

BREWS ON SUMMER'S HEART

R.C. Crespo

Brews on Summer's Heart

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To my older sister, Tata.

Thank you for being the definition of a proper woman and the greatest big sister a brother could ask for. Watching you become a wonderful mother has been a joy, and your guidance was one of the lights that led me back to God.

I wrote this thinking of the trials you faced with such grace growing up. I am so grateful for you. I pray you enjoy this.

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Chapter 1 — Beans and Boredom

The espresso machine at Summers' Brew Café made a sound like a small dragon clearing its throat. Jessica Summers watched the steam curl up and vanish into the fluorescent hum, then set a paper cup under the portafilter and wrote, in neat block letters: WHINY HIPSTER.

She labeled the cup. Labels were safer than names. Cups didn't leave. People did. If she controlled the story, even a little, it couldn't surprise her later.

"Name?" she asked the customer without looking up.

The man in the vintage band tee smiled like his haircut hurt. "Caleb."

"Right. That's what I wrote." She slid the cup along the counter, added two shots, three pumps of "maple-ish," and a sprinkle of what their manager swore was nutmeg but smelled like candles. "Anything else, CalEEb?"

He hesitated. "Is it... is it good?"

Jessica stared at him, utterly calm, like an alligator in a kiddie pool. "The weather is good. This keeps you from falling asleep."

He laughed, which counted as a successful transaction. The drawer money clacked shut; the dragon hissed again. A bell above the door jingled once, then twice, then—jinglejinglejingle—like it was trying to be a wind chime and failing.

Summers' Brew handled the morning rush with the practiced choreography of a three-person circus: stutter-step, pivot, pour. The front case held muffins swaddled in parchment and cookies the size of regret. The chalkboard listed drinks in swirls and hearts that Jessica absolutely did

not draw. She'd written a smaller, angrier board at the register: NO WE DO NOT HAVE PUMPKIN YET. Someone had added a pumpkin doodle crying a single tear.

When the lull finally hit, Jessica leaned her hip against the counter, opened *The Devil's Knot* to her dog-eared page, and pressed a thumbnail to a particularly bleak sentence as if checking for ripeness. Across from her sat a composition notebook with corners softened by war. Her notes lived in there—fragments of fictional murders and grocery lists she never remembered to show her mom.

In the margin beneath a list of coffee filters and AA batteries, she'd scribbled:

The ants kept score because no one else would.

The world was full of giants stepping on things they didn't see. Someone had to write it down. Someone had to notice the small things before they disappeared—including girls like her.

She tapped the words once, then flipped to a blank page and, half without thinking, sketched a crooked cabin tucked under trees. Smoke drifted from its chimney, thin and wavering. She shaded the smoke darker until it looked more like fire. Then she closed the notebook quickly, like she'd been caught.

"Jess!" called Winona White from the kitchen in a tone made of sunshine and polite marching orders. "Could you bring the courage blend out? We have a few wobbly hearts this morning."

"I'm shocked," Jessica said to no one and all of them. "People in Harrisburg have emotions before noon."

Winona swanned through the swinging door, cheeks flushed, apron perfectly tied, a crown of escaping curls held at bay by a polka-dot scarf. She carried a tray like a prize.

“Courage tea,” she announced, setting down a gleaming pot and cups painted with tiny stars. “Cinnamon, orange peel, a whisper of clove, and a nudge from Auntie Winny.”

“You’re not my aunt,” Jessica said.

“I am when people need tea.” Winona smiled that invincible, community-activist smile—part nurse, part mayor, part benevolent witch. “You should have a cup.”

“I’m on a strict diet of caffeine and nihilism.”

“Cinnamon counteracts nihilism. Scientific fact.” Winona slid a cup toward her anyway. “Two sips. It tastes like campfire bravery.”

Jessica gave the cup the exact look she gave people who insisted foam art tasted better. Then she picked it up because it was warm and her hands were always cold. The first sip surprised her—less sweet than it looked, more honest. She coughed like she meant to.

“There,” Winona said, triumphant. “You didn’t combust.”

“Yet.”

The door jingled again, admitting a flurry of mother, stroller, and toddler. The toddler pressed both palms to the glass of the pastry case like an explorer who’d discovered muffins. “I want the big cookie,” he said, which everyone always did.

“Great choice,” Jessica said in her deadpan that, depending on your spirit, read as either cruelty or high art. “That’s our Large Regret.”

The mother laughed and ordered it anyway.

Between drinks, Jessica checked her apron knot—left loop tucked, right loop over, pull—and that tiny act pressed her spine into place. She kept it snug against her waist, a small, private oath: don’t unravel.

Sometimes she wished people came with instructions. Or warning labels. Or maybe a reason to stay. But knots were easier. Knots stayed put—mostly.

A guy in a suit elbowed his way to the counter, plant-watering while on speakerphone. He reached into the community literature pile—zine-ish, church-ish, yoga-ish—and pulled a glossy rectangle from the bottom. He set his coffee on it like it were a coaster, too busy to notice.

The flyer's logo winked up from under the cup: ALEHANTE SECURITIES. The slogan promised SECURE YOUR FUTURE in a font that looked expensive.

Jessica slid the drink toward him and tapped the corner of the flyer. "Secure your future? I'm just trying to secure my lunch break."

He blinked, then chuckled like his phone didn't know he existed anymore. "Sorry," he said, grabbing both his coffee and the glossy promise, and left.

Winona, watching him go, clucked her tongue. "Alehante again. Did you hear they bought up a bunch of land in the Poconos? Cabins. Whole bunch of acres of them. Going to 'revitalize' the area." She made air quotes like they were profanity.

Jessica rolled her eyes. "Yeah, nothing screams 'revitalization' like bulldozing history and putting in condos."

Winona smirked. "You could always apply. Alehante Securities: barista to security to a billionaire."

Jessica barked a laugh. "Please. One, evil corporation. Two, I'd need a blood oath just to walk through their revolving door. I'm not even qualified to refill their lobby mints."

"You underestimate yourself."

“No,” Jessica said. “I just estimate them correctly.”

Winona only hummed, unconvinced.

The lunch wave built and broke, with iced drinks clacking and the espresso dragon roaring like thunder. Jessica held her own, taking names, writing insults, resetting knots. She even wrote DREAD ON THE ROCKS for a man who tipped generously.

By the time Winona flipped the little wooden sign to CLOSED, Jessica’s head felt cottony with conversations she hadn’t exactly participated in. She washed the pitchers, wiped down the counters, packed her book and notebook. Before untying the apron, she pressed the knot once—an I was here to the day.

“Car?” Winona asked, jingling her keys. “Or college?”

“Those aren’t the only options,” Jessica said, following her out.

“Of course not,” Winona said. The evening smelled like the Susquehanna pretending to be an ocean. “There’s also starting a bakery on the moon. But for people without rockets, sometimes it helps to pick a road and drive it awhile.”

“I don’t even have a license,” Jessica said.

“Then we’ll get you courage and a driver’s manual. In that order.”

Dinner at the Summers house sounded like good intentions and a fork hitting plate. Martha had the oven open when Jessica walked in, hot air rolling out with the smell of onions and something buttery.

“Wash your hands, honey,” Martha said, voice trying to be two places at once. “And tell me about your day. Did anyone cry in public? I hope not. But also, I hope they felt better afterward if they did.”

“I made a man drink dread,” Jessica said.

“That’s my girl,” said Dick from the table, skimming an envelope from Orangeside Community College. He still wore his coaching whistle like a necklace. “Dread builds character. Fire hardens steel.”

Erica breezed in, eyeliner sharp, jacket screaming THRIVE. She eyed Jessica’s black-on-black ensemble. “We need to talk about your aesthetic: raven who shoplifted from Hot Topic.”

“Is that not thriving?”

“It’s... a choice,” Erica said, stealing a potato from Dick’s plate. “Also, your stories are better than your wardrobe. Why not submit one instead of hiding in that notebook?”

Jessica tucked her elbow over the notebook she hadn’t realized she’d carried to the table.

Martha slid plates down, warm and quick. “No judgments at the table,” she lied brightly. “Just conversation. How was work, Jess?”

“Capitalism,” Jessica said. “But warmer.”

Mail shifted toward her. “Info session next Thursday,” Martha said gently.

Jessica looked at the envelope like it might bite. “Cool.” Teenage for: please don’t make this about me.

“It’s not pressure,” Martha said quickly. “It’s just—we should look. Options. We want you to have all the doors.”

“Doors are lies invented by landlords.” She softened, seeing Martha’s face. “I’ll look. Maybe I’ll major in coffee theory.”

Dick leaned back, chair creaking. “Listen. Right now, you’re watching the game. That’s okay. Everybody watches

before they play. But sooner or later, you've gotta pick a position."

"Can I be waterboy?"

"You can be quarterback if you want. But you can't stand on the sideline saying the game is stupid if you're not even in it."

Erica smirked. "She already plays goalie for Sadness United. It's very competitive."

"Erica," Martha warned, though she smiled.

Jessica stared at her water glass, then at the cabin she'd doodled in her notebook earlier. Crooked. Smoky. Waiting.

"I'll go," she said finally. "I'll check it out. And I'll get my license - eventually."

A ripple of laughter loosened the table.

Later, in her room, Jessica opened her notebook again. On a new page, she wrote:

CHAPTER ONE: THE GIRL WHO WATCHED.

Beneath it: Secure your future? I'm trying to secure my lunch break.

She smirked, then added a doodle of a cabin with smoke curling from its roof, this time drawing the smoke lighter, less like fire, more like breath.

She set her apron on the chair, retied its knot out of habit, and lay back, listening to the cricket-noise night. Somewhere in the dark, a cabin still stood. And somewhere else, Alehante Securities was tearing cabins down.

"Fine," she told the air, making surrender sound like a threat. "I'll try."

The house settled. The knot held.

Chapter 2 — Dark Brews and Distant Sparks

The café breathed in and out like a sleeping creature: the espresso machine exhaled steam, the refrigerator hummed its tired lullaby, and the bell over the door blinked at the morning like it was waking up, too. Jessica Summers watched the counter the way a lifeguard watches a pool—calm, bored, prepared to save exactly no one.

Her notebook lay open to a clean page, spine softened by overuse, a cheap pen clicked between her fingers. She wrote the date. Then, in the corner, tiny enough to hide from herself: The ants kept score because no one else would.

“Good morning, storm cloud.” Winona White entered mid-morning rotation, arms full of optimism and scones. She set a tray down with a flourish; steam rose in plumes, smelling like lemon and butter and church bake sales. Her polka-dot scarf today was navy with stars, like she’d escaped from a children’s book that refused to be cynical.

“Is it?” Jessica said. “Morning, I mean. Time’s a construct.”

“Which is why we construct it joyfully.” Winona tapped the tray. “Lemon poppy seed for clarity. It’s a clarity day. I felt it when I woke up.”

Jessica clicked her pen closed. “Do they come with instructions, or is it more of a vibe?”

“Instructions!” Winona’s eyes lit up. She pulled a laminated card from under the counter. “Steep three minutes if you’re wrestling with decisions, four if you need to see through nonsense, five if you’d like to forgive yourself. And a scone. They pair with conviction.”

“You sell carbs like medicine,” Jessica said. “Diabolical.”

“That’s marketing, dear.” Winona nudged one toward her. “Two sips, one bite. Courage and clarity.”

“Didn’t we do courage yesterday?”

“We can always do courage.”

Jessica picked it up. Warm. Smelled faintly like campfire sugar. First bite surprised her—less sweet than it looked, more honest. She coughed like she meant to.

“There,” Winona said, triumphant. “You didn’t combust.”

“I dunno, this time, I feel a little combustible.”

The bell jingled. A man in a neon vest and fresh bandages set both hands on the counter. “Large coffee. Black. And a scone if it’ll stop throbbing.”

“Which is throbbing,” Jessica asked, “your thumb or your soul?”

“The thumb,” he said, showing her a half-sliced crescent. “Mandoline accident. Wife insists on homemade chips. Tool didn’t fail—I did.”

Jessica poured coffee, slid a scone. “Two sips, one bite. Prescribed by our local wizard.”

He chuckled, winced. “Got a stirrer?”

“They’re called wands.”

He left coins and a story. Jessica immediately wrote it down—mandoline, honesty, throbbing—then doodled an ant next to it.

Customers trickled in: GALAXY HIP (woman with bruise shaped like a galaxy), TEACHER WHO WHISPERS, SANDAL PHILOSOPHER, SCHRÖDINGER’S ICE. The espresso machine hissed; her pen faltered. “Of course you were too fragile for this world,” she muttered at it.

The bell jingled again. No breeze. Wheels squeaked on tile.

He slid in like a rumor: faded uniform, small cart, mop that looked like it had seen wars. He didn't look up. Parked by the window next to Winona's miracle plant.

"Coffee," he said, voice low enough to be an afterthought.

"Drip?" Jessica asked.

He nodded. Lights caught the threadbare seams of his shirt, like maps. Lawyers had mentioned him once, over lattes—that janitor from downtown, guy they call Snakes, talks in riddles. She hadn't believed them until now.

She poured. He set exact change on the counter, coins lined up like soldiers. Then slipped a pencil from behind his ear—dull, flaking paint, chewed—placing it across her notebook like he was measuring its patience. His gaze skipped and then landed on her, heavy as weather.

"Ants know the score," he said. "Always do. Wind's changing."

Jessica blinked. "Cool."

The door was shut tight against the April chill, but the wind chime above it shivered anyway—a single, dissonant note that didn't belong to the morning. A faint draft brushed her wrists, cold enough to raise goosebumps. The air felt thinner, like the pressure drop before a storm.

Wind's changing. She hated that she knew exactly what he meant.

He nudged the coffee toward himself like a chess piece and shuffled past. A man in a suit stepped into his path. For one tense second, they orbited each other. Snakes looked at the tie, then the floor. "Not today, Geoffrey."

The man froze, then stepped back. "Uh—thank you?"

Snakes nodded at nothing and left, bucket trailing a perfect square of water.

Jessica stared at the pencil. Too heavy for its size. She picked it up, scratched:

Ants kept score because no one else would. The wind carries the scoreboard.

“New friend?” Winona asked, too casual.

“Goblin of the tiles,” Jessica said. “Fellow ant commentator.”

“The ground shifts before floods,” Winona murmured, glancing at the wind chime outside.

“Do you sell a flood-prevention scone?”

“Cardamom. For boundaries.”

Jessica looked at the tea. Her whole life was a boundary—a fortress of sarcasm and black clothes—and yet she still felt like she was standing in a drafty room without a coat. She almost reached for the cup, just to see if magic worked on cynics. Instead, she wiped a spotless counter. “I’ll stick to drywall. It’s cheaper.”

The day lifted into afternoon. A skateboarder staggered in, napkin pressed to a bloody shoelace.

“You okay?” Jessica asked, startling herself by sounding human.

“Yeah. Ate it on Seventh. Tripped on the only rock in Pennsylvania. Then got swarmed by ants. Like, full-on. Metal?”

“Ants don’t do metal,” Jessica said, handing him a Band-Aid. “They do marches. You’re bleeding on your shoelace.”

He grinned, embarrassed. “Hot chocolate, please. And, uh, one of those clarity things?”

“Peer pressure from pastry.” She wrote SKATE SCAR on his cup. “Two sips, one bite. No kickflips after consumption.”

He laughed—better than a Band-Aid.

Between rushes, Jessica filled pages with the pencil. Ants marching like punctuation, keeping a ledger no one asked for. Snakes’ words stuck like a burr: wind’s changing.

“You’re smiling,” Winona said softly.

“I’m scowling internally.”

“Of course.” She raised a cup of clarity tea like a toast. “To the right words at the right time.”

Jessica wrote faster. The graphite flowed like it already knew what she meant.

By closing, her hand ached in the good way. She set the pencil across her notebook with unusual care.

Dinner at the Summers house tasted like capers making a big show of themselves, potatoes playing understudy. Across the table, Erica’s eyeliner caught the light—like she carried a nightclub in her eyelids.

“How’s thumb guy?” Dick asked.

“Still attached. Barely.”

“Write about that,” Dick said. “Not just ants and wind.”

“Ants and wind are real. Ants are terrifying socialists. Rivers drown people.”

“Jess,” Martha warned gently.

Dick cleared his throat, set his mail aside, and adjusted his glasses like he was about to deliver a TED Talk no one requested.

“So...” he began. “You seeing any customers that tickle yer fancy?”

Jessica froze mid-chew. “What?”

Martha blinked. “Dick.”

“What? I’m asking! She’s nineteen. That’s normal.”

Erica snorted. “Please. Jess barely has a reason to like herself. No aspirations. She’s not going to land some college boy with Axe body spray and a Fortnite addiction anytime soon.”

Jessica stared at her. The hit landed somewhere between insult and eerie accuracy.

“I—excuse me?”

Erica shrugged. “I’m just saying you’re... an acquired taste.”

“Acquired taste,” Jessica echoed, trying it out like it was a foreign word. “With boys?”

“It’s healthy!” Dick said, too loud, as if volume could save him. “I mean, everybody’s different, some people are just more different than others—look, I just want to know if anyone out there has gotten used to yourweirdne....err..unique perspective on life....yeah that.”

“Dick,” Martha muttered, but she didn’t stop him. She just handed Jessica the bread basket like emotional carbs could help.

Jessica stared at her plate. At her family. Felt the table tilt in a way she wasn’t prepared for.

Her dad, who normally talked only in drills and metaphors, cared about whether she liked someone.

And her sister, who knew every contour of her eyeliner, also knew the uncomfortable truth: Jessica wasn’t sure she liked herself enough to imagine someone else liking her.

Jessica swallowed hard. “I don’t... I’m not...” The words fogged in the air, unfinished. “There’s no one.”

Erica raised an eyebrow. “Yeah, with that attitude, I can tell.”

“Erica,” Martha scolded.

“I’m trying to bond!” Erica protested, but the grin said otherwise.

Jessica pushed a potato around her plate. “Look, customers at work are... customers. I don’t know what you want me to say.”

Dick lifted his hands defensively. “Nothing! You don’t have to say anything. I’m just checking in. Making sure—y’know—I don’t have to threaten anyone.”

It was clumsy. It was deeply awkward. It was somehow sweet.

Jessica exhaled slowly. “I’m fine, Dad.”

“Good,” he said, sounding both relieved and confused by his own relief.

The conversation dissolved into safer topics—Erica planning outfits for events that didn’t exist, Martha talking about a new bakery method, Dick muttering about car maintenance like it was a love language.

Jessica sat back, studying them like a three-panel comic:
Mom, warm and anxious.

Dad, sturdy and baffled.

Erica, sharp and glittering, terrified of being unseen.

And herself—somewhere between them, but not quite fitting.

Her notebook lay by her plate like contraband. She flipped it open, pencil hovering.

Maybe liking someone wasn’t the part that scared her.

Maybe it was being seen.

Later, upstairs, Jessica sat cross-legged with the notebook. She wrote, sturdy graphite scratching dark:

Case File 0: Why the ants keep score.

Evidence: rocks tripping skateboarders, knives that hate fingers, people who confess to baristas.

Theory: someone has to count. Maybe the wind. Maybe us.

She tied her apron knot tight: left loop, right loop, pull. The click anchored her. Not a prayer, but close.

Outside, the chime whispered in a breeze no one felt.

Jessica closed the notebook, but her mind lingered on Summers Brew—the glow of the counter lights, the soft hum of the machine, and the empty stool Snakes had left behind. It always caught the dust motes in the afternoon, like it was saving a place for someone.

She didn't know who was coming to sit there, or why the thought made her chest feel less hollow.

But for the first time,
she hoped they wouldn't order decaf.

Chapter 3 — The Briefcase Enigma

By nine forty-five, Summers' Brew had survived two stroller convoys, a woman in a visor debating oat vs. almond like international law, and one conspiracy lecture about carrots. Jessica Summers had written only three interesting things in her notebook:

April ice equals dramatic bruises; see: Galaxy Hip.

Socks are a psyop.

The ants kept score because no one else would.

She underlined the last one and printed a title across the top of the page like she was filing a motion: CASE FILE #1: THE BRIEFCASE ENIGMA.

It didn't have a subject yet. But the bell over the door was a barometer for plot, and today it felt primed.

It chimed.

He stepped in like a commercial for "responsible adulthood" filmed by someone with a sense of humor. Blue suit, crisp but not precious. Hair supervised but still mischievous. A leather briefcase the color of dried blood, corners scuffed into honesty.

He paused at the threshold, scanning the chalk menu, sunny windows, and croissant shrine like a juror reading a room—then smiled like he could sell the feeling of okay to a courtroom.

Jessica's breath caught.

Not because he was handsome (he was) or because his smile hit like a warm lightbulb flipping on (it did), but because her pulse just did a stupid little stutter-step. He was a suit. A corporate drone. Absolutely not her type.

So why did her chest suddenly feel like a nervous drummer was warming up?

He came to the counter.

“Morning. Large black coffee. And... a muffin that won’t humiliate me.”

“All muffins humiliate,” Jessica said. “They just disagree on methods.”

He laughed, a real thing that lived in his chest. Real, maybe. Or maybe rehearsed. Jessica filed the doubt immediately: dangerous, possibly performative.

“Dealer’s choice,” he said.

She plated a lemon poppy seed muffin with the dignity of a bailiff. The espresso machine hissed like it approved of her metaphor. On the cup she wrote in precise block letters: SILVER TONGUE.

He watched. “That my name?”

“It’s your function.”

He offered exact change plus a dollar like an apology for existing. “Nick Wright.” Said like a business card shaking hands.

Jessica met his gaze half a second longer than she allowed mortals. Early thirties, lawyer obvious, but his eyes carried tired magician tricks. “Congratulations, Nick,” she said. “You’re caffeinated and labeled.”

“And judged,” he said, glancing at the cup. “Is there an appeal process?”

“Two sips, one bite,” she said, sliding the muffin toward a patch of sun. “Then you can file a motion to reconsider.”

He surrendered. Sip, sip, bite. His shoulders dropped like a verdict in his favor.

“Overruled,” Jessica said. “You like it.”

“I do,” he admitted, surprised. “And I don’t even usually... do muffins.”

“No one does muffins. Muffins happen to you.”

He set up at the counter’s far corner, briefcase perched like an altar. When he opened it, Jessica pretended not to look—like pretending not to eavesdrop on a bus fight while recording details for later. Inside: a legal pad, folders in government blues, and a sleek pen with a silver logo. The letter A flickered in the light before his hand covered it. Alehante. Of course. Corporate red flag planted.

Between orders, Jessica observed like a scientist with an opinion about her microscope. He wrote, crossed out, stared at the ceiling. When she wiped the counter, he grinned—a jacket of charm flipped inside-out, weariness stitched underneath.

“Ever offer legal advice with the coffee?” he asked.

“We provide caffeine. Moral absolution costs extra.”

“Shame.” He reached for the pen, hesitated. “Do you have sugar?”

“It’s labeled regret crystals.”

“Fitting. I’ll take two regrets.”

“That’s optimistic.”

Orders stacked. WATER WITH EMOTIONAL ICE. NEBRASKA HIP. TEACHER WHO WHISPERS. Jessica kept one eye on the briefcase, half expecting it to confess.

When she refilled his cup, he tilted it politely. “Careful. Caffeine voids most warranties.”

