

Riches to Rags

By Veronica Sullivan

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Chapter One

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Student counsel is serious business.

Now, read it again, only this time add 100 times more sarcasm.

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes again. Amanda, the one sitting at the back with her boobs popping out and her blonde hair shining in its platinum glory, fixed me with a dopey look. And no, she wasn't high or just came back from smoking pot, she always had that expression on.

“Okay so like, y'know how prom is coming up and everything? Well I think that like, we should focus our attention on that and stuff,” she said.

“Amanda, for the last time I will tell you this; prom is months away. We need to focus our attention on the fundraiser for Haiti.”

“What's wrong with Heidi?” she turned to look at the girl across the room who was unfortunately named Heidi.

“Oh dear God she's a fucking moron,” I mumbled. I looked over at Amanda's boyfriend, Rex. “Can you explain to her the situation in Haiti while I get this meeting going?” Not that I could trust him with that considering if you add both of their IQ's together you get 50. I just really needed her to shut-up.

“Anyways, our main concern is beating St. Andrew's. Last year they had 500 more dollars than us when we tallied our fund-raising money up, and this year we need to beat their asses into the ground.”

“Shouldn't we care about the money we raise for Haiti, not to beat St. Andrew's? If we're only raising

money to beat them, we're not really having our hearts put into this and in the end I don't think we even deserve to qualify for the Leadership Award." Derek said. He pushed his glasses up his nose with his index finger and fixed me with a glare.

"Whatever. Does it really matter what our intentions are? The money still goes to Haiti."

"Wow," he said. I rolled my eyes and looked at the rest of the student counsel.

"So I want flyers done by tomorrow and hung up around the school by second period. I want some people to go around to each classroom and let everyone know that Haiti needs us. Make sure you say some sappy shit that'll get the teachers donating too. This year we are not coming in second place."

"Hear hear!" Amanda shouted from the back. Then she snorted and laughed. I narrowed my eyes and picked up my binder from the desk I had been standing by, glancing at the time.

"Well, I guess we can all go home. Make sure you have the flyers done, Beth," I yelled over the commotion of everyone gathering their things and shuffling out. Beth was our Counsel artist and school-wide, two-faced bitch.

On my way out I hunted down Nancy, our secretary. I shoved my binder into her arms and forced a smile.

"Nancy, can you type out my notes and have them done for tomorrow? Printed and stapled? Thanks."

"Alexis, I- I can't." I looked at her again, almost shocked as she started putting my binder back into my arms.

"What do you mean, you can't? You're the secretary, that's your job."

"But, see, my dad is sick and I have to go to the hospital,"

"Do you think I fucking care about that?" I hissed. Her daddy wasn't going to die, this was the third time he's been in the hospital this month. She could stand to type out a few paragraphs.

"But, I- I,"

"Have it done by tomorrow or you're off student counsel, okay?" I smiled and slapped the binder back into her hands, walking away feeling mighty proud of myself.

“She's not even President,” someone muttered. I turned and looked at Beth, who looked flustered that I had heard her.

“No, I'm not, but I'm taking charge. It's what this fucking school needs.”

“Wow, do you always have to swear?”

“It gets the point across.”

Sure, I may not be President, but our real one was off on vacation or whatever, and our student council needed someone to take charge and run the show. Since no one stepped up “or did it right” I appointed myself President for the time being. And no, the vice-president was no help. He barely showed up to the meetings, and only got the VP spot by being popular.

Anyways, student council was the least of my worries. With college acceptance letters supposedly rolling in this time of the month, I had to make sure I got into my first choice, which would be the University of Toronto, way out east in Ontario. I lived in Calgary, so it'd be a huge experience for me to get away from this town I've lived in my whole life and start networking in a different part of the country.

Hands went over my eyes as I grabbed my bag in my locker. I smiled.

“Jake, you sure do know how to surprise a lady,” I said sarcastically in a fake southern accent. He leaned down and kissed my cheek. I turned and wrapped my arm around his neck, smiling warmly into his brown eyes.

“How was your day?” he asked.

“Ugh, don't get me started. The student council is filled with retards,” I said. He smiled, leaning down to kiss me on the lips.

When he pulled away I smiled at him again. “How was yours?”

“Same old same old. I can't believe they still let me in here though,” he laughed. Jake and I have been together since I was in grade 11 and he in grade 12. It was easy enough to stay together once he went off to college, considering it was still in town and practically down the road from my high school.

“I don't have to be home until 7...,” I murmured, trailing off. Jake laughed and grabbed my bag for me.

“Wan'na come to my house and play some xbox?” he asked.

“Sure, even though you know I'm going to kick your ass.”

“Oh really?”

“Yes, really,” I said as we began heading out. His house was just a block away, so the cold April weather didn't really bother me.

“I might get hard... to beat.”

“Well I want to play with you... on xbox.” Jake laughed.

“Stop, you're getting me excited.” I reached down and linked hands with him. My life may not be perfect but I was happy exactly where I was. If anything was going to change this, what I had going on, I'd fight it. I'd fight it with a passion.

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We got to Jake's house and immediately got to action. His lips met mine hungrily at the door as I was still fumbling to close it. My hands snaked up into his short brown hair, and I wrapped one leg around his waist. He picked me up easily and carried me over to his apartment's living room couch, pressing me into the cushions comfortably.

This was as far as we've ever gone, and it was as far as I was comfortable with. He never pressured me to do anything more, and I never asked for anymore. I had always thought it was a comfortable arrangement, but this day I felt like something was off.

His hands reached up my shirt, and I pushed them away, trying not to get distracted by the uncomfortable feeling I got when he did that. I gripped his forearms, trying to hold his arms still, but his hands slid up my shirt again.

“Jake, stop,” I gasped, pushing him away.

“Why?”

“I’m, I”

Lexy, he sighed. I inwardly cringed. I hated that nickname. “I’m a college student now. All my friends are with girls every weekend. What would they do if they found out I’m still a virgin, or haven’t even seen my girlfriend fully naked yet?”

“I just don’t feel comfortable”

“It’s me, Lexy, how can you not feel comfortable? Besides, I’ve touched your boobs before. Why is now any different?”

“Because you’re on top of me, and I can tell you want it to lead to something more.”

“Of course I want it to lead to more. Alexis, I love you, I do, and I’m not trying to pressure you, but I think its time we took our relationship to the next level.”

“I...” I pinched my lips shut and looked at him, sitting there all cute and loving. He was right, though. All my friends weren’t virgins, so why was I holding out? I sat up and touched the hem of my shirt.

“Okay,” I said. My voice shook and I cleared my throat. “Okay.”

“Okay what?” Jake asked.

“I’m ready.” He smiled at me, kissing my lips hastily as he took my shirt off. His hands brushed against my chest, and his kiss trailed off my chin and down to the base of my neck.

Thoughts flew through my head and I swallowed nervously. I talked when I was nervous, so I did the only thing that came naturally to me.

“So, all those times we were making out, were you picturing it going further, or did it just pop into your head now?” he didn’t reply. I linked my hands in his hair as his fingers undid the button on my jeans.

“Did you expect me to hold out this long? Did I hold out too long? I’m sorry, I didn’t realize that”

“Alexis, stop!” he pulled up and sat back on the couch, staring at me.

“What? What's wrong?”

“I think it's time you went home.”

“Aren't you,” I was about to ask, “aren't we going to do it?” but then I realized I didn't want to do it. The regret and nervousness filling me wasn't normal. Or maybe I wasn't normal for not wanting it, but whatever.

I grabbed my shirt and pulled it on, standing on shaky legs and heading for the door.

“Jake?”

“Alexis, just leave.” I bit my lip and left his apartment. Did I do something wrong? Why was he acting like this, like I was repulsive for not wanting to do what he wanted?

I sighed and reached into my bag, pulling my hoodie out and slipping into it. I checked my watch, not sure what time it was since the student counsel meeting had gone on a little longer than natural. I was surprised to see it was only 5:30.

“I guess I'm spending the night with the fam-jam,” I sighed.

My dad owned a chain of restaurants inside and around the Calgary area. I don't want to brag, but we're the type of family where money just isn't that much of a problem. My dad even said to me that money is no problem for my schooling, that any school I go to I will have enough money to attend.

My step-mom was a whole different story. I was pretty sure the only reason she stayed with my dad was because of the money he shovelled into her purse. They constantly fought, so pretty much the only reason my hooker-for-a-step-mom stayed was because of the money.

I walked up the driveway of our house, jingling the keys in my hand. The house should be empty until 6:30, when the Hooker gets home from her job as a prostitute.

No, I'm kidding. She doesn't have a job. She usually spends her days out with her “girlies” trying to be young again, or her boyfriend. She thinks I don't know about him, but I've seen them together on the street enough to know my Dad's isn't the only bed she sleeps in.

I got home and made myself a sandwich, heading upstairs only when I heard the front door open and the

Hooker walk in.

I tried not to think about the incident at Jake's house, but it was hard not too. I felt awkward and uncomfortable thinking about it, but I tried going over and over of what exactly happened. My talking is what ended it, I knew. It had saved my dignity and virginity, but had possibly ruined the relationship between Jake and I. I couldn't help it though; babbling was a bad habit I get when I'm extremely nervous.

But what got me the most was that this was Jake; I had never been nervous around him before, not even back when we were in the first awkward stages of dating. If I was nervous around him, I was surely doomed to a life of awkward loneliness and â€“

â€œAlexis!â€• my father yelled. That meant it was dinner time. I headed downstairs to enjoy another disgustingly healthy meal cooked by my step-mom and eaten in silence as I tried very hard not to listen to the Hooker ramble on about pointless shit.

Then I headed to bed, in what I thought would be another normal night.

Oh, how I was so very wrong.

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Chapter Two

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I awoke in the middle of the night to what I thought was nothing. I didn't think much of it, because I'm a light sleeper and I usually wake up to the littlest things; like my cat, Angel, curling up beside me, or the wind howling or the dust particles under my bed moving.

I glanced at the clock beside my bed as I curled up to fall asleep again, squinting to see it in the moonlight. It was 2:45 am, on a " I struggled to remember what day it was through my hazy, sleep-filled brain " Thursday morning.

The door creaked and I assumed it was my cat, coming to cuddle with me again.

I shifted over to one side of the bed, kissing my lips together to invite her over.

"Come here, Angel," I whispered. I waited a minute, and when she didn't come I brushed it off and closed my eyes.

I was just about to fall into sleep again when I felt something brush my arm. I reached over to pet Angel, but instead of meeting soft fur, a hand grabbed mine and pulled my arm behind me, making me yelp in pain.

They pulled me off my bed and I hit the floor hard, my forehead smashing against my nightstand table.

"Holy fuck I'm being robbed!" I screamed. The person on top of me grabbed at my arm again, but this time I thrashed under them, trying to get out, get away. I needed to wake my dad up, or my step-mom, so I opened my mouth to scream.

The person on top of me, dressed in black, reached down and stuffed my mouth with my own bed sheets. I gagged as they pinned my right arm down and grabbed my left, stretching it out.

I struggled again, but their weight on my chest was making me sluggish and weak. I saw them reach down for my arm, and in the moonlight streaming in from my balcony window, I saw a needle glint.

I don't know what I thought then, just that I needed to get away. Whatever they were doing couldn't be good. I resisted and squirmed and tried to scream and did all I could, but as soon as that needle punctured my arm, my eyelids began to shut.

“Finally,” the robber said gruffly. Just as I was falling asleep, I felt my body being dragged away.

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I woke up several times, unsure if what I was seeing was dream or reality. I remember opening my eyes once, and seeing streetlights flashing by. I didn't realize it at the time, but I was being kidnapped. I don't know how long we travelled, or what they were doing to my body while I slept, but I woke up to see early morning light streaming in through the car window.

“She's awake,” someone said. I felt a prick in my arm and immediately I fell back to sleep.

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I don't know how much time passed, but when I finally was able to open my eyes, I was so drugged-up I couldn't move. I just stared at a streetlight, unable to get up off the ground, unable to understand where I was, and unable to do little more than blink.

I couldn't even think. At that moment, I didn't know who I was, all I could do was stare at that light and wonder if what had happened was a dream. So much time had passed, and yet there was so little I could remember. It felt like I had been robbed of life.

And as my memories started to come together, I tried to find reason to what had happened. Why? Why did they take me? Why did they live me and not kill me? Where did they take me? Why? Why? Why?

When I was finally able to move my arms, I attempted to lift myself up off the ground. I got halfway up and collapsed back into the pavement.

Pain started to register in my mind at that moment. My left arm was throbbing, and when I looked at it, it was covered in bruises.

What had they done to me?

My head was throbbing and when I reached up and pulled my fingers away, they were covered in blood.

My hand was shaking, and there were cuts all over my arms.

What was going on? Where was I?

I pushed myself up on my elbows, my arms shaking from exhaustion. My muscles were weak and not used to moving, so it made me wonder how long I had been asleep. I struggled to remember what day it was when I had gone to bed, but even that was lost to me.

I pushed myself up farther until I was sitting, slumped forward and trying to get my body working. I didn't think about crying, or being scared, I just needed to get up.

When I got to my feet, I took in my surroundings and felt a sliver of panic ride up my spine. I didn't recognize where I was, not the street or any of the buildings.

I had been laying face-down in an alley, weak and susceptible to rapists and murderers and whatever else kind of freaks there were out here, wherever "here" was. I struggled to step out onto the street, and saw it was almost deserted.

"Where the fuck am I?" I asked. What finally scared me was how weak my voice was.

I pushed all these thoughts aside, of what could have happened while I was in my drug-induced sleep, what probably happened, and instead focused on lurching down the street.

I passed by a dark shop with a huge window, and almost cried at who stared back at me in the reflection. My blonde hair was dingy and stringy, my face was covered in spots of blood and dirt, and my blue eyes were red-rimmed and hazy.

What had happened to me?

I needed answers, and the fact that I was hopeless to getting any made me want to scream in frustration.

I kept on walking until I reached a main street, where cars were passing by at a steady rate. Several people were walking on the sidewalk, and I tried to ignore the fact that they crossed the street to avoid me.

I wasn't some homeless person, I was Alexis Jones, I had a future " a university degree was waiting for me " and I wasn't poor, underneath the grime my clothes were designer-label.

Why did this happen?

The more I walked, the more I was able to remember. The day I was kidnapped had been a Thursday, sometime in early-April. I had been kidnapped while sleeping, and when I looked down I realized I was not in my pj's. Who had changed my clothes?

I plucked at the shirt I was wearing. It was a scratchy hoodie, cheaply made in some superstore. I looked down at my legs and saw bright blue jeans under the dirt, something I would never wear.

I wanted to cry.

I was not someone who walked around looking like some charity-case. I had always been presentable, and knowing that I was walking these streets looking like some fucking hobo just broke my heart and made me want to scream.

Why was this happening to me? What did I do to deserve this?

I stumbled by a restaurant, at first not interested until I glanced inside and saw they had a calendar. I opened the door and practically ran to it. The only Thursdays in early April had been the 1st and the 8th and I knew immediately that I had not been kidnapped on the first, since that was way too early in the month.

A restaurant worker was walking up to me wearily. I spun, and realized I was practically hyperventilating.

“What day is it?” I asked.

“Um, ma'am, I'm sorry but we're going to have to ask you to leave.”

“What?”

“We don't give out freebies to your type, sorry. Not my choice, it's the mana,”

“Where am I? What day is it?”

“It's uh... what?” he looked confused, like he couldn't believe this retard didn't know where they were. I felt my anger build and honestly, I didn't mean to snap at him.

“Am I speaking fucking Swedish? What day is it!”

“Ma'am, you're going to have to leave.” he reached for my elbow and I dodged him, narrowing my eyebrows.

“I will as soon as you tell me what day it is!”

“It's the 14th! Holy crap, can you leave now?” The 14th, which meant it was a Wednesday. Which meant I had been gone for almost a week. Which meant I had been asleep for almost a week. Which meant a number of possibilities could have happened to my body while my mind was gone.

“Oh please God, let nothing bad have happened to me,” I whispered as I left the restaurant. **“Please, I beg you.”**

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I stumbled around a bit more, asking strangers on the street where I was. None of them spoke to me, they all just shot me a look and quickened their pace. By now I was too scared to wonder if I looked like a crazy-person, I just needed answers.

I needed them.

I walked the streets, unsure where I was going or what I was doing until I saw something, up in the distance. It was almost night by this time, and the wind was picking up, blowing my disgusting hair into my face.

In the distance, I saw the C.N. Tower, something I had never seen in real life, considering I lived hundreds of kilometres away from it. The only reason I recognized it was because I had seen it in my textbook in Geography class.

The C.N. Tower was in fucking Toronto.

“How the fuck did I get here!?” I screamed. Calgary and Toronto were as far from each other as the moon and the earth as much as I was concerned. I knew no one in Toronto, knew no one I could go to to get back to my home, knowing only that this was where I wanted to come for University.

My knees shook and gave out from under me. I collapsed on the pavement, my head down on the sidewalk as my body shook with tears.

“How did I get here?” I sobbed. “I want... I want to go home, I want to be in my bed again. I want to see and my Dad and everyone and I “ I “,“ everything after that was gibberish as I broke into sobs, crying on sidewalk until my tears were dried out.

After that initial panic, I went into a sort of trance. How was I suppose to get home? How was I suppose to convince people I wasn't a hobo when I looked like one?

My dad... I missed him, even if we didn't have the best relationship. Oh God, how I missed him. I wish I could call “

“That's it!“ I gasped. I could call my dad and he would arrange for me to get picked up and sent back home. I just needed money, and I knew exactly where to get some considering I had passed a source of money on the way.

I traced my steps back to a fountain in the middle of a park. I didn't care about looking like a crazy, I jumped into that fountain and started grappling around for quarters, grabbing more than two just in case I needed to make more calls in the future. Then I took off before someone could alert a park security guard or get the cops to come and arrest me.

I almost laughed when I found a set of pay phones and started dialling. Considering it was a long-distance call, I had to chose the option to make it a collect call.

“Please say you're name after the beep,“ the operator said. I excitedly shouted “Alexis!“ knowing troubles would soon be over.

The phone rang.

My heart was thumping like crazy.

It rang again.

And again.

And... again.

Finally, my dad's voice-mail came on.

“Hello, you have reached Simon Jones. Me and my sweetheart aren't home and we don't plan on being home for awhile. Leave you're name and number and I'll get back to you when we get back.”

“Dad! It's Alexis. I “ I don't know how I got here, but I'm in Toronto, and I'm so scared, and I've been out cold since the 8th and it's the 14th now and Dad, I'm so scared and I don't know what to do so please help me. I'll go to the police and get them to call your cell or something. I love you”,

The message ended with a beep and I hung the phone up, gnawing on my lip nervously. My dad wasn't home, and he didn't plan on being home for awhile?

Was he out looking for me? Or was he too upset for business calls?

As soon as he heard that message though, I knew everything would be okay.

Now I just needed to find a police station and tell them all what was happening. Maybe they'd let me stay with them until my dad calls back. He'd be smart enough to know to call the Toronto Police, because he knew that's exactly where I'd go, and if they let me use their phone again, I'd give him another call and tell him where exactly I'd be.

I let myself smile.

I'd be home tomorrow night, at the latest. And this would be an adventure to tell. Me, being kidnapped and dragged across the country “

I let my thoughts stop, because that panic was bubbling up in my chest again. The important questions still remained; Why did they do this, and what did they do to me while I was knocked out?

I headed off down the street just as the streetlights were flickering on.

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Chapter Three

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“What do you mean you don't believe me?” I asked the police officer. He perked one attractive blonde eyebrow at me and crossed his arms.

“What I'm saying is, you look like a street kid, you smell like a street kid. If you're doing all this lying to try and get a place to stay, it ain't here. There's a homeless shelter down “,”

“I'm not going to a homeless shelter!” I yelled. His jaw snapped shut and he glared at me.

“Well you ain't staying here.”

“Look, my name is Alexis Jones, look me up “ I was kidnapped from Calgary and brought to Toronto, and all I need is to call my dad to prove it to you.”

“Right, dragged all the way from Calgary to here and for what? I highly doubt a kidnapper would just let you go after bringing you miles away from home.”

“I'm telling the truth!”

“Sure.” He turned and looked over his shoulder at a dark cop who was standing there with a quizzical look on his face. He sipped at a cup of coffee daintily, his eyebrows raised up to his hairline.

“Can I just call my dad? I'll prove it to you.”

“You know what? Fine, here, have your phone call.” The cute blonde cop passed me a cordless phone from the front desk. I took it and sat down in a plastic blue chair in the waiting room.

“It's going to be long distance,” I told him.

“No shit.”

'Fuck off.' I thought. The police in Toronto were so rude and disrespectful. My dad would probably give them a reward or something for helping me “ well, not anymore. Not after the way they treated me.

The phone rang and I felt my stomach plummet. My dad still wasn't home, even though it was about 9:00 at night. I dialled his cell phone when the cop turned to whisper to his friend, and still got voice-mail.

“Hey Dad, it's me, Alexis, again. Um, I'm with the Toronto police so if you could give them a call when you get this message? Yeah... Dad, I'm scared and I don't know what's happening... so, love you. Bye.”

I hung up and the blonde cop approached me again, flipping open his notebook.

“So let me get this straight. You were kidnapped, from your home, almost a week ago, and you magically appeared in Toronto from Calgary. What happened during the past days? Do you not remember anything?”

“I was drugged,” I snapped.

“Right. Now, tell me, how much of this bullshit do you expect me to believe? If you really are the daughter of a rich restaurant owner who was kidnapped in her own home, wouldn't you face be up everywhere? On the news, in the paper, on the internet? So why haven't I heard anything?”

“I don't know but please “ you have to believe me.”

“Sorry, you're going to have to leave now.”

“But what do I do now?!” I yelled as he grabbed my forearm and led me to the door.

“Look, we'll keep your story on record just in case, but until we get some evidence we just can't believe this.

It's way too far-fetched.

“You think that I don't know that?! I need help! Please!”

“I'm sorry,” he said, even though his tone of voice said he wasn't sorry at all. “As far as I'm concerned seem like some street-kid trying to hitch a ride to Calgary or trying to get somewhere warm and dry to sleep for the night. Are you running from something? Get in trouble with them older street-kids out there?”

“I'm not a fucking street-kid! I'm on the honour roll at St. Margret's in Calgary! I'm on the fucking student council!”

“Watch your language, Missy,” the cop said. He reached for the doorknob and held the door open for me. I shoved myself away from him and shot him the dirtiest look I could muster.

“You're a fucking faggot. A low-life faggot, how could you turn a young girl away? Now I'm probably going to get raped or murdered on these God-forsaken streets.” He stared at me, and I felt my breath coming in short rasps of anger.

“No rapist would touch you with a ten-foot pole, not with that stench.”

“Fuck you!” I screamed and stomped away.

I let my tears bubble over. I had no plans now, no goals, no ideas to get me out of this situation. I was trapped, and hopeless. How long was I going to wander these streets for? I had no cell phone, no way of letting my dad contact me. How was I going to get home?

I stumbled down another street, trying to out-run the rainclouds that were rolling in, trying to find a place I could hunker down for the night away from the rain.

I missed Jake. Sure, we had gotten into a fight a mere week ago, but he probably regretted throwing me out like that. He was probably torn up that I was missing, the whole school was probably doing fund raising events to try and find me.

I let my mind wander as I walked down the street. I wondered if my strange kidnappers had fed me while I was out, considering my stomach was only just starting to growl. I also let my imagination wander, from the horrors of what they did to me while my mind was gone, to the imaginary world where Jake would pull up in his car and whisk me away.

Oh, how I missed him. I'd give anything to be in his arms again, anything. I'd even have sex with him if it meant I'd be back with him again, safe and sound in Calgary.

I found an old, rusted can of beans on the sidewalk and started kicking it. I was in hobo-country now, I could tell. I had already stumbled over two of them, sleeping on grates and wrapped up in blankets. They had woken up and cursed at me, one threatening to chase me down the street and hog-tie me, whatever that was.

I kept walking until my feet wanted to give out. I leaned against the brick wall and slowly slid until I was sitting. I folded my knees up to my chest and linked my fingers, staring straight ahead as the rain began to fall.

“At least I'll be clean,” I mumbled. As clean as germ-infested rain water could get me.

I only thought about trying to find shelter once, when the thought of hypothermia popped into my head. But if I got that, then I could go to the hospital, a report would be made about me and my dad could find me.

So I sat there in the rain for a long time, until my body began to shiver. I pulled my hood up over my head and tried not to think. If I thought, my mind would get carried away.

Instead, I tried to dream, but no matter how hard I tried, I could not fall asleep.

My eyes snapped open as a car passed, its headlights lighting up the wall in front of me, the alley ahead, the “

Wait. In the alley, did I just see some sort of can? Can of food?

I shoved myself off the wall and ripped across the road, collapsing in front of the full, unopened can of pineapples.

“How to open it?” I murmured. I looked up and my mouth dropped open in shock.

There, in front of me, was not only a piece of tin over two dumpsters “ a fairly sized shelter “ but several more cans filled with different varieties of food.

“I'm in heaven,” I gasped, crawling into the little shelter. I started rooting through the other things, and

among them I found a can-opener, a pair of scissors and a sharpened, clean knife with ridges in it.

“I'm a lucky bitch,” I murmured as I struggled to pin the can-opener onto the lid of pineapples. “A fuckin' lucky bitch. There is a God out there,” I sighed.

“What the fuck?” I heard someone yelp. I jumped to my feet and smacked my head on the tin roof, the can of pineapples flying off. The piece of tin slid off the dumpsters and exposed the small, confined space to the rain.

Someone stepped out of the shadows with a grocery bag. I pressed up against the wall, my breath hitching into my throat.

“Don't hurt me, homeless man. I didn't know this place was yours. I didn't,” he advanced on me, his fist ducked, turned, and saw he wasn't going to punch me, just grab the tin roof and place it back on top of the dumpsters.

“Who the fuck do you think you are?” he yelled as soon as he got the roof set right. He spun and looked at me, and from this point of view the light from the streetlamp hit his face.

His face was relatively clean, and he had a black mess of hair falling onto his forehead and partially obscuring his eyes, and yet he couldn't be older than 19, there was age in his eyes.

“I'm like I said, I'm sorry. I didn't know this place was occupied.”

“Of course it's fucking occupied, there was food here wasn't there? Maybe not anymore considering you helped your fat-ass self to some of my cans.”

“Chill the hell out, I'm sorry, I was just really hungry.”

“We're all really hungry,” he snapped, “That's why it's one versus the world out here. Every man for himself. He looked me up and down, then shook his head and turned away to fix his tin roof.

“What?”

“You're new to this.”

“No, I'm not” “I'm not a hobo. I just, I need to find my dad.”

“Right. Well uh, fuck off? 'Kay? This is my place, so go find your own and don't ever try and eat my food again.”

“You're an asshole.”

“It's how you gotta be if you're gonna survive.” He crawled under his roof and looked at me. I turned and was going to leave until I felt a blast of hot air come out from a vent as I walked by.

I turned back and planted myself in front of it, curling my legs up and tucking my chin onto my knees. If I couldn't be dry then I'd be warm, and I was far enough away from that creature to not have to listen to him eat his stupid cans.

“You're blocking my heater!” he yelled at me.

“You can fuck off!” I yelled back, not even thinking about who I was talking to. I watched him start shifting around in his little shelter, afraid he'd come at me with his knife. I even prepared myself to run but instead, his legs stretched out comfortably and I saw him pop off a lid from a can.

He used the knife to scoop the piece of fruit into his mouth, and I couldn't help but grimace at how much of a disgusting, low-life, hobo pig he was.

What did I expect, though? He was some street-kid. Was I really expecting manners out here?

My eyelids began to bob when the rain died down a bit, and despite being weary about how close I was to that freak under the tin roof, I let myself fall asleep.

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Chapter Four

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I woke up probably not four hours later. The night was still very dark, but I could see streaks of blue lighting the cloudless sky. My whole body ached. The events from yesterday and my uncomfortable sleeping position all factored into the aches in every joint and limb in my body.

I stretched my legs out and groaned in pain, my leg muscles protesting against the movement.

“Okay,” I whispered, leaning down to massage my cramped legs, “If you stop hurting I won't use you today. That's a good deal, right? We'll just sit here all day.”

They didn't seem to hear me since they continued hurting, so I stretched all my limbs out and looked out onto the street. It had to be early in the morning, around the time when all the party people were going to bed and all the workers were rising since there weren't that many cars passing, and I couldn't hear any traffic noises in the distance.

I tried not to think about what I had to do today, which was somehow find a way to contact my dad again, just in case he got my messages from earlier. That was the only thing I had to go on, to keep calling my dad and hope one day he'd answer. Otherwise, I was trapped here.

I sucked in a deep breath, my lower lip quivering. I was not going to be left here, not me. This kind of thing happened to people, but it didn't happen to me. I would not be left here, I was going home no matter what, even if I have to bribe, steal and trick my way into getting back to Calgary.

I heard shuffling and looked over in the direction it came from, almost having a heart attack when the guy from last night rose to his feet. I hadn't remembered he was there.

Rolling over onto my side, I pinched my eyes shut and pretended I was asleep as he passed by. When he approached, I felt my body tense. He did have a knife and I had upset him last night. Even though logic told me he had all night to kill me, I was still almost surprised when all he did was trip over my foot, curse a bit, and continue walking.

I let out a sigh and sat up when the echoing of his footsteps disappeared down the road. Sitting up, I scrambled over to his shelter, grabbing a couple cans of food and his can-opener.

In all honesty, I didn't even really think about what I was doing. All I knew was that my body was screaming, “feed me! Feed me!” and I had to comply. It's not like he would suffer any, though, he had about twenty cans stored up in his stupid little shelter, he wouldn't miss three.

I tore down the street then, my muscles whining in protest. I put the can-opener in my hoodie pocket and

juggled the cans in my arms, trying not to drop any as I ran.

“Hey!” someone yelled. I looked over my shoulder and saw, with a pang of fear, the guy from last night hadn't left exactly. He was taking a leak down the road and was in full view of me and the cans in my arms.

“Shit!”

“You fucking thief!” he yelled, zipping up his pants and running after me. “I'm gonna kill

I turned my head back and pushed myself to run harder and faster. The guy was taller, with way longer legs than me. He could catch up to me easily if we ran in a straight line, so I'd have to veer to avoid being caught.

I took a hard left into an alleyway, praying there wouldn't be a fence blocking the path. Luckily, there wasn't. I jumped over a fallen trash can, hearing his footsteps behind me picking up.

Veering right, I saw a street up ahead. I did a quick judgement in my head and decided I'd dash into the traffic.

In dodge-ball I had been the best dodger. Now, I'm not a retard so I know the difference between a hard, small dodge-ball and a hard, big car. I knew one was easier to dodge than the other, but I was willing to risk getting hit rather than having my face carved up by the psychopath chasing me.

I dashed onto the road, my eyes darted back and forth to take in all the cars around me. There weren't that many, and I made it across the road without incident, to my disappointment. That meant that the little detour I had pulled in hopes of losing the guy chasing me hadn't slowed him down. He probably caught up a bit, considering we had run in a straight line down the alley and across the road.

Glancing over my shoulder, my suspicions were confirmed. I could almost feel his breath down my neck, and I knew immediately at that moment that this would not end well.

I darted in between two buildings, only to see a chain link fence towering over me. I spun, saw the homeless guy at the entrance of the building, and spun around again, using one hand to hold the cans and the other to start climbing.

“Nuh-uh, no way are you crawling your way out of this,” he murmured. I felt someone grab the hood of my sweatshirt and tug. I fell backward, my head hitting the pavement. An explosion of lights lit up my eyes as

I blinked and struggled to focus.

“Can you stop robbing me?”

“I ‘ I ‘, I couldn't think, couldn't formulate an excuse in my head. I was hungry, that was all. And stole them I hadn't been thinking.

“I ‘ I ‘.' Oh, shut up. You sound like a fucking baby.” He reached behind into his pocket and pulled knife. I watched it glint in the sunlight and tried to swallow. My mind was racing as I tried to think of an escape route, the only good one that popped into my head required me throwing the cans at him and running.

He leaned down over me, his thighs pressing into my knees. The tip of his knife went to my throat and I blinked hard, trying to focus on anywhere other than his dirt-streaked face.

“You listen to me, 'kay? You steal my things again and I will hurt you. I will fucking make you wish you had never been born.”

You pulled the knife upward, the tip dragging along my cheek lightly.

“You're pathetic,” he said, “You're not going to last out here if you keep acting the way you

“I don't plan on staying out here much longer.”

“So you're just some punk-ass kid thinking she can get her kicks by pretending to be a street-kid? Robbing the legit ones, planning on going back to your friends and laughing over it? Hmm? Is that how you think in that little retarded brain of yours?”

“Excuse me?” I said. “Retarded? Getting kicks? Yeah, okay. You don't even know what the fuck is going

“Shut the fuck up.” He said, pulling his knife back and tucking it into his pocket. He crouched down in front of me and took the cans from my trembling hands. I hadn't realized until now that he had a backpack slung over his shoulder.

As he began putting the cans in his bag, I scrambled up and away from him, crawling backwards until I hit the wall. My stomach growled in protest, whining because the only source of food I had was being taken away.

I was scared, hungry, tired, exhausted and alone. I didn't know what to do, didn't know how I was going to survive.

And then an idea popped into my head randomly. What if I walked it to Calgary? Sure it would take awhile, and sure it'd be a hell of a long walk, but I could make it. Maybe hitch a ride or two in a trailer, or sucker an old couple into buying me dinner every night.

I stood, proud that I had thought of a new idea to get me out of here. I turned toward the guy and jumped in surprise, considering he was standing right beside me.

He pointed a finger at my face.

“Don't tell anyone about this,” he said. I felt something cool press into my fingers and when I looked down, was almost shocked at what I saw. He was pressing one of the cans I had stolen into my hand.

I looked up into his eyes, hidden under his dirty, lanky black hair and attempted to smile.

“Thanks.”

“Whatever. It was dented anyways, probably no good.”

“Hey boys, look who it is!” someone yelled. I turned and saw about five men standing in front of the alleyway entrance, all of them looking menacing. I tucked the can into my hoodie pocket and felt the can-opener graze my fingers. A pang of guilt rode up my spine and I made a mental promise to give it back to the guy.

“If it ain't my little friend Milos,” one of the men said.

“It's Miles,” the guy said through gritted teeth. His chin rose a bit and his eyes slanted, like he was daring them to come and correct him. I tried to press myself against the wall, trying to blend in, trying to stay out of their little hobo-sparring match.

“I thought I told you to stay off my streets, boy,” the same one said. He had a Spanish accent. I looked over and squinted, barely making out their features in the dim light.

“And I thought I told you and your Mexican ass to go back to your country. I was born here you dipshit, I own these streets.”

â€œGo back to my country? I'm a little insulted. That hurt me, Milos, it hurt me real deep.â€• One of the Spanish guy's friends laughed and stuck his hand in his pocket. I didn't have to guess to know he had a pocketknife in there, too.

â€œWhatever,â€• the guy, who I'm assuming his name is 'Miles' said.

â€œNo, not 'whatever.' Back when I told you to keep your ass off my streets? That was your last warning. Now I see you're back in my territory so what am I suppose to feel?â€• he held his arms out and looked around, like he was seriously expecting an answer.

â€œYou're suppose t'feel threatened,â€• one of his gang members said.

â€œExactly,â€• the Spanish guy answered. â€œI'm threatened, and frankly, I don't like it.â€• He stepped forward and me and him made eye contact.

â€œOh, whose your little friend? Got yourself a girlfriend? Or is she just another hooker off the street corner?â€•

â€œHooker?!â€• I yelled. The Spanish guy laughed.

â€œYeah, that's right. You're a hooker. A whore. What, you gonna come here and fight me, sweetheart?â€• My hands clenched but I knew not to get involved. These guys were out looking for a fight, and I was not going to give it to them.

After a moment of silence, the Spanish guy took another step, in my direction.

â€œYou don't say much, Whore.â€• I kept my mouth shut, avoiding the Spanish guy's gaze. He stopped five feet in front of me, smiling an ugly grin.

â€œAin't you gonna say something to me, sweetheart?â€•

â€œNot until you give me a little respect.â€•

â€œRespect? Respect!â€• he laughed. He strode over and grabbed my face, his fingers digging into my cheek. â€œI'll give you all the respect you deserve when your boyfriend he fucks off of my turf. And owes me that five hundred dollars he stole.â€•

“Five hundred dollars? Turf?” I repeated. I tried to smile but his fingers stopped that from happening. I hope you realize that none of you own 'these streets.' The government does.”

“The government owns shit, you retard. You and your tight little whore ass haven't been out here long, have you?” he asked. My eyes shifted over to Miles when his hand went into his pocket. My own hand wrapped around the can in my hoodie pocket, and I was waiting for the perfect moment to bash it on this guy's head.

“Well, we gonna teach you two a lesson on street life eddigut.”

“It's etiquette you dumb shit.” He took a step back, his eyebrows furrowed, his hands clamping into fists.

“What did you say, you fucking whore?”

“You heard me. Dumb. Shit.” His fist flew and I turned, trying to avoid it. He still sucker punched me in the cheek, and through the pain I pulled my hand out of my pocket and bashed his head with the can. When at first he just stood there, I bashed it into his head again. This time I saw a trickle of blood run down the steel on the bottom of the can and I jumped back, fear gripping my heart.

“Oh my God, what ‘?’ What ‘?’” His gang advanced on us as soon as the Spanish guy hit the floor, the drawn. I saw one with rope and wondered if they were going to strangle us to death instead.

When four advanced on me, I raised my hands in surrender. They used the rope to wrap my hands up, then they pulled out the can-opener from my pocket and snickered, insulting me, thinking I was going to use that as a weapon.

I looked over their shoulder and saw 'Miles' was putting up a fight, until the four that were with me turned and helped bring the guy down. They wrapped his fists up and shoved him into me. We bumped and tripped over each other, hitting the brick wall hard.

One guy started slapping the Spanish guy's face and he woke up, blinking rapidly and jumping to his feet.

“You okay boss?” one of them asked.

“Fuck off and get them in the van,” he barked. Hands gripped my arms and dragged me down the alley toward the white van parked down the road. The paint on the car was chipping away, and it was the type of van you'd expect kidnapers to drive.

“Low blow,” I whispered to myself, cringing against the memories I had of being injected with something and dragged kilometres away from home.

They opened the back up, and I had just enough time before they threw me in on my back to notice that the sun was coming up.

It had been officially one week since my kidnapping.

They threw Miles into the van after me, then they shut the door. The only light in there streamed in from a crack between the van doors. I could hear Miles breathing steadily, and my own breath; short, desperate rasps as I struggled to stay calm.

I could hear the gang outside, climbing in and slamming doors. They began blasting music, and I looked at Miles beside me, trying to distinguish his face from the darkness.

“What's happening?”

“You think I know?” he asked. I heard him shift, and as my eyes adjusted to the dark I saw that he rolled onto his side, facing me.

“They didn't take my knife out,” he whispered, “I'm gonna need you to pull it out of my p

“Which one?”

“The left one.” I looked down at his black baggy jeans and sighed.

“Yeah, like I can see where the pocket is in the dark.”

“Just fucking do it, okay? Unless you want to get fucked up by Martinez and his retards I suggest â€”

“How am I suppose to grab your knife if my hands are behind my back?” I heard him sigh and my face twitched slightly in anger.

“You are a retard.”

“Thanks.”

“Flip over so you're back is facing me.”

“Am I supposed to blindly feel my way around your crotch?” I asked as I complied to what he told me to do. I heard more shifting and felt his body press into my back. My cheeks flamed and I wanted to shove him away from me, get his grimy body away from mine.

“No, let me line myself up with your hands. Don't move.” His body slid up my back until what I'm guessing was his pocket lined up with my hand.

“Okay, now reach in and —,” I pushed my hand outward, trying to find the pocket, and his breath gushed across my neck.

“Did I say to fucking grab my crotch? No, the pocket, the pocket.” My cheeks heated even more and I fumbled around, feeling a huge sense of accomplishment when my hand slid into his pants pocket and brushed against the knife.

I grabbed it and he pulled away from me, flipping over again.

“Now hold it steady, pointing outward.” He backed up against me until his hands met mine. He cursed and guessed the knife punctured his skin instead of the rope. Eventually the sound of sawing rope filled the little cabin, and I was glad the idiots were blasting music because I was sure they would've heard otherwise.

When he scrambled away from me I guessed that his rope had cut. His hands grabbed the knife from mine and I watched him in the darkness. He made his way toward the back doors and opened one slightly. The sound of the car driving down the road filled the cabin.

“Wait, are you going to jump out?”

“Yep.”

“Aren't you going to free me?”

“Nope.”

“What the fuck!” I yelled, “I helped you! Don't just leave me here!”

He looked over at me, shutting the van door again.

“Don't you remember what I said? It's one man for himself out here. I just suckered you into helping me, but I'm not gonna get suckered into helping you. I'll see you around. Maybe. I think I'm going to relocate, leave this city.” His hand reached for the door again and my mouth opened and shut incredibly fast in an incredibly small amount of time.

An idea just formed in my mind.

“Wait, I have a proposition.”

“A what?”

“An idea,” I said.

“Not interested.”

“Wait! Here me out, please,” I gasped. I looked at him in the darkness, waiting, expecting him to rip open the van door and leap out onto the street.

That didn't happen.

He looked at me and I took that as a sign to go on.

“I need to get to Calgary, and if you help me out of here I'll reward you.”

“Why Calgary?” he held up his hand. “Wait, don't answer that. I don't care. And a reward? Like I bet that.”

“I'm going to spare you the details, but Calgary is where my father lives, and he has a lot of money, and I can give you the five-hundred you need to pay off what's-his-face, maybe even a little more so you can have all the cans of food you need for the rest of your life.”

“Right,” he dragged the word out like he didn't believe a word I just said.

“Please. Please help me.”

“And if I do, how do I know you aren't suckering me into this, then when we get to Calgary there's no money?”

“Trust me.” He laughed sarcastically and his hand gripped the door handle again. “Or! Or, or, or,” getting his attention back on me. “Look at my back.”

“What the fuck?”

“How much do you think tattoos cost?” he stared at me like he thought I was crazy, his face showing he was debating if he should answer or not.

“I can get a tattoo for free if I just find a needle and ink,” he said finally.

“No, that's gay. I mean, a real tattoo.”

“50 bucks?”

“More like 80 at a professional place. Now lift up my shirt.” He stared at me, and I shifted onto my belly fumbling with the bottom of my shirt. He crawled over slowly and plucked at my hoodie, lifting it halfway up my back. I had gotten a tattoo when I was 16 that said 'Nana's girl,' in a heart with a dove flying over it. It was on the left side of my back, just above the waistline of my jeans.

I had gotten it to remember my grandma, the only pleasant woman who had been in my life since my mom took off a while ago. My Nana had died close to my 16th birthday, and instead of getting my driver's license I got a tattoo for her instead.

“If I had 80 dollars to spare,” I said to Miles as he shifted away from me again, “Would I have been stealing your food? Would I have gotten a tattoo instead of feeding myself?”

“Maybe, if you're one of those dumb craps who spend their money on useless stuff.”

“If I was one of those people, would I have gotten a tattoo that said 'Nana's girl'? No, I would have gotten one that made me look tough, right?” I flipped over and looked at him. “Please, I just really need to get home.”

His eyes met mine, and even though I couldn't see them, I knew we were raging in a hardcore staring competition of decision.

“Fine,” he barked. “I’ll get you to Calgary. I need to leave the city anyways...,” he scratched his head and looked at me. “How good are you at tucking and rolling?” he asked as he sliced the rope off of my hands. I sat up and stared at him.

“What?”

“Tuck your head in.”

“What?!” I gasped. He shoved open the door and barked, “Tuck your head in!” I did as he said, put my arms up over my head and felt myself get shoved out of the back door.

I hit the ground and rolled, the pavement scratching up my arms and shredding my knees as I rolled to the curb.

Once I was safe, I jumped up and saw Miles was half way down the road, brushing the dirt off of his jeans. Walking over to him, I felt weird. Like I never suspected I’d be in an alliance with the jerk hobo who I thought was going to kill me last night while I slept.

He looked at me and I saw a grimace line his features, like he was thinking, “What did I just get myself into?”

“I’m Alexis Jones.”

“Miles,” he said.

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Chapter Five

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It was awkward, to say the least. Miles didn’t say much and when he did, it was usually to complain about

something. I found myself tired of his company already, bored and annoyed every time he swore considering every other word that came out of his mouth was “fuck.”

We were heading off to a truck stop I think, apparently to hitch a ride but I wasn't sure since Miles didn't say much. In all honesty I didn't know how long me and him would stay together. I assumed he would stay with me all the way to Calgary so he could collect the money, but when I thought about it, about the way he was acting “ quiet and moody “ it seemed unlikely that he'd stick around any longer then he had to

Maybe he'd give me his name after he insured I would be getting to Calgary and I could send it to him or something. I wasn't sure, but the longer I hung around with this guy Miles, the more I knew he seemed like the type to slither his way out of a promise but still reap the rewards.

We headed down another street, me walking a few steps behind him. I caught a glimpse of myself in a store window and grimaced at my appearance. It only reminded me of being passed out for a week, and only made me confused and frustrated since I didn't know what happened during this time.

My blonde hair was greasy, coming down to my shoulder blades in tufts of disgusting-looking hair locks. My grey hoodie was smeared with dirt and some other unnameable substances.

I forced myself to look ahead and concentrated on taking steps. By now it was daytime, and I was still starving. Every step felt like it sucked the energy out of me, and I knew I had to eat soon.

I didn't want to tell Miles I was starving because knowing him he'd probably just tell me to suck it up. I decided to wait until he was hungry for both of us to go off and find something to eat.

When that Spanish guy had kidnapped us, his gang had left Miles' backpack in the alleyway, along with the can he had given me and the can-opener I had hidden in my pocket, so we had absolutely nothing except the dingy clothes on our back.

We turned down another street and I could hear a highway in the distance. My heart automatically slammed into my mouth because now it all seemed like a reality “ I was actually going to get to Calgary! I was actually going to see Jake and Dad again.

The noises of the highway filled my senses with something similar to hope. In Canada, one highway could take you all the way across the country. So hearing that highway nearby? Yeah, I was pretty excited and almost one-hundred percent positive that I'd be getting back home to Calgary within a week.

“Okay, you wait here,” Miles said, making me jump considering he hadn't spoken for over an hour. I looked

around and saw we had stopped at a metal gate that blocked off a driveway, "And don't follow me," he added. He walked around the metal gate, shoving his hands into his back pocket.

"Excuse me?" I asked to his retreating back.

"Excuse me?" he mimicked in a high-pitched, whiny voice. I sucked in a deep breath and turned, leaning against the metal gate that barred the entrance to wherever Miles had gone.

We were at a deserted road, or deserted as far as I could tell. No cars were driving by, but maybe that was because there was a factory down the road and a highway overpass crossing over the road and not much else. Not exactly friendly-looking turf.

I turned and looked down the other side of the road. It took a sharp left turn and as far as I could see, there was just some building down across a field.

I sighed and jiggled my foot and craning my neck to try and see where he had gone.

"Wait here. Don't follow me. Bluh bluh I'm so tough 'cause I'm a street kid," I mumbled, turning and hitching my leg up on the metal fence. The building down the driveway where Milos had disappeared was a... mechanic's?

"Bruni's Auto Shop," I read out-loud, my brows furrowing. "Okay, so we're at a mechanics, why...? What was Miles going to get us to Calgary with a magic transporting wrench? We didn't have a car, so coming to an auto-shop was really pointless, unless he had a car hidden in one of the garages.

Which, I seriously doubted, since he seemed so keen on bragging that he was a "real deal street kid."

I put my other leg up and stood on the lowest bar of the gate. At this height, I could see into the little shelter. I could see Miles, but I couldn't see who he was talking to. What was he up to?

I didn't know him, but I knew him long enough to know he was deceitful, a schemer and full of twists and turns. What he could have been doing with that mechanic guy could range from striking a deal with him to blackmailing him into getting a car.

And with these thoughts, I began to wonder why I first trusted him to take me to Calgary in the first place. This whole plan we were knotted into was stupid. It relied on both of us trusting the others promises. I was trusting him to take me to Calgary safely, and he was trusting there would be a reward at the end of it all.

Other than that, we were two strangers, and the only thing we shared was distrust and a bit of hatred.

“You!” I looked up and saw Miles was pointing at me. “Come over here. And get off the gate” it painted. I swung my legs over the bars and jumped down. “Oh yeah, perfect, just climb right over it. Yeah get your grubbiness all over it,” I heard him mutter under his breath.

“My grubbiness?” I repeated. He shot me a look that told me to shut it and started walking back towards the guy he had been speaking to.

“Whats going on?” I asked.

“I got us a deal.”

“Really?”

“Yep.” I rolled my eyes at his back.

“Yeah, okay, when I say 'really?' you're suppose to elaborate.”

“Just shut-up.”

“Fuck you.”

“Up yours,” he said. I ducked under the shelter and saw the mechanic dude -- “Al” read his name tag at us.

“So you'se guys off on a little adventure, aye?”

“Um, no,” I said. When he gave me a shocked expression, like he wasn't expecting such attitude from me, I forced a smile and said, “He's just getting me back home. It's a long story. A very long story.”

“Well,” Al tucked his thumbs into his overalls and smiled at us broadly. “Take care of my baby. Don't her too hard, and I'd like her back with a full can of gas.”

“His baby?” I asked, turning to Miles. He smirked and held up a set of keys, jangling them together. My jaw must have dropped, and for the first time since this whole situation started, I felt a glimmer of hope. A

real, deep, for-sure glimmer of hope.

I was getting home!

I grabbed the keys from his hand, unable to suppress the smile that lit up my face. I ducked out of the shelter and ran out to the centre of the yard with an explosion of energy.

“Yes! Yes oh fuck yes!” I screamed, clutching the keys in my fist with a sense of renewal deep within me. I couldn't believe it. We were getting out of here.

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“Oh, what on earth is that?” I gasped as Miles heaved the garage door up. Sunlight streamed into the dusty confine and lit up the atrocity that was “Baby.”

Miles fixed his shirt and looked back at me, a smirk on his face.

“How did this thing pass the emissions test?” I asked, walking into the garage and resisting the urge to cough from the layers of dust.

“I don't think it did. That's why Al's letting us take it.”

“Why is some mechanic letting us take his car halfway across the country?” I asked, watching as he ran a hand along the hood, leaving finer streaks in the dust. He walked across the garage and picked up a hose strapped to the wall.

“Okay, one: because he's a friend of mine, and two: he doesn't know where we're taking it. He just thinks we're going up north or some shit.” He reached over and turned on the hose. I stepped back as he cleaned the car from all the dust, allowing the real “beauty” of it to shine through.

I was no car expert and I never claimed to be one, but that thing had to be over 40 years old. It was burgundy red “or maybe that was rust?” and about as big as a boat, probably as fast as a sinking one, too.

I stepped outside and squinted up at the sun. So we had a car, but now so many other questions were running through my head. All of them bounced around in a jumble; gas? Money for gas? Did he have his driver's license, considering I didn't? What if we got pulled over for anything?

I looked across the mechanic's yard and saw Al leaning into the hood of some crappy-looking car that was way more better looking than ours.

He saw me watching and he smiled and waved. I waved back out of pure courtesy. Al had to be in his late twenties. He looked like he was bordering on over-weight and had once had a bad case of acne since his cheeks were scarred. Still, his face was inviting, and I found myself walking towards him without even really thinking through what I was going to ask him.

“Hi,” I said.

He leaned up again, put a greasy rag down on the hood of the car, smiled, and said, “Why, hello.”

“I was just wondering, um, if you're really okay with us taking your car?”

Al laughed and brushed his hand through the air.

“That old thing? Of course I'm okay with you taking it. I trust CJ'll take good care of it. We go way back.”

“CJ?” I repeated. I glanced at the garage and frowned. CJ? What kind of a name is that?

“Oh, shit, that's just my nickname for him. I bet you call him Miles, right?”

“Isn't that his name?” I asked. Al laughed again, a deep chuckle that seemed to rumble up from his chest.

“Yeah, it's just that I'm beginning to wonder 'bout you two. He said you were his cousin visiting him, and that he can't wait to take you out of his hair, but for him to tell you to call him Miles? Well shit, you guys really do have a bad relationship.”

“So what's his real name?”

“Hey, you!” The boy in question called. I turned and saw him squinting at us. He gestured for me to get my ass over there. I turned back to Al and smiled.

“Well, thanks again. We'll take good care of the car.”

“I'm sure you will. CJ's a good guy, y'know.”

“Oh, right,” I laughed. As I turned away, I mumbled, “My ass he is.”

“Did I say you could talk to Al?” Miles said when I got close enough. He loomed down on me, but I resisted the urge to take a step back away from him.

“Wow,” I said, narrowing my eyes up at him, “I didn't know I was under your control?”

“You are if I'm the one getting you to Calgary.” He turned and opened the car door. I stood and watched him, almost regretting this whole thing considering he was being even more of an asshole than I first thought he would be.

I stepped up to the passenger door and gave it a tug. It didn't open. I tugged at it again, thinking it was one of those cheapo cars where the doors sometimes stick. When it still didn't open, I looked down and saw a huge dent was making the door practically impossible to open.

Miles rolled down the window.

“Guess you're stuck in the back,” he said.

“The hell I am,” I said as I pulled open the door behind the passenger's. When I was in the car, an awful stench hit my nose and I almost groaned in disgust. It smelt like rotting fruit, and when I looked around I realized my prediction wasn't that far off. The back was littered with banana peels and rotten apples, just laying around among other questionable items.

Miles put the car into gear and started driving, but I leaned forward, grabbed the back of the two front seat headrests, and pulled. I had meant to only use that to help me lurch my way into the front seat, but the headrest on the passenger seat snapped off.

“Um...,”

“Jesus Christ, we're not even out of the lot yet and you already broke something,” Miles said. I put the headrest under the seat and squeezed my way into the front passenger's. I sat down and exhaled loudly, taking a moment to breathe before I bombarded Miles with the questions I had thought up earlier.

“So, what are we going to do for gas money?”

“Don't worry about it.”

“How am I not supposed to worry about it? Are you going to steal it? Get the cops chasing after us? That'll look like we're doing something illegal to get gas.”

“No, we're not going to do anything illegal to get gas.”

“But...”

“Just trust me.” I was silent for a moment as I stared at him, wondering if he honestly expected me to believe that. I let a chuckle escape my lips and I stared at him incredulously, my brows raised practically up to my hairline.

“Okay, what about a license? You do have yours, right?” I stared at him, but he stayed quiet. My hands tightened into fists. “Right?”

“What do you think? I'm a fucking street kid, of course I don't have my license.”

“So why are you driving!?”

“How else are we going to get there!?” he yelled back.

“I don't know, hitch a ride? Anything that won't get us in fucking jail?”

“Just shut-up, okay? As long as I don't do anything to make the cops curious, we're fine.”

“Like driving an emission-test failure with rotting stench floating out the windows and several broken or dented parts isn't enough to make them curious? Really?” I threw my hands up and looked out the window as he turned onto the highway merge.

“I liked it better when you had your mouth shut,” he said.

“Fuck off.”

“Up yours,” he said. I glanced at him and saw his eyebrows were furrowed and his knuckles were white. Oh, this would be one hell of an interesting trip.

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