

The drone of the overworked engine was the only sound he'd heard for hours. Robert had been driving since way before the sun had set on the previous day, stopping only for coffee and gasoline. *Tap, tap tap, tap...* His jittery fingers drummed on the shiny plastic of the wheel to the imagined song in his head. This was better than the thoughts he had turned over and over on this flight.

*Why are you leaving?*

Silence.

*Will I see you later?*

It was deafening the answer he couldn't supply the exotic beauty that gazed into his soul with her chocolate orbs, but managed to nod. A lie.

"No, just say no," Robert spoke to the empty space inside the cabin before banging the side of his fist against the steering wheel. "She deserved the truth," he continued to no one.

Paper cups littered the ripped seats and stained floor of his '97 Jetta. The car had more character and life than the thirty-something trader – ex-trader – had any right to be around.

*Thumpthumpthumpthump.* Robert jerked the wheel to the right when the sound of him drifting across the center line of the deserted highway shocked him out of his head. The road noise was replaced by the fast pounding of his heart as the adrenaline kicked in and made him alert once more.

Success had eluded the man for almost a decade when Robert had been mentored by a man notorious for his questionable trading tactics. *Arbitrage trading is like running across a busy highway to pick up a few coins*, he had been warned by his favorite professor before accepting the job. In hindsight, that might have been a better business plan for Robert. Honestly, though, he had been fine with his mediocre income. It furnished his third floor apartment and kept his vehicle running way past its prime. He had regular sex with the woman down the hall in 3-B, a clerk at the grocery store. Lorraine wasn't much to look at with her bleached hair that always had about an inch of its true color showing at the roots, but she knew how to get the job done and didn't bother him too much otherwise, aside from an occasional cup of sugar or splash of milk for her coffee. It was a good arrangement.

Then entered Asmita and everything changed. The twenty-eight year old dark-skinned woman stepped through the doors of the firm in search of employment. Robert's coworkers all perked up in their chairs as her heels clicked across the floor when she was led to Mr. Grover's office. Robert's eyes had followed her, but he did not look like the panting dogs his friends had become.

The interview was over by the time her exotic scent had reached Robert. Mr. Grover wasn't taken in by looks or false words, so unless she had talent and the fortitude it took to work in their high pressure, low pay office, he wasn't interested in wasting his time with her.

*A rare beauty*, Robert thought as the woman left with the same practiced posture as she'd entered with. True, he would've thought about her for a few nights in the shower if she had left dejected like so many others before her, but it was her confidence that struck him. Without thinking, he rose from his desk and followed her out.

"Excuse me!" Robert called out to her while cursing himself for not getting the woman's name from the receptionist before he rushed out.

The woman appeared to not hear him or not want to be bothered. *Likely the second*, Robert thought as his eyes moved up and down her long legs from behind, but it didn't stop him from continuing the pursuit. When he got within arm's length, he stretched out his arm and touched her bare, swarthy shoulder with the tip of his fingers.

She jerked around, defensive. "I don't require your pity," she spat out, only guessing it was one of the men at the place she'd just been rejected from. They thought they were so clever, that somehow there was a veil over them that hid their obvious undersexed disposition. How cliché of one to follow her and try to play on her feelings of rejection.

“Woah,” Robert said, pulling his hand away to assume a defensive stance. “I’m not offering pity. On the contrary, I was going to congratulate you for dodging a bullet.” His grin came naturally as his seldom-appreciated humor reached out to the stranger who still looked at him skeptically. “Not much of a place to establish a career,” he added more seriously, already feeling like hope of a connection was lost.

The woman sighed and shook her head. “I’m sorry. It’s just... I’m so used to... Nevermind. It was nice meet you...”

“Robert,” he interjected while puffing out his chest.

“Robert. But I’m not the best company.” Even in the woman’s admission of defeat, she held herself with unmistakable poise. “I’m just going to go somewhere and rethink my career choice.” She turned away from Robert and began walking again.

Robert understood that hopeless feeling. While not openly admitting it often, he had wasted many nights eating ramen on the stained couch, questioning his life and every choice he’d made. Usually around that time, Lorraine would come knocking with a bottle of scotch and any hopeless thoughts were suppressed by alcohol and sex.

It seemed like only a blink, but Robert stepped out of his reflections to find the woman had disappeared into the sea of people. *Dammit*. He lumbered forward in the direction she had been heading, bumping into shoulders and stepping on the backs of heels as he pushed his way through the crowd while craning his neck to try and get a glimpse of her radiant energy. He wasn’t the tallest man at five-foot eleven, but with effort, he spotted her crossing Fourth.

Robert reached the curb as the light turned yellow, but entered the crosswalk anyway. His steps fell quickly as he raced to catch up with the mysterious woman. At the three-quarters mark, the other light turned green and angry yellow cars blared their disapproval at him. He didn’t pay much attention, but the horns caught her attention and she turned her head sharply to see what the commotion was about. From a distance, it almost looked to Robert that she smirked when she recognized it was him, although she turned back around and continued walking away.