“I’m already void,” he said. “Do you always do that? The names?”

“Names are lies. Descriptions are honest.”

“And I’m Silver Tongue.”

“Allegedly.”

“Feels like you’re calling me a liar with frosting.”

“If the shoe fits.”

He laughed again. Another crack in her armor. Jessica scribbled in her notebook:

Exhibit A: Laugh sounds unpracticed. Dangerous.

Underlined twice. Added a tiny ant hauling the number 1. Scoreboard begun.

The lunch tide hit. Jessica rebelled through precision: grind, tamp, pull, pour.

Silver Tongue’s pen rolled; she caught it without looking.

“Nice reflexes, kid. You play softball or just caffeine-fueled ninja?”

Jessica’s pulse flicked sideways. Kid. She hated kid.

But the praise? The praise was annoyingly warm. She held onto the pen just a second too long—long enough that he had to reach for it.

“I’m professionally nimble,” she said as she finally surrendered it.

Her thumb brushed the logo again: Alehante. The same corporate insignia on the flyer shoved into the café’s community pile that morning. Snakes had warned her. The flyer warned her.

But then Nick smiled—
that tired, crooked thing that made him look human—
and she decided the red flag was just... maroon.

She could work with maroon.

“Thanks,” he said. Briefcase smile reversed—unguarded, honest.

“You ever... write?”

“I’m literally writing right now.”

“Not cups. Real writing.”

“Cups are real. People drink out of them.”

He smiled at the counter, then looked up—really looked. He leaned in a little, elbows resting on the bar like the rest of the café had dissolved around them.

“You know what I mean.”

Jessica’s breath stilled.

He wasn’t looking at the coffee anymore. He was looking at her.

Not the barista. Her.

“I know many things,” she said, trying for flippant. It came out softer. “It’s a burden.” Then, quieter still: “I take notes.”

“About people like me,” he guessed. His voice gentled, like he was letting her in on something private. “Should I be worried?”

“Are you guilty?”

“Aren’t we all?” he murmured—then abruptly sat back, breaking the spell with a scrape of his chair and a chuckle. “Keep at it,” he said, tone shifting older, lighter, protective. “You’ll be terrifying when you grow up.”

The words hit like a chalk-snap. A joke. A boundary. A reminder of the distance she’d almost forgotten.

Winona breezed by, tray fragrant with garden tea. “How are we doing, Jess? Nicholas?”

Nick straightened, busted mid-daydream. “Good.”

“Good-good,” Winona said, because twice meant truer. The wind chime outside tsk’d in a breeze. “It’s a clarity day. Lemon for decisions.”

Winona turned to Jessica. “Can you put debate teams in the glaze? We have a lot of undecided muffins.”

Winona smiled like they were her sitcom. “Two sips, one bite,” she reminded Nick, as if sacraments needed supervision.

He obeyed.

Later, the lull arrived. Nick packed and unpacked his briefcase twice, a ritual of containment. Jessica refilled napkins, polished the steam wand to a squeak, retied her apron knot—left loop, right loop over, pull. The click steadied her spine. When she looked up, he was watching.

“That knot seems important.”

“It keeps the universe from falling apart.”

“Useful.”

“Do you work near here?”

“Close enough to start calling this place ‘my café’ in arguments.”

“You argue about cafés?”

“Only with people who disrespect muffins. I’m... at a firm downtown.”

“Lawyer.”

“Unfortunately. I sell stories to people who pretend they only buy facts.”

“You should bill yourself for that line.”

“I’ll put it on your tab.”

A delivery clattered in. Jessica signed, turned back. His phone lay face-down, red badge glowing. He didn’t touch it.

“You escaping?”

“Rehearsing.”

“For what?”

“Being a better version of myself by tomorrow.”

“Exhausting.”

“It is.” He looked at her. “You?”

“I’m rehearsing apathy. It’s a lot of work.”

“Effortless on you.”

“Don’t objectify my ennui.” But her mouth betrayed her.

The bell jingled. Wheels squeaked. Snakes coasted in, mop like a flag for the kingdom of “don’t ask.” He buffed one square of tile with religious focus, then muttered without looking up: “Wind’s changing.” He rolled out, leaving prophecy and Pine-Sol behind.

Nick frowned. “Who—”

“A local weirdo,” Jessica said. “Mop, riddles, direct line to the plot.”

Nick laughed, half-believing. “I like this place. It’s honest.”

“It’s caffeinated.” But she wrote: He likes honest places. Note potential contradiction.

By two, the café’s light turned syrup. Chess guys debated knights and mortality. A toddler demanded a cookie “as big as my consequences.” Nick checked the time like he was considering surrender: leave now or risk lateness. He risked one more sentence.

“You’re... different,” he said. “Most people in this job try to be palatable.”

“I’m an acquired taste.”

“You’re sharp. Accurate. And you care more than you pretend.” He nodded toward the aligned sugar packets, the spotless steam wand. “It’s a good bit.”

“It’s not a bit.”

“I like when things work.”

“Me too,” he said. “I just prefer when they work because I talked them into it.”

“Different religions.”

“Same prayers. Different knots.”

He stood, business card in hand. Set it down without pushing it. “For when your apathy needs counsel. Or if the espresso machine sues someone.”

“I’m representing it pro bono.” She let the card vanish under the register’s shadow.

“See you, Silver Tongue.”

“See you, Registrar.”

The bell overacted his exit. Sunlight carved him across the lot.

Winona appeared, mug steaming. “He’s a good egg.”

“He’s a man. Complicated.”

“So are making omelets. They still come from eggs.”

Jessica stared. “You’re smiling.”

“I’m scowling internally.” It didn’t convince either of them.

She touched the wind chime on her way out. It chimed once, a word she didn’t catch. Probably nonsense. Or tomorrow’s weather.

Dinner smelled like garlic and argument. Martha declared, “Capers make it fancy, Dick, don’t make that face.” Erica rotated through sunglasses in the mirror until she landed on glitter-liner, then slid into her chair.

“How was work?” Martha asked.

“Only the espresso machine cried.”

“Machines have feelings,” Martha said solemnly.

Erica smirked at Jessica’s notebook peeking from her hoodie pocket. “Sooo,” she sang, “is this the part where you tell us we were right yesterday?”

Jessica nearly inhaled a noodle. “About what?”

“That you like someone!” Erica beamed. “Father, queue triumphant horns. Jessica Summers has been flirting with a

boy— or man— for more than thirty seconds without fleeing to the nearest supply closet.”

Martha swatted her napkin at Erica. “Let her breathe.”

“I can breathe,” Jessica said, stabbing a potato like it owed her money. “And I wasn’t flirting. I was—working.”

Dick folded his arms, too casually. “So there is someone.”

Jessica’s cheeks heated, traitors. “I didn’t say that.”

Erica leaned in like a shark scenting emotional blood. “Come on. You’re glowing. Well—glowing for you. Like... dim fairy lights.”

“I hate this family,” Jessica muttered.

Martha smiled gently. “Jess, honey. It’s okay to be excited about someone.”

“I’m not excited,” Jessica said.

Her pulse: liar.

Her brain: remember the laugh. remember the way he watched you write.

Her stomach: we are leaving this conversation immediately.

“It was just...” She groped for a lie that wouldn’t crumble in her own hands. “A customer. Someone... funny.”

Erica’s eyes widened. “Funny? Jessica ‘the human raincloud’ Summers thinks someone is funny? Oh my GOD, was he cute?”

“Cute is subjective,” Jessica hedged.

“So that’s a yes,” Erica said, smug as a cat in a diamond store.

Martha kept her tone soft. “We don’t need details if you don’t want to share. Just... I’m glad you talked to someone who made you smile.”

Jessica swallowed hard. Smile. Right.

She had smiled. She hated that she remembered it.

“It was nothing,” she said. “Just banter. Barista stuff. I make jokes, people laugh. That’s literally my job.”

“People?” Erica repeated. “Or... person?”

Jessica stabbed another potato. It disintegrated into surrender.

Dick cleared his throat, trying—and failing—to sound neutral. “Well. Whoever he is... as long as he treats you with respect.”

“He does,” Jessica said too fast. Then, softer: “I mean—he did. He was... easy to talk to.”

Too easy, she thought.

Like slipping into a warm bath you didn’t realize was deep until you were up to your neck in feelings you had no business having.

Erica tilted her head. “Is he your age?”

“Age is a construct,” Jessica said immediately.

Dick’s eyebrows rose. “Oh, good. She’s dodging. That’s comforting.”

“I’m not dodging!”

She absolutely was.

She could not tell them he was in his thirties. Her father would implode like a neutron star.

“He’s... older than me,” she amended. “Vaguely. Not important.”

“Older than me,” Erica echoed. “Wow. Jess skips the high-school drama and goes straight to emotionally-stable-adult type. Ambitious.”

Jessica groaned into her hands. “Please stop talking.”

Martha reached across and squeezed her wrist. “We won’t pry, sweetheart. But... I’m happy you opened up to someone. Even a little.”

Jessica didn't trust her voice, so she nodded.

Dinner found its rhythm: clink of silverware, Erica narrating her day like a vlog, Martha's gentle questions wrapped in warm concern, Dick pretending not to be relieved that the mystery man was "older-ish" and "vaguely not important."

Jessica let it all wash over her like background music.

But underneath it, that swallowed-coal feeling kept glowing:

flirty banter, his crooked smile, the way he said her name like it mattered.

Ridiculous, she scolded herself.

He's a customer. A grown man. A whole different universe.

But her pulse refused to listen.

Later, upstairs, Jessica wrote:

CASE FILE #1: THE BRIEFCASE ENIGMA

Subject: Nick Wright (Alias: Silver Tongue)

Artifacts: Briefcase (bruised), Pen (A-logo), Business card (not taken)

Notes: Laugh unpracticed. Possibly rehearsed. Corporate red flag. Likes honest places. Watches my hands.

Risk Assessment: Developing complications.

Under it, smaller: Smiled in two languages at once: charm and thank you.

She grimaced, crossed out thank you, wrote weather report. Then crossed that out too, and drew three ants carrying 1, 1, 1 across the page. Scoreboard's rigged, or maybe I'm keeping the wrong stats.

Her apron hung on the chair. She lifted it into her lap, tied the knot: left loop, right loop, pull. The click steadied her lungs.

Downstairs, Erica laughed at her reflection, Martha exclaimed over forgotten raspberries, Dick slammed the dishwasher like a small victory.

Jessica lay back. A briefcase burned behind her eyelids. A pen logo flickered. A laugh cut both ways.

“Filed,” she told the ceiling.

The chime outside said something again, single word. Probably nothing. Probably tomorrow’s forecast.

Inside, a knot held. And three ants marched their little numbers toward whatever came next.

Chapter 4 — Shadows of Envy

Morning arrived with a low-grade thrum, like the café had a heartbeat. The espresso machine breathed steam; the refrigerator hummed a lullaby for dairy; the bell over the door blinked at the day and decided to try optimism.

Jessica Summers turned a clean page in her notebook and wrote, in courtroom-precise block letters:

CASE FILE #1 (Appendix A): THE REUNION VARIABLE

Hypothesis: Some storms announce themselves before the sky darkens.

She capped the pen, uncapped it, capped it again. The apron knot at her waist sat exactly where it belonged. Left loop, right loop over, pull. Click. The sound lined her spine like a ruler.

“Good morning, storm cloud,” Winona said, breezing out of the kitchen with a tray of lemon scones. Today’s scarf was sprigged green, like a meadow had gone to grad school.

“Your feelings are baked goods,” Jessica said, arranging scones in militant diagonals.

“Clarity never needs an invitation,” Winona said, setting down a ceramic pot. “Two sips, one bite. For decisions.”

“I don’t have decisions. I have a shift.”

The door chimed. He entered like a headline.

Nick Wright: suit in the category of tired competence, tie suggesting he knew how to pretend something was fine until it wasn’t. Briefcase, scuffed honest. Smile, practiced but not cruel.

“Morning,” he said. “Large black coffee. And if there’s a pastry that can keep secrets, I’ll take that.”

“All pastries gossip,” Jessica said, plating a lemon scone with judicial gravitas. “This one whispers.”

He leaned just close enough for the day to tilt. “And what’s on my cup today?”

Jessica stared at him like a cat reading a contract. She wrote: MYSTERY MAN.

“Promotion or demotion from Silver Tongue?”

“Lateral move. Appeal pending.”

He laughed again—real, maybe. Or rehearsed. Jessica jotted the thought down in the back of her head: Exhibit B: Laugh still dangerous. Possibly performative.

He tucked the cup into his hand like a verdict. “This place is a courtroom.”

“We sell judgments by the ounce.”

He sipped. Shoulders adjusted. Briefcase opened. The phone buzzed.

“Wright,” he said, voice trimmed to business.

Jessica heard the other voice even from behind the counter—too loud for technology, the kind of voice that didn’t believe in the concept of whisper.

“—NICKY, MY SAINTED BROTHER! REUNION, BABY!”

Nick winced, but smiled. “Good morning to you too.”

“GOOD MORNING TO DESTINY! To gossip! To resurrection! NICKY— I heard she’s gonna be there. The legend. Samantha Spring... Spring-something. Spring-ton? That hot goth chic that ruined you in high school!”

Jessica froze mid-wipe.

A hot goth chic?

Her hand tightened on the rag until it squeaked.

She wore black every day.

She was the “Raven who shoplifted from Hot Topic.”

Nick liked goth girls. That was his type.
Girls who looked like her, acted like her.
And he still called her kid.

Nick's ears went faintly pink. "She didn't ruin me, and her name was Springfield, I think. And I doubt she'll be there."

"YOU DON'T KNOW THAT! Fate loves a sequel!"

Jessica's cheeks burned. Her stomach flipped—the unfair kind, the hopeful kind, the disappointingly human kind.

If Nick liked girls like Samantha, then...

why didn't he see Jessica that way?

She stabbed at a spotless stretch of counter like it had betrayed her for not having answers.

"LOUD IS LOVE," the caller boomed. "You and me, tank of gas, legends again! You still got the suit? The face? Remember the quarry?"

Nick groaned, half-grinning. "Hard to forget."

Jessica's insides knotted. She reached for her notebook, already drafting Exhibit A: Emotional Sabotage via Loudmouth Idiot, but before she could write anything, a customer leaned over the pastry case.

"Excuse me," the man said brightly, pointing at Nick. "Do you guys host class reunions here? Because if so, I'd like to speak to the proprietor about renting some...."

Jessica didn't miss a beat. "Sorry, sir. This one only hosts midlife crises."

He laughed, collected a muffin, and left.

Jessica's chest did not laugh.

Nick lowered his voice. "Okay. After work."

"AFTER WORK, WE BEGIN THE BETTER HALF OF THE DAY!" Eldorado roared. Then the line cut.

The café seemed to exhale again. Jessica still felt that voice lingering, like cheap prophecy rattling around a tin can.

Nick stared at his cup.

Jessica stared at him.

Samantha was his type. I am his type. So why don't I count?

The counter offered no answers.

Jessica set her rag down like a gavel. "So. Mysterious man with mysterious phone friends."

"Guilty," Nick said. "Old friend. Old... everything."

"Reunion?" she asked, casual as a scalpel.

He nodded. "Yeah. We were idiots together. He remembers it fondly."

"Do you?"

"Sometimes. On good days."

"And tonight?"

"I'll let you know."

Jessica hesitated, then went for it. "So. Who is Samantha Spring-ton-field? The one who ruined you?"

Nick froze for half a breath, then huffed a rueful laugh. "Ancient history. Before your time, kid. Back when you were watching cartoons, I was making bad decisions in eyeliner. Don't worry about it."

The word kid hit harder than the eyeliner revelation.

Cartoons. As if she were still sitting cross-legged in footie pajamas while he lived in a world full of quarry nights and goth legends.

Jessica flipped to a clean page and wrote:

Appendix A, Exhibit 1: Phone call with Eldorado (volume: illegal).

Old flames. Adventures. Objectively annoying. Subjectively worse.

The pen pressed too deep. She didn't fix it.

Her stomach pressed fire against ribs. She added a smaller line: Note: maybe jealousy isn't about him. Remember hallway crush, sophomore year—the one with the Smashing Pumpkins hoodie. He never knew your name. You still hated when he laughed with someone else.

Winona materialized with a plate. "Clarity scone, dear. You look like you're swallowing a thunderstorm."

Jessica broke off a piece, chewed lemon denial. "It's sharp."

"Sharp can be good," Winona said.

Nick shut his briefcase. "I should—errands, billing." He slid a tip across. "See you around, Mystery Judge."

"Registrar," Jessica said. "Of cups."

"File me something good."

The bell dramatized his exit. The wind puffed the chime; it answered with a quick, uncertain ring. Jessica muttered: "Great. Weather chime with commitment issues."

"Jealousy is a flavor," Winona murmured. "Goes with lemon."

"I'm not jealous," Jessica said. Which sounded exactly like jealousy with a better PR team.

"Then you won't need a second scone."

"I need six."

Life resumed. A man wanted "water with no ice but the idea of ice." A college kid apologized to a croissant. Jessica logged: IDEA OF ICE, CROISSANT APOLOGIST.

Wheels squeaked. Snakes rolled in, cart rattling. He slapped a folded newspaper onto the counter, circled Alehante ad bleeding red ink. SECURE YOUR FUTURE.

“Ants don’t read,” he said. “They follow sugar.”

Jessica eyed the circle. “And the sugar is...?”

Snakes leaned, grinning like a secret. “Ask your boyfriend. He sells the bags.”

Jessica blinked. “Excuse me?”

From a stool at the far end, Nick—who’d apparently circled back for his forgotten pen—groaned. “Don’t start, Snakes.”

Snakes smirked, not moving. “What, can’t handle two jobs? Courtroom lies and sugar packets?” He tapped the ad again, then winked at Jessica. “Careful, storm cloud. This one trips over his own briefs.”

“Still here?” Nick said, trying not to laugh.

“Always,” Snakes said. “Like mildew.” He buffed a random square of tile, muttered, “Wind’s changing,” and rolled out, leaving prophecy, Pine-Sol, and Nick’s patience in his wake.

Jessica stared at the circled ad. Her chest felt like someone had underlined the wrong sentence in her life.

Winona dried a mug. “Ah.”

“That’s your whole comment?” Jessica asked.

“Sometimes ‘ah’ is the kindest word,” Winona said.

--

Home was loud in the comforting way of houses that knew their parts. Martha staged “pasta night” with garlic zeal. Dick interrogated junk mail like it owed him money. Erica rotated in with a skirt physics couldn’t defend.

“Emergency,” Erica declared. “Fall Fling. Two weeks. Three offers, two dresses, one soul. Advice?”

“Return the soul,” Jessica said.

“You should crash it,” Erica shot back. “Sad Girl Corner. You’ll be a star.”

“I don’t dance.”

“You also don’t leave the house unless bribed with caffeine and pastry. Expand your brand.”

Martha clasped her hands. “It might be fun, honey. You could go make some friends.”

“I’m out of High-School, and I have acquaintances.”

“Then level up and make those acquaintances, evolve them into friends,” Erica said.

Dick raised a pamphlet. “Info session Thursday. Driving practice Saturday. Class first, practice. Structured plans matter.”

“Say ‘structured plans’ again,” Erica sighed theatrically.

“Serious,” Dick said. “Better first thousand miles on your brain than on a rust bucket.”

“I want the bucket,” Jessica muttered. “Freedom means leaving when I want.”

“College is freedom,” Dick countered.

Martha softened: “Cars too. But order matters.”

Erica’s eyes glinted. “Speaking of order... order of the day is more info on Jessica’s crush.”

Jessica froze mid-twirl of pasta. “Excuse me?”

“Oh, come on,” Erica said, triumphant. “Mystery Man. Silver Tongue. You wrote about him. Don’t deny it.”

Martha blinked, hopeful and worried at once. “Jessica... is this true?”

Jessica stabbed a noodle. “It’s nothing.”

“She’s crushing on an old lawyer guy,” Erica sing-songed. “Grapevine says our very own teen goth heroine falling for a man with a contact list of forgotten women. It’s like one of those vampire love books you inhaled. Only instead of eternal youth, he’s got... student loan payments and litigation.”

Jessica's cheeks burned. "He's thirty-two, not ancient. And I wasn't— It wasn't—"

Erica's smirk sharpened. "Wait. I heard he dated some Goth Legend? Samantha Something-field?" She snapped her fingers, delighted. "See? He likes goths. You are exactly the acquired taste he ordered."

Jessica nearly snapped her fork. "I'm not— It's not— Can we not do taxonomy at dinner?"

Dick set down his fork with a clatter. "He's thirty-two, Jess. He was passing the Bar when you were learning long division."

"Dad," Jessica hissed, mortified.

Martha winced sympathetically. "Crushes can be harmless. Educational, even."

"Educational?" Dick scoffed. "Not when the curriculum starts with 'Sorry, I have alimony payments.'"

"Dick," Martha said, squeezing Jessica's hand, tone softening. "It's just a crush. She's figuring herself out. That's allowed."

Erica leaned back, delighted. "Translation: Dad's the villain, Mom's the therapist, and Jess is the broody heroine of Lawyers & Lattes. I'd read it."

"Eat your pasta," Jessica muttered.

Upstairs, Jessica sat at her desk, notebook open under the soft glow of her lamp.

Subject: Nick Wright (32).

Evidence: Eldorado shouted about "Samantha Spring-something." Goth. Ruined him.

Analysis: He has a type. I fit the type. But he still called me "kid."

Verdict: I am competing with ghosts I can't beat.

She stared at the final line until it blurred, then pressed her pencil harder—darkening it, anchoring it, pretending that made it less true.

She drew a single ant dragging a question mark across the margin, then slammed the notebook shut.

Her apron hung on the chair back. She tied the knot one more time. Left loop, right loop, pull. Click. The sound was steadier than her pulse.

“Too old,” she whispered to herself. “Too old. And you’re not even supposed to care.”

The ceiling gave her nothing back but blankness. Somewhere outside, the wind teased the chime into a sound that might have been wait or let go. Inside, a knot held, tighter this time, as if to pin her heart down where it belonged.

Chapter 5 — A New Face in the Brew

The day arrived gray and undecided, the kind of sky Harrisburg specialized in—blank as paper, waiting for someone to write weather on it. Summers' Brew eased awake the way it always did: fridge humming its soft threat, espresso machine practicing its dragon breath, wind chime at the door doing one clear note just to prove it could.

Jessica Summers turned a clean page in her notebook and wrote with courtroom precision:

CASE FILE #1 (Addendum): LAWYER MAN

Exhibit D: Reunion call; old flames; headline ego.

Weather advisory: Envy with lemon undertones.

She capped the pen, uncapped it, checked the knot at her waist—left loop, right loop over, pull. The little click set her spine into its assigned place.

“Morning, storm cloud,” Winona said, floating out of the kitchen with a tray of scones. Today's scarf was soft blue with tiny constellations, the kind of accessory that believed in you before you did. “Harmony scones. For days when hearts jostle for elbow room and you Harmo-NEED some space.”

“My heart sits at the kids' table,” Jessica said, arranging the scones in militant diagonals. “It doesn't jostle.”

“Good,” Winona said serenely. “Then it'll taste the lemon better.”

The bell chimed.

Jessica looked up—and braced.

This was it: the grand entrance of Samantha Spring... whatever, goth legend of Nick Wright's tragic high-school lore.

Leather jacket.

Eyeliner sharp enough to qualify as a weapon.
The kind of cool girl you needed a permit to stand near.
Jessica steeled her shoulders for combat with a Hot
Goth.

Nick Wright stepped in with his tiredly competent suit
and scuffed briefcase—fine, predictable, emotionally unsafe
but at least familiar.

But the woman beside him—

Jessica blinked.

Cardigan.

Soft.

Warm.

Hair pinned back like a gentle apology.

Eyes bright with unweaponized kindness.

Absolutely no eyeliner of mass destruction anywhere.

She wasn't a Samantha.

She was the anti-Samantha.

Which somehow made everything worse.

A goth rival she could have handled: sarcasm, eyeliner,
emotional fencing.

But this?

A soft, warm, sunshine-in-a-sweater person?

Jessica had prepared shields and snark and posture.

She had not prepared for... nice.

Nick grinned, oblivious to Jessica's internal cardiac
collapse.

"Jess, this is Abby. Abby, Jessica. Jessica keeps this place
honest."

Abby Winters smiled—and some unseen instrument in
the room tuned itself to match her.

“Hi.” Her voice carried the quiet steadiness of someone who kept plants alive and meant it. “I’ve heard about the lemon scones.”

“From whom,” Jessica said, already reaching for a cup, because movement was safer than feeling.

“People with taste,” Abby said—joking without punching down.

Jessica wrote VET BARBIE on the cup because professionalism required her to commit petty crimes.

“Coffee?”

“Latte,” Abby said. “Whatever you think is best.”

Jessica’s hands performed boredom at an Olympic level—grind, tamp, pull—but her chest was performing an entirely different play.

She poured, balanced the milk, and—traitorously—pulled a heart in the foam.

She slid the cup forward and immediately regretted the flourish.

Abby’s smile brightened, not at the art—but at Jessica’s hands.

“You have incredibly steady hands,” she said softly. “You noticed I needed something gentle today.”

Jessica’s pulse stuttered.

She wasn’t prepared to be seen, let alone correctly.

“It’s milk,” Jessica said. “It’ll curdle, drink fast.”

Nick leaned on the counter with the stress-relieved slouch of a man who had practiced charm in mirrors.

“Still labeling your customers, Registrar?”

“Still carrying your personality in a briefcase?” Jessica shot back.

Before he could answer, a voice from the corner declared:

“Wright! Does HR know you bring dates into small businesses? That’s a violation of... something.”

Snakes rolled in behind the voice, mop forward like a lance, uniform in the color family of “former navy.” He seemed to have formed himself out of the café’s shadow lines and the scent of industrial cleaner.

Abby glanced over, amused. “Friend of yours?”

“Stalker,” Nick said without looking. “He lives to keep me humble.”

“Can’t keep what never stood up,” Snakes said, parking his cart with ceremony. He squinted at Abby. “You his secretary?”

“Vet receptionist,” Abby said, grin easy. “Animals, not plaintiffs.”

Snakes nodded, satisfied. “Explains the patience with this one. Wright can’t even get his aim straight at the urinals.”

Jessica bit the inside of her cheek to dam a laugh. Nick shot her a put-upon look and failed to hide his own.

They stood together—Nick with his courtroom slouch, Abby with her calm, plant-whisperer posture. They looked like finished adults, people whose edges had already been sanded by life. Two trees that had grown in the same wind, even if they hadn’t met until recently.

Jessica felt suddenly thirteen again, not nineteen. A rough draft.

And she was on the wrong side of the counter—a glass wall she couldn’t step through without breaking something.

Snakes set a folded newspaper on the counter and slid it toward Jessica like an indictment. A red circle bled around an advertisement in the corner: ALEHANTE SECURITIES — Secure Your Future. On the front page, a smaller headline about a riverfront warehouse gas-leak; the cameras had

blinked at the wrong time, missing the cause. The circle and the headline weren't near each other. That seemed to be the point.

"New ants on the line," Snakes said, eyeing Abby, then Nick. "Sugar piles higher now."

"Not today," Nick groaned. "Please."

"Today most of all." Snakes shifted the newspaper half an inch, a move that felt like fate filing paperwork. "Try not to lose at checkers in front of your guest."

"I don't lose at checkers," Nick said.

"Sure," Snakes said. "And don't let someone replace all your pens with crayons again. Careful, Wright—your charm's heavier than it looks."

With a Mix of disgust and shock Nick opened his hands in defense firmly saying "That was YOU!"

Abby laughed, surprised and delighted. Jessica watched the ease between them—Nick's long-suffering, Abby's quick humor, Snakes' choreographed nuisance—and something pressed hard under her ribs. Not anger, exactly. Not sadness. The discomfort of realizing two people can speak fluent in each other's rooms.

Winona drifted in, teapot like a halo. "Harmony?" she offered, setting down cups painted with tiny stars.

"Is that... for me?" Abby asked.

"For the room," Winona said. "Which you've brightened."

Abby blinked, a shy pleased, and Jessica—against her own narrative—liked her for not capitalizing on the compliment. That made things worse.

"Two sips, one bite," Winona told them as if swearing in witnesses. "For peace."

“Is there a surcharge if we drink it near Wright?” Snakes asked.

“Absolutely,” Winona said. “But the house will cover it.”

They drank. The espresso machine sighed like an old god. People came and performed themselves at the counter: NEBRASKA HIP girl reported her bruise had faded to Iowa; SANDAL PHILOSOPHER argued that socks were surveillance; a toddler asked for “a cookie as big as my disappointments” and was cheerfully accommodated.

Nick ordered a coffee for himself, and Jessica handed over a cup labeled ANTI-HERO because she hadn’t decided to forgive him for existing with other people yet. He read it, bit back a smile, and held the cup like a truth.

Abby stood close enough that their elbows could negotiate without speaking. They bent toward each other to look at something on Nick’s phone—a photo, probably—backlit laughter ghosted both their faces.

They didn’t just look like peers.

They looked finished.

Hardcover books with dust jackets and author photos.

People who’d been paying adult bills long enough to have opinions about health insurance and the appropriate number of pillows per bed.

Jessica felt like a rough draft watching two completed editions compare notes.

A scribble looking at a matched set.

Trees that had grown in the same wind, even if they’d only just met.

And Nick had called her “kid.”

Ridiculous, maybe. True, unfortunately.

Jessica felt nineteen in a way she hadn’t all week.

“You work nearby?” she asked Abby, because curiosity and self-harm share a wall.

“Clinic on Ninth,” Abby said. “Mostly cats who think gravity is an opinion.”

“Relatable,” Jessica said before she could stop herself.

Abby smiled—recognition, not condescension. “Do you do the chalkboard art? The little skull in the corner?”

Jessica looked away. “Skull is a universal.”

“I like it,” Abby said. “He looks like he knows a good secret.”

“He knows where all the bodies are buried,” Jessica said.

Nick tapped his briefcase. “Speaking of buried bodies...”

“Do not,” Snakes said immediately.

“Do not what?” Nick said.

“Do not try to be interesting,” Snakes said. “I have a shit ton of markers.”

Abby laughed again.

Jessica wrote in her notebook with grim tidiness:

CASE FILE #2: VET BARBIE

Exhibit A: Slightly less than average height. Stands taller anyway.

Exhibit B: Mid-Twenties. Finished edges. Laugh doesn’t bounce.

Exhibit C: Speaks fluent Wright and human.

Exhibit D: Not Samantha. Worse. She’s nice.

Threat level: **catastrophic**.

Her pencil left dents her pen wouldn’t have. She flipped to a new page before she tore the old one.

The morning moved. Nick signed a receipt like it might testify against him later. Abby took a second harmony sip and

complimented Winona on the tea name, which made Winona's aura ring like a bell. Snakes cleaned an already clean square of floor and, on his way out, tapped the circled Alehante ad with one finger, then pointed lazily at the door—as if to say: Watch what comes in and out.

“Thanks for the ambiance,” Nick told him.

“Anytime,” Snakes said. “Don't choke on your charisma.”

They left in staggered choreography—Nick first with a promise to bring back the briefcase for sentencing, Abby a beat later with a “thank you” that stuck to the counter like honey. The bell granted them equal melodrama on exit.

“Jealousy is a flavor,” Winona murmured, not looking at Jessica because mercy is a kind of magic. “It brines or it burns.”

“I'm not jealous,” Jessica said.

“Good,” Winona said gently. “Then have another scone just for the lemon.”

Jessica broke off a corner and let it dissolve on her tongue. It didn't fix anything. It clarified the shape of the ache.

She set the red-circled ad into her notebook and traced the circle once with her fingertip. Secure your future. Jessica had exactly two futures to secure, if you believed the dinner table: pick a car and go; pick a class and stay. But those were nouns. Today had been a verb.

She worked the rest of the shift with vengeful competence—steam wand squeaking clean, condiment bar arranged like a choir, names rendered on cups in hand-lettered verdicts. She wrote WATER WITH EMOTIONAL ICE and LADY WHO SIGHS A LOT and, for a man who wanted extra everything, MAXIMUM. She did not write

Abby's name again on anything. She had already given it space.

By close, the chime had rung itself out and the room had the echo of a theater after the audience leaves. Jessica flipped the sign, pressed her thumb to the apron knot—left loop, right loop over, pull—and let the tiny click steady her. On her way out, the wind lifted, and the chime gave a single, indecisive note.

“Great,” she muttered. “Even the weather’s shrugging at me.”

Dinner at the Summers house smelled like basil and bread. Jessica twirled pasta without looking at it, fork circling the plate like it was training for a marathon. Her thoughts hissed louder than the TV in the other room: You’re a fool. He’s a customer with a haunted briefcase, not a chapter heading.

“Jess?” Martha asked, breaking through. “How was work?”

“Fine.”

Erica leaned in like a cat spotting weakness. “Fine, any news on that Mystery Silver Man?”

Jessica stabbed her pasta. “He’s taken.”

Dick exhaled hard. “Oh thank God. Good for him!”

“Relief noted,” Jessica said flatly.

Martha’s brow furrowed. “Taken? Who’s the girl?”

Erica’s eyes lit up instantly. “Wait—wait. Is it her? The Goth Legend? Samantha Spring-something? Did our acquired taste find a rival?”

Jessica’s fork paused mid-stab. “No.”

She sighed, defeated. “It’s worse.”

Erica leaned closer, thrilled. “Define worse.”

“She’s... nice.” Jessica grimaced at the word. “Cardigan nice. Takes care of animals nice.”

Erica blinked. “Oh. Cozy nice.”

“Like someone who alphabetizes their spices,” Jessica muttered. “Like someone who keeps plants alive without murdering them emotionally.” She rolled her eyes at her own admission. “Her name’s Abby.”

Erica clasped her hands dramatically. “Spill. Details.”

Jessica shook her head, but the family didn’t drop it—they pried, poked, circled, curious in the way families always are: Dick with cautious questions, Martha with careful ones, Erica with gleeful ones.

Finally, Jessica’s fork clattered. “She’s perfect, okay? The sweater, the hair, the laugh that didn’t sound rehearsed. She talks to him like they’ve shared the same air their whole lives. She even drank the tea without rolling her eyes. She’s... finished. Put together. Everything I’m not.”

Her pulse disagreed with her attempt to sound detached. She thought of the heart she’d poured into Abby’s latte, already collapsed in the foam, and hated how much that image lived under her ribs.

Dick sat back, unsettled, but Jessica cut him off before he could speak. “I know he’s too old. I know it doesn’t matter. But it still feels... weird. Watching someone else fit.”

The silence that followed was soft, waiting.

Martha reached across, gentle. “Maybe your little crush on Nick was just a catalyst. So you could meet Abby. She sounds lovely. And friendships can come from the most unexpected places.”

Jessica barked a humorless laugh. “Right. Vet Barbie, best friends with the goth barista who doodles ants in her notebook. Totally realistic.”

Erica grinned. “Honestly? I’d read that book.”

Jessica shoved back her chair. “Hard pass.”

She left her plate half-finished and stormed upstairs.

In her room, the notebook waited like it already knew the answer. Jessica dropped onto the bed, cracked it open, and wrote:

CASE FILE #2 (Appendix): Vet Barbie

Status: Taken. Perfect smile. Finished edges.

Exhibit E: Too nice. Suspiciously.

Verdict: Not my story.

Underneath, smaller: Mom thinks maybe Abby could be my friend. Like that’s a thing. Why would someone put together like her want to hang out with the girl who crushed on her guy?

She almost drew ants out of habit, then stopped, tapping the pen against the page. The scoreboard would have to wait.

She tied her apron knot in her lap—left loop, right loop, pull. Click.

“Customer,” she muttered. “He’s a customer. That’s all.”

Chapter 6 — Brewing Bonds

The café smelled like espresso and wet coats. Harrisburg’s morning had opened with a rain that didn’t commit, just misted the sidewalks until everything looked blurred at the edges. Jessica Summers stood behind the counter with her notebook open, pencil balanced against her lip.

CASE FILE #2: VET BARBIE (Addendum)

Exhibit E: Shows up with Wright like she belongs to the scene. Older, mature, smiles without a receipt. Threat level: catastrophic.

She underlined catastrophic twice, then set her apron knot tighter. Left loop, right loop over, pull. The tiny click was her gavel.

The bell above the door chimed—one note, indecisive. Jessica didn’t look up immediately; she’d learned that waiting gave her power. When she did glance over, her chest pinched.

Abby Winters stood in the doorway.

Alone.

No Nick.

No briefcase shadow.

No adult duo looking like matching hardcovers.

Just Abby—cardigan, umbrella, damp curls from the mist, smile professionally intact.

Jessica’s stomach tightened.

Why was she here alone?

Was this reconnaissance?

A friendliness audit?

Was Abby here to check on the barista with “acquired taste” stamped on her forehead like a warning label?

Jessica braced herself.

This was how older women behaved in movies when they suspected “the kid” of orbiting too close. They came to the younger girl in soft sweaters and polite smiles before they lowered the boom.

Abby shook her umbrella at the mat like someone raised by manners and walked to the counter.

“Morning,” Abby said, voice even-tempered—weather that wouldn’t ruin your picnic. “Could I get a latte?”

Jessica narrowed her eyes just a fraction.

A casual visit?

A test?

Was Abby checking for flirt residue?

Measuring the threat level of the goth barista who doodled ants and heartbreak in the margins?

She clicked her pen and wrote on the cup with surgical precision:

SMILES TOO MUCH.

She slid it across. Abby read it and laughed, the kind of laugh that didn’t bounce off sarcasm but absorbed it. “At least it’s accurate,” she said.

Jessica blinked. Most people rolled their eyes, or sighed, or asked her name. Abby took it like she’d ordered honesty and gotten her money’s worth.

“Milk preference?” Jessica asked, monotone honed to a blade.

“Whole’s fine.” Abby leaned a little on the counter. “Do you always write... notes?”

“Judgments,” Jessica said, grinding beans. “It’s policy.”

“Policy,” Abby repeated, amused. “From the registrar?”

Jessica kept her face still. “I file what I see.”

Abby tilted her head toward the notebook on the counter —spine frayed, corners bitten by time, pencil dented from too much thinking and not enough sense.

“You write outside the cups, too,” Abby said.

Jessica froze.

Instinct: hide it. Like a diary. Like contraband.

She slid her arm halfway over it, casual in the way people are when nothing is casual at all.

Her brain immediately betrayed her:

Real adults have planners. Calendars. Appointments. Abby probably keeps a color-coded digital schedule with reminders about flea meds and client birthdays.

I have doodles of ants staging political coups.

“It’s just... homework,” Jessica said, aiming for bored and landing somewhere near guilty.

Abby’s smile gentled, not mocking — dangerous in a way Jessica hadn’t prepared for. “Looks more interesting than homework.”

Jessica tamped the grounds too hard, the handle snapping back like it resented her. “It’s fiction. Creepy fiction. Ants keep score, rivers carry secrets, muffins plot coups. Very highbrow.” She added quickly, “You wouldn’t like it.”

A lie.

A shield.

A preemptive dismissal before Abby could deliver the one Jessica expected:

‘Aw, that’s cute.’

Instead Abby rested her chin lightly on her hand, expression thoughtful in a way that made Jessica’s stomach drop through several unapproved emotional floors.

“You might be surprised what I like,” Abby said softly.

Jessica’s pulse misfired.

She poured the milk too fast, nearly ruined the crema, then—even worse—pulled a heart into the foam again. An instinctual apology or confession, she couldn't tell.

She cursed herself, slid the cup forward without commentary.

Abby's grin, impossibly, widened. Not at the art.

At Jessica.

"Thank you," she said, sincerity unarmored.

Jessica jotted in her notebook the moment Abby stepped away:

Appendix C: Vet Barbie

Exhibit F: Doesn't flinch at ants.

Exhibit G: Doesn't treat notebook like kiddie menu drawings.

Risk assessment... glitching.

The café slipped back into its rhythm — toddlers bribed with muffins, overcaffeinated college kids chugging iced lattes despite the rain, the old man who always asked if they carried cigars (they still didn't).

Jessica labeled cups with sharp fairness:

EXISTENTIAL ESPRESSO.

RUNNER WITH BETTER CALVES THAN ME.

COOKIE APOLOGIST.

But her attention kept drifting toward the table where Abby sat — sunlight in a cardigan, reading something on her phone, smiling at no one.

Not the enemy she'd braced for.

Worse.

Someone she could accidentally like.

Abby lingered near the counter, sipping slowly, as though she had nowhere urgent to be. She watched Winona drift between tables with her tray of teas, distributing advice

disguised as chamomile. Then she leaned closer again, elbows resting lightly on the wood.

“So what do you want to do with your writing?” Abby asked.

Jessica’s pencil hovered mid-air. “Do with it? It’s just... notes.”

“Notes are seeds,” Abby said. “You could plant them.”

Jessica snorted, defensive. “What are you, a gardener?”

“Vet,” Abby corrected, grinning. “Different training. Same patience.”

Jessica tipped her notebook shut a fraction, suddenly conscious of the dents and the frayed edges. “It’s just... observing. People. Moments. Dumb stuff.”

Abby shook her head. Soft, but sure. “Not dumb.”

Jessica’s brows rose. Suspicious. “Oh really?”

Abby set her cup down, thoughtful. “Animals don’t talk. Not in ways that translate cleanly. So we watch. Patterns. Posture. What they want to hide. What hurts. What doesn’t. That’s half my job.”

Jessica blinked.

Abby continued, gentler now:

“You do the same thing—only with people who won’t say things. You diagnose them.”

Jessica’s breath hiccuped somewhere behind her ribs.

“That’s not dumb,” Abby said. “It’s... necessary. Someone has to see the symptoms.”

Jessica stared at her, unsure whether to bristle or melt.

Abby didn’t flinch at the silence. She only sipped again, as if this conversation wasn’t quietly rewriting Jessica’s entire internal architecture.

“I used to write too,” Abby offered. “College essays, silly short stories. And a blog once, back when the internet was

mostly cat pictures and bad poetry. No one read it, but it felt good.”

“What kind of stories?” Jessica asked, voice steadier than her pulse.

“Ones about animals talking to each other. And people who didn’t say what they felt out loud, so I made them say it in secret.” Abby smiled, sheepish. “Fanfiction for humans, basically.”

Jessica had to look away at that—the recognition was too sharp.

She snapped her notebook open again, scribbling fast to hide her face:

Exhibit G: Sees patterns.

Exhibit H: Diagnoses people better than licensed therapists.

Exhibit I: Takes me seriously.

Threat level... glitching but possibly repairable.

The bell jingled again. Wheels squeaked. Snakes shuffled in, mop cart rattling like it had a personal vendetta. His uniform smelled faintly of bleach and unsolicited prophecy.

“Wright’s not here,” Jessica said preemptively.

“Didn’t come for Wright,” Snakes muttered. “I have him locked in the firm’s restroom, with a series of clues leading to a puzzle holding the key to the door.”

Abby glanced over, amused. “Do you two actually dislike each other, or is this some sorta bit?”

Snakes jabbed his mop like he was warding off spirits. “Man slipped on a wet floor after the ‘Caution’ sign was right in front of him. Oblivious. And charming. Deadliest combination.”

Jessica almost snorted.

Snakes approached the counter, rummaged in his pocket, then slapped down a torn scrap of paper.

A piece of the ALEHANTE SECURITIES flyer.

The logo circled three times.

Ants doodled around it in furious red ink.

He pushed it toward Jessica like it was evidence in a crime.

“Ants move where the sugar spills,” Snakes said.

Before Jessica could roll her eyes, Snakes added, quieter, pointed:

“Our lawyer friend thinks the sugar is a gift.”

He tapped the circled logo.

“He doesn’t see the hook.”

Abby blinked, eyebrows lifting. “Is that... about his job?”

“About everything,” Snakes said, already shuffling backward. “Especially a trap door that welcomes you when all the other exits are blocked.”

His mop squeaked like a dying accordion as he retreated out the door.

Jessica tucked the paper into her notebook, spine prickling.

Abby leaned in slightly. “Is he always like that?”

“Yes,” Jessica said. “But sometimes he’s the kind of weird that turns out right six weeks later.”

Abby left after her second sip of harmony tea, waving politely to Winona, thanking Jessica like she hadn’t been insulted by a cup label. The bell let her out with ceremony, and the chime gave a soft, undecided note—halfway between stay and wait.

Jessica stared at the empty counter space she’d left behind and scribbled furiously:

CASE FILE #3: BREWING BONDS

Exhibit A: She asked.

Exhibit B: She listened.

Exhibit C: She didn't laugh when I said ants keep score.

Risk assessment: TBD.

She drew a bridge, ants marching across it. Then crossed it out until only faint ghost lines remained. In the corner, a crooked cabin rose, smoke curling—not fire this time, just breath.

Dinner at the Summers house was pasta night—steam fogging the windows, Martha humming something soft, Erica drifting through with her dress bag like she was auditioning for a musical, and Dick sorting bills with the seriousness of a man defusing a bomb.

“Trevor texted me three times today,” Erica announced proudly. “I am officially more important than Fortnite.”

“Historic,” Jessica said.

Martha plated bowls. “Jessica, how was your day?”

Jessica twirled spaghetti with studied indifference. “Work.”

“Quiet again?” Dick asked.

“Loud enough,” she said.

Erica narrowed her eyes like a detective smelling emotional contraband. “You’re glowing. Did lawyer man talk to you again?”

“I’m pale,” Jessica deadpanned. “I don’t glow.”

Martha tilted her head, soft and perceptive. “You do seem... lighter. Different.”

Jessica stabbed her pasta. “I am exactly the same amount sunshine and lollipops as always.”

Erica leaned in, grinning like she'd been waiting all night for this.

"So—tell me. Did the lawyer guy and anti-Goth come back today? Or are we still mourning the relationship that never was?"

Jessica's fork froze mid-twirl.

Dick blinked. "Anti-Goth?"

Erica waved a hand. "You'd know if you listened. Jessica thought Nick's ex or whatever was going to be a Goth Legend—eyeliner, leather, tragic poetry energy. Instead she got Vet Barbie in a cardigan."

"Erica," Martha warned, though she couldn't quite hide her smile.

Jessica rolled her eyes, but her voice came out quieter than she intended.

"She came back. Alone."

Erica's eyebrows jumped. "Ooooh. Vet Barbie does sole reconnaissance! Plot twist."

Jessica tried to hide in her food. "It wasn't like that."

Martha's voice softened with curiosity she tried to keep gentle. "Did you two talk?"

"A little," Jessica said. Her pulse betrayed her. "She... didn't treat me like a kid."

Dick looked up at that, relieved. "Good. People should see your capacity, not your age."

Jessica didn't correct him—in her mind, Abby had seen her as older, but still not equal.

Erica nudged her under the table. "So she's nice-nice? Not secretly evil?"

"She's aggressively nice," Jessica muttered. "And she likes my writing."

Erica gasped. “Shut up. Vet Barbie has an acquired taste. That’s some skibidi Ohio rizz.”

Jessica groaned into her hands. “Please never say those words again.”

Martha reached across, touched her daughter’s hand. “It’s okay to like people, Jess. Even unexpectedly.”

Jessica thought of Abby leaning over the counter, saying You diagnose them. Someone has to see the symptoms.

She swallowed. “It’s... not what I expected.”

Erica smirked. “That’s how all good subplots start. Don’t ruin this for me.”

“Eat your pasta,” Jessica said, but her voice lacked its usual bite.

Dick, satisfied the storm had passed, went back to his bills.

Martha smiled knowingly.

Erica looked far too pleased with herself.

Jessica twirled her spaghetti and told herself she wasn’t thinking about Abby’s smile.

She absolutely was.

That night, Jessica sat cross-legged on her bed with the notebook open. The torn flyer from Snakes sat like evidence.

She wrote:

CASE FILE #3 (Addendum): ABBY WINTERS.

Less than average height. Mid-Twenties. Laughs like a human, not a customer. Threat level shifting. Maybe not catastrophic. Maybe something else.

Below it, smaller: Mom saw through me. That’s worse than being unseen, and better too.

She tied her apron knot one last time, but gentler, not bracing. Left loop, right loop over, pull. The click sounded less like armor this time, more like grounding.

She stared at the ceiling until it blurred into a blank page. In the corner of her mind, ants crossed a bridge she hadn't meant to draw. And she let them.

Chapter 7 — Cracks in the Counter

The rain had washed Harrisburg into the color of dishwater. Streets gleamed, gutters overflowed, and every customer who pushed into Summers' Brew smelled faintly of damp fabric softener. Jessica Summers stood behind the counter, arms crossed, notebook open like a file she planned to prosecute.

CASE FILE #4: CRACKS IN THE COUNTER

Exhibit A: Vet Barbie returns.

Exhibit B: Mystery Man brings her like proof he's not imaginary.

Exhibit C: My stomach reacts like it swallowed a lemon whole.

She set the pencil down, tugged the knot at her waist—left loop, right loop over, pull—and braced herself.

The bell chimed.

Jessica looked up—and immediately wished she hadn't.

Nick and Abby walked in together, not just side by side but mid-laugh, their conversation still bouncing between them like a ball Jessica had never been invited to catch.

"...and then ERMEE tried to vault out of his wheelchair," Nick was saying, wiping rain from his hair. "Straight at me. Full torpedo mode."

Abby covered her mouth, already laughing. "You caught him! Nick, you looked like someone handed you a live grenade."

"And you used the moment to declare mankind evil and stole the debate," Nick said, bumping her shoulder with practiced ease. "I'm still not convinced that counted as an argument."

“It counted,” Abby said, smug but warm. “The judge applauded. Philosophers applauded. Sharon screamed. Jacob fainted. It was a whole thing.”

Nick shook his head, smiling the soft kind reserved for old stories and familiar people. “We were such disasters.”

Abby corrected gently, “Adorable disasters.”

They approached the counter finally—together, still sharing the same memory, the same air, the same past.

Jessica swallowed. Hard.

She tried to slide in with the joke before the moment could suffocate her.

“Did all your debates involve attempted assault, or was that a special case?”

Nick blinked like he’d only just remembered she existed. “Oh—hey, Jess. Morning.”

Abby smiled kindly, the way adults smile at someone younger who says something funny without meaning to. “Hi, Jessica.”

Jessica felt it—a glass wall she hadn’t built but somehow stood behind anyway.

Nick leaned on the counter. “Two coffees. One black, one whatever mystical stuff ya did last time.”

Abby nudged him with her elbow, teasing. “Don’t call it mystical stuff. Jessica actually puts effort into things.”

Jessica wrote on Abby’s cup in neat, weaponized block letters:

OVERQUALIFIED FOR ALL OF THIS

Nick watched Abby read it and chuckle, and his grin softened again—fond, familiar, easy.

A grown-up smile for another grown-up.

Jessica ground the beans like they owed her rent.

“So,” she said, aiming for casual, landing closer to brittle, “clinic good today?”

Abby shrugged, unwinding her scarf. “Slow. They cut my hours again. New owners claim they’re restructuring, but nobody seems to know what that means.”

Jessica’s heartbeat hiccuped.

A subsidiary, whispered Snakes’ warning. The sugar is a hook.

“And your law firm?” Jessica asked, too quickly. “Still standing?”

Nick laughed—but tiredly. “For now. We lost two major clients last month. Harrison’s trying to keep morale up, but...” He rubbed the back of his neck. “There’s only so much pep a man can put in bankruptcy paperwork.”

Abby touched his arm lightly—a gesture so intimate and unconsciously adult that it made Jessica suddenly aware of her own posture.

“They’ll pull through,” Abby said. “They always do.”

“Maybe,” Nick said. And his smile didn’t quite stick.

Jessica watched the moment pass between them—a soft, steady current of shared life experience she couldn’t parse, let alone enter.

Two finished people.

Hardcovers.

Meanwhile she was... what? A scribble? A sticky note? A draft labeled revise later?

She slid Abby’s latte across. The heart in the foam was perfectly symmetrical.

Of course it was.

Abby beamed. “You always do this. It’s so sweet.”

Jessica shrugged, feigning boredom. “I was aiming for a skull.”

Nick chuckled. “You missed.”

“Tragic,” Jessica said.

They laughed together—grown-up laughter, shaped by college memories, past arguments, near-kisses, shared history.

Jessica wiped an already clean counter.

They didn’t notice.

The café pulsed with its usual background noise: Winona humming over her tray of teas, the hiss of steam, the low mutter of chess players in the corner. A damp college kid shuffled up, rain dripping from his hoodie.

Jessica wrote DAMP REGRET on his cup and handed it over without comment. He accepted it like she’d seen his soul.

Winona breezed past, depositing a steaming pot. “Chamomile with honey. Good for weather that seeps into your bones,” she announced.

“It’s seeping somewhere,” Jessica muttered, wiping down a spotless counter.

Abby lifted the cup, admired the heart. “She’s an artist,” she told Nick.

“Registrar,” Jessica corrected. “Don’t inflate the title.”

Nick took a long sip of his coffee, shoulders relaxing the way they only did inside Summers Brew. “Okay, Registrar,” he said, tapping his cup, “have you decided when the book comes out?”

Jessica pretended not to flinch. “What book?”

“The one you pretend you’re not writing every time I walk in,” Nick answered. “You’ve got, what, a whole intelligence dossier on me in there?”

“It’s not a book,” Jessica muttered. “It’s a classified file.”

“On me?” Nick grinned. “Flattering.”

“Don’t be,” Jessica said. “You’re just Exhibit A. There are... other ‘criminals’ in there.”

Abby leaned forward, elbow on the counter, latte steaming between her hands. “Okay, I’m invested. What’s he guilty of?”

Jessica didn’t break eye contact. “Existing.”

Abby burst into laughter—real laughter that crinkled her eyes and made her look even more infuriatingly warm.

Jessica’s pencil made an automatic note:

Exhibit B: Abby laughs too easily at my jokes. Unacceptable.

Nick nudged Abby lightly. “See? I told you she’s a menace.”

Abby rolled her eyes affectionately. “Please. You love it.”

Jessica lowered her gaze to the counter before anything inside her could betray itself. They looked like a couple from a commercial for joint tax returns.

But then—

Nick exhaled, rubbing the back of his neck. “Actually... I, uh—really should elaborate. Things are weird at the firm.”

Abby’s brows lifted. “Still losing clients?”

“More like lost,” Nick said. “Harrison called a meeting yesterday. Alehante pulled every contract. Ninety percent of our caseload evaporated in one hour.” He forced a laugh. “We look like a ship after the iceberg but before the violinists give up.”

Jessica blinked. Because of Alehante, her brain whispered.

Abby nodded grimly. “Remember my cut hours? Rumblings around the clinic swears it’s some shell company—Santa’s Little something? I forget the name.”

Jessica felt a familiar energy in the name.

She felt the flyer in her memory like a thumb to a bruise.

Nick brightened suddenly, grabbing onto the next thought like driftwood. “But! There might be an upside.”

Jessica had never heard anyone say that after “we lost everything” without being dreadfull.

Nick continued, animated now: “Eldorado has this new thing—AIM? Alehante Influencer Media. Says he wants fresh voices, people with Something To Say. He thinks Abby and I could stream together. Commentary, news, lifestyle stuff. Says he’ll bankroll the whole thing.”

Abby added softly, “He said it could... stabilize things. Just until we get back on our feet.”

Nick grinned like it already was their future. “Imagine it, Jess. All those student loans? Gone. Abby’s loss of hours? Covered. Plus... we’d get to do something fun for once.”

Jessica felt her stomach twist.

He loves Goth girls. He called her kid. Now he’s building an empire with Abby.

She tried for nonchalance but landed on brittle. “AIM? Like AIMing to take your life? Can you really trust a place named after what you do with a gun?”

Nick waved her off. “It’s just an acronym. Don’t worry about the finances, kid.”

There it was—

Kid.

Again.

He softened it with a grin. “Leave the boring stuff to the suits.”

Jessica’s jaw ticked. “You don’t even like suits.”

“See?” Nick said. “That’s why you’re the registrar.”

Abby reached out and touched his sleeve—barely anything, but it drew Jessica’s eyes like a magnet.

“Nick,” Abby said gently, “she’s not wrong to worry. It’s a lot to jump into.”

He sighed. “I know. I know.”

Then he smirked again, reflexively charming. “But Eldorado believes in us. And honestly? It’s not like people aren’t busting our doors down for a lawyer from a Vet receptionist.”

Jessica’s hands tightened on her notebook.

Belief from Eldorado is not a gift.

It’s bait.

Sugar in a trap.

Before she could speak, the bell over the door jangled—hard, rattling like a warning.

Snakes shuffled in, mop cart squeaking, eyes sharp as winter.

He did not greet Nick.

He did not greet Abby.

He walked straight to Jessica, reached into his pocket, and dropped a torn napkin on the counter.

ALEHANTE SECURITIES

circled once.

Then again.

Then again, until the napkin nearly tore.

Dead-center in the circle, drawn in cramped ballpoint:

Abby’s name.

And swarming over it—

a mass of tiny, frantic ants, rushing past her toward the Alehante logo.

A perfect picture of collateral damage.

Snakes tapped the napkin once, like a judge delivering a verdict.

“Sugar spills,” he murmured. “Ants don’t check ID before they bite. They just take whatever’s in the way.”

He looked at Nick—really looked—like he was cataloging every blind spot.

Then, directing the words to Jessica:

“Warn your friend. The man sees candy. Not the hook.”

He shuffled out without another sound.

The chime gave one thin, dissonant note as the door shut behind him.

Jessica felt every hair on her arms rise.

Nick just rolled his eyes.

But Abby—

Abby looked frightened.

Jessica’s pulse thudded against her ribs.

Ants on Abby’s name?

Not the sugar—

the casualty between sugar and swarm.

She scribbled into her notebook with a shaking hand:

Exhibit C: Abby caught in the crossfire. Collateral. Systemic. Too close to Wright.

The rush ebbed. Abby stayed near the counter, leaning toward Nick, their shoulders almost touching as they bent over his phone. Jessica scrubbed a spotless counter, resenting the sound of their laughter.

It hit harder than she expected. A memory flickered—sophomore year, Smashing Pumpkins hoodie, that boy whose laugh bent toward someone else while she went invisible in

the doorway. The same pressure now—Abby’s warmth folding into Nick’s—pressed that old bruise right where jealousy lived.

Jealousy wasn’t a spark.

It was weather.

A low-pressure system rolling in, slow and inevitable.

“Registrar,” Nick called, teasing. “Got a cup for me today?”

Jessica handed him one with SILVER TOUNGE scrawled across it.

“And me?” Abby asked.

Jessica met her eyes. “Too Perfect still stands.”

Abby held up her cup like a toast. “Then I’ll stick with it.”

The chime at the door whispered against the rain, uncertain as a forecast. Jessica didn’t write it down. Yet.

Dinner at the Summers’ house carried its usual circus. Erica recited her dance plans in excruciating detail, Martha tried to keep up, Dick muttered approval through mouthfuls of chicken.

Jessica mostly pushed food around her plate.

“You’re quieter than usual,” Martha said gently.

“Unlikely,” Jessica muttered.

Erica squinted at her. “She’s sulking. Probably over some guy.”

Jessica froze. “I don’t sulk.”

“You brood,” Erica corrected. “Like a crow. Same thing.”

Dick looked up from his plate. “Crow’s smart birds. They remember faces.”

Martha touched Jessica's arm lightly. "You don't have to tell us. Just—don't lock yourself away, okay?"

Jessica swallowed too fast, almost choked, muttered, "Noted," and stabbed another potato.

That night, in her room, she opened her notebook.

CASE FILE #4: CRACKS IN THE COUNTER

Exhibit A: They laugh together.

Exhibit B: Snakes makes it communal.

Exhibit C: Even flaws look good on her.

She doodled ants circling Abby's name, then scrawled a cabin behind them—crooked roof, smoke curling like hesitation. She crossed the page out so hard the paper tore.

Chapter 8 — Echoes of Harmony

The day started like a rumor—thin light, uncertain sky, the street outside pretending it might rain just so the air could smell interesting. Summers' Brew woke up one machine at a time. The grinder cleared its throat; the espresso machine sighed like an old god; the wind chime over the door tried one clear note, then decided it had earned a break.

Jessica Summers turned a clean page in her notebook.

CASE FILE #5: ECHOES OF HARMONY

Advisory: Yesterday was a triangle. Today, avoid geometry.

She checked the knot at her waist—left loop, right loop over, pull—and let the little click line her spine up with gravity.

“Morning, storm cloud,” Winona sang, emerging from the kitchen with a tray of scones. Today's scarf had tiny flowers stitched into it like a patient apology. “It's a balance day. The cards said so.”

“The cards are scammers,” Jessica said, squaring the scones into militant rows. “But congrats to balance.”

Winona set a teapot beside the pastry case, steam unspooling. “And congrats to you for showing up.”

“I basically live here,” Jessica said.

“Exactly,” Winona replied, drifting toward the tables to adjust chairs by half inches, as if symmetry might hold the universe together.

The bell chimed. Jessica didn't look up at first. Power move. She finished writing NEEDS COFFEE FOR PERSONALITY on a cup and only then glanced at the door.

Abby Winters breezed in, alone, giving her wet umbrella a cheerful shake that sent droplets flying onto the mat. She wasn't holding herself with that "finished adult" carefulness today. She looked... unbuttoned. Her hair was escaping its clip, her cardigan was buttoned wrong at the bottom, and she was practically bouncing on the balls of her feet.

Jessica's stomach did something rude—it fluttered. Not with dread. Not with jealousy. With relief. She was happy to see her. Traitor, Jessica told her own pulse. You are supposed to be a fortress, not a welcome mat. She scowled harder to compensate, capping her marker with a loud click.

"Hi again!" Abby said, stepping up to the counter, beaming like she'd just been told a secret she couldn't keep. "Could I get a latte? Whole milk is fine. And maybe a shot of something that tastes like Friday?"

Jessica uncapped her marker. She wrote **AGGRESSIVELY CHEERFUL** and slid the cup across.

Abby read it and laughed—a bright, unbothered sound that cracked the café's morning gloom. "I like the honesty."

"It's free with purchase," Jessica said, priming the shot. "No returns."

"Dangerous policy," Abby said, leaning on the counter with a grin that dared Jessica to keep frowning. "You might convince me to keep coming back."

Jessica tamped the grounds harder than necessary. "Tragic." Don't smile back, she ordered herself. Do not smile back. But the corner of her mouth twitched, disobeying orders. She poured. The milk made a small storm in the cup and then, because her hands were apparently in on the conspiracy against her dignity, it resolved itself once again into a heart before she could stop it.

She slid it across, regretting it instantly.

Abby didn't make a big deal. She just took a quiet breath like the heart smelled good and said, "Thank you." And then: "Do you mind if I sit here? I've got some time before I have to go in."

"Vet tragedies waiting for you?" Jessica asked, because it's easier to say the wrong thing than to say you care.

"Mostly comedy," Abby said, taking the stool at the far corner—the one Nick usually adopted like a second spine. She leaned her forearms on the wood, relaxed. But her fingers told a different story. She was tapping a rhythm against the counter. Not a nervous fidget—a complex, frantic beat. Tap-tap-thump-tap-tap-thump. It wasn't pop. It wasn't classical. It sounded like the drum intro to an anxious rock song.

Jessica paused, pitcher in hand. She knew that beat. She'd listened to it on loop for three weeks straight during finals last year. That beat didn't match the cardigan. It didn't match the "finished" adult exterior. It sounded like something Erica would blast to drown out a bad day. It made Jessica curious.

Winona drifted by, depositing a steaming pot in front of Abby. "Balance blend," she said warmly. "For when the world needs to be in tune."

Abby stopped tapping, smiling up at her. "Thanks."

When the rush thinned, Abby was still perched at the counter, sipping. But her fingers started ghosting that rhythm again on the ceramic mug.

"Twenty One Pilots?" Jessica asked.

Abby froze, hand hovering over her cup. She looked up, caught. Then she grinned—a conspiratorial flash that made her look five years younger. "Caught me," Abby said. "It's the drums in 'Overcompensate.' It's stuck in my head on a loop."

Jessica raised an eyebrow, re-evaluating. “I didn’t peg Vet Barbie for the Skeleton Clique.”

“Please,” Abby laughed. “I practically lived in their albums through college. The anxiety? The screaming? It was cheaper than therapy.” She sighed, tracing the rim of her mug. “I always promised myself I’d see them live. Be in the pit. Scream the lyrics until my voice gave out.”

“So go,” Jessica said, wiping the steam wand. “They tour.”

“Yeah, but...” Abby slumped slightly, gesturing to her sensible sweater. “I feel like those days are behind me. I have a rent now. And a houseplant with needs. And I get excited about the price of hummus going down.” She made a face at her own reflection in the tea. “I think my mosh pit license expired when I bought a slow cooker. Now it’s just... adulthood. If I went now, I’d probably be the lady standing in the back worrying about the fire exits.”

Jessica let out a sound that was half-chuckle, half-snort. It was sarcastic, sure, but it felt startlingly heartfelt. “You make being twenty-four sound like a terminal illness,” Jessica said. “It’s a concert, not a war zone. You don’t need a license.”

Abby looked at her, eyes brightening. “You like them too, don’t you?”

“They’re... tolerable,” Jessica deflected, though her playlist history would testify otherwise. “They understand that the world is mostly stress and noise.”

“Exactly,” Abby said. She leaned forward, dropping her voice like they were plotting a heist. “Okay. Deal. If they ever come to Harrisburg—or Philly—we go.”

Jessica blinked. “We?”

“Yes. We,” Abby insisted. “You can protect me from the mosh pit, and I’ll buy the overpriced t-shirts. Tentative plan?”

Jessica looked at Abby—smart, put-together, cardigan-wearing Abby—who was currently looking at Jessica like she was the coolest person in the room. “If they come,” Jessica said, fighting a smile. “Tentative plan. But I’m not holding your purse.”

“Deal,” Abby beamed.

Jessica turned away to rinse a pitcher, feeling a strange warmth in her chest that had nothing to do with the espresso machine. Vet Barbie liked the same anxious, loud music she did. And she wanted to go to a concert. With Jessica.

She scribbled in her notebook before the thought slipped:

Appendix C: Abby Winters.

Exhibit H: Taps drum solos on counters.

Exhibit I: Thinks a slow cooker killed her youth.

Risk assessment: glitching in a new direction.

The bell clanged, harsh and sudden. It wasn’t Snakes. A kid stumbled in—maybe fourteen, scuffed sneakers, hair that had clearly lost a fight with a comb. He wore a jacket two sizes too big and looked around the café like he was casing it for exits.

He marched up to the counter, slap-happy energy radiating off him. “One hot chocolate,” he announced. “Extra whip. And don’t skimp, I got funds.” He slapped a crisp twenty-dollar bill onto the counter.

Jessica raised an eyebrow. “Big spender. You rob a lemonade stand?”

“Better,” the kid said, grinning. “I got relocated.” He leaned in, bursting to tell someone. “You know the Harrison Home? That old brick orphanage on 4th?”

“Sure,” Jessica said. “Creepy place. Bad plumbing.”

“Not anymore!” the kid crowed. “Sold! To Alehante Securities.”

Jessica froze. Abby looked up from her tea, interested.

“They bought it?” Abby asked. “What for?”

“‘Harrison’s Academy for Brilliance,’” the kid quoted, making air quotes with dirty fingers. “Gonna be a fancy school for geniuses or something. But the best part? They moved us out while they’re fixin’ it up.”

“Moved you out?” Jessica asked, narrowing her eyes. “To where? The street?”

“Nah, the Mall!” The kid looked like he’d won the lottery. “They set up these temp-homes in the old department store wings. It’s awesome. Video games, food court access, no creepy ghosts.” He took a breath. “It’s not THAT bad. Honestly, it’s sweet. My buddy William? He got adopted into the Alehante family. Like, actually became one of them. He lives over at the Alehante estate. Says they treat him like a king, but he didn’t change, still visits us like everyday.”

Abby’s face lit up. “That’s amazing.” She turned to Jessica, eyes shining. “See? Alehante isn’t all bad. They’re helping orphans. Upgrading them.”

Jessica looked at the kid. He seemed happy. He had money. He had whip cream. But the name Alehante still felt like a burr under her skin. “William,” Abby murmured, tilting her head. “That name rings a bell. William... something. I feel like Nick mentioned a William once.” She paused, thinking. Then she shook her head, smiling. “Probably just a coincidence. It’s a common name.”

“Common name, uncommon luck,” the kid said, grabbing his hot chocolate. “William’s set for life. And so are we, long as we stay in the program.” He saluted them with

the cup. “Harrison’s Academy for Brilliance, baby! Future secured!” He bounced out the door, the bell jingling cheerfully behind him.

Abby watched him go, beaming. “See, Jess? Nick was right. Eldorado and his company... maybe they really are trying to do good. 'Secure Your Future.' That kid certainly looks secured.”

Jessica looked at the empty space where the kid had been. Sugar spills, Snakes had said. The kid looked happy. William sounded happy. But ants didn’t check ID.

“Maybe,” Jessica said, voice tight.

Abby finished her tea, stood up, and gathered her things. “I should go. Patients waiting.” She paused, looking at Jessica. “Hey. If you ever want to show me... the notebook. The real parts. I promise not to tell anyone you have skin.”

Jessica felt a flush rise up her neck. “I’ll... think about it.”

“Okay,” Abby said. “Okay.” She left into the gray, the chime giving a soft, undecided note behind her.

Jessica stared at the counter. The kid was happy. Abby was happy. Why did Jessica feel like she was the only one waiting for the other shoe to drop?

She opened her notebook to a fresh page.

CASE FILE #5: ECHOES OF HARMONY (Addendum)

Exhibit A: She knows the rhythm of panic.

Exhibit B: Thinks a slow cooker killed her youth.

Exhibit C: Alehante is buying orphanages and renaming them "Academies."

Exhibit D: Abby thinks it's charity.

Forecast: Smoke on the horizon.

She took her pencil and started to draw. She drew a cabin. But she didn't draw smoke curling from the chimney this time. She drew flames licking up the sides. Consuming the wood. Ants marched around the base, carrying buckets that were too small to help.

Connection warms you, she thought, tracing the fire. But fire consumes the wood. If you build it, you have to be ready to burn with it.

Her apron sat on the chair-back, knot loose. She pulled it into her lap and tied it—left loop, right loop over, pull. The click sounded less like a gavel and more like a lock snapping shut.

Outside, tires hissed on wet asphalt. The city, practicing being a town, told itself it had done enough for one day. Jessica closed the notebook, felt the heat of the imaginary fire on her fingertips, and lay back until the ceiling blurred.

The cabin burned on the page. And for the first time, she wondered if she was the one holding the match.

Chapter 9 — Faded Blends

The morning had that washed-out look Harrisburg specialized in, as if the sky had been erased and no one remembered to redraw it. The sidewalks glistened with last night's rain, the air smelled of wet asphalt and paper mills, and Summers' Brew blinked awake one machine at a time.

Jessica Summers arrived early, notebook under her arm, apron tied not as armor but rhythm. She turned to a clean page and wrote:

CASE FILE #6: FADED BLENDS

Exhibit A: Said maybe yesterday.

Exhibit B: Didn't combust.

Exhibit C: Balance is a rumor but I'm considering it.

She tapped the pencil against her lip, tugged the apron knot tighter. Left loop, right loop over, pull. The click steadied her heartbeat.

The bell jingled.

Jessica's stomach clenched on reflex—not dread, not excitement, just that annoying middle-space where hope lived rent-free.

Nick Wright walked in, briefcase damp at the corners, wearing that grin he carried like an umbrella—automatic, functional, not waterproof. Beside him was Abby Winters, cardigan neat, hair tucked back, the exact shade of calm Jessica wanted to punch on principle.

But they weren't just walking in.

They were already laughing.

"...and then Hunt looked at us like we'd personally declared war on Switzerland," Nick said, shaking his head.

Abby covered her face, groaning-laughing. "Please don't remind me. I wanted to sink through the floor."

Jessica stiffened. A college memory. A shared orbit she had no gravitational access to.

She scribbled on a cup before they even reached the counter:

BRIEFCASE & LUNCHBOX.

“Morning, Jess,” Nick said, leaning an elbow. “Still labeling customers like a parole officer?”

“Use any markers recently to sign important paperwork?” she countered, nodding to his briefcase.

Abby smiled warmly. “Registrar, right? I kind of like it.”

Jessica raised an eyebrow. “Finally, someone does.”

Nick smirked, then nudged Abby. “Tell her the rest. She’ll love the part where you threw a tantrum over a Model UN fart.”

Jessica blinked. Model UN. Fart. Tantrum. This might be the most interesting sentence she’d ever heard Nick say.

Abby shoved him lightly. “It was not a tantrum. It was... situational emotional dysregulation.”

“You yelled at a freshman delegate because he giggled,” Nick said.

“He giggled at me!”

“He giggled at the fart,” Nick corrected, barely containing a grin.

Abby groaned; Jessica’s interest sharpened. Abby Winters—the cardigan saint—once lost her mind over a fart? Incredible. Humanizing. Delicious.

But then Abby said something that froze Jessica’s blood mid-pulse.

“You weren’t exactly helpful,” Abby reminded him softly. “You told me I was acting like a schoolgirl.”

Nick winced. “Yeah. Awkward line.”

“And in the library,” Abby continued, smiling more gently now, “you admitted why you said it.”

Nick rubbed the back of his neck, embarrassed. “Okay, okay—don’t quote me. It was a moment.”

But Abby did quote him, eyes bright with nostalgia.

“You said you treated me like a schoolgirl because you were scared of... other feelings. And that it wasn’t fair to me. Or to you.”

Jessica’s hand stopped mid-reach for a cup.

Schoolgirl.

Scared of feelings.

That’s why he said it.

Jessica’s heart executed a treasonous double-beat.

Nick called her “kid” all the time.

She had assumed it meant he saw her as a minor, a non-threat, a child on the sidelines.

But now Abigail Cardigan Winters was calmly stating that Nick calling someone diminutive was... a defense mechanism. A way to avoid dealing with attraction.

Jessica didn’t breathe for three seconds straight.

Her thoughts split in two:

Hope:

What if he calls me kid because he... feels something?

Fear:

He got over it with her. He’s never going to get over it with me.

Regret:

What if he DOES feel something, Abby is REAL, I don’t want to hurt her.

Nick cleared his throat, desperate to abort the conversation. “Anyway, uh—two coffees, Jess. Before Abby destroys my entire college reputation.”

“You don’t need help with that,” Jessica said automatically, but her voice was thinner than she wanted.

She wrote on fresh cups with courtroom precision:

HISTORY MAJOR and SCHOOLGIRL RECOVERY
ARC.

Abby laughed, delighted. “Very fair.”

Nick groaned. “I regret giving her ammo.”

Jessica didn’t say anything.

Her mind was still replaying that line:

You treated me like a schoolgirl because you were scared
of other feelings.

And she couldn’t help thinking—

What are you scared of with me, Nick Wright?

And worse—

What aren’t you?

When the moment softened, Nick leaned forward on the counter again. “So, Registrar—still filing indictments against innocent customers?”

Jessica rolled her eyes. “Someone has to document the crimes you commit by existing.”

Nick grinned. “You ever going to let me read your little... case files?”

She nearly choked. “Absolutely not.”

Abby looked up from her phone. “They’re not just case files.”

Nick raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“Seriously,” Abby said, turning to him fully. “She’s good, Nick. She notices things. She—captures people.”

Jessica froze.

Abby kept going, warming to the topic. “Remember that guy with the soggy umbrella who apologized fourteen times?”

Jess wrote ‘DAMP REGRET’ on his cup. Tell me that isn’t perfect.”

Nick laughed. “Okay, that’s pretty good.”

Jessica’s throat tightened. She wasn’t used to someone—not Erica, not her parents, not anyone—defending her notebooks. They were weapons and shields, not something to praise.

Abby smiled at her, soft and certain. “It’s not just lists, Jess. It’s insight.”

Jessica’s pencil twitched in her hand. She wanted to look away. She wanted to melt. She wanted to teleport home in to run upstairs and hide under a blanket until her bones stopped vibrating.

Instead, she muttered, “It’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing,” Abby said firmly.

Jessica’s chest did something unregulated.

She scribbled under the counter:

Exhibit C: Abby Winters—champion of crimes and creativity.

Risk factor: rising.

Nick smirked. “See? Now you’ve inflated her ego.”

Abby shrugged. “If it fits, it fits.”

Jessica felt the compliment like heat under her skin, intrusive and welcome all at once.

The café filled: toddlers negotiating cookie settlements, retirees arguing pawn structures like God was taking notes. A college kid staggered in, smelling oddly herbal, and Jessica handed him a cup labeled TREES FAN without breaking stride. He blinked, muttered thanks, and shuffled to the corner.

Winona floated through with her tray of teas, setting one in front of Nick and Abby. “Connection blend,” she said with a wink. “Sometimes harmony needs three notes, not two.”

Jessica nearly sprained her eyes rolling them, but Abby smiled and lifted her cup in a toast.

The bell banged—none of its usual polite chime, just a metallic complaint. Wheels squeaked. Bleach announced trouble before Snakes did.

“Wright,” Snakes said, dragging his mop cart in like a courtroom exhibit. “Want some of my M&M/Skittles/Reeses Pieces mix?” pulling out a large zip-lock bag full of multi-colored candies.

Nick groaned. “Not today, man. Seriously.”

Snakes ignored him entirely—he always did when a warning was the point. He reached into his pocket and slapped something onto the counter.

A matchbook.

ALEHANTE SECURITIES on the cover—
or what was left of it.

Most of the letters had been scratched until they bled paper fuzz.

Abby reached for it. “What’s this supposed to—”

Snakes cut her off with a sharp look. “School days are over.”

Jessica froze.

Abby’s face shifted—surprise, confusion, something unsettled.

Snakes continued, voice low and pointed:

“Gas can change the way the world looks. Don’t burn yourself up lighting a match to see the way.”

Nick opened his mouth to argue, offended on principle.

Snakes pointed a finger at him without looking.

“And you—don’t mistake a spark for a promise. Just because it glitters like gold, doesn’t mean it is. A city spray-painted gold, is just a lie.”

He started shuffling away, mop squeaking like it disapproved of everyone involved. At the door, he added without turning:

“Registrar knows where to file it. Cabins catch fire, too.”

The chime let him out with a sigh.

Silence followed, the kind that rearranged the air.

Abby stared at the matchbook in her hand. “That was... ominous.”

Nick rolled his eyes, trying to shake off the moment. “Snakes thinks everything is ominous. Yesterday he warned me about the TV in the lobby listening.”

But Jessica—

Jessica slipped the matchbook into her notebook like evidence from a crime she hadn’t witnessed yet. Her pulse thudded.

For a moment she saw, in her mind’s eye, her crooked cabin drawing from weeks ago—

not peaceful, not lonely—

but glowing orange, swallowed in flame.

And around the base, ants carrying buckets too small to matter.

She shut the notebook quickly.

Because suddenly she wasn’t sure if Snakes was warning her about them—

or about herself.

Nick rubbed his temples. “Why me.”

“Because you deserve it,” Jessica muttered.

Abby shook her head, smiling faintly. “He’s... unique.”

“Cryptid,” Jessica corrected. “Native to this café.”

“Your cryptid,” Abby teased Nick.

“Don’t encourage him,” Nick said.

Later, when the rush thinned, Abby lingered at the counter, her latte empty but her smile still warm.

“So,” Abby said, leaning her elbows on the wood, “if you liked Twenty One Pilots, I need to ask—how do you feel about Muse?”

Jessica didn’t look up from wiping the steam wand. “They’re fine.”

Abby’s grin widened. “Fine? Jess, they’re space opera with guitars. That’s not ‘fine.’ That’s religion.”

Jessica shrugged like she hadn’t listened to “Supermassive Black Hole” on loop during midterms last year. “Their early albums slap. Don’t get dramatic.”

“Oh, I’m absolutely getting dramatic,” Abby said. “Top-tier dramatic. Okay—what about Gorillaz?”

Jessica hesitated one second too long.

Abby snapped her fingers. “Knew it. You’re a ‘Plastic Beach’ girly, aren’t you?”

“I’m not anything,” Jessica said, entirely too fast.

Nick, overhearing, snorted into his coffee. “Here we go. Abby’s converting another one.”

“We’re bonding,” Abby corrected. “Let us have this.”

“God forbid,” Jessica muttered.

Abby turned back to her. “Okay—last one. Of Monsters and Men. Be honest.”

Jessica sighed with the weight of all suffering. “They’re... acceptable.”

Abby lit up. “You like them.”

“I tolerate them.”

“You tolerate them passionately,” Abby teased. “Good. Then the universe is ready.”

“For what?” Jessica asked warily.

Abby pulled out her phone. “You won’t believe it. The algorithm heard us. East Coast tour dates just dropped for Twenty One Pilots.”

Jessica’s heart attempted a gymnastic maneuver. “Oh.”

“That’s enthusiasm,” Abby laughed. “Try it with feeling.”

“I mean—acceptable,” Jessica said, aiming for stoic and landing somewhere near flustered. “I guess I can clear my schedule.”

Nick raised an eyebrow. “Are you two forming a club? Should I be worried? Any ganging-up-on-me clauses I should know about?”

“Yes,” Abby and Jessica said at the same time—Jessica deadpan, Abby cheerful.

Nick threw up his hands. “Great. The alliance has formed. My doom is sealed.”

Abby elbowed him gently before turning back to Jessica. “We should plan it. Or even just hang out before then. Listen to music. Compare playlists. Judge each other’s choices.”

Jessica blinked. “Judge?”

“Lovingly,” Abby said. “Mostly.”

Jessica tried not to smile. Failed.

Then Abby held out her phone. “Trade numbers? So we can coordinate.”

Jessica’s lungs staged a coup. “Oh. Uh. Sure.”

She slid her phone across the counter, trying not to visibly flinch when Abby’s fingers brushed hers. Abby typed quickly, handed it back with a smile so bright it felt like an indictment.

“There,” Abby said. “Now you can’t pretend you don’t exist between shifts.”

Nick made a wounded noise. “She pretends I don’t exist all the time.”

“That’s because you’re annoying,” Jessica said, tucking her phone away before her hands could tremble.

Abby laughed—soft, pleased, warm. “Okay. I should go. But text me. Seriously. We’ll make plans.”

Jessica nodded once, businesslike, as if she hadn’t already mentally curated her playlist for the event. “We’ll see.”

But the moment Abby stepped out into the gray drizzle, Jessica opened her notebook under the counter.

Exhibit F: Shared music taste—catastrophic.

Exhibit G: Vet Barbie now exists in my contacts.

Threat assessment: escalating beyond salvage.

She doodled three ants carrying an earbud together. Beneath them, faint pencil lines sketched the crooked cabin again—roof smoking like something waiting to ignite.

Outside, the wind chime sang one soft note.

Chapter 10 — Distant Storms

The morning air smelled like damp pavement and exhaust. Harrisburg was in one of its indecisive moods—too gray for sun, too wet for dust. Jessica Summers sat stiff in the passenger seat of her dad’s old sedan, notebook balanced on her knees, pencil tapping in irritation.

Dick Summers drove with both hands on the wheel like the steering column was a playbook and he was quarterbacking traffic. The windshield wipers squeaked in uneven rhythm.

“You know we can’t really talk cars until you get your license,” Dick said, eyes fixed on the road ahead. His voice carried that practiced calm that meant serious dad mode.

Jessica didn’t look up from her page. “We can’t really talk license until one of you has time to take me driving.”

“I make time,” Dick said, but his jaw flexed. “Reps matter more than game day. You don’t just run onto the field cold—you drill, you practice, you make mistakes where it doesn’t count.”

Jessica sighed, writing without lifting her head:

CASE FILE #7: PARENTAL CONTRADICTIONS

Exhibit A: ‘Practice’ is code for ‘figure it out alone.’

Exhibit B: Benched without warning.

“You’re not benched,” Dick said, as if he could read the page. “You’re warming up.”

Jessica raised an eyebrow. “From the sidelines?”

He chuckled despite himself. “Point taken.” The sedan rattled to a stop in front of Summers’ Brew. He shifted into park. “Just—don’t wait too long. You’ll want that license sooner than you think.”

Jessica closed her notebook with a snap. “I want a lot of things.” She opened the door before he could reply and stepped out into the street’s damp breath.

The café was already buzzing by the time she tied her apron on. Winona had gone full constellation with her scarf—silver threads like meteor trails—and hummed as she lined up harmony teas for the morning rush.

Jessica manned the counter, labeling cups with ruthless honesty: FRAZZLED TODDLER DAD. YOGA PANTS APOLOGIST. ESPRESSO SURVIVALIST. A man in a raincoat dripped onto the floor mat and got RAINCOAT APOLOGIST for his trouble. The rhythm of grind, tamp, pull, pour steadied her mood, but her thoughts still hummed with Dick’s words.

Winona appeared at her elbow with a steaming pot. “Road-Trip blend. For courage and brakes.” She slid it across the counter with a wink.

“I don’t even have a car,” Jessica muttered.

“Cars come later,” Winona said cheerfully. “Brakes first.”

Jessica rolled her eyes, but the chime at the door cut her retort short.

Nick Wright strolled in, briefcase in hand, suit jacket damp at the cuffs. Abby Winters walked beside him, umbrella folded neatly, cardigan dry, hair tucked back with surgical precision. They looked like they belonged to the same photograph.

Jessica’s pencil twitched.

“Morning, Jess,” Nick said, placing his briefcase on the counter like it needed caffeine too. “Got any insults saved up?”

“I ration them,” Jessica said. “You’re not special.”

“Registrar’s going soft,” Nick teased.

Abby smiled warmly. “Good morning.”

Jessica scrawled TUNED OUT on Nick’s cup and GOOD MUSIC TASTE on Abby’s. She slid them across. Abby laughed when she read hers.

As Nick fished for change, Jessica muttered, “Apparently I can’t get a license because no one has time to take me driving.”

Abby perked up. “Wait—you don’t have a drivers license?”

Jessica stiffened. “Shocking, I know.”

Abby’s smile sharpened into mischief. She turned to Nick. “Perfect solution. You should teach her.”

Nick choked on his own inhale. “Me? No. Absolutely not. My insurance company would explode.”

“You’ll be fine,” Abby said, nudging his arm. “You’re patient.”

Jessica snorted. “That’s the funniest lie I’ve ever heard.”

Abby ignored her. “Besides, you’re always going on about responsibility. What’s more responsible than helping someone get their license?”

Nick groaned, looked between them like he’d lost a bet. “I can’t believe I’m agreeing to this.”

Jessica arched an eyebrow. “Neither can I.”

But something fluttered in her chest—half excitement, half dread. The chime behind them gave a single, indecisive note, like it wasn’t sure if this was a good idea.

By the time her shift ended, the sky had wrung itself into a clearer gray. Jessica stepped outside, expecting the walk

home, and froze. Nick's car idled at the curb, Abby in the back seat, waving her over.

"Your chariot awaits," Abby called.

Jessica blinked. "I walk."

"Not today," Abby said, grinning. "Today you drive."

Nick leaned over the console, expression pained. "Against my better judgment."

Jessica slid into the driver's seat like it was a courtroom. The upholstery smelled faintly of coffee and aftershave. The keys glinted in the ignition. She thought briefly of the Alehante matchbook tucked into her notebook back at the café—proof waiting to spark if someone struck it.

"Seatbelt," Nick barked immediately.

"She hasn't even turned the car on," Abby teased.

"Seatbelt first," Nick insisted, tightening his own.

Jessica rolled her eyes, clicked hers into place. "Happy, Dad?"

Nick pinched the bridge of his nose. "Thrilled. Adjust your mirrors."

"She's got this," Abby said, nudging one of the mirrors with a smile. "Relax."

Nick shot her a look. Abby grinned, unbothered. The chemistry between them sparked like static—the kind you don't notice until it shocks you. Jessica caught it, stomach twisting.

Hands on the wheel, she muttered, "You two done?"

"Never," Abby said lightly. "Go on. Ease into it."

Jessica turned the key.

The engine groaned awake like it had been napping in protest.

She pressed the gas too quickly; the car lurched like a startled horse.

Nick clutched the dash like that might save his life.

“Easy!” he barked. “Gentle—gentle! It’s a gas pedal, not a bass drum.”

“You’re making her nervous,” Abby said from the backseat, laughter warming the air. “She’s fine.”

“I am not fine,” Nick muttered through his teeth.

Jessica smirked, letting the car glide forward slightly more smoothly. “Paranoid much?”

“About my luxury car? Yes,” Nick snapped. “She trained for one hour. ONE. You need years before you trust someone with a fine piece of Japanese workmanship—”

“It’s just a car, Nick,” Abby said.

Nick threw her a betrayed look. “Spoken like someone who’s never watched a teenager nearly take out a mailbox.”

Jessica raised an eyebrow. “I would not take out a mailbox.”

The air in the care settled for a moment.

“Unless it deserved it.”

Abby laughed into her sleeve. “See? She’s got your sarcasm and my optimism. Best of both worlds.”

“The candy-corn of attitudes,” Nick grumbled, tightening his seatbelt.

They rolled down quiet suburban streets—gray sky, wet pavement, the kind of day that smelled like unfinished arguments. Nick micromanaged every turn; Abby countered him with encouragement; Jessica tried to pretend she wasn’t internally screaming.

Then it happened.

The glance.

Abby teased Nick about being dramatic; Nick pretended insult; their eyes held a second too long. Their laughter aligned into the same wavelength.

A wavelength Jessica didn't have the password to.

Her stomach tightened. She remembered cafeteria tables she wasn't invited to sit at. Erica's friends whispering secrets over music Jessica wasn't cool enough to understand. Laughter always just out of reach.

She tightened her grip on the steering wheel.

If they were a duet, she was background static.

Jessica reached for the radio—mostly to drown out Nick's backseat driving.

Static.

Static.

And then—

A warped synth groove slipped through the speakers, followed by a detached, almost smug voice:

“Basic being basic, I don't want it—”

Jessica's face lit up before she could stop it.

Nick recoiled like the dashboard had personally insulted him.

“Oh no. Nope. Absolutely not,” he said, already gesturing wildly. “Why does it sound like irony learned how to dance? Why is he bored at me? Why does this feel like my personality is being judged?”

Jessica's hand froze halfway to the dial. “...It's good.”

“It's aggressively self-aware,” Nick said. “It's like the song knows it's better than me and won't shut up about it.”

“It's called satire,” Jessica muttered.

“It's called emotional bullying,” Nick shot back. “This is exactly the kind of thing Samantha used to play. You know—music that smirks while it ruins your day. I didn't like it then, I don't like it now.”

Jessica's stomach dropped.

Samantha.

Cool without trying.

The era where Nick pretended he didn't care what anyone thought—and absolutely did.

And suddenly her music—the one place she felt older, sharper, more put-together—felt childish. Performative. Like something she was borrowing instead of owning.

Her fingers hovered over the volume. “I can turn it down.”

In the rearview mirror, Abby grinned and—God help her—gave a tiny, rhythmic nod.

“Honestly?” Abby said. “It's kinda catchy. Annoying. But catchy.”

Nick buried his face in his hand. “Please. I can feel the song making eye contact with me.”

Jessica switched the station, cheeks burning.

They pulled into an empty stretch of curb so Jessica could practice parallel parking. She hadn't even aligned with the curb yet when Nick's phone buzzed with all the subtlety of a bomb countdown.

Nick glanced at the screen, froze.

“Oh no,” Abby said. “Is it—”

“Yes,” Nick groaned. “Him.”

He answered.

“WRIGHT!” Eldorado's voice exploded so loudly the car's speakers rattled despite being on a phone call.

Jessica winced. Abby mouthed sorry from the backseat.

Nick leaned away from them, half hanging out the open car door like fresh air might protect him. “Hey, man. We were just... yeah. Thinking about it. The AIM thing.”

Eldorado's response was muffled but unmistakably enthusiastic. And loud. Very loud.

Nick rubbed his forehead. “I know the earning potential. I know the exposure. Yes. Yes, I remember your TED Talk about ‘the future of narrative’—”

Another blast through the receiver.

Jessica exchanged a look with Abby, eyebrows raised.

Nick’s voice dropped, suddenly serious, quieter—private.

“...Yeah. It would help. The loans. And the rent. I know.”

Jessica’s heart jerked.

Rent. Student loans.

They looked like “finished adults,” but the cracks were showing.

Nick stepped fully out of the car to finish the call.

The door shut behind him.

And suddenly the car was small, warm, and quiet enough for something else to slip in.

Jessica glanced in the rearview mirror. Abby sat with her chin on the seatback, cheeks still pink from laughing at the radio moment.

“So,” Jessica said, pretending nonchalance, “AIM? Really? What would you even do on a stream? Diagnose hamsters?”

Abby laughed. “Oh God, no. If I streamed vet stuff, people would cry. Or sue.”

“Then what?” Jessica asked.

Abby bit her lip. Then smiled—a mischievous smile Jessica hadn’t seen before.

“...Cosplay.”

Jessica blinked. “You?”

Abby nodded, brushing invisible lint off her cardigan. “In high school. And college. I had phases. Lucy Heartfilia.

Nami. Sometimes Nami and Lucy if the con was a multi-day thing.”

Jessica’s brain short-circuited. Cardigan Abby? Nerd? Cosplayer?

“What?” Jessica finally croaked.

“Oh! And once I tried to go as Zelda,” Abby continued. “Except the costume company sent me a ‘Sexy Female Link’ outfit because they thought the guy in green was Zelda.”

Jessica stared.

“No.”

“Yes,” Abby said, hand to heart. “Spent the whole convention explaining I wasn’t Rule 63 Link. I was just a victim of bad customer service.”

Jessica let out an involuntary snort.

“Oh my God.”

Abby leaned forward conspiratorially. “So... if AIM wanted me to stream? I’d probably do some anime reviews while in cosplay. Something fun. Something stupid. Something that doesn’t involve cleaning up after pugs with anxious farts.”

Jessica stared at her for a full beat.

Abby wasn’t just Cardigan Nice.

The cardigan played the persona for a massive nerd.

And suddenly the “we should hang out” offer from before didn’t feel like pity.

It felt like an invitation from someone who actually got her.

Nick slid back into the passenger seat with a long exhale.

“Well,” he said, rubbing the bridge of his nose, “Eldorado is... Eldorado.”

“That’s one word for it,” Jessica said.

Abby leaned forward from the backseat, voice gentler now. “He means well. He just... makes everything sound intense.”

Nick didn’t disagree.

Jessica looked between them. “So you two are really considering AIM.”

Nick shrugged. “It’s a maybe.”

“A heavy maybe,” Abby added, softer still. “We’re just... trying to stay afloat. Things are tight. This could help.”

Jessica blinked.

She’d been so busy seeing them as “finished adults,” she forgot they were real people with bills and fear and pressure closing in.

Sugar spills, Snakes had warned.

To Nick and Abby, the sugar didn’t look like bait.

It looked like a lifeline.

Jessica swallowed. “Okay.”

Nick nodded, oblivious to the storm tightening behind her ribs. “Alright. Parallel parking. Attempt two.”

Jessica put her hands on the wheel.

That evening, the Summers house was louder than usual, but the kitchen clock was the loudest thing in it. When Jessica finally pushed through the back door, the smell of garlic bread was already cooling.

Martha turned from the stove, brow furrowed. “Jessica! You’re over an hour late. I was about to call the—” She stopped, seeing outside the window, Nick entering the drivers seat of the car “You drove?”

“I drove,” Jessica exaggerated, dropping her bag. “Nick let me take the wheel. We did loops around the Nurburgring .”

Dick looked up from his plate, fork pausing mid-air. “In his car? That fancy Acura?”

“It survived,” Jessica said, sliding into her chair. “He only panicked twice.”

Erica smirked, examining her new Converse shoes—a gift from Trevor. “Only twice? He must have a death wish.”

“Who was with you?” Martha asked, passing the salad bowl. “Just... Nick?”

“No,” Jessica said, stabbing a cucumber slice. “Abby came too. She sat in the back. Backseat driver, but the nice kind.”

Dick exhaled, a long sound of genuine relief. He exchanged a look with Martha that clearly said: See? She’s not alone with the older guy. Chaperoned. Safe. “Good,” Dick said, nodding vigorously. “That’s good. Safety in numbers. Plus, she’s... what, closer to your age? Good to have friends who aren’t... you know.”

“Ancient?” Jessica supplied dryly.

“Established,” Dick corrected.

“We talked,” Jessica said, surprising herself by sharing it. “She’s not just... sweaters. She used to cosplay. Like, full-on anime. She ordered a Zelda costume once and got sent a sexy Link by mistake and wore it anyway.”

Erica choked on her water. “Vet Barbie? Cosplaying? No way.”

“Way,” Jessica said, a small smile tugging at her mouth despite herself. “She likes Lucy Heartfilia. And she likes my music. Or at least... she tolerates the nerd pop stuff better than Nick does.”

Martha clasped her hands together, looking ready to weep with joy. “Oh, Jess. That is wonderful. You found a friend. A real girl friend who likes the things you like.”

“She’s a woman, Mom, not a girl,” Jessica muttered, but the warmth in her chest was undeniable.

“It’s healthy,” Dick declared, cutting his chicken with authority. “Expanding the roster. diversifying the team. That’s how you win.”

“Please stop making friendship a sport,” Jessica groaned.

But as the dinner noise washed over her—Erica asking if Abby knew how to do eyeliner, Martha planning imaginary sleepovers—Jessica felt a strange pang. They were relieved she was “over” Nick. They were thrilled she had Abby. And Jessica was... confused. She had sat in the driver’s seat. She had controlled the car. But when the phone rang and Nick stepped out to talk money with Eldorado, and Abby leaned forward to comfort her... Jessica realized she wasn’t the driver. She was the passenger in their life.

Later, upstairs, she opened her notebook.

CASE FILE #7: DISTANT STORMS

Exhibit A: I controlled the wheel.

Exhibit B: Nick hates my music. (Marilyn Manson = garbage disposal).

Exhibit C: Abby knows who Lucy Heartfilia is.

Exhibit D: They worry about money in a language I don't speak yet.

Analysis: I am in the car. I am part of the joke. I am invited to a concert. But I am watching them through the rearview mirror even when I’m sitting right next to them.

Verdict: It hurts. Strangely. Like a limb waking up, or falling asleep.

She doodled a steering wheel. Three ants. One driving. One navigating. One just holding on. She couldn't tell which one she was.

Her apron knot tied tighter before bed, bracing against something unnamed. Outside, thunder muttered far off. The storm was coming.

Chapter 11 — The License Victory

The new day brought a sky of punishing, crisp blue—the kind of color Harrisburg usually hoarded for the last week of May, then immediately regretted. The air outside the DMV had finally shaken off its damp-basement chill and now smelled of cut grass, hot asphalt, and the strange optimism of people trying to accomplish paperwork before noon.

Jessica Summers sat in a DMV plastic chair that felt intentionally hostile to human posture. Her black jeans had a new frayed spot on the hem—a trophy from catching the pedal during one of their seven—no, eight—practice sessions. Her notebook balanced on her knee, she'd already written:

CASE FILE #8: WHEELS UNLOCKED

Status: Post-Operative. License acquired.

Elapsed Time: 18 days, 7 practice sessions, 1 existential crisis at a four-way stop.

Exhibit A: Parallel parking conquered. (Nick's prayer circle optional but noted.)

Exhibit B: State examiner survived. Only one sigh recorded.

Exhibit C: Cardstock weapon now will be in pocket. World, consider yourself warned.

She closed the notebook on a pencil dent deep enough to be emotional.

Her name was called and she was handed the laminated card and placed it in her pocket—thin as a wafer, smug as a miracle—felt like a foreign object. A responsibility. A weapon. A promise. Something that transformed her from

“child with legs” to “person technically allowed to operate a two-ton vehicle without adult supervision.”

The examiner, a man who smelled of stale coffee and existential *déjà vu*, had only sighed once during the whole test. A personal best.

And Summers’ Brew, miles away, would be in its mid-morning lull. Winona would be rearranging the chairs by half-inches. The chalkboard would already have switched to summer mode: ICED SUNSTROKE SAVIOR, COLD BREW OF THE DAMNED, and probably something citrus that pretended to cure heartbreak.

Leaving the DMV, someone’s toddler was losing a legal battle with gravity. A printer jammed in a way that implied vengeance. A teenager in front of Jessica whispered, “I’m gonna fail,” the way someone in a horror movie whispers, “We shouldn’t split up.”

Jessica’s chest still carried the residue of the test:

Left turn. Blink. Breathe. Don’t crash.

Alive? Yes. Barely? Also yes.

Dick Summers was waiting outside the DMV like he’d just coached her through the Super Bowl. The sunlight bounced off his car window and made him look—annoyingly—proud.

“You did it,” he said when she stepped out.

Jessica raised an eyebrow. “Your lack of faith is disturbing and logged.”

“Faith I had,” Dick corrected, “patience, not so much.”

“Translation: you were convinced I’d crash.”

He grinned. A real one. “You pulled a clean three-point turn, Jess. That’s better than half the people on the road.”

He clicked the key fob with a victorious beep.

“So. Next step’s easy. Pick a car.”

Jessica slid into the passenger seat like the DMV chair had prepared her for it. “Next step is money. Cars cost money.”

“Don’t underestimate momentum,” Dick said, buckling in. “Game day feels different when you’ve been running drills.”

Jessica jotted:

Exhibit D: Dad compares everything to football.

Exhibit E: Still proud though.

She shut the notebook softly—as if the moment might break if she moved too fast.

That afternoon, the café seemed brighter than usual—maybe because Jessica could finally imagine driving herself there instead of begging for rides. She tied her apron knot a little looser, left loop, right loop over, pull, and started her shift.

Winona flitted through the shop, humming under her constellation scarf, scattering harmony tea like it was confetti for the universe. She placed a steaming mug in front of Jessica with ceremony. “Freedom blend. For roads and rules you’ll break gently.”

Jessica smirked. “Not FDA approved.”

“Neither is joy,” Winona replied, breezing away.

Jessica labeled cups with her usual precision: PANIC LATTE, COOKIE DEFENSE STRATEGY, CARPOOL REGRET, I SURVIVED DMV (the last for herself, which she drank while pretending it was just a refill).

The bell chimed.

Nick Wright entered, briefcase in hand, still damp from the misty walk across the block. Abby Winters followed, cardigan immaculate, hair tucked neatly behind her ear. They

looked like they were posing for a stock photo titled Competence, Duo Edition.

“Registrar,” Nick said, setting his briefcase down. “Got our usual citations ready?”

Jessica handed him a cup labeled SILVER TOUNGE STUNG before he could finish the question.

Abby leaned in, smiling. “What about me?”

Jessica slid over one labeled A BEE.

Abby laughed. “Accurate.”

Nick squinted at Jessica. “You’re in a better mood. What happened?”

Jessica cleared her throat, pretending her heart wasn’t doing parkour inside her ribs.

“I passed my driver’s test.”

Silence froze the air for a beat—then:

Abby let out a delighted, actual cheer, loud enough that Winona nearly dropped a teapot.

“You did? That’s amazing! Jessica, that’s huge!”

Nick grinned like he had personally taught her to parallel park.

“Registrar behind the wheel. God help Harrisburg.”

Jessica managed half a smirk. “Optimism noted.”

Abby bumped Nick’s shoulder. “We should celebrate! Drinks on us tonight. The Blue Door on 3rd has great IPAs.”

Nick didn’t miss a beat.

“She’s nineteen, Abby. Unless you want to buy her a Shirley Temple.”

Abby froze—then flushed so fast it was almost audible.

“Oh god. Right. I forgot. You seem... older.”

Jessica blinked, torn between mortification and triumph.

“I’m going to take that as a compliment, but my ID takes it as a denial of service.”

Nick's grin sharpened. "Careful, Abs. You're projecting. Just because you needed a fake ID to function doesn't mean Jessica needs to break the law."

Abby slapped his arm. "Nicholas."

Jessica narrowed her eyes. "Fake ID?"

Nick turned to her like he'd been waiting for that opening.

"You don't know about Magnificent Mindy, do you?"

Abby groaned into her palms. "No, no, no, we are not telling—"

"Oh, we're absolutely telling it," Nick said. "You can't hide your supervillain origin story."

He perched an elbow on the counter, settling in.

"It was Tyrone Barren's birthday," Nick began. "We were all over twenty-one. Except Abby."

"I was twenty," Abby muttered, mortified.

"So Christina Purre," Nick continued, "gets her this cheap fake ID that looked like it had been printed on a cereal box."

Abby held up a finger. "It worked at two places!"

"Because the bouncer was blind in one eye and flirting with Perry in the other," Nick said.

Jessica tried and failed not to smile.

Nick went on, warming to the story.

"So we get to the bar, Abby panics—full deer-in-headlights meltdown—and instead of just ordering a drink like a normal criminal, she becomes—"

He spread his hands theatrically.

"Magnificent Mindy."

Abby covered her face. "I hate you."

Nick ignored this. "Mindy was a drifter from Memphis, Tennessee—"

Abby, unable to help herself, muttered in a perfect drawl: “—born free, died probably in a honky-tonk brawl.”

Jessica choked on air.

Nick laughed. “She used a Southern accent so thick you could pour it on pancakes. Claimed she followed Phish on tour just to prove she could.”

“I don’t even like Phish,” Abby admitted.

“She hates Phish,” Nick confirmed. “But Mindy? Mindy loved chaos. Mindy loved freedom. Mindy told the bartender that her friend Abby had her whole life planned out for the next fifteen years and it was—quote—‘suffocatin’ my spirit like a too-tight brassiere.’”

Abby dropped her head onto the counter with a groan.

“I was suffocating,” she said quietly. “My real life felt so... mapped out. Everything I did had to be perfect. Mindy was a mess. But she was... free.”

Jessica felt that land somewhere under her ribs.

“And then,” Nick said gently, “she cried to the bartender about an identity crisis until I had to take her outside and convince her she was actually a good person underneath the accent.”

Abby looked at him then—really looked—and the softness between them hit Jessica like a slow bruise.

Jessica’s pulse misfired.

Nick used to call her a kid.

He called Abby a kid too—back then—because he was scared of other feelings.

Was he still scared?

Or had he already gotten over it—with Abby?

Jessica suddenly felt fourteen again, standing outside a cafeteria joke she wasn’t invited to.

Abby sat up, cheeks flushed but smiling.

“Okay. No bars,” she declared. “But now that you can drive—”

Here it came.

“—this means you get to drive us to the concert when Twenty One Pilots comes.”

She winked. “Designated driver secured.”

Jessica blinked. “Me? Driving you two?”

Nick raised a hand. “Hard pass. If it’s not blasting actual instruments and existential rage—Rob Zombie, AC/DC, the classics—I’m staying home.”

“That’s because you’re OLD,” Abby said sweetly.

Nick sputtered. “I’m thirty-two, not fossilized.”

Abby ignored him. She turned back to Jessica, eyes bright.

“You and I will go. Front row. We’ll scream the lyrics until we can’t feel feelings anymore.”

A warmth spread through Jessica so unfamiliar she almost stepped back from it.

“We?” she echoed.

“Yes,” Abby said. “We.”

Jessica wrote nothing in her notebook.

Her hands were too busy holding the moment together.

Chapter 12 — Winona's Cause

The morning wore sunshine like a new shirt—stiff, hopeful, maybe not quite the right size. Harrisburg pretended to be cheerful anyway. Summers' Brew smelled like citrus cleaner and the first shot of espresso, the kind that hits the cup with a hiss like stage fog.

Jessica Summers tied her apron—left loop, right loop over, pull—and let the small click make bones out of her spine. She turned a clean page in her notebook.

CASE FILE #9: HARMONY IN ACTION

Advisory: The universe is nosy. Assume it will meddle.

"Team meeting!" Winona announced, striding out of the kitchen with a tray balanced like a halo. Her scarf today was yellow—full-sunflower aggressive—with tiny stitched bees that looked like they'd unionized. "Gather, my lovelies."

"We don't have a team," Jessica said, stacking clean mugs into militant columns. "We have hostages."

"We have a family," Winona corrected cheerfully. "And I'm about to make it larger."

The bell chimed. Nick Wright slid through the door with his briefcase, followed by Abby Winters, umbrella tidily furled, cardigan soft enough to be a threat. They looked awake in a way people aren't before coffee. Annoying.

"Perfect," Winona said, clapping once. "Newly deputized volunteers."

Nick froze. "No."

Abby smiled. "Yes."

Jessica blinked. "I haven't even clocked in."

"Consider yourselves clocked by destiny," Winona said, depositing the tray on the counter. Mason jars clinked,

chalkboard labels stacked neatly beside them. A poster-board leaned against her hip, painted in chaotic cursive: Fill the Pack — School Supplies Drive.

“You’re doing a drive?” Abby asked, instantly warm. “That’s wonderful.”

“WE are doing a drive,” Winona corrected, pronouncing the we like it had already been ratified. “Kids over at the mall are moving back into the renovated ‘Harrison Academy for Brilliance’ they can’t start school without basics. We fill backpacks with pencils, notebooks, erasers, courage. All proceeds to the kids at the Harrison Academy for Brilliance.” She looked at Nick with a smile that could make a priest swear. “That means you, too.”

Nick shifted his briefcase like a shield. “I’m very busy being an adult.”

“Adults are my best helpers,” Winona said, pressing a bundle of string and clothespins into his hands. “You get to hang the ‘Acts of Goodness’ line.”

Nick stared at the string like it had insulted him. “I’m a lawyer.”

“Then you can read the small print,” Winona said, already handing Abby a box of crayons and stickers. “Abby, label the jars. And Jessica—”

“No,” Jessica said automatically.

“—you get the poster,” Winona finished, radiant. “And the clipboard.”

“The dreaded clipboard,” Jessica muttered, but her fingers already took it. The pen attached had a puff of yarn that looked like a stress cloud. Of course it did.

Abby leaned beside her at the counter, chalking labels in clean, attractive letters—clinic-legible, neat as a textbook

diagram. Each jar name curved perfectly, like even her handwriting had its life together.

“Nice penmanship,” Jessica said grudgingly.

“Occupational hazard,” Abby replied. “Vets have to write legibly. Otherwise someone’s cat ends up with a tooth extraction when they needed a nail trim.”

“Human doctors just shrug,” Nick added from the window, where he somehow managed to clothespin the string to his sleeve.

“You’re not bleeding,” Abby said mildly, unclipping him with practiced efficiency.

Jessica watched them both—Abby’s ease, her quiet competence, the way she moved through the café like she had a manual for adulthood nobody had ever handed Jessica.

Her pen hovered.

I remember what Nick said yesterday.

About the fake ID.

The accent.

The meltdown at the bar.

Magnificent Mindy from Memphis who followed Phish and cried to a bartender because she wasn’t sure who she was.

Jessica looked at the chalkboard labels—perfect. Her cardigan—perfect. Her posture—perfect.

Today Abby Winters seemed like she was the one organizing a charity drive like she was running for office.

Was “Competent Adult” just another costume?

Like Mindy?

A persona she slipped into so cleanly it was impossible to see the seams?

If so, the fit was annoyingly perfect.

Jessica wrote:

Exhibit A: He fumbles string.
She fixes it without making a speech.
Magnificent Mindy is nowhere in sight.
My job: record and try not to stare.

Winona taped a thermometer chart to the poster, marked BACKPACKS: 0/50 with (plus one for luck) scribbled underneath. She arranged jars like troops, assigning stars and stickers as weapons.

Jessica muttered, "We're all going to die."
"From kindness," Winona said. "What a way to go."

The first wave of regulars came through. Winona pitched with guile disguised as sincerity:

- To a retired teacher: "You've always known the power of sharpened pencils."

- To a construction worker: "You build the city. Help me build a backpack."

- To a broke student: "You are the exact age you needed this once. Pay it forward five pennies at a time."

People melted. Coins clinked. The thermometer blushed pink.

"Emotional manipulation," Jessica observed.

"Emotional invitation," Winona corrected. "Different suffix, same heart."

Meanwhile, Jessica labeled cups with merciless honesty: GLUE STICK FANATIC, BINDER CLIP HOARDER, CAFFEINE TAX DEDUCTION. A man actually asked if donations to the "Dreams" jar were tax-deductible, and Jessica deadpanned, "Absolutely. Just fill out this 80 page form."

Abby crouched beside the little girl at the art table, her cardigan pooling like soft steam around her. She held up two

colored pencils—teal and lavender—and asked, with full sincerity:

“Okay, important question. What color should a mermaid’s tail be if she wants to swim faster? This is science.”

The girl giggled, delighted by the seriousness of the question, and tapped the teal pencil like she was making a royal decree. Abby gasped in theatrical awe. “Excellent choice. Hydrodynamic. Sleek. A mermaid with taste.”

The girl beamed.

And Jessica—wiping down a perfectly clean table because it gave her hands something to do—felt something sharp lodge under her ribs.

Erica was right.

She watched Abby listening, laughing, making a kid feel like the center of a constellation just by existing in the same gravitational pull.

I am black licorice.

Distinct. Divisive. The candy people argue about on the internet. The flavor you either crave or spit out.

Abby is vanilla bean.

Warm. Reliable. Sweet in a way nobody distrusts. Universally loved. The flavor people choose without thinking because it feels safe, familiar, almost nostalgic.

Who chooses licorice when vanilla is right there—soft, effortless, glowing under café lights like she belongs in every warm memory anyone ever had?

Jessica’s throat tightened. She pretended to rearrange napkins.

Of course Nick likes her, she thought, pulse thudding.

Of course everyone likes her.

Hell, I like her. She's Abby. She fits the world. I argue with it.

The little girl hugged her sticker sheet. Abby ruffled her hair gently, like she'd known her forever.

Jessica turned away before anyone could see her face.

The ache in her chest didn't ask permission. It just settled in, familiar as the next page of her notebook.

The glass door squeaked. Bleach rolled in with philosophy.

Snakes parked his cart, set a folded newspaper on the counter, and stared at the jars with narrowed eyes. The front page carried a community grant story; the corner ad—**ALEHANTE SECURITIES / SECURE YOUR FUTURE**—was circled in angry red. Beside it, he had drawn three ants: one pushing a coin, one a pencil, one a briefcase.

He tapped the ad, then the thermometer board, then the ad again.

His voice dropped to something too sharp to ignore:

“Charity covers a lot of sins. But it doesn't cover debts.”

Nick stiffened.

Snakes continued, eyes slanting toward Abby, then toward Nick again.

“Your friends are filling backpacks while emptying their own pockets into the giant's mouth. Don't let the giant convince you he's hungry for anything but you.”

Jessica's stomach clenched.

Nick folded his arms. “Whatever you're implying, un- imply it.”

Snakes ignored him completely, turning to Jessica.

“Keep your books true.”

Then back to the AIM-flavored ad:

“And remind them—sugar brings ants. Giants? Bring fire.”

He rolled out, mop squeaking like a violin choking on its own warning.

Jessica’s pencil hovered. The crooked cabin smoke flickered behind her eyes—waiting to catch fire. She tucked the image away before it spread.

By mid-morning, the café hummed with purpose. Donations stacked, stars glittered, Abby made paper crowns for jars, and Winona orchestrated like a benevolent tyrant.

Nick held up the thermometer board. “We’re at twenty-seven backpacks. Not bad for an early push.”

“Not bad?” Winona beamed. “That’s stellar!”

“Star-level stellar,” Abby agreed, adjusting a paper crown on the DREAMS jar.

Nick pulled out his phone. “Hold still. Winona needs a team photo for the fundraiser page.”

Jessica froze. “What page?”

“Relax,” Nick said. “It’s not going on a billboard. Smile.”

Before she could protest, he lifted the phone.

Click.

In the quick flash of movement:

Winona was beaming like she’d singlehandedly unlocked world peace.

Abby glowed—soft cardigan light, eyes warm, the kind of person who always looked like hope in photographs.

And Jessica ... wasn’t looking at the camera at all.

She was looking at Abby.

Like gravity had opinions.

Nick glanced at the screen. “Perfect. You all look great.”

Jessica tightened her apron knot. “Delete it.”

“Nope,” Nick said cheerfully. “This is going on the board.”

Jessica muttered something unprintable and walked away before her face could betray her.

But the image stayed burned into her brain.

Why was she looking at Abby like that?

Why did it feel like she'd been caught doing something she didn't understand yet?

Chapter 13 — Confessions Over Coffee

Glitter clung like guilt.

Jessica Summers flicked at her sleeve for the twelfth time that morning, but the flecks from Winona's fundraiser had embedded themselves in her black shirt like permanent constellations. She could practically hear Erica's voice in her head: You look like you hugged a craft store explosion.

She hunched over her notebook at the register, scratching in impatient letters:

CASE FILE #10: CONFESSIONS OVER COFFEE

Exhibit A: Glitter is immortal.

Exhibit B: So is embarrassment.

The café was half awake. Winona hummed as she aligned chairs according to rules only she understood. The espresso machine hissed like a restless dragon. Outside, the sky pressed down, a heavy sheet of gray.

The bell chimed.

Nick Wright shouldered through the door like the weather itself had landed on him. His tie was crooked, his hair in full rebellion, and his briefcase dangled from his hand like a carcass he was dragging to the afterlife. He didn't stride in; he slumped, gravity claiming partial custody.

Jessica raised an eyebrow.

"You look like a man who lost a fistfight with Monday."

Nick groaned and collapsed onto a stool. The briefcase hit the counter with the dull thud of something too empty to be useful.

"Registrar," he rasped. "If you've got mercy on tap, I'll take it black."

“Fresh out,” Jessica said, already pouring. “All I’ve got is disappointment and steamed milk.”

“Perfect.” He rubbed both hands over his face like he was trying to sandpaper a fresh mistake off his soul. “Exactly my flavor of punishment.”

She set the cup in front of him with a thump. Steam curled upward, blurring the edges of his face until he looked like someone remembering a past life.

“So,” she said lightly. “Spill. What funeral are we hosting—yours?”

Nick didn’t meet her eyes.

“The rumor’s official,” he said, voice hollow. “The firm’s dissolving. Partners are jumping ship. Cases reassigned. Everything we’ve built...” He exhaled, long and cracked. “Gone. We’re bleeding out, Jess.”

Jessica’s pencil froze mid-word.

He wasn’t wearing his grin-armor today. He was... unguarded. Too human.

“And Abby?” Jessica asked before she could stop herself.

Nick huffed a humorless laugh. “ ‘Restructuring,’ they said.” He made air quotes that wilted halfway up. “They cut her to ‘as needed’. Effective immediately.”

Jessica swallowed.

“That’s—awful.”

“That’s rent,” Nick said quietly. “That’s student loans. That’s groceries.” He ran a hand through his hair. “We can’t keep going like this by ourselves.”

Jessica looked at him—this man who always walked into the café like charm was something he manufactured in-house—and saw the cliff edge behind his eyes.

“So... what now?” she asked softly.

Nick pressed his lips together.

“Eldorado sent the contract,” he said. “AIM. The streaming deal.”

Jessica’s stomach dropped straight through the floorboards of Summers’ Brew.

He continued, forcing a laugh that didn’t reach the surface.

“It’s... generous. Suspiciously generous. It covers equipment, a signing bonus, loan relief. Basically a golden parachute sewn entirely out of red flags.”

“Then why would you—?”

“Because,” he said sharply, then softened, “because we can’t say no. Not anymore. Abby deserves stability. I... deserve a job. And Eldorado’s deal is the only lifeboat left.”

Jessica tightened her grip on her pencil until it squeaked.

Snakes’ warning echoed in her skull:

Sugar spills. Ants don’t check ID before they bite.

“Nick...” she tried.

He waved her off with the tired confidence of someone who still believed optimism counted as income.

“Relax, Jess. Eldorado might be dramatic, but he’s not the devil.”

Jessica stared at him, stunned.

He was choosing fire.

And he thought it was warmth.

She opened her mouth to argue again—Don’t take the bait. Don’t let him own you—but Nick beat her to it, rubbing the back of his neck the way he did when a decision was already made, when he just hadn’t said it out loud yet.

“There’s one more thing,” he said.

Jessica froze. “That sounds ominous.”

“It’s just logistics,” he said, which only made the dread worse. “If we’re streaming partners... we need a studio. A real one. Decent lighting, soundproofing, space for equipment.”

She frowned. “Okay, so...?”

“So we can’t do that from two apartments.” He took a breath, not meeting her eyes. “We’re looking at places together. Abby and me. Consolidating rent.”

Jessica’s pulse stuttered.

Together.

A studio.

A partnership.

A home.

Her notebook stayed closed, but a line still wrote itself across her ribs:

They are building a life. I am still building a résumé.

“Oh,” she managed, the word folding in on itself.

Nick finally looked at her—gentle, oblivious, already halfway gone into the future he hoped AIM would buy him.

“It makes sense,” he said. “Financially. Professionally.”

Emotionally.

He didn’t say it, but the air hummed with it anyway.

Jessica nodded once—too sharp, too fast—then wiped a nonexistent spill from the counter.

“Sure,” she said. “Makes... sense.”

Nick brightened a little, relief softening his shoulders. “Right? Exactly. It’s not— I mean— it’s not like, a big romantic move or whatever. It’s just practical. A partnership.”

Right.

A partnership.

Jessica felt the glass wall thicken—quiet, solid, airtight.

On their side: two adults making plans.

On hers: a barista with a notebook full of ants.

She jotted later, when Nick wasn't looking:

CASE FILE #13 (ADDENDUM):

CONSOLIDATION

Exhibit D: They're moving in together.

Exhibit E: Household forming.

Exhibit F: Register me as "Outside Looking In."

Verdict: The future has a door. I am not on the lease.

Nick didn't notice her stiff posture.

Didn't notice her silence.

Didn't notice the way her hand shook as she capped her pen.

He was staring into his coffee like it held the future.

Jessica wished it didn't.

Nick exhaled like the air itself weighed too much.

"I need this to work, Jess."

The words were soft, but heavy—like he was afraid of hearing them out loud.

"Not just for rent," he added. His fingers traced the rim of the coffee cup. "I was... I was looking at rings. Before the firm imploded."

Jessica's pulse stuttered.

Rings.

He kept going, unaware he'd just pushed a knife through her ribs.

"I'd finally started putting something aside. Not much, but enough for a start. A real proposal. A place we could grow into. But now... the only thing that's going to save that future is AIM money."

Jessica's hand tightened around her pencil until it trembled.

The future. Saved by Eldorado.

Her stomach twisted.

Moving in. Marriage. Streaming empire.

They weren't just making plans—they were boarding a rocket ship to Adulthood.

And she was the ground crew, waving little flags while it blasted off without her.

She swallowed. "Big dreams," she managed. "For... digital stares."

Nick gave a broken laugh. "Yeah. But the AIM deal—that income changes everything. It keeps the future intact. Keeps... her future intact."

Steam rose between them, blurring his face until the words ring, house, her hovered like ghosts.

Jessica looked down so he wouldn't see the way her expression cracked.

A mop squeaked.

Jessica didn't need to turn. Snakes carried warnings the way some people carried umbrellas—always ready for a storm.

He slid a napkin onto the counter.

At the center: the Alehante Securities logo.

Around it—ants tangled in a sticky web, legs stuck, bodies straining but going nowhere.

Snakes tapped the drawing once.

"Golden cages are still cages," he murmured. "The sugar isn't free, Wright. You sign that paper... you don't work for the giant."

His gaze lifted, sharp as glass.

"You belong to him."

Nick's jaw tightened. "Snakes—"

But the janitor was already turning, mop squeaking like a violin bow dragged too hard.

Jessica stared at the napkin.

The ants weren't marching.

They weren't circling.

They were caught.

Just like Nick.

Just like Abby.

Just like this future they were clawing toward.

Caught.

When Nick left—coffee half-finished, shoulders slumped like they were carrying the sky—Jessica stayed frozen at the counter.

People flowed around her: retirees debating chess openings, moms wiping sticky hands, students pretending deadlines weren't real. Life moved.

She didn't.

Her pencil hovered, then descended.

CASE FILE #13: THE FINAL NAIL

Exhibit A: Law firm: dissolved.

Exhibit B: Abby: cut to 'as needed'.

Exhibit C: AIM: lifeboat lined with teeth.

Exhibit D: He said ring. He said house. A future he's still trying to salvage. A future that doesn't have a seat for me.

Verdict:

They are packing bags for a life I can't visit.

At the bottom of the page, she drew three ants:

Two ants walking away together, holding tiny boxes—one labeled studio, one labeled future.

One ant standing still, holding a coffee cup, watching them shrink into the distance.

She stared at the drawing too long.

Then she closed the notebook.

The crack of the cover sounded like a door locking on the other side of the glass wall.

Chapter 14 — Shine like Silver, Sting like Bee

The house had settled into its late-night rhythm—dishwasher humming, Erica screaming into her gaming headset, the hallway light flicking on and off because the fixture was older than all their childhood pets combined.

Jessica lay sprawled on her stomach across her bed, ankle bouncing, pen uncapped and dripping absent-minded ink constellations onto the margin of her notebook.

Her phone sat beside her ear, actually being used as a phone.

“Okay,” Abby said on the other end, voice bright with nervous electricity. “Don’t laugh. Promise you won’t laugh.”

“No promises,” Jessica replied automatically, but her chest warmed anyway. She doodled an ant wearing oversized headphones.

She had spent a lifetime avoiding calls—too intimate, too revealing—but somehow Abby Winters had bypassed every firewall and was now rambling in her ear about her new streaming persona like it was the most normal thing in the world.

“Well... AIM wants me to lean into this whole ‘ABeeWin’ thing,” Abby said. “They think I’m ‘authentic chaos with a soft sting.’ Whatever that means.”

“It means you dress like a sentient honeycomb,” Jessica said, flipping to a new page.

“Rude,” Abby gasped. “It’s cozy! And people like bees!”

“People also like tax refunds. Doesn’t make them cute.”

Abby laughed—a bright, fizzy sound that Jessica now recognized as the audio equivalent of carbonated hope.

Jessica twirled the pen between her fingers. “So... you’re really doing it? The full persona? Sweater, glasses, bee emoji empire?”

Her voice tried to sound flippant. Her stomach was a riot in a glass jar.

“Well... yeah,” Abby said softly. “I mean... we need this. The clinic cut me to ‘as needed’. Nick’s firm is... well. You know.”

A pause.

“It feels good to build something. Even if it’s silly.”

Jessica’s throat tightened. Ring. House. Her.

The words Nick had confided sat like hot soup in her chest. She could spill them. She could warn Abby. She could shatter something fragile before it finished forming.

Girl code locked her jaw.

Not her news.

Not her right.

Before she could respond, her bedroom door swung open.

Erica leaned in, hair wrapped in a towel like a judgmental cinnamon bun. “Are you—” she squinted “—actually talking on the phone? Like voice talking? Ew. You’re turning into a Boomer. It’s contagious. Do I need to call a doctor?”

“Get out,” Jessica hissed, throwing a pillow.

Erica caught it one-handed like an Olympic-level menace. “Tell Trevor I love him,” she said to no one in particular and shut the door.

Abby laughed quietly. “Siblings?”

“Unfortunately,” Jessica muttered, heat climbing up her neck.

Footsteps padded down the hallway. Martha appeared with a laundry basket, paused in the doorway, and softened. “Haven’t heard that sound in years,” she murmured. “Teenagers whispering on phone lines. Cordless phones, secrets... nice to hear the house alive again.”

“MOM,” Jessica groaned.

Martha winked, left, and the hallway light flickered back into its buzz.

Jessica buried her face in her pillow for a second, mortified. Abby giggled.

“Your mom sounds sweet.”

“She weaponizes nostalgia,” Jessica muttered.

“Mine weaponizes guilt,” Abby said. “We all cope differently.”

A beat of quiet.

Then Abby’s voice lowered, conspiratorial. “So. Be honest. You really think the ABeeWin persona works? Nick keeps telling me it’s good marketing, but I think he’s just biased.”

“I mean...” Jessica chewed her lip. “It’s adorable. And chaotic. And kind of badass.”

She swallowed.

“But Jess-note? I still don’t trust Alehante.”

Abby exhaled. “I know, I know. Eldorado is... intense. But he’s been a gentleman so far.”

“He’s a persona, Abby. Like wrestling. Except wrestlers don’t own your livelihood.”

“You worry too much,” Abby said gently. “We’re doing this because we need stability. Money helps. The rest...” She trailed into a shrug Jessica could hear. “We’ll handle it.”

Jessica rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling fan spinning like a hypnotist’s coin.

They weren't handling it.

They were rewriting reality because the paycheck demanded a prettier version of the truth.

She didn't say that out loud.

Instead she drew an ant wearing a striped yellow sweater, stumbling under the weight of a honey jar.

Abby's voice returned, softer. "I'm glad you're talking to me, Jess."

Jessica capped her pen. "Yeah. Me too."

And she meant it.

Morning at Summers' Brew arrived like a reluctant apology—gray sky, wet sidewalks, and the espresso machine wheezing itself awake like it resented employment.

Jessica tied her apron knot (left loop, right loop, pull), grabbed her marker, and wrote the morning's thesis on the tip jar:

TIPS = EMOTIONAL SUPPORT FOR BARISTAS
WITH DRIVER'S LICENSES

She didn't expect the bell to chime this early.

It did.

Hard.

Then Abby walked in—and the whole café blinked.

Yellow and black sweaters did not usually glow. But somehow Abby's oversized striped knit pulsed like someone had turned the saturation up on her existence. The sleeves were long, the neckline slouchy, the black shorts peeking beneath it intentional. Her glasses were neon-accented enough to disorient the timid. Her hair was pulled back in a sleek ponytail, and her legs were inked—bee wings, honeycomb, trailing vines.

It was the ABeeWin persona in the flesh.

Cute nerd aesthetics weaponized into a tactical strike.

Jessica almost dropped the milk pitcher.

Abby beamed, spinning once. “Well? What do you think? Bee gentle, I only had two hours of sleep and three existential crises.”

Jessica’s throat attempted mutiny. Her brain supplied four insults, two jokes, and one marriage proposal.

She settled on:

“You look like a bumblebee who joined a hacker collective.”

And then, quieter, defeated—

“I hate how much it works.”

Abby squealed. “YES! Okay, if you say it works, it works.”

“I said it works in a dystopian, corporate-manufactured, algorithm-pleasing hellscape,” Jessica corrected.

“But still. It works.”

Abby grinned so hard her glasses slid down her nose. She pushed them up with her fingertip—adorable in a way that felt illegal.

Jessica scribbled quickly in her notebook:

Exhibit: ABeeWin — dangerously effective branding.

Threat level: catastrophic.

“Nick’s already live,” Abby added casually, setting her bag down. “He’s doing a whole rant about corporate overreach. He called himself SilverTongue.”

Jessica froze mid-pour.

“Sorry—what?”

Abby laughed. “Yeah! He said it’s his ‘lawyer-bard energy.’ AIM loved it. Chat loves it. People are already clipping him shouting ‘Objection to late-stage capitalism!’”

Jessica stared at her.

Her nickname.

Her private joke.

Corporate-repurposed.

Of course he'd taken it.

Of course it fit him.

Of course she hated how right it sounded coming from someone else's mouth.

Inside her head, irony face-planted into traffic.

Out loud she said, flat:

"He's ranting about the machine while cashing the machine's checks. Nice."

Abby shrugged, cheerful. "It's performance art!"

"It's hypocrisy."

"It's relatable hypocrisy."

Jessica muttered, "Irony is dead."

"Long live views," Abby said brightly.

Jessica wanted to roll her eyes so hard they'd auto-unsubscribe Nick from AIM. Instead she looked at Abby's sweater again—at the soft fuzz, the warm yellow, the stupidly perfect silhouette—and a traitorous warmth bloomed in her chest.

ABeeWin wasn't corporate cringe.

ABeeWin was... Abby, distilled.

And Jessica hated—hated—that she felt proud of her.

Abby leaned across the counter, eyes sparkling. "So? Should I give you early mod privileges? Perks of being my unofficial stylist-slash-therapist."

Jessica snorted. "I'm not moderating your cult."

"It's not a cult," Abby insisted. "It's a hive."

"Same intentions."

Abby's smile dimmed just enough to look real. "Thanks for... not roasting me too hard."

Jessica swallowed. “Trust me. I could.”

“I know.” Abby grinned.

“But today, you didn’t.”

And Jessica felt the compliment like a pulled fire alarm behind her ribs.

Abby was still glowing—literally and metaphorically—in the ABeeWin sweater when she suddenly snapped her fingers like she’d forgotten Christmas in a drawer.

“Oh! Jess. I almost forgot. I have something for you.”

Jessica braced herself. It was either merch, a sticker, or something that would rearrange her entire emotional architecture.

Abby dug into her bag.

Two glossy rectangles slid onto the counter like tarot cards predicting chaos.

TWENTY ØNE PILØTS — FRONT ROW — EAST
COAST TOUR

Jessica stared.

Blink.

Stare harder.

Her voice cracked like a haunted violin.

“...Those aren’t real.”

“Oh, they’re very real,” Abby said, practically vibrating. “Eldorado pulled strings. Like—real strings. Mafia-adjacent strings.”

Jessica’s entire soul rejected the idea.

“No. Absolutely not. This is a bribe. This is emotional warfare. And I am not riding in some corporate hearse to get there.”

Abby blinked. “Corporate... hearse?”

“THE LIMO,” Jessica hissed. “I’ve seen ‘Hostel’. ‘Come to the concert, girls, climb inside this branded coffin, I promise it’s fun.’ No thank you.”

Winona glided past with a tray of muffins, laughing.

“Oh, honey. Nobody kidnaps people with front-row tickets. It’s bad PR.”

Abby placed her hands on her hips. “Jess. Listen. We don’t have to take the limo.”

Jessica exhaled sharply. “Good. Because I’m not stepping into a corporate coffin on wheels.”

She paused... then heard her own mouth say:

“...I could drive us.”

Abby’s face lit instantly—too instantly—like she’d been waiting for Jessica to offer.

“YES! That’s perfect!”

Jessica blinked. Wait—what did I just commit to?

“My... my license?” she croaked.

“Your license!” Abby echoed, thrilled. “Your rules! And it’ll be great practice. You’ll finally get some real miles under your belt.”

Jessica’s brain performed a hard reboot.

She didn’t even own a car.

But Abby was smiling like Jess had just offered her the moon, and Winona was mouthing she’s proud of you behind her shoulder, and somehow backing out felt illegal.

“I mean,” Jessica said, trying for cool and achieving stunned, “that’s the only logical choice.”

Winona beamed.

Abby bounced on her toes.

Jessica concentrated very hard on not combusting.

The bell clattered.

Bleach rolled in.

Snakes shuffled toward the counter with the solemnity of a man attending his own funeral. His gaze landed immediately on the concert tickets.

He tapped the glossy edge with one gloved finger.

“Front row,” he murmured. “Just means you’re the first to get crushed against the barricade.”

Jessica winced despite herself.

Abby laughed. “Snakes, oh my god. It’s a concert, not the running of the bulls stampede.”

Snakes didn’t blink. “Everything is a stampede if the giant starts running.”

Jessica stiffened.

The giant.

Alehante.

Abby waved it off. “Look, Eldorado is... intense. But he’s been nothing but helpful. He even sent movers for the apartment. Didn’t charge us a thing.”

Jessica’s stomach dropped clean through the floor.

“H–He... movers?”

Her voice sounded wrong. Thin.

Abby nodded without noticing Jessica deflate. “Yeah! We’re consolidating. I’m moving in with Nick, new schedule, new projects. Chaos, but like... fun chaos, you know?”

Jessica did not know.

Hearing it from Nick had stung.

Hearing it from Abby felt like dropping three stories through glass.

Snakes sighed, ancient and disappointed. “Charity blinds the honest. But debt blinds faster. Golden cages still have locks.”

“Snakes,” Abby groaned.

He held up a napkin—ants drawn not marching, but tangled in a sticky black web around the Alehante logo.

“Sugar looks sweet,” he said, backing toward the door. “Webs look invisible.”

The bell let him out like a warning shot.

Jessica swallowed hard.

No one seemed to hear the echo but her.

A lull settled as the door closed.

Abby leaned on the counter, softer now, tracing the rim of her mug with one fingertip.

“So... transportation,” she said, voice lilting like this was casual and not a life-altering logistical question. “What’s the plan? Did you ever decide between the college savings or the dream rust bucket?”

Jessica barked a laugh—sharp, defensive, practiced.

“College looks like is winning,” she said. “The rust bucket died in pre-production. Never made it past the storyboard.”

Abby smiled—warm, indulgent, maddeningly genuine.

“Then what,” she asked, nudging Jessica’s elbow with her own, “are we driving to the concert?”

Jessica straightened with the importance of someone preparing to deliver an official proclamation. She inhaled like the moment required oxygen clearance, squared her shoulders, and declared:

“Nick’s car. Obviously.”

Abby blinked, then laughed—not polite laughter but a full, bright burst that lit the café like someone opened the sunroof on a clouded day.

Jessica pressed on, emboldened by her own ridiculousness.

“He owes me,” she added, pointing at Abby as though performing courtroom evidence. “For switching off ‘Basic Being Basic’ when you two took me out for driving lessons.”

Abby covered her mouth, giggles shaking her shoulders. “Oh my God—Nick hated that song so much. He looked physically pained.”

“He was physically pained,” Jessica said. “The man flinched like the opening riff was attacking him.”

Abby wiped a tear from the corner of her eye, still laughing. “And you still made him listen to at least two minutes of it pretending to find another channel.”

“I was asserting dominance,” Jessica deadpanned. “Poorly.”

Abby leaned closer across the counter, grin softening into something warm and fond.

“Well,” she said, “if Nick’s car survives your channel changing, it can survive anything.”

Jessica pretended to glare, but the heat blooming in her chest wasn’t embarrassment anymore.

It was belonging—dangerous, flickering belonging.

And Abby’s laugh, bright and unguarded, left fingerprints on the air.

From outside, Snakes’ voice drifted faintly, already wandering down the sidewalk:

“Can’t save people who choose their own fires...”

Jessica sighed, watching him go.

But when she looked back at Abby—glowing, hopeful, wearing a sweater that could start a religion—

she felt something else rise beneath the anxiety.

Not clarity.

Not comfort.

But momentum.

Her license.

Her rules.

Her chance to drive somewhere.

Chapter 15 — Cracks of Envy

The forest wasn't a forest.

It was the idea of one—too still, too quiet, as if someone had painted a backdrop and forgotten to add wind. Jessica stepped between the trees, her boots soundless on soil that didn't feel like soil at all. Every trunk leaned slightly inward, as though eavesdropping.

A clearing appeared before she realized she'd been walking toward it. In the center stood a cabin—her crooked sketch made real, wood darkened with age, damp with memory. Smoke curled from the chimney in slow, unnatural spirals.

Jessica's breath hitched.

To the right of the cabin, out of place like a wrong puzzle piece, sat a hospital bed. Nick lay on it—motionless, tubes feeding into his arms like parasitic vines. Machines blinked silently beside him, monitors flashing red and green without a sound. His skin looked waxy, like someone had drained the color but left the shape.

"Nick?" Jessica whispered.

No response. Not even a flicker.

She turned back to the cabin.

Through its window she saw Abby—panicked, pounding on glass that didn't crack. Her hands bruised from beating against the pane. Her mouth formed Jessica's name, but the dream swallowed the sound whole.

"Abby!" Jessica shouted, sprinting toward the porch.

Movement flickered at the edge of her vision.

Eldorado Alehante materialized beside Nick's bed like he'd stepped out of the shadow of the trees. Perfect suit.

Serene face. Smile carved with precision. Without a word, he placed two fingers on the footboard and casually rolled Nick away—back into the dark between the pines.

“NO—!”

Her scream didn’t echo. It dissolved, devoured by the forest.

She spun back toward the cabin—and froze.

It was burning.

Completely engulfed.

Flames climbed the walls like starving hands. Smoke poured through the seams of the windows. Abby’s silhouette flickered inside, pacing, slamming into invisible walls, trapped in a box drawn by nightmare logic.

Jessica bolted forward.

The ground beneath her trembled.

Ants—giant, monstrous, dog-sized ants—erupted from the soil, clacking mandibles, bodies glossy with ember-light. They surged as a swarm, forming a living barricade between her and the porch.

“No—MOVE!”

She kicked the first one hard, sending it skidding across the dirt. Another lunged; she shoved it away, hands burning from the heat of its shell. A third latched onto her sleeve and she ripped free, stumbling, sprinting, forcing every limb to work like the world depended on it.

Maybe it did.

She reached the porch, breath tearing from her lungs. She kicked the cabin door with everything she had—once, twice

—

The third kick smashed it open in a spray of splinters.

“ABBY! RUN!”

Abby staggered toward the threshold... and slammed into nothing.

An invisible wall. A barrier. A trap.

Her palms pressed against empty air and recoiled as if burned. Flames licked up behind her, catching the rafters. The heat warped the room. Abby's face warped with it—fear twisting her features.

“Jessica—help—!”

“I'm trying!” Jessica screamed, pushing her own hands toward the barrier. Nothing. No give. Just smooth, cold resistance.

A crack split the ceiling.

A burning beam snapped loose, tumbling end over end—bright, blazing, aimed directly at Jessica's face.

She didn't have time to move.

—

Jessica jolted upright in bed, gasping.

Dark room. Ceiling intact. No flames.

Her heart tried to punch a hole through her ribs.

The clock on her nightstand glowed softly:

3:33 AM.

Because of course it was.

She fumbled for her phone, needing an anchor. The screen lit her face, the brightness too sharp. Her news app refreshed automatically.

Alehante Conglomerate completes construction on luxury cabins in the Poconos.

A promotional photo showed brand-new timber lodges lined up like smiles on a brochure. Clean. Attractive. Ashless.

Jessica's stomach turned cold.

Coincidence.

It had to be coincidence.

She set the phone down, palms sweaty.

“We’re not going to the Poconos,” she told herself out loud, voice barely more than breath. “We’re going to a concert. Abby’s fine. Nick’s fine. Dreams are just... psychological junk mail. Nothing real.”

She lay back, eyes open in the dark.

But the smell of smoke lingered in her imagination.

And somewhere inside her chest, ants tallied something new.

Summers’ Brew breathed in morning light like it was oxygen: the grinder clearing its throat, the espresso machine performing its daily death rattle, Winona humming to the tea leaves as if encouraging them toward enlightenment. Jessica tied her apron—left loop, right loop, pull—and flicked on the register.

Normal. She clung to normal like it was a railing on a rocking boat.

The bell chimed.

Nick Wright slipped in alone, the kind of tired that didn’t come from lack of sleep but from too much reality. His tie was straight, his hair cooperating for once, but his eyes—yeah, those were frayed at the edges.

“Morning, Registrar,” he said, managing half a grin. “Got anything strong enough to wake the dead?”

“Fresh pot,” Jessica replied, pouring without ceremony. “But no guarantees about necromancy.”

He slid onto a stool. The thud of his briefcase sounded lighter than yesterday, but not by much.

“You look...” She searched for a word that wasn’t wrecked or ancient.

“Like someone who stayed up until 2 a.m. watching his girlfriend stream anime reviews?” he offered.

That wasn’t even on her list.

She blinked. “Wait. She streamed already?”

Nick brightened—pride edging through exhaustion. He held out his phone. “Yeah. Check it out. ABeeWin’s debut.”

Jessica leaned in.

The video loaded.

Her chest tightened on instinct.

Abby filled the screen—nearly all of it—wearing the full ABeeWin persona: oversized yellow-and-black striped sweater, round glasses catching the ring light, hair pinned back by bee-shaped clips, smile radiating sweetness weaponized. The background was soft pastels and floating hexagon graphics. She looked like a mascot for “Adorable Hacker Night.”

In the lower right corner—maybe 25% of the screen—a tiny rectangle showed the Naruto episode she was reviewing. It was barely the size of a playing card. A postage stamp.

“Wait,” Jessica said slowly, “why is the anime the size of a thumbnail? Isn’t that... the point?”

Nick rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah. Abby wanted the episode to take up most of the screen. Like picture-in-picture.”

“Then why—”

“AIM said no.” He lifted the phone again, showing how Abby’s face practically swallowed the broadcast. “Management said the algorithm pushes face-forward streams, especially when the host is—” He gestured vaguely. “—marketable.”

Jessica stared at Abby on the screen.

Bright. Kind. So earnest it hurt.

And framed.

Contained.

Arranged.

A window that only opened one way.

Her stomach folded in on itself—envy, admiration, and something darker twisting threads around each other. She couldn't unsee the dream's barrier. Abby's palms on invisible glass.

"Cute girls get views," Nick said, almost apologetic. "Their words, not mine."

For a heartbeat, Jessica hated the world for agreeing.

She clicked the phone off and handed it back. "So... what else does AIM want you two to do? Wear bee outfits at Costco? Sell vitamins?"

Nick chuckled, and the moment softened.

"Oh, right," he said suddenly, snapping his fingers. "We're doing a scuba thing."

Jessica blinked. "A... what?"

"Scuba trip," he repeated, like it was normal to announce such things before coffee. "Florida coast. One day. AIM wants to test some 'influencer-grade waterproof VR recording tech.' Private jet, hotel room, the whole nine yards. We film a segment, splash around in the ocean, come back."

She stared at him.

"You're kidding."

"Nope."

"And you're just... going?"

He shrugged. "It's work. Weird work, but work. Pays more than law ever did."

Her throat tightened. "The concert is in two weeks."

Nick waved her off. "We'll be back the next morning. Promise. She's not missing Twenty One Pilots, and I'm not

dealing with her complaining about missing Twenty One Pilots.”

He smiled like a man confident in promises he didn’t understand.

Scuba diving.

Warm water.

Sunlight.

The exact opposite of a burning cabin in a nightmare that had left her sheets damp.

Jessica exhaled slowly.

Right.

This was reality, messy and stupid but survivable.

The cabin was just a dream.

Abby was safe.

Nick was safe.

And the ocean didn’t burn.

“Fine,” Jessica said, wiping down the counter. “But if you get humped by a manatee, I’m telling everyone YOU thought it was a mermaid.”

Nick laughed—really laughed—and some part of her unclenched.

For now.

The front bell chimed a gentle three-note chord—Winona’s doing, no doubt; she tuned it for “good omens.”

She swept in from the kitchen with a tray balanced on one hand like a benevolent circus performer.

“Tea for the weary!” she sang. “And a pastry for the man whose aura is the color of over-filled schedules.”

Nick groaned. “That obvious, huh?”

Winona slid a steaming mug toward him.

The tag fluttered: KOALA TEA.

A smiling cartoon koala clung to the string, winking like it was in on the joke.

“For Quality, dear,” she explained. “Helps soothe existential dread.”

“And for you—” she said, turning the tray toward Jessica, “—a Scone-an the Berrybar. He battles your hunger with the strength of a barbarian and the sweetness of a tiny berry mage.”

Jessica took the scone with a snort. “This is why you’re my favorite adult.”

Winona winked. “I’ll let your parents know.”

Nick took a cautious sip. “Okay, wow. That’s pretty good.”

“It should be,” Winona said, dusting flour off her hands. “I brewed it with intention. And a little spite.”

She turned that soft, perceptive gaze toward Nick—one that saw far more than she should.

“Congratulations, by the way,” she said. “Your ABeeWin’s stream broke our little café Wi-Fi for an hour. I had to threaten the router with sage.”

Nick looked startled. “Oh—thanks, I guess? We weren’t trying to cause a blackout.”

“It was positive,” Winona said brightly...

But then her brightness dimmed.

Shadows passed under the surface of her smile.

“Still,” she added, lowering her voice, “be careful about Alehante.”

Jessica’s attention snapped up. Nick froze mid-sip.

Winona placed the tray on the counter, hands folding together as though bracing herself.

“They came to me,” she said quietly. “Alehante’s real estate division. Yesterday morning.”

Jessica’s stomach cinched.

“Why?” Nick asked.

“They wanted to purchase Summers’ Brew.” She didn’t soften the words. “For ten times its value.”

Nick nearly choked on his tea. “Ten—? Why would they —?”

“Consolidation,” Winona said simply. “They’re buying land. Buildings. Contracts. People. Anything they can place under one umbrella.”

Jessica felt a cold draft along her spine.

Abby’s tiny picture-in-picture screen.

Nick’s scuba trip.

Her nightmare cabin.

Winona leaned closer. “I told them no. Firmly. This café isn’t for sale. It never will be.”

She tried to smile, but it wavered.

“They didn’t argue,” she said. “They just told me they’d be in touch. As if... as if the matter wasn’t closed.”

Nick set his cup down too hard. It rattled.

“Winona,” he said slowly, “I’m—working for them.”

She touched his shoulder gently. “I know, sweetheart. That’s why I’m telling you.”

Her eyes searched his face.

“They don’t want partnerships,” she murmured. “They want ownership. And you two are not a thing to be owned.”

The words sat heavily between them, like a truth too sharp to pick up.

Jessica watched Nick swallow.

His jaw worked.

His confidence cracked at the edges.

Summers' Brew—the one place he relaxed, joked, existed—

and his new employer wanted to turn it into a portfolio line item.

Jessica's heart squeezed.

Winona gathered the empty tray with a brisk motion, but her tone stayed soft. "Drink the tea. Eat the scone. And please—keep your eyes open."

She drifted back into the kitchen, trailing the scent of cinnamon and foreboding.

Nick stared into his mug as if the tea might rearrange into an answer.

Jessica tapped her pencil once.

Twice.

She didn't write anything yet.

Sometimes even the Registrar didn't know where to file a fear.

The bell over the door didn't just chime—it hissed.

Snakes rolled in with his mop cart like a prophet dragging a tombstone. His eyes swept the café with the usual disdain... then slid straight over Nick as if he were a lamppost.

A first.

"I'm not wasting time on him today," Snakes muttered, brushing past without a glance. "Some people choose the fire. I argue with water only."

Nick blinked. "What did I—?"

Snakes cut him off mid-breath, heading straight for Jessica like a heat-seeking missile.

He planted a folded, damp newspaper on the counter in front of her. The ink had bled around the edges, turning it into a storm cloud of headlines. He tapped one finger on a photo

of a honeycomb marketing graphic—AIM’s logo variant for ABeeWin’s channel.

“You keep track,” he rasped. “So track this: Ants and bees are cousins.”

Jessica raised an eyebrow. “...what?”

“Hymenoptera,” Snakes said flatly. “The hive and the hill. Same order, same instincts. They don’t fight each other when the boot comes down. They huddle.”

His stare sharpened.

“You understand? You better.”

Jessica swallowed. She nodded—automatic, unsure.

Snakes leaned closer, voice low enough to blend with the espresso machine’s hum.

“You’re watching a girl dress like a bee,” he said, jerking his chin toward the ABeeWin video still open on Nick’s phone. “But the hill she stands on? Not hers. Hills collapse. Hives collapse. Pretending to be someone else won’t save her.”

Jessica’s fingers curled around her pencil, pulse thumping.

Then, as abruptly as he’d arrived, Snakes backed away, mop squeaking a two-note dirge.

“Clean your ledgers,” he said over his shoulder. “The giant’s shadow is longer than you think.”

And he vanished out the door.

The silence he left behind clung to the air.

Nick checked his watch, exhaling sharply.

“Abby’s ending her stream,” he said. “I’ve gotta head home. My SilverTongue segment starts in half an hour.”

Jessica blinked. “What are you ranting about today? Corporate conspiracies? The DMV?”

Nick looked toward the kitchen—toward Winona.

Her refusal to sell.

Alehante's attempt to swallow Summers' Brew whole.

Inspiration struck. It lit his eyes the way good legal arguments used to.

"Principles," he said. "Local consolidation. Corporate overreach touching the little guy. Y'know—capitalism with teeth."

"You're... streaming that," Jessica said, deadpan. "On the platform owned by the corporation you're criticizing."

Nick shrugged like irony was a fashion choice.

"Hypocrisy pays better than truth," he joked. "Besides, Eldorado said authenticity is 'good optics.'"

Jessica stared at him, struck by how casually he'd accepted the contradiction.

How easily he'd stepped onto the conveyor belt.

How unaware he was that it was moving.

Nick gathered his briefcase. "Wish me luck, Registrar."

"Break legs," she said automatically.

"Preferably not mine," he grinned—and headed for the door.

The bell chimed behind him, a hollow, uncertain note.

Jessica watched him walk out into the afternoon light—

a man preparing to rail against the machine

while being paid handsomely by the machine to do it.

The irony was so loud it drowned out her pulse.

She opened her notebook.

CASE FILE #11: HYMENOPTERA

Exhibit A: SilverTongue railing against the system.

Exhibit B: The system wiring his paycheck.

Exhibit C: Ants and bees—same family, same danger.

Verdict:

The invisible force from the dream isn't magic.
It's the contract.

Chapter 16 — Static in the Pulse

The day strutted in wearing its best impression of summer.

Light spilled through the Summers' Brew windows in loud rectangles, making the dust look like it had somewhere important to be. The chalkboard boasted ICED ESPRESSO – SUNSTROKE SAVIOR in Jessica's best fake-cheer writing. Someone had drawn a tiny skull in sunglasses in the corner. (Someone was Jessica.)

Mid-morning lull. Moms with strollers, one laptop zombie, Winona humming over a tray of lemon bars.

The bell chimed.

Nick Wright walked in first and immediately made the room feel smaller, like his embarrassment needed extra space. His hair still held the memory of being squashed under something rubbery. Abby Winters followed, cardigan sleeves pushed up, curls frizzed slightly from humidity, both of them trailing the faint chemical-clean smell of a sporting goods store.

Jessica took one look at them and wrote on a cup:

SEA WORLD REJECT.

"Registrar," Nick groaned, collapsing against the counter. "Please tell me you didn't see the wetsuit photos."

"You're assuming I want to," Jessica said. "Bold."

Abby snorted, setting her bag on the stool Nick usually adopted. "He looked fine."

"I looked," Nick said, "like a seal who gave up on life."

Abby patted his arm. "You looked aerodynamic."

“You,” he said, pointing at her, “looked smokin in that skin tight swim-suit. Which should be against some maritime law, because those things are basically rubber burials.”

Abby flushed, swatting his hand away. “They’re practical. Streamlined. Hydrodynamic.”

“They squeaked when we walked,” Nick said. “You can’t be dignified if you sound like Cell from Dragon Ball Z walking around.”

Jessica pretended to consider this, uncapping her marker. “You’re right,” she said, scrawling on his cup. She spun it toward him:

SQUEAKY COUN-CELL.

Abby leaned over to read and laughed, shoulders relaxing in that way Jessica was starting to recognize as a relief valve. “She’s right,” Abby said. “You were very... auditory.”

“Remind me why I come here,” Nick muttered, but his mouth curled.

“Because you like being insulted with caffeine,” Jessica said. “Same order as always?”

“Dealer’s choice,” he said. “Just nothing that tastes like I lost a bet.”

Abby slid her own cup forward. “Latte, please. Actual milk. No weird almond-water experiments today.”

Jessica wrote on Abby’s cup:

BEE IN TRAINING.

Abby’s eyes lit. “Ooh. Brand synergy.”

Jessica rolled her eyes, but it was the fond kind. “Fun times at Scuba Dress-Up?” she asked, tamping the grounds. “Did they measure your souls or just your inseams?”

Nick slumped on the stool. “Both.”

“Mostly the suits,” Abby said, perching beside him and stealing half his muffin like it was community property.

“They had Nick try on three different sizes for normal people, they did something different for me, I must be some special size or something.”

“You’re just special,” Nick said immediately, reflexively, like the truth had sprinted out of him before his brain could wrap it in dignity.

Abby made a face. “Nick, I’m serious. They had this super teched-out scanner thing—looked like a metal detector married a 3D printer—and it measured my wrists and ankles down to the millimeter. It beeped every time I breathed. That guy kept saying, ‘Hold still, Miss Winters,’ like I was actively trying to destabilize the ocean.”

Jessica raised an eyebrow. “Fancy tech just to make you look like a SeaWorld intern.”

“That’s what I said.” Abby jabbed a thumb toward Nick. “But here’s the weird part—they didn’t use it on him.”

Jessica blinked. “Wait... what? Why?”

Nick shrugged—too casually to be casual. “Because they eyeballed me and decided anything that fit’s this guy should work.”

Abby swatted his arm. “No, seriously. They made me stand in the scan circle, arms out, feet apart, like a TSA wizard was sizing me for an exorcism. But then Nick walked in and they just went, ‘You’re good.’ No scan. No measurements. No weird ankle-beeping. Just ‘Here, try this on.’”

Nick took a sip of his drink to hide the heat crawling up his neck. “Maybe I have standard-issue limbs.”

Jessica snorted.

Abby ignored both of them, narrowing her eyes. “It was strange. High-tech precision for me, guesswork for him. AIM logic.”

Nick finally looked at her, and Jessica watched the softness slip into his voice before he could catch it.

“For the record,” he said, leaning back with a grin he pretended wasn’t reverent, “you looked—uh—good. I mean—professionally good. Like, very competent... ocean-ready... person.”

Abby burst out laughing. “Nick. Just say ‘hot’ like an adult.”

Jessica choked on her iced chai.

Nick went pink. “Fine. Yes. You looked hot. There. Happy?”

Abby shrugged, smug. “A little.”

Jessica wrote mentally in her invisible notebook:

Exhibit: Two adults flirting like teenagers.

Verdict: Irrelevant to the café’s zoning code, deeply relevant to the ache behind my ribs.

Jessica watched the exchange over the rim of the steaming pitcher. The way his disagreement was almost reflex, the way Abby’s smile answered it like a call. It should’ve hurt. Today, weirdly, it didn’t. Or it hurt less. Maybe she was building scar tissue.

She poured the shots, tilted the milk, pulled hearts into both cups because her treacherous hands were apparently unionizing against her emotional health.

“So Florida’s still on?” she asked, sliding drinks forward.

“Yep.” Nick picked up his coffee, blowing across the surface. “One-day equipment test, then back here in plenty of time to corrupt the youth with our streaming empire.”

“Eldorado called it ‘content diversification,’” Abby said, making a face and miming air quotes. “I call it ‘trying not to drown for views.’ But hey. Private jet. That’s new.”

Jessica's stomach twitched, remembering the dream's cabin flames, the submarine quiet of her own fear—but she shoved it aside. Florida was water, not wood. Completely different element. Science backed her up.

She checked the knot of her apron—left loop, right loop over, pull. The click lined up her inhale.

“So,” Abby said, spinning on the stool to face her fully. “How's the college hunt?”

Jessica groaned. “Weaponized.”

“Progress,” Nick said. “That's what she means.”

“Dad's got spreadsheets,” Jessica said. “Columns. Color-coding. He says we should look at ‘schools with real campuses’ which, translation, means ‘more debt’ and therefore ‘car becomes theoretical concept.’”

“Cars are overrated,” Abby said. “Until you have to get groceries in the rain.”

“Or not be beholden to Mom' or Dad's ride schedule,” Jessica muttered.

“See?” Nick said. “Basic human dignity, four wheels.”

“Someone put that on a bumper sticker,” Jessica said. “We'll sell it next to the pumpkin spice.”

Abby tapped her lip thoughtfully. “Have you thought about Orangeside Community?”

Jessica snorted. “I thought we liked me.”

Nick made a strangled noise. “Absolutely not.”

Abby elbowed him. “It's not that bad.”

“You're forgetting the STD Fair,” he said.

Abby's ears went pink. “I am trying to.”

Winona, wiping down a nearby table, perked up. “I feel like this is a story I need with my tea.”

Jessica leaned on the counter, interest officially piqued. “STD Fair?”

Abby sighed like someone accepting their own roast. “I helped organize a health awareness week back at Orangeside,” she said. “Dean Resh decided we needed a ‘memorable visual demonstration.’”

“Dean James Resh,” Nick cut in. “Man had the soul of a liability waiver.”

“He asked me,” Abby continued, “to demonstrate how to put on a condom. On a mannequin. In front of, like, half the campus.”

Jessica blinked. “...romantic.”

“I was twenty and very repressed,” Abby said. “Also, I had... experience but not exactly familiarity.”

Winona raised an eyebrow, delighted. “Meaning...?”

“Meaning,” Abby said with dignity, “that I had never actually seen the equipment in question. Lights off. Blanket logistics. Long story.”

Nick choked on his coffee.

“So I panicked,” Abby went on. “And enlisted my friends Christina and Sharon to break into Dean Resh’s office the night before to practice on the mannequin. Pure academic dedication.”

“Reverse Porky’s,” Nick said. “Instead of peeping into the girls’ locker room, they were breaking into Admin to stare down a Plastic Pecker.”

“We got caught,” Abby admitted. “Dean Resh, Counselor Wondolf, and Officer Ramirez all standing there while I’m holding this... thing... and refusing to say the word ‘penis.’”

Jessica barked a startled laugh. “You refused?”

“I told them,” Abby said primly, “I am quite comfortable with my sexual repression, thank you. If more people were like me, we probably wouldn’t need an STD Fair.”

Winona clapped once, delighted. “Iconic.”

“Officer Ramirez almost passed out,” Nick said, grinning at the memory. “Resh looked like he wanted to sue God. Wondolf tried to turn it into a teachable moment.”

“It was one,” Abby said. “I learned I don’t like being onstage with plastic anatomy. And that I get to decide what I’m comfortable with. Even if everyone else thinks I’m weird.”

Jessica watched her as she said it—this woman who now streamed in neon bee stripes to thousands of strangers, who used to sneak into admin offices and refