leaning back onto his shoulder. "Use your hand. I need it."

With a kiss to my skin, he snaked his hand around. This was so similar to how we'd been when I was on his lap, and it felt just as good this time.

He pushed in as deep as he could go before pulling out and thrusting back in.

I was a mess. Words were gone, and I knew this had been what I needed.

He moved the pad of his finger up and down, shooting me right toward an orgasm. My thoughts only made it more intense, and I knew this wouldn't take long.

"Gabe," I gasped out.

"Come for me, Jade." He used the same low voice he had before, and that sent me over the edge. I came and completely lost myself to a sea of him.

He was still moving after I came back into myself. My pussy tightened.

"Want another one?" he asked.

I shook my head. "There's no way I can come again. Your turn this time."

Gabe nodded and rolled me onto my stomach. That was when he increased his speed, taking me for himself.

My spent body somehow came back to life, and I felt every movement. I could've lived there forever.

I'd definitely find a way to do this again.

His thrusts grew short and choppy, and I knew he was close. I wanted him to lose his mind like I did, so I tightened around him.

Moments later, he sputtered a curse when he shoved in as deep as he could go.

I knew he'd come.

"Was it worth it to wait?" I asked.

"You're always worth the wait, Jade."

My eyes drifted shut. "Think you can go again in the morning?"

He huffed out a laugh. "I'll do my best. Worst case, I'll use your phone again."

"Don't you dare. I still have to clean it."

"YOU HAVE to put the other side over that one."

Gabe frowned. "What other side? Left or right?"

I paused. “Uh, left.”

“This *is* my left.”

“My braid is taking forever,” Agnes whined. Beatrice’s was done, but Gabe had insisted that he wanted to learn.

He was terrible at it. I was terrible at teaching it.

“Okay, hang on.” I moved behind him and wrapped my arms around his. I was comically smaller than he was, and he laughed. “Shut up. You need this.”

“Sure, sure. It’s just . . . romantic.”

“If you didn’t have this sweet girl’s hair in your hands, I’d tickle you,” I muttered. “Okay. We do this hand”—I moved one for him—“and then this one.”

“And then what?” he asked.

“You keep doing it in the same pattern.”

“Wait, that’s it? I thought it was a whole thing.”

“Oh, Gabe.” I chuckled. “You always make things way too complicated.”

“Shut up,” he muttered. I didn’t need to look at him to know he was blushing.

By some miracle, we got Agnes’s hair braided. It was messier than Beatrice’s, but she seemed unbothered.

“You’re a terrible teacher,” he muttered.

“You’re a terrible student,” I fired back.

He opened his mouth and I was sure we were heading for more banter when the doorbell interrupted us.

When we opened the door, I had a feeling we both wished we hadn’t.

“Good morning!” Kerry said.

“Who’s that weird lady?” Agnes asked from behind us.

“Weird lady?” Kerry gaped. “I’m not weird!”

“I’ve seen you before! Ms. Rudder says your mouth is never closed!” Beatrice pointed at Kerry, whose jaw dropped.

I stifled a laugh. She was proving Beatrice’s point.

“I’m Kerry,” she said to the girls. “And I’m not weird. I’m just informed.”

Her eyes went to Gabe and me, and I knew why she was here.

“So, grant owner and mayoral candidate. Have any updates for me?”

“I’m gonna make gossip illegal.”

Kerry gasped. “No!”

“Kidding. But there’s not much of one. I’m gonna have Gabe come in and make a game plan later.”

“Will you be here for the election?”

“I will. And for the other ones after that.”

Kerry clapped, which made Beatrice hiss. “I’m so happy to hear that! And you’ll be happy when you see what I brought.”

She lifted an insulated reusable bag and walked into Gabe’s apartment. He gave me an incredulous look, but I only shrugged and followed her. There was no stopping Kerry when she wanted something.

“I have the most delicious casseroles for the four of you.” She pulled out a massive dish. “The first is an egg and bacon breakfast one for the girls. The second is spinach and cheese.”

Agnes went to gag, but I covered her mouth just in time. Kerry didn’t notice.

“And the final is my specialty. Chicken and rice.”

Three casserole dishes were now piled on the counter.

Slowly, I looked at Gabe with a grin. “Wow, this is so sweet,” I said to Kerry, not looking away from him. “Is it for anything in particular?”

“Well, I have to treat our town rescuer somehow.”

Gabe sighed. It looked like I was finally getting the new car I wanted.

“More will be coming. Don’t worry.”

“I-it’s fine,” Gabe said.

“It very much isn’t. Let us treat you just a little bit for all that you’ve done. And now you don’t have to worry about food for a while.”

We very much had to worry about food. Agnes and Beatrice weren’t touching the casseroles with a ten-foot pole.

However, I wasn’t going to tell Kerry that.

“I have something even bigger for you, though.”

Gabe raised his eyebrows. “Is that possible?”

“Oh, it very much is.” Kerry took a deep breath and smiled. “I offer you free secret keeping.”

My jaw fell open. This might have been the one gift Gabe could get that would be useful.

“Free secrets?”

“Yes, just say the word and no one will hear about whatever is going on with you. You have an unlimited supply, by the way, but don’t abuse it.”

“This one’s good. You should say thank you.”

“Thanks,” he said, though his shoulders were still tense. “For all of it. You don’t have to do anything for me.”

“But we will. You’re one of us. So, we would do this even if you didn’t need it. But now that we know who you are, you have a big storm coming.”

“I look forward to watching him suffer,” I said. “But I need to feed these children these casseroles, and I don’t think anyone wants to witness them eat. They’re a little like monsters, so you might want to head out.”

Kerry’s smile fell as she looked at the girls. They were glaring at her as if they could turn into demons at any time. I knew that was partially true. And so did Kerry.

“Right, well, have fun! Enjoy the food.” She waved before walking out.

“She smiles too much,” Beatrice said.

“Yeah, yeah,” I said. “She’ll annoy you in many ways, but she means well.”

“Please tell me that’s all we’re going to have,” Gabe said.

I was about to laugh, but there was another knock at the door.

We were in for a long day.

NONE of us got much of a break. Thankfully, Agnes and Beatrice could play in between all the visitors, but the entire town seemed excited to say hello. Eventually, they flipped people off as a form of greeting, and we used that as an excuse to cut each visit short.

Not that it did anything. There were so many people who wanted to express their gratitude to Gabe that we were busy for the rest of the day.

Tammy brought gift cards for the diner and Jackie came by to say that we could bring the girls in for a haircut for free at any time. Gabe went through the motions of smiling and saying thank you, but I knew he probably wasn’t going to take up any of their offers.

He at least let them think they were offering something to him, though.

But by far the most perplexing visitor came right as the sun was setting.

Agnes and Beatrice had settled for hanging off the fridge, hoping to scare whoever came in.

Gabe and I were shocked when Hugh made his way through the door.

“I guess I should say something sappy, huh?”

“Don’t strain yourself,” Gabe said.

Hugh laughed. “I like your style. And theirs.” He pointed to the girls on top of the fridge.

“We’ve had a lot of people coming in and out,” I explained.

“I bet you have,” Hugh said. “And I bet you’re tired of talking to all of them too.”

“I don’t mind seeing all of you guys, but these three need some adjustment time.”

“I’ll keep this short and sweet for you. I have a gift.”

He frowned. “But you’ve never even used the grant.”

“And I never will. But I can see what you did for the town. So, I figure I should pay my dues.”

“You really don’t owe me anything.”

“Yeah, but I want your kids to have some fun experiences. Come outside.”

Agnes and Beatrice were interested in whatever this was, so they silently followed us outside. When we got to Hugh’s old car, I gasped. “No, you didn’t.”

“Free chickens, just for you guys.”

“Chickens!” Agnes yelled.

“They’re beautiful!” Beatrice added.

They both ran to the car, excitedly watching the six chickens that were in a large dog crate. The birds were not thrilled about being transported, but they didn’t peck at either of the kids watching them.

“Hugh, we live in an apartment.”

He rolled his eyes. “But you have the one next door. I have a feeling you’re not using it since you’re moving in with him.”

“That’s not how that works,” I said.

“These are my babies!” Agnes announced. “I love them more than life!”

“We gotta figure out names.”

Gabe let out a long sigh. “We’re gonna have to figure out how to get land, aren’t we?”

“Do you think Cain will take partial custody until we do?”

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62

GABE



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
G Singh: Friendly reminder to vote this week for Jade! Early votes are the easiest way to cast your ballot!!

Comments:
Hu Gh: For the last time, who are you and what do you want with my town!!!
Jade Clark: For the last time, it's Gabe!!! I've told you twenty times!
Hu Gh: He should use his full name like a real man!
Gabriel Sinclair: Happy now?
Hu Gh: I'm never happy.

"HEY, SORRY I'M LATE." I joined the table where Cain, Henry, and Dean all sat. Theo was behind the counter, working on a drink.

"It's fine. We talked shit about you," Dean said.

"What was it this time?" I asked. "And please tell me Jade didn't give you ammo."

"There wasn't anything," Henry said. "We were mostly worried you'd overslept."

It was a real risk. Since we announced Jade's candidacy, I'd been busier than ever.

It wasn’t easy convincing the town to vote for a write-in candidate. Our core group of townspeople were all banding together, but pulling this off meant talking to tons of people we didn’t know.

Between planning, the girls, finding land here, and selling my place in San Francisco, days melded, time flew.

Jade had taken me staying seriously and renewed her efforts to get me to connect with the other men in town.

The first time we all met up at The Reserved Bean was mostly silent. I didn’t know how to start a conversation, and between Cain’s and Theo’s usual quietness and Henry’s autism, it was hard to find anything to talk about.

Dean then brought up how we were in the same dad group on Facebook and how dumb he was for not putting together who I was, and that finally started everything up.

Now it was much easier.

“I don’t envy you,” Cain said.

“I don’t envy *you*,” I replied. “You work on the farm. And you have an evil chicken.”

Cain sighed. “She got out again. And went after Kerry.”

“What’s with her and getting messed with by animals?” Dean asked.

“It’s her karma for being nosy,” I replied.

“Earl Grey,” Theo announced as he set down a cup in front of me and sat in the last open chair.

“Thank you,” I replied. I went for my wallet, but a stern glare stopped me. “Still not letting me pay?”

“Fuck no.”

I sighed. No one had let me do anything since they found out who I was. “Either I pay for this tea, or the grant gets you another grinding machine.”

“I’ll send you the model,” he replied.

“Fine,” I said. “Expect it in the mail.”

“He’s gonna actually do it,” Dean said. “Don’t try to bluff.”

“I will.”

Theo let out a long sigh. “Why do you have to be so fucking nice?”

“Why can’t I pay for my drink?” I replied.

Theo didn’t answer, and I was definitely getting him something. He’d regret this.

Henry laughed and took a sip of his drink. “When are you bringing the girls in for a checkup?”

“You don’t want to invite that in your life.” I shook my head, but knew he had a point bringing it up. Alice had taken care of it before, but now that was my responsibility.

“I’ve dealt with plenty of kids. That’s why I save all my energy for my job. Are they screamers? Fighters?”

“All of the above.” I sighed. “Maybe I’ll bring Jade. She’ll probably be able to work her magic on them.”

“If she has time,” Theo said. “Will she once she’s mayor?”

“You guys have a lot of confidence that she’s gonna win this thing.”

“We’ve all seen the work you’ve put into it,” Cain said.

“I know. A write-in win seems impossible, but people are open to it. And I don’t know. She’ll find a way.”

“She’s also always helping,” Theo said. “I’ve seen her running around the square ever since I opened this coffee shop.”

A corner of my mouth curled upward. Even when we were double-checking with the core group of townspeople, all of them mentioned how much she’d done for them over the years. Even if she was a little wild and did her own thing, they respected her and knew she was good for the job.

“Are you excited to see if she wins?” Henry asked.

“Excited and nervous. I’ve gotta figure out how to keep her from losing her mind.”

“A few things work on Wren, but they’re not things I should mention in a coffee shop,” Henry added.

“Oh, I’ve heard about that.” Cain shuddered.

“I’ve also heard about yours,” Henry said. “None of us here are immune to the gossip.”

“The ladies talk about everything,” Dean said. “Do you think they’ve talked about which one of us is the biggest?”

“No,” Cain said.

“Absolutely not,” Theo added, going bright red.

“They have,” I replied. “They absolutely have.”

“I figured,” Dean said. “It’s me, right?”

“I don’t usually brag,” Henry said. “But I get no complaints from Wren.”

“It would not be you,” Theo said.

“We could measure.”

“We are *not* measuring our dicks,” Cain hissed.

“I wouldn’t mind.” Dean shrugged. “I have a measuring tape in my truck.”

HANGING out with the guys had been a good distraction from all that was going on. But when the day of the election came around, there was nothing that could get my mind off of Jade.

She’d been steadily getting more and more stressed as time went on.

When the day started, she seemed totally fine. Then she couldn’t sit still.

After that, she started pondering spellcasting, which told me she was really stressed.

When I made sure that she wasn’t about to start a science experiment in the kitchen, she started pacing. I hadn’t gotten her to stop.

“And what if they change their minds? What if there aren’t enough votes?” Jade asked.

“We did our best. No expense was spared.”

“I’m still a write-in candidate.” She shook her head. “We were nuts for trying this.”

“It’s what’s best for the town.” I grabbed her hand to stop her. “You want this, don’t you?”

She swallowed. “I do. I really do.”

Most people had seen it. Without realizing, Jade had taken on more responsibilities. After I offered to watch the shop, she was handling issues with the town.

She helped Mark with a delivery problem. She helped Tammy with sourcing tiles for the diner. It was like she gave herself permission to step in.

I loved seeing it.

“We still have two hours until the results are in.” I put my hands on her shoulders and guided her to sit in my lap. “Breathe.”

“I’m so glad Mollie took the girls.”

“Think they’re terrorizing Cain?” I asked with a laugh.

“Them and the chickens. I bet it’s so funny.”

Atticus was usually our first point of contact, but Mollie had offered to watch them too. Jade wanted me to lean on the community, so I took her up on her offer.

It went well. Despite Jasmine being younger, they were all wild and had fun playing on Mollie’s seemingly endless land.

Tonight was a good reason to not have them. Jade was a mess, and if she was, I was too.

“We won’t know for a few hours.” I tried to say it in the calmest voice I could muster, but it was hard.

Jade wanted this so badly, and it was a no-brainer that she would be great at the job. Better than great, even. It was like she was made for it.

The town had been more than kind with their reassurances. When they finally got their attentions off me, they focused on her. As time went on, more and more of them seemed thrilled with the idea of her taking over as the mayor. Her phone was alight with messages full of support as votes came in.

“Should I look at the preliminary results again?” she asked.

I took her phone out of her hands. “That site is barely running at best. You’ll drive yourself up a wall if you keep looking.”

“Then distract me.” She fell back onto the couch, arm covering her eyes. I could see how tense her entire body was. “Tell me a story about San Francisco. Oh, or piss me off. You could tell me that you’re leaving again. That might work.”

“Absolutely fucking not.”

“Rage is a great distractor. Just piss me off.”

“Sh.” I covered her mouth. “Just stop.”

I expected her to fight me. Instead, she lowered her arm and her eyes went wide while she stilled.

“Do you like that?”

Jade opened her mouth and I uncovered it. “Kind of? I do like talking, but it was nice to not think for a second. Everything is so loud and scary right now.”

An idea crossed my mind. “Hang on,” I said lowly. A few weeks ago, Jade had brought over her noise-canceling headphones for some quiet time. I grabbed them and put them over her ears.

“It kind of helps. I still have my eyes, though.”

I got up once more and found a tie in the back of the boxes I'd had sent from San Francisco. I took off the headphones for a second to put the tie over her eyes.

Jade went still and then she slowly nodded. I sat in front of her, willing to give her space.

Then she reached out, trying to find me.

I grabbed her hand. It took her a moment to find exactly where I was, but then she crawled onto my lap. I sucked in a shocked breath but didn't move away.

If she wanted to be close to me, she could.

For a while, there was only the sound of her breathing. I was content to stay there, but Jade reached out once more. Her hand hovered in the air, and I tried to figure out what she was going for.

She angled downward, and her fingertips trailed to my hips. I was tempted to jerk away, but she went farther to touch her own leg. Then she slid between them to my crotch.

"Ah, Jade." I said it out loud even though I knew she wouldn't be able to hear me. "I don't think you want to be there."

Her fingers brushed over my zipper and fumbled with it for a moment before pulling it down. Then she moved to the button of my jeans.

"Oh. This is exactly what you want."

I wasn't hard yet, but she took my cock into her hand anyway and slowly ran up and down the shaft. I hissed as blood moved and my head went fuzzy.

My touch went from her back to her ass and lifted her off me. She squealed as her back hit the couch, but she didn't move to uncover her ears or eyes. I got her clothes off as quick as I could. I tapped twice on her hip to make sure she was okay. She nodded and I dove in.

I'd never get over how she tasted. I'd never get over that I got this whenever I wanted. She was incredible in every way, even now when she was stressed.

I took my time with her, moving in the exact way she needed, making sure to build her up. As much as we both loved a challenge, I was enough right now. I'd give her everything she craved.

Jade's breathing grew faster and I knew she had what she was looking for.

I wanted to give her more.

I pressed two fingers inside of her. Her pussy was tight and it took her a moment to relax around me, but her wet core told me this was the right thing to do. I made sure to give both her clit and her G-spot attention, pushing her toward an orgasm.

Jade yelled when it hit her, arching off the couch and pushing my face deeper into her. I kept going until she let out a long sigh and finally relaxed.

I was rock hard and I wanted her more than anything, but I knew she was worried about the election, and I'd be happy for her to be the only one feeling good.

But Jade wasn't done. She tugged me up to her, pulling me into a kiss. Her legs wrapped around me, and I knew what she was hunting for.

She whined when I pulled away, but I had to get my jeans and shirt off. She was still frowning up until my cock touched her core. Then she went silent again.

For a second, I had to admire the way she could communicate even when she couldn't hear or see me. She was so clear about what she wanted these days, and she trusted me to do whatever it was.

I never wanted to break that trust again.

Jade wasn't patient forever and she tugged me closer. Without all her senses, she was clumsy and moved the wrong way.

Squeezing her hip, I adjusted myself until I was lined up. I pressed inside of her. As much as I wanted to watch her pussy swallow my cock, I was more worried about any tension returning. The last thing I wanted was to make anything worse.

Jade was fully pliant. Her jaw fell open as I stretched her inner walls, and she was in her happy place. I'd never get over the fact that I was a part of that.

I went slow, but she was ready for me. Her legs were open as wide as they could go, and she moaned when I was fully inside of her.

For a moment, I stilled. I felt fully connected. I had Jade, and she had me.

We got everything we wanted.

Eventually, she started whining and begging for movement. I pulled out before going right back in.

"Don't be gentle," she said. "Fuck all the thoughts right out of me."

I groaned. I loved it when she said that.

Finally, I let loose, going at the harshest speed I could. I was sure the couch was moving, but I couldn't bring myself to care.

In this moment, there was no election. No stress. Just me and her.

It was bliss. Bliss that I'd never get anywhere else.

Bliss that I'd never lose again.

My balls tightened and I knew I was close. Jade was breathing heavily again, and I moved my hand to touch her clit.

"God," she said, arching once more.

I felt it when she came. I felt her pulse around me with each bolt of pleasure I'd given her.

That was it for me. There was no holding back.

With one last slam inside of her, I exploded. Earth melted away, and all I could feel was whatever magic she and I had. I was on fire in the best way.

And I was able to have it again.

There was no speaking after we were done. I tried to keep myself from falling on top of Jade, but she tugged me to her, content to cuddle after what we'd just done. She made no moves to get up or regain any of her senses, and I let her hold me.

The sex and stress had taken it out of me, so for a while, both of us drifted somewhere between consciousness and sleep. Eventually, Jade's phone continuously went off, and so did mine.

She tensed as if she knew what time it was, and I got off her to check. I opened my phone, heart pounding in my ears.

"Well?" she asked as she took off the headphones.

My jaw was on the ground, and I slowly looked at her. "Jade, you won."

"I what?" She stood and ran over. She grabbed the phone from me and looked at the results herself.

It was narrow. By the skin of her teeth, but she'd done it.

Jade was the next mayor of Strawberry Springs.

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63

JADE



Strawberry Springs Neighborhood Watch
Henry Connor: As much as we like to joke around in here, I think we should take a moment to talk about Hugh. His memory seems to be declining, and I'm worried about him.

Comments:
Marjorie Brown: He seems as sharp as a tack! There hasn't been an ass posting in months!
Hu Gh: Quit your yapping. I'm totally fine. I just like to watch you little pansies run around freaking out.
Mollie Wilson: You once posted a picture of your ass on here asking for medical advice.
Jade Clark: You also forgot that you got chickens.
Hu Gh: And you all screamed about it each time. I love messing with you. You're all too easy.
Hu Gh: Besides, didn't you compare my real ass to the ones in the photos? Half of those were pulled from Google, you idiots.
Wren Hackett: Is he being serious right now?
Tammy Jane: You knew how to use Google the whole time?!?!

I WALKED into the mayor's office with a smile on my face. "Wow, this is nice."

It was still hard to believe that I'd somehow become the mayor of Strawberry Springs. I had no idea what I would be doing each day, but this was my new job.

As much as I liked to joke around, I was taking this seriously. I knew that I would be here as much as I could, and I would be dedicated to making the town better.

"It's not yours yet," a dry voice said.

I turned to see Toby glaring at me.

"Where's your little henchman? Usually he's here being an asshole."

"Oh, I'm here." Kevin walked in behind his uncle. "I have plenty of things to be an asshole about."

Kevin looked like the same rat he always did, except this time he was more red faced. I could tell that Toby losing the election really took it out of him.

"We've decided to fast-track. We'll be making sure that land is gone by the time you take office."

"And break the law?" I asked. "There are historical trees, remember?"

"All it takes is finding the right person to do it."

"And all it takes to stop it is a right person reporting." I held up my phone, which was recording this entire conversation. "I was thinking I would have to push it out of you, but you're so easy."

Their faces went slack. As much as it would have been fun to come here simply to mess with them, I did have a plan.

Gabe and I had talked about this. Me winning the election would mean that they would want to do everything faster. They were desperate now and willing to break the law.

My friend at the county historical office would love to hear the recording.

Kevin's face became impossibly more red.

"Oh wow, you should get your blood pressure checked out. I hear heart attacks are common in younger people who are stressed."

That must have been the final straw for him. Kevin stormed toward me.

Then a wall came in between us.

I let out a sigh. I told Gabe not to get involved, but I should have known he would anyway. He'd been quite worried when I came to this office by

myself that something would happen to me. His worries weren't unfounded, but the brass knuckles in my pocket would have taken care of it.

"Aw, Gabe." I frowned. "You should've let him hit me. I wanted to have a chance to hit him back."

"Not happening." Gabe's voice was dry.

Kevin glowered. "Of course you're here. You're the guard dog, as always."

"I'll bark," Gabe said. "Only if she asks me to, though."

I hummed and peered around him. "I don't think we need to get to barking just yet. I think we have other things to discuss. Gabriel, you were interested in that land, weren't you?"

"I was."

"Interesting. I hear it's only going to stay private use. There's no chance of it becoming commercial land. Is that okay with you?"

"I have no plans to do anything commercial with it."

"You know, you could drag this out. We could go to the courts and you could waste a lot of money. Or you can sell it to this nice man who's willing to offer you full market value."

"Less than full market value," Gabe said flatly. "And I'll keep knocking it down the more you mess with my future wife."

I had to fight to keep from reacting to those words. We'd been discussing marriage since we were inseparable, but nothing had been set in stone.

Just a few months ago, I wouldn't have thought this was possible.

Kevin scoffed.

"This is the con of all cons. You two are playing me."

"Just like you played other small towns." Gabe crossed his arms, and I knew what he was about to go for. "I could look into all of that, you know. I could check into every single transaction you've done. Every single thing you've built. I have a feeling you've cut corners somewhere. I can't change what you've done, but I can ruin your future."

Kevin went pale at the threat. It wasn't empty. Gabe had already come up with many things that he could take him to court on.

He would, eventually. For now, we needed that land back.

"I hate this place." He held up a hand. "Fine. I'll sell it. Full market value." His hand moved to offer a handshake.

"I don't do handshake deals. Sign. Now."

Kevin went red in the face, but he took the papers that I offered him.

“I want my lawyers to review it. In case you have any bright ideas.”

“Sure, have lawyers review it. But the more you piss off Jade, the less it’ll be for.”

“You can’t change it once you’ve offered it to me.”

“There’s a clause in there for making me wait. The longer you do, the less it’s worth.”

Kevin scoffed again and flipped through the pages. I knew what was in that offer. It was more than Kevin would ever get if he tried to sell it anywhere else. Even with the deductions.

He stormed to the desk and took a pen, scribbling his name on it. “You small-town hicks don’t know what you’ve lost.”

My chest loosened at seeing his signature on the offer. Finally, the land would be back in our hands.

“We small-town hicks are happy with exactly what we have,” I said, a genuine smile taking over my face. “So fuck off into the sunset and never come back, Kevin.”

THE GRASS WAS GROWING BACK SLOWLY from the bulldozers. I shivered in my jacket, and a hand tugged on my own.

“You broke me out of school for this?” Agnes frowned. Beatrice was still near the car. She’d agreed to be taken out of school, but she didn’t want to come all the way to the tree line. Agnes was a bit more adventurous.

“I’m having fun.”

“It’s cold as shit. My hands are gonna fall off.”

“Sorry.” I put her hands in mine to warm them up. “I just wanted to stop here now that everything is signed.”

Agnes nodded and looked out across the land. “What are they doing with it?”

“Your dad said it would be a surprise. I don’t think he’ll change it much, but this is the last time I can see it as it was, but it’ll be better.”

“What does that mean?” Agnes asked.

“Can we go get food?” Beatrice called.

“Yeah, yeah. I suppose I should feed you while I watch you.” I took in all the land for one more moment. I knew the spring wouldn’t change, and it was far too cold to go there anyway. Once I had my fill, I walked Agnes back to the car.

Gabe had made true on his promise to get me a new vehicle after I won my bet. I was fine with something used and cheap, but he went above and beyond as usual. For the first time, I got to directly see how much money he had, and my new car was nicer than anything I ever imagined.

“Where did Daddy go?” Beatrice asked.

“He went to get the things not burned from San Francisco and his computer, remember?”

“Why is he getting his computer?”

“He wants to start coding again.”

I kept smiling as I thought about us talking about it. He wanted to make a new game, one that matched everything he’d been through. It would be set entirely in a small town.

I couldn’t wait to play it.

He’d offered for Beatrice and Agnes to go with him, but they turned him down. They both really wanted to go to Jasmine’s birthday party, which was this weekend.

As time went on, both of us were finding a rhythm that worked for us. Slowly, we were able to find time to do our hobbies. Gabe worked at night and I hired someone for the shop during the day. Sometimes, Atticus helped. Other times, other people in town stepped in. The girls were slowly trusting everyone else, and it made it easier for them to be watched.

“Come on. Let’s go get breakfast.” I drove them back to the square and went to the diner. As much as I knew what the girls liked to eat, I was not as good of a cook as Gabe, and they both knew it.

Tammy was a close second. So, when it was just the girls and me, she was my best option.

I knew that Tammy would try to give us our food for free, and I would pay anyway. For some reason, her kindness with Gabe extended to me as well, and I didn’t want her to lose out on business.

Gabe didn’t either, and when he was here, they both fought over whether or not the food would be free. It was one of my favorite pastimes, watching those two battle it out.

When we walked in, we were taken to our usual table, and Tammy immediately got all our drinks. The girls were quiet as I made sure our order was in, and I had to poke them both when we were alone.

“Penny for your thoughts,” I asked them both. “You’re not planning a robbery, are you?”

Both girls seemed oddly sullen. They looked at each other and then at me.

“What are you?” Agnes asked.

I blinked at the question. It wasn’t very often that I was confused by something they were asking. For kids so young, they had great communication.

“What do you mean, what am I? I’m Jade.”

“I wanna call you something else. You’re like a mom. You help us.”

I looked at Beatrice, who also nodded excitedly. I felt like I could melt onto the floor. When I took on this role, I never expected to get anything in return. I simply liked the girls, and I wanted them to have another parental figure in their lives. I would have been content to simply be called “Jade” for the rest of my life.

“You two have a mom, though.” I said it slowly, hoping it wouldn’t start a meltdown.

“We call her Mommy,” Beatrice said. “I like her and I miss her a lot.”

“But we like you too and want you to have a special name.”

“I’m not using ‘Mommy.’ That one is taken. I’m really fine with just being called ‘Jade.’”

They both frowned again. Now we were heading into dangerous territory.

“But we can make a new one,” I offered.

“Poophead?”

“Turd?”

I sighed. Ever since starting at the elementary school, they had discovered different curses. To me, they were cheesier, but to them, they were brand new.

“I feel like those are reserved for people you don’t like. You just said you like me.”

Agnes sighed and Beatrice poked out her bottom lip.

“I don’t know what to call you. Do you have any ideas?”

“What about Ammie?” I asked. It wasn’t a term I’d ever heard for a mother figure, but that didn’t matter. The second I said it, it sounded right.

I watched the girls carefully, hoping they wouldn’t immediately deny it. If they did, I’d come up with something else and deal with it.

Then they both nodded and it felt like my heart could burst.

I never thought this would be my future, but it was perfect. Even if it was messy, even if it was busy, I had everything I could have possibly dreamed of.

It didn’t come from the grant. It didn’t come from some mysterious magic that I was always chasing.

It came from Gabe. It came from the town.

Most importantly, it came from me.

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GABE

ONE YEAR LATER



Dad Company (But Sometimes Good Advice)
Eddie Pierce: Just found out I have a kid I didn't know about. He's wild and hates me. What do I do???

Comments:
Robert Colt: @Gabriel Sinclair has this. He went from babysitter to dad of the year.
Dean Briggs: And now, he's my friend 🥹
Ryan Kim: The bromance is epic.
Gabriel Sinclair: Buckle up, buttercup. It's a long ride. I have detailed advice I can give you, but start with just being there. He might be angry and hate you, but if you're steadily there, it WILL get better. Feel free to DM me. I'm an open book.

THERE WAS loud pounding on the door.

"Fuck, is someone trying to buy something again?" I muttered. People did want to build here, and since I owned a lot of the land and buildings, they came to me. Some even came to me in person.

Strawberry Springs became a pinnacle of small-town life, and many people wanted to move here. Developers eyed the empty land, either for

commercial use or to build a lot of houses.

At first, Jade had been resistant to the idea of building anything, but as time went on, we had multiple discussions on how to expand the right way. We wouldn't take from Strawberry Springs. We wouldn't ruin what was already here. We had to go slow and do it right.

Anyone who was resorting to showing up at my front door instead of setting up an official meeting was not going to have the same desires as we did. They didn't see the town's potential, just the potential dollar signs.

I sighed and closed the coding program. I'd been deep in developing another game. In fact, it took all my time when I wasn't working with Jade or watching the girls. Them being in school meant I could get a lot done during the day.

I just had to not get kidnapped first.

Standing, I stretched for a moment before going to the door.

"Gabriel Sinclair, you're coming with us."

I recognized that voice. It could have been none other than Kerry.

"Uh, why?" I asked.

"Just follow us."

"Uh, I have to—"

I was grabbed. Before I could do anything, I was taken to a car.

"Mark? Since when are you strong?"

"Had to get you before you fought us." He laughed and shut the door.

We were off in a moment.

The car ride was silent, and we pulled in next to another car.

Jade got out of it. Behind her was Agnes and Beatrice, who definitely should have been in school.

"What are you two doing here?"

"Ammie kidnapped us!" Beatrice said.

"For the greater good!" Agnes added.

"You're gonna get me in trouble."

"I'm the mayor," Jade said with a shrug. "I can do whatever I want."

"You definitely can't." I sighed and rolled my eyes. That was when I saw the crowd of people. We were at the entrance to the spring. Everyone in town who wasn't working was gathered here.

"What's going on?"

Jade cleared her throat. "I have a surprise for you."

"You do?"

She held up a hand. “But first, you have to promise you’re not going to get mad at us for trespassing.”

I let out a laugh. “I would be a pretty big hypocrite if I got mad at people for trespassing on this land.”

“Good. Then follow me.”

Everyone went. I hadn’t seen the town of Strawberry Springs collect like this in a long time. Not since Kevin was threatening the very land we stood on.

We walked through the field to the larger space of open land. I was expecting to go back and see the water like I usually did. Ever since I turned this into a public park, many people came by here.

Instead, we came to a clearing. It wasn’t close enough to see Hugh’s house, but it was marked with tiny red flags.

“What’s this?”

“A section of land. It’s proposed to become a new house.”

I slowly nodded. “We were talking about houses, but here? And why does the whole town have to be here for this?”

In the crowd, I heard a squeal. I turned to see Kerry covering her mouth. She looked like she was witnessing the greatest moment of her life.

I’d never been more confused.

But then I turned back around and saw Jade had gotten onto one knee.

My heart stuttered in my chest.

“What are you doing?” I asked in a panic.

“We’ve talked about this, but neither of us have made the move. So, this is me making the move.” She took a breath and got something out of her pocket. For a second, I thought it would be a ring. Instead, it was a crystal.

“This is a ridiculously expensive emerald. It’s the highest quality, and it means deep commitment and eternal love.” Tears gathered in her eyes. “I want to start a life here. I want to build a house and have chickens and be near the place where we spent our childhood.”

“Please take the chickens!” Cain yelled. “I have too many!”

“Shut the fuck up!” Mollie hissed next to him.

Jade rolled her eyes, but her smile didn’t fade.

“Do you really think there’s any other answer you’ll get? Of course I do.”

“So, you’ll sell the land to me?”

I laughed. “I’m not selling the land to you. I’m building the house. And it’s gonna be the biggest, best house you’ve ever seen.”

“Be careful, or I’ll think you’re compensating.” Jade said it quietly so the girls wouldn’t hear. I rolled my eyes and got down on my own knees.

“Jade, you’re my everything. I’m not going anywhere.” I took the crystal from her. “But I propose a trade.”

The crowd behind us gasped.

“A trade?” She frowned. “Wait, propose?”

I reached into my own pocket. I had carried this around for far too long and never found the right time to offer it.

I opened the velvet box to show off a ring. Not just any ring, but an emerald one.

Jade covered her mouth and tears gathered in her eyes. “We chose the same crystal. I can’t believe we chose the same crystal.”

“So, will you—”

She collided with me. “Yes!”

“Let me finish the sentence.”

“You steamrolled my proposal.”

“You *took* my proposal.”

Jade pouted and I knew she was going to argue more. But behind us, the crowd cheered and we were interrupted.

“Finally!” Kerry said. “Group hug!”

“No! No! Those are way too tight and—” I was buried before I could finish my sentence. It wasn’t often that the town all came together for a group hug, but it was a new thing ever since we started working on things together. Being in the middle was a little like having the life crushed out of you.

But Jade was next to me, as well as my two daughters, and the family that we’d all made in this tiny little town.

Once upon a time, I never thought I would call Strawberry Springs home ever again. But it had become more than that. It had become everything.

It had become magical.

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WANT MORE?

Get a bonus epilogue from Agnes and Beatrice's perspectives here!



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WHAT'S NEXT FOR ELLE RIVERS?

We aren't going far…

Pre-order the first book in the Rainwood series here!

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THANK YOU

When I first started writing the Strawberry Springs series, I knew which book I was most excited for. I always had *As You Wish* in my mind, and it was the one thing I couldn't wait to write. This was always going to be the final book in the series, and it would answer all the questions I purposefully left in the other books.

It's surreal that this book is now written and in your hands.

The Strawberry Springs series in its entirety has carried me through so much. Even though I only spent a year and a half writing all these books, my life has changed so much. I've grown into my own in my personal life and as a writer, and I'm so proud of where all five of these books have ended up. So many readers have told me this is their favorite small town, and they want it to be real more than anything else. Because of my readers, it became real. I continued to write it and make it grow, and that's because of every single person who has picked up this series.

I will never be over the fact that this is my job. Writing is truly one of the greatest things in my life, and I can't wait to tell you more stories, even as the sun sets on Strawberry Springs.

Now it's time for the part that's in every one of my acknowledgements—I have to thank all of the people that I work with. I'll start with Mae, who helped me develop this story and proofread it. When I originally came up with *As It Was*, we were early into our working relationship and were just starting to figure each other out. I believe that plotting out *As It Was* was the time we realized that video calls were really good for us. We're literally sitting on one now, and she has no idea that I'm typing this. So Mae, I hope I make you cry when you finally read this. Without you, this series wouldn't have happened. Not only because you helped me with these books, but because you've been cheering me on for two years now. Writing can be such a lonely journey, and having a friend who also helps me with plotting is everything I didn't know I needed. Because of you, I have more confidence. I love writing even more than I did before, and I look forward to talking to

you nearly every single day. I am so glad I randomly emailed you one day. I don't think either of us knew that it would turn into something like this, but I wouldn't have it any other way.

The next person I want to thank is Kasey. You've worked with me since *Contractual Obligations* and helped me edit all my books, including my backlist. You're an incredible copyeditor and catch so many of the little things that I let slip through. You've been flexible and tell me what I need to hear in order to make the book even better than it was. And every single time we work on a book together, I'm so happy that you found me on TikTok. For as long as I am publishing indie, you are stuck with me. Sorry not sorry.

I'd also like to thank Summer, who has designed all the covers of the Strawberry Springs series. I personally love the landscape nature theme so much. I have to say that this final one is my absolute favorite. Thank you for bringing Strawberry Springs to life with your drawings. I love these covers, and they fit the theme so well.

Finally, I'd like to take a moment to thank all the people in my personal life who have made my publishing journey possible. First and foremost, I have to give a big shout out to my husband, Josh. This year is our 10th year anniversary, and I can confidently say that I wouldn't be able to write the romance I do if I hadn't ended up with you. I always knew I wanted love, but actually receiving it was the turning point for me. Also, I want to shout out Lizzie, who has listened to me talk about these plots for many hours. You're not even a romance reader. So, every time you pick up one of my books, it makes my day. I love that I'm your one exception author. There are, of course, countless other people in my life I have to thank, and I can't name every single one of them or else this thank you will be as long as the book. But seriously, anyone who's ever given me support, I owe you a massive thank you. I'm allowing myself to be a little sappy and make a longer acknowledgement than I usually do, mostly because this is such a milestone book for me. I cannot believe this five-part series is over, and the story is now yours.

Thank you for visiting Strawberry Springs with me.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elle Rivers writes fun romance books filled with real-world problems wrapped in beautiful, heartwarming happy endings. When not writing, she can be found speed-reading other authors' amazing romance novels, curling up next to any warm object she can find, or singing obnoxiously loudly to her favorite music.

Elle was born and raised in Nashville, Tennessee, and she considers herself one of the few native Nashvillians who does not like country music. She has far too many cats who fight for the spot on her lap, and a ton of chickens who couldn't care less about her unless she is bringing them food. She lives with her romance hero of a husband who endlessly supports her writing endeavors, and her son, who is the biggest, but most adorable, distraction.

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