The vibration in Robert’s pocket was not a distraction as he jogged a few steps to settle in beside the woman. It could have gone either way; she might have been annoyed at the persistent bother or she could’ve been amused.

“Listen,” Robert said, trying not to sound breathless. Despite the relative shape of the man, he spent most of his days behind a desk and wasn’t in the same shape he was in while in college. “I’m a decent listener. Maybe we could go grab coffee. You could tell me about your failing career and I could tell you about mine. The one with the worst story will be treated to coffee by the other?” His animated gestures tried to sell his point.

“Your pocket is buzzing,” she said, amusement evident by the corner of her mouth twitching upwards. She looked as if she was trying to hold onto the frustrations she had expressed in their previous conversation, but was unable to maintain with Robert’s animated approach.

“I don’t care about that,” Robert admitted, but pulled it out of his pocket to see who was bothering him. “Just work, you know that place that didn’t see your potential?”

The woman rolled her eyes, but had taken her guard down. “Tea. I’d like tea.”

Robert looked around and saw a café up the street that he knew served warm tea because Lorraine had mentioned it once in their pillow talk conversations. “How about the Tamori Deli?” He motioned for her to continue walking and put his phone on silent. “I never caught your name.”

“I never told you it,” the woman smiled and let the silence linger for an extended moment. “Asmita,” she said with a wonderfully rich accent that wasn’t apparent in anything else she’d said. “And yes, I’m American,” she quickly added.

“Asmita,” Robert repeated, although it didn’t roll off his tongue as delicately as it had hers or even as it sounded in his head.

She laughed again at his pronunciation and reached to open the café door.

Robert jumped forward and opened it for her. "Hey, give me time and I'm sure I'll give your name the credence it deserves."

The two walked in and sat at a table. A dim light hung directly over them creating an ambiance that was more intimate than Asmita would have preferred. She imagined at that moment that coffee might have been a better way to go, but it was always tea that made her feel like herself again, something she needed after three failed interviews that day.

"So tell me, what's been so awful that you believe you should abandon all hope and become a flight attendant?" Robert pulled a menu from the side of the table, but didn't browse it. He was far too enthralled by Asmita's eyes.

"I never said anything about being a flight attendant," she said with a laugh. "I have a strong fear of heights and would rather clean the bathrooms at Grand Central Station than make a living in one of those metal coffins." Asmita shivered at the thought of it.

This time, Robert laughed. "The commercial ones aren't bad. It's the tiny private jets that should worry you. You didn't intend to be a personal attendant to a millionaire, did you?"

Asmita rolled her eyes and playfully hit his arm. "No airplanes." She sighed and sunk back into the wooden chair, something that if Robert had tried to do would likely have bruised his back. But she seemed to make the world melt around her. "How is a woman to make it in this world when all employers think I'm good for is sex on the side?"

Robert arched a brow immediately. "Are you good for sex on the side?" He regretted the crass comment as soon as it had left his mouth.

The amusement was washed from Asmita's face instantly and she stood up. "I should have known," she said.

The frustration turned her cheeks a soft pink, a lovely color for her, Robert thought. He responded by jumping up, hitting his knees on the table in his haste. "Ouch! Fuck! I mean, no. Asmita, I didn't mean it like that. Shit." Robert pulled his fingers through his hair while he watched the woman pause.

"What *did* you mean?" she challenged.

"I meant that not all bosses are assholes like mine. Did he seriously proposition you?" Robert stood like a statue, unsure of which move would force Asmita to walk away.

"Him, the one before, and even the woman this morning. She could have been mistaken for a man, though." Admitting that made her collapse back on the chair and bring her hands to her face. "I'm more than that." Her muffled words still reached Robert's ears and he felt even worse for his comment.

"No, I mean, I don't know many women who have tried to enter the industry, but I'm sure there's a real position for you." Robert's brows furrowed as he saw the hopeless look in Asmita's eyes. But he saw more than that; he saw the truth that she was as smart as she was beautiful, a rare combination in any field. "I have a friend..." he began and pulled out his phone. "I haven't spoken to him in years, but if he's still in business, I can see if he'll give you an interview."

Asmita looked at him curiously. "Why would you do that for me?"

*Thank you* was what Robert had been expecting, not the "why" question. "Well... Hmmm... Do people generally need a reason to do something nice?" Robert shrugged as he answered.

"No, but they usually want something," Asmita replied, her face full of skepticism.

Robert shrugged again. "Maybe I'm just trying to get my tea paid for."

Asmita cracked a grin and nodded. "See? You wanted tea."

The two laughed and continued their conversation until the café closed for the night.

Robert continued driving down the dark, winding highway at speeds that probably would've been avoided if his mind was on what he was doing. But he was a million miles away, or at least several

hundred. "Asmita..." He sighed, entering a state of remorse. His eyes twitched over to the seat beside him and almost imagined the dark skinned beauty curled up there, sleeping. She would definitely sleep on a car ride, he had decided, assigning her traits he couldn't possibly know.

Robert would want her to sleep, though. He wanted Asmita to be comfortable and relaxed with him from the first awkward encounter. What would have happened if he hadn't chased after her – twice? His left elbow rested on the window sill while the fingers of that hand rubbed his forehead.

*"I got the job,"* the voice on the other end of the phone said with composure.

"You don't sound happy about it," Robert commented, switching his phone from his right ear to his left while kicking his feet up onto his desk. Few around paid any attention to what he did since he ceased being the top grosser three years prior. *You're out of your prime*, they'd said to him. He didn't have the passion in him to argue or prove them wrong.

A squeal sounded from the other end of the phone and Robert had to pull the phone away from his ear. A few coworkers notice and shot him a curious glance. He smiled and put the phone back to his ear.

"Asmita, that's really great. Let me take you out tonight to celebrate?" Robert swung his feet down and started looking up restaurants to make reservations. While things between him and Asmita had been casual and friendly, this was a reason for enjoying more than just their usual tea and pastry.

"Take me out?" She sounded hesitant, but as she thought about it, she nodded and spoke up so Robert will hear. "Sure. Yeah. That'll be great."

Robert barely worked the rest of the day. He browsed around for a suitable restaurant and the left early to go by the grocery store to pick up some white roses.

"You shouldn't have," Lorraine said with a grin as she rang up his few groceries.

Robert looked confused for a moment and then laughed, without thought to the checker's feelings. "Oh, these aren't for you," he said carelessly. He barely picked up on the incredulous look she threw him.

"I picked up a movie from Redbox earlier. I thought you might come over," Lorraine continued with a tense jaw.

It dawned on Robert that he hadn't picked up on the cues because he was thinking about how his evening with Asmita would end. "Oh, umm, the thing is... You see, I have-

"Plans. Got it. No big. John said he might come over anyway," she said with an air of indifference, but Robert picked up on what could've been an attempt to make him jealous.

John was a relatively new tenant in the complex. He was a couple of years younger than Robert and apparently good looking, not that Robert paid much attention. He was surprised that Lorraine was acting this way.

"How about tomorrow night?" he offered. He didn't realize things between him and Lorraine were this complicated. It seemed like casual sex, but then again, he had never really shown interest in anyone else.

She made a sound that could've passed for a grunt and finished scanning his purchases. "That'll be eighteen fifty-eight," she said systematically.

Robert had already swiped his card and was looking at her curiously. Could she really believe they had something more? He would have to think about this, but not now. His thoughts were on Asmita and their date as he waited for his receipt to be printed. "I hope you have a good night," he said truthfully.

"Yeah, sure," Lorraine replied, sounding rejected.

Robert didn't know what else to say. He hadn't believed their relationship was complicated. It was sex and a few neighborly gestures. He left the store and soon forgot about the encounter, setting the roses on the table while he went to shower.

“Lorraine,” Robert said to the empty car. “Maybe it would’ve been better if we had just been more serious.”

Robert turned right off the highway, the needle hovering just below a quarter of a tank. He should fill up both the car and his stomach, which was already growling with anticipation.

It wouldn’t take him long before he reached the spot he had inadvertently set out upon after leaving Asmita. God, that woman was too good to look at him the way she had.

“Yeah, that’s the place. Why do you sound so surprised?” Robert asked Asmita. He had texted her after his shower, but she immediately called to make sure it was the restaurant she was thinking of.

“Because it’s expensive and I know you don’t make *that* good of money,” she teased.

“Hey,” he sounded offended, but really wasn’t. “Okay, so maybe I don’t make the big bucks that you’re going to, but I don’t have much to spend my money on. Don’t worry about it, okay?”

Asmita giggled. “Sure, but I might have to take you out next time. I mean, I am going to be making what a senior trader will be making before commissions.”

Robert rolled his eyes, but was actually happy that she had been hired by his friend. She deserved a break. Through their conversations, he came to understand that she was incredibly gifted and intelligent. “That’s never going to happen,” he said, hoping that was the truth. With Asmita getting the break in her career, he was beginning to think that it was time for him to put effort into advancing himself. He had worked hard for it, after all.

Within an hour, Robert was entering the restaurant. There were candles lit on every table and the presence of wine was so prominent, it perfumed the air. He followed behind the hostess to a table in a dark corner, not exactly what he had hoped for. His eyes glanced over with envy to the couples sitting at tables near the window when a nearly panoramic view of the city. *Assholes*, he thought, but it quickly disappeared when he turned his attention to the table that Asmita was already seated at.

The dark locks that usually rippled in waves over her shoulders and down her back were pulled on top of her head in a mass of curls and hairspray. Around Asmita’s neck was a silver pendant in the shape of a heart, something that looked like it was a gift from a family member more than a boyfriend or lover. When she stood, the black dress she was wearing fell softly, stopping at the three-quarter mark down her thigh. Robert couldn’t help but look at the way her cleavage was emphasized by the V-neck and by the tip of her necklace which seemed to point directly at it.

Asmita was patient as she waited for the shock of her date to pass and took the time to admire his pressed maroon shirt with the black tie. She looked at it closer and saw patterns of lighter black stars adding depth to the accessory, which made her smile. She had always loved the night and always appreciated a man who was subtle about details.

“Wow,” Robert finally said. “You look incredible.”

The candlelight did a good job of hiding Asmita’s blush, but the way she looked down at the table cloth showed she was taken back by the compliment. Still, she held herself in a way that showed an inner confidence that was in contrast with her humble movements. “Thank you,” she said as she met his gaze. “I was a little early,” she confessed as she sat again.

Robert sat opposite of her at the table before realizing he was holding the flowers in his hand. “Here, these are for you. Just a little something to congratulate you.” He knew very little of flowers, but knew that red was for love and white was more neutral. He was still figuring out his feelings for Asmita, but knew that red was a little presumptuous.

“They’re lovely,” she said as she brought the white buds to her nose and inhaled. “They have a wonderful aroma, too,” Asmita added before setting the bouquet aside. “And you look nice.”

“Thanks,” Robert said with a grin. “Had to dust this shirt off since we don’t dress like this at the office. I think the last time I wore this shirt was for lunch with my sister when she came to town a few

years ago. She always picks formal places.” He rolled his eyes, but was grateful that he had been dragged to those restaurants, which had taught him how to act and what to expect.

“Maybe you should be looking for a new job, too,” Asmita added as she watched the wine being poured into the two glasses.

“Heh,” he breathed. Robert had little ambition for his career anymore, and had believed he felt the same about life until he saw Asmita. She had brought back to life a part of him that he believed died years ago and hundreds of miles away. “That’s looking for a positive in a dark place,” he commented.

Robert found himself in a dark place again. The gas station was lit with only a flickering fluorescent, the hum of which filled the silence between the seldom passing cars on the highway. He walked inside and paid the clerk for the tank of gas, another cup of coffee, and a cherry Danish.

“You look familiar,” the squinty eyed attendant said. His eyes blended with the wrinkles that flared out from the corner of his eye and would have made an almost comical looking man if Robert had felt an ounce of humor in him. Instead, a part of him cringed when the man recognized him.

“No, you’re mistaken,” Robert said and ducked his head while grabbing his purchases. The bell chimed angrily as he pushed out the door to escape to his car that was still receiving fuel. He paced for a moment at the pump where the manual numbers ticked by slowly and finally gave up and opened up the passenger’s door to sit and wait.

With a sigh, Robert brushed the cups onto the floor instead of picking them up and tossing them in the overflowing trashcan nestled between the pumps and sank into the cool seat. He hadn’t consciously decided to drive here when he fled the city, but as car seemed to turn instinctively at each intersection, he had resolved that maybe it was time to make peace with his past. Maybe then he could return to Asmita. Maybe.

*Robert was seventeen and preparing to go into the military. Jeanine was only a junior and tried to desperately to convince him to stay.*

*“You’re really going to leave me here with Bradley drooling over me like you’re already gone?” Her large, brown eyes flickered with emotion - well concocted emotion - and widened in the most pathetic and beautiful sight. His hand reached for her face and his thumb caressed her warm cheek while he held back the laughter inside.*

*“You are the strongest girl I know. You’ll be fine. Besides, you’ll be too busy with your committees and clubs and getting good grades to even remember you have a boyfriend,” Robert joked.*

*“Fiancé, Bobby. You’re my fiancé, remember?” Jeanine curled up beside Robert and moved her fingers along the ring finger on his left hand.*

As Robert sat in the front seat with the pump clicking away the seconds, he could feel the warmth of the girl who somehow still had a draw on him. He closed his eyes and could smell the perfume she wore instead of the gasoline fumes that were seeping out of his old tank. Of course the old man would remember him; he had been a part of the biggest scandals the town had seen.

*Graduation night – the two had gravitated away from the party to have some time alone. Robert was going to ship off in two days and there was a desperation that hung in the air between them.*

*“Let’s just do it,” Robert said as they sat on the tailgate of his truck, kicking their legs as they stared out at the lake. The full moon reflected perfectly on the glassy surface making the night seem even more surreal.*

*“Go swimming?” Jeanine asked with a puzzled look.*

*"No," he said with a gently nudge. "You know we can get married in the next county." Robert jumped down from the back of the truck and stepped between her legs, pulling her closer with his arms wrapped around the small of her back.*

*"Stop kidding," Jeanine said, playfully pushing on his shoulder. "You know my parents would kill you... and then me." The kiss she placed on his lips contradicted her words. Of course she wanted that. She had nightmares of Robert going off to fight in some war and never returning.*

*"Unlikely. You're their only child and I'm going to be in California in a couple of days." His lips captured hers again and it felt like there was nothing that could come between the two of them, not even the thousands of miles that would soon physically separate them. "Say yes," he insisted.*

*"Y-y-yes! Yes!"*

The clicking off of the fuel pump startled Robert out of his past. The door creaked when he pushed it fully open and he rose to finish the transaction. After a quick jiggle of the handle, he removed the red coated handle and hooked it back onto the pump, still managing to drip gasoline on the car's paint and in a line on the ground. He shook his head, replaced the gas cap, and slammed the doors shut after getting back in behind the steering wheel.

He drove down the highway several more miles before pulling to the side. The moon and lake peaked through the trees, beckoning him to remember. It was cooler than it had been that night, but the memories always gave him a cold chill.

*"We did it," Jeanine had said for about the twentieth time as the two drove in Robert's pickup back towards town.*

*She could say it a hundred more times and Robert wouldn't have minded. There had been nothing else in his life that felt right like being with Jeanine did. He squeezed her leg as they veered off the highway and onto a dirt road that dead ended at Mr. Callihan's old, abandoned house.*

*The two exchanged glances every few seconds as they bounced down the rutted path until they pulled in past the rotting wood fence and turned off the engine. This was a popular place for the kids to have sex, but with the graduation parties in full swing, Robert expected the place to be quiet; a perfect place for him and his bride to stay their first night together.*

*"Nervous?" Robert asked as they both stared at the faded red barn in front of them.*

*"Why would I be nervous? This isn't the first time we've... you know... done this," Jeanine said with a girlish giggle. She was nervous, but not about being with her husband.*

*Robert got out of the truck and walked around to help Jeanine out, surprising her by lifting her out of the vehicle. He carried her past the warped wood door that had rusted in a partially open position. Jeanine tossed down the blanket she had grabbed from the truck and Robert laid her down onto it with ease, his eyes never leaving hers until they were deep within the thralls of passion.*

A car passing on the highway honked at Robert, bringing him back to the present. He put the Jetta back into gear and continued down the highway with a heavy foreboding bearing down on him. He was minutes away and wasn't sure this was going to resolve anything.

*"It was a lovely night, Robert," Asmita said as they stood outside her apartment complex. They were facing each other, but not touching. She was holding the flowers that had wilted some as they had walked around the park after eating.*

*"You're full of surprises," he admitted with an endearing smile. "I would have never guessed that you knew anything about deep sea fishing."*

Asmita laughed and he could see a hint of color in her cheeks again, illuminated by the streetlight nearby. "It's not something many people know. Consider yourself lucky. I can trust you'll keep my secret."

Robert held up his fingers in a Boy Scout salute. "Promise. It'll go with me to my grave." Everything came so easily around Asmita. It had been so long since he had made a connection like this, but he refused to push it. Despite her show of strength, the thing that had drawn him to her, he had come to find out she was very much like her namesake: often strong and feeding off of the positives, but with a fragile side that made her vulnerable. He doubted many people could see past her external beauty to realize this. He also doubted that she was aware that he could see flaws in her that only made her more perfect in his eyes.

Asmita leaned in and kissed Robert's cheek. "Thank you again. I had a great time." The woman turned and walked up into the steps to her complex.

When the door had closed behind her, Robert finally turned and walked back to his car. The conflict was already strong within him. Not only did he have Lorraine to deal with (whatever that was all about), but his past was creeping up on him like he never imagined it would. He would be forced to revisit it, something he never wanted to reflect upon.

*"My beautiful wife," Robert said as he held Jeanine in his arms, protecting her from the critters that scurried around them in the dimly lit building.*

*Jeanine didn't notice anything but the man beside her. "Bobby, you've made me so happy. Can we stay here tonight?"*

*Robert scrunched his brows, but nodded. He didn't like the idea of her having to sleep on the hard ground, but he equally hated the idea of her sleeping in her bed away from him. "Anything you want, angel," he whispered and kissed her light brown locks, inhaling the scent of her sex, sweat, and perfume.*

The dirt had been grated recently, which meant there was likely someone living in the old house. *Good for them*, he thought as the cups jittered around violently regardless. He turned off his headlights when he reached a white fence that replaced the old, rotten one. The faded red barn had been repainted and there was a mural of a hillside painted on the side of it.

*Damn*, he thought, but turned off his engine and got out of the car anyway. He had come this far and was too stubborn to let the occupation of the old house stand in his way. The gravel crunched beneath his feet as he stepped out into the cool night air. He could hear the breeze moving between the trees, but was too numb to feel anything. The pounding of Robert's heart filled his ears as he moved closer to the door, which was now closed.

*The morning sun flowed in through the gaps and holes in the old wooden structure. In a different place, Robert might've grumbled and buried his face under the pillows to try and cheat the impending day a little longer. But the aura of his new wife was strong enough to remind him even in his groggy state that he was blissfully happy to be woken like this. He nuzzled Jeanine's neck and placed soft kisses on it as her breathing changed from a steady rhythm to a more alert and awake cadence.*

*"Good morning, beautiful," Robert said as his arm draped across Jeanine drew her closer.*

*"Tell me I didn't dream it," she whispered with her eyes still shut, like she was afraid if she opened them, the previous night would've just been a dream.*

*Robert chuckled and placed a quick but firm kiss on her dry lips. "I promise it wasn't a dream, unless you are talking about something other than our marriage."*

*"Good," she said and finally opened her eyes. "I don't have to go back to sleep to be blissfully happy then."*

*"No, and I wouldn't let you anyway. Your parents are going to be on a witch hunt when they wake up and find you not at home." Reluctantly, Robert sat and helped Jeanine to a seated position, too.*

*"I could go with you to California," she suggested as Robert gathered their clothes that were scattered around the couple.*

*He scoffed at the unlikely scenario. "You have to finish school and I... I'm going to be stuck in boot camp for the next ten weeks with no hope of seeing you or anyone else that doesn't have a shaved head."*

*"I won't be able to concentrate on anything. And to keep this a secret...?"*

*"You have to keep this a secret, at least for now. You know your parents will do everything they can to have it annulled if they caught wind of it."*

*"I know, I know." Jeanine rolled her eyes in frustration as she pulled on her shirt, purposely leaving her bra off to tease her groom. "It's just not fair." Her pout, unlike the other night, was genuine.*

*Robert felt the frustration, too. He was regretting his decision to join the military, even though it was the only way he'd be able to afford college. It's the right thing to do, his old man had told him the night Robert broke the news to him that he was joining right after graduation. Robert's father was a practical man who had been focused solely on his auto repair shop after his wife had died of cancer when Robert was thirteen.*

*"We'll always be together," Robert tried to explain poetically, but the sentiment was lost when the barn door groaned as it was forced open.*

Robert squinted as he recalled that morning, the sunlight blinding as the door had suddenly been forced ajar. It was night now, but his eyes were still mostly closed, as if he was trying to adjust his eyes to a bright light. He even brought his arm up to shield his gaze as his feet brought him to a stop a few feet from the door where he knelt down and drew his fingers through the fine dirt.

*"Daddy, no!" Jeanine shouted when they were both able to see who the shadowy figure was. Robert had already jumped in front of her to protect her from the intruder. "Put the gun down, Mr. Johnson."*

*"Git away from my daughter," he drawled, not lowering the weapon.*

*Robert spoke before he thought about what he was saying. "She's my wife. You need to get a hold of yourself and put that away. We can talk about this, sir."*

*The gun clicked and the man's posture stiffened. "Jeanine, git away from him if you know what's good fer you."*

*Jeanine was shaking behind her husband as she watched her father prepare to shoot the man she loved.*

What had happened after that had always been a blur to Robert. Even as he felt the cold earth, he tried to imagine her warmth. It was as impossible to find on that night as it had been the morning it happened.

*Robert lunged at Mr. Johnson as soon as the shot had been fired. In the instant just before, Jeanine had run out from behind her husband to act as a shield between her father and Robert. Just as quickly as she had jumped out, her body hit the ground.*

*In an act of pure instinct, Robert tackled the man with the gun, determined to wrestle the weapon from him. The shock of his daughter catching the shot had snapped something in his mind and he fought back to regain control of the gun, intending to use it on the man who had caused the scene.*

*The gun fired again, but it wasn't Robert who was dealt the blow. If the shot wasn't deafening enough at that range, the realization of what happened caused his heart to race, rendering his ears*

*useless to real world sounds. He couldn't even hear his own voice screaming out his wife's name as he scrambled to get his footing. He fell several times as his legs almost refused to take him closer to Jeanine.*

*There were a few seniors camping nearby that heard the two shots and came over to help. They found Robert cradling Jeanine's bloody body and her father's several yards away with the gun between them.*

It wasn't a hard leap to accuse the only one left alive of being guilty of the crimes. Robert still wasn't sure, even crouched in the dark, reliving the morning, of who fired the gun the second time. He had spent nearly a month in jail after that while the town collected evidence against him. His father's business was forced to shut down when it was boycotted by the church, a campaign spearheaded by Mrs. Johnson.

Those memories were dull in Robert's mind, even upon reflection. His life should have ended that day and for a long time afterwards, he felt it had. He went to the trial, sat through the accusations, spoke the truth, and was somehow acquitted of the crimes, but not before the small town had made national news and been turned upside down. His fault.

Robert was relieved to have been accepted to a college far away from his home, but his hope of getting the military to pay for his education died the night that his wife did. Student loans would likely never be paid off, but somehow, Robert managed to move forward with his life, keeping most at a safe distance.

The key entered the lock of his third floor apartment. Robert glanced down the hall at Lorraine's door and saw a shadow move under it; she was looking out her peep hole, watching to see if he came home alone. Safely inside his home, he rolled his eyes at this new dynamic with the woman. It was a complication he neither wanted nor needed. He would talk with her, probably end things, but not tonight. He was relishing the feeling of being happy again, an almost awkward sensation.

Etiquette dictated that he wait forty-eight hours to contact Asmita, but since it was barely a real date, he sent her a short good night text before he collapsed onto his bed, enjoying the rich, spicy scent of her perfume that lingered on his clothes.

Lights went on in the main house when the dog started barking at Robert. Somehow, he had thought if he returned to this spot, he could've changed what had happened or maybe at least found it within himself to extend himself forgiveness. *Jeanine would've forgiven you.* That was the truth, but it held little sway with his heart and mind.

Robert stood and within a moment, was back in his car, driving to the highway. There was one other place that he had to see before he could face things in his real life.

*"You did what?!"* Asmita shouted over the phone.

Robert pulled the earpiece away just in time to keep his hearing intact. "I punched him. He deserved it and you knew that from the five minutes you had with him in your interview." Robert looked down at his slightly swollen hand and flexed his fingers, making sure they all still worked.

*"Yes, but I didn't think you should do that! What are you going to do for work? And your apartment? Robert!"* Asmita was freaking out more than Robert had ever imagined she would or could. She was usually a sea of calmness, but he knew that she had weaknesses and apparently his well being had become one of them.

"I have some saved up. It won't be hard to find another job. Besides..." Robert paused, unsure if he wanted to tell Asmita the real reason that led to the assault. He sighed and continued, knowing

the woman would get it out of him eventually. "He said my performance was suffering because I was, and I'm quoting, so don't hold this against me, 'screwing that Indian chic.'"

There were several moments of uncomfortable silence that was broken by Robert. "I didn't think it was any of his business to tell him that I wasn't screw-err sleeping with you. He had that coming to him for a long time, Mita."

She grumbled a response which seemed to correlate with her agreeing to his actions. "*Maybe you can get a job here,*" she posed.

"Eh, don't worry about it. I'll find something."

"*Okay, well at least let me take you to dinner tonight. I owe you for about ten lunches and dinners over the last couple of months.*"

It was hard to say no to Asmita, even though he had bought her meals for the selfish reason of wanting to spend time with her. They weren't officially a couple and had only shared their first kiss within the last week. Both had relationship issues, it seemed, and somehow their conversations never evolved to the topic of romantic pasts. Robert felt safer this way, given that he had no idea how to make peace with his past. It was becoming harder and harder for him to deny his feelings for her, feelings he didn't believe he had any right to own.

"You don't owe me anything. But..." Robert couldn't finish his thought before Asmita interrupted.

"*No cuts, no butts, no coconuts,*" she recited like an elementary school girl.

Robert laughed and rubbed his temples. "Fine. Maybe an early dinner at the pizza joint?"

Asmita laughed. "*I'll pick the place. Don't dress for a pizza place, either. Expect a text from me with the address. Gotta get back to work. Stay outta trouble.*"

The highway was quiet after the quarter of a mile jaunt down the dirt road. Robert was deeper in his head than he had been the whole drive; the silence was welcome. Three miles down the road, he turned right and followed a maintained rural road through the trees until there was a clearing surrounded by a wrought iron fence. Gargoyles guarded the locked gate, perched above it on brick pillars. They would've been better with real dogs, though, because it was an effortless jump that carried Robert over the thin bars to the grassy ground on the opposite side.

So much had changed in nearly two decades since he had been there last. Many more rows of tiny monuments had been erected. In the dark, Robert would be lucky to find what he was looking for. In the distance, he recognized the willow tree that he had sat in for days, staring at the freshly turned soil below.

Robert walked around the markers, occasionally catching a name in the moonlight. He was nearly at his destination when a pair of names stopped him abruptly. "Dammit," he muttered and crouched down at the overgrown plot. He rested his hand on the soft, cold grass; soon it would be frozen and unwelcoming. "Miss you, mom," he whispered and then read the name of his father. Robert was at the university when his dad shot himself. It was just another reason to never come back to this town, but being there now, he felt years of remorse catch up to him. "Sorry for everything, pops." It wasn't the most eloquent of speeches, but it was more than he ever expected to say.

After another couple of minutes, Robert stood and resumed his progress towards Jeanine. As alive as he felt she was when he was at the barn, Robert could never find any connection between this place and her being alive.

He paced in front of the gravestone, searching for something to do or say that would make sense and would break the awkward silence that hung in the air. Robert walked closer to the granite stone and with a shaking finger, traced her name. "My wife," he said softly. "Tell me what I should do."

As naturally as it would have been to sit on the couch in someone's house, he sat beside her headstone and leaned against it. "I don't deserve Asmita," he began, quickly jumping into the difficult topic. "Not after what I did to you."

"Would you like to come up?" Asmita whispered as they stood outside her building in an embrace that was both affectionate and for warmth.

Of course he did. Almost every inch of him wanted to know Asmita in every possible way. Robert spoke before his brain could change his words, "That sounds great."

Their cold noses brushed as they kissed once more under the streetlight before Asmita turned and walked up the steps. How many times had Robert watched her do this, only now, he was right behind her. As she stopped to enter her code, he weaved his fingers through the back of her black hair and inhaled the scent of her lavender shampoo.

There was an anxious silence between the two as they took the elevator up to Asmita's fifth floor apartment. Robert suddenly felt ashamed of his own building and as they walked the carpeted hallway towards her door, he realized that if they were at his place, Lorraine would be staring at the two through her peep hole. She might have even stepped out and introduced herself.

Ever since the apparently awkward moment at the grocery store when Robert bought flowers for Asmita, things had been tense between him and Lorraine. She had come over a couple of times, but the frequency of sex had dwindled and she never stopped by for milk.

"My place is a mess. I should've cleaned it," Asmita muttered as she opened her door.

*Pristine, of course.* Robert rolled his eyes and chuckled. "If this is a mess, you are never coming over to my place."

Robert sat and listened to the wind in the trees, but no voice of reason was carried on it, nothing whispered into his ear. He knew it was what he deserved, the silence that was deafening, the coldness of the headstone creeping under his skin. His hand caressed the grass like it was Jeanine's fine hair.

"I swore that there wouldn't be anyone but you ever. Don't start on me about Lorraine. You know she doesn't mean anything to me. She probably deserves better, too."

A leaf tumbled past, carried by the wind.

It was as if the last months had built up to this one perfect night. The awkwardness quickly dissipated between the two and raw passion took over. Robert heard something fall over and break as they were shedding clothes on the way to the bedroom, but he simply stepped over where he thought it was and continued trying to keep her lips occupied with his.

Once in the bedroom, the moonlight shown through the undressed window and Robert took a moment to admire Asmita from the ground up. Her toes were painted a deep blue (his favorite color) and wiggled nervously. Her thin ankles transformed into well-shaped calves.

"You have tiny kneecaps," Robert said seriously with a smirk.

"That's all you have to say?!" Asmita threw a pillow from her bed at him before pulling back the comforter. She stood anxiously waiting for him, but he was still taking in the sight of her.

Asmita's thighs curved perfectly for her hips which dove into her tiny waist. *Just like Jeanine's,* his subconscious whispered. Robert shook his head to rid himself of the comparison while taking a step towards her. *Perfect breasts,* he thought instead as he stared just a little longer at her perky chest. He could see her excitement in her hardened nipples which he wanted to tease with his tongue and teeth.

Asmita swallowed nervously as she watched Robert look her over. She knew he wasn't judging her. "I think you need to get a little closer," she commented playfully.

"Mmm... definitely," he practically groaned and closed the gap even more.

By the time they were together again, Robert had studied Asmita's entire body. She wasn't a prize, but a treasure, and when he lowered her to the bed, he gazed at her with honest tenderness and desired nothing more than to take care of this beautiful woman.

The night was intense and passionate. Neither were disappointed, but both sufficiently exhausted by the time the sun started to rise. Nestled against each other, they both fell into a deep, satisfied sleep.

Asmita woke first and was admiring Robert while he slept. He felt her eyes on him and smiled before speaking. "Good morning, beautiful," he said without thinking. But it was too late. The words he'd spoken to his bride the last time he'd felt this blissful, the last moments of her life. He took it from her as if he had pulled the trigger himself.

"We're way past morning. It's nearly four in the afternoon." Asmita laughed and continued touching Robert tenderly.

He stiffened and froze, seemingly from the realization of how late it was. It wasn't the reason. "Shit. I should go," he grumbled, trying to keep the panic from his voice, trying to keep the pain and the emotion from spilling out in front of this perfect woman.

"Why are you leaving?" Asmita asked, her brows furrowing together as her fingers were forced to retract when Robert stood.

There was only silence and Robert looking around for lost articles of clothing.

"Will I see you later?" she attempted.

Robert practically jumped into his pants and nodded in her direction, but didn't answer. He made the mistake of looking into her eyes that seemed to be able to see the truth in his soul and his heart squeezed tightly in his chest.

With a quick kiss on Asmita's forehead and his shoes in hand, Robert left the apartment, running down the stairs to his car. His heart would've been racing anyway, but the excuse of exerting himself provided some comfort as he sped away from her.

Robert was exhausted. The gallons of caffeine were finally wearing off and the weight of the journey had gotten to him. Without thinking, he laid on the cold ground, head on the grave site, and closed his eyes. He felt a dead leaf brush over his legs and another past his face, but he didn't move.

The cold was almost comforting, the silence welcome, the loneliness deserved. Robert would remain there until he could forgive himself or until he joined his wife in whatever afterlife awaited him (likely much warmer). Asmita drifted in and out of his thoughts, as did Jeanine. Even Lorraine had moments of consideration while the broken man surrendered to unconscious thoughts.

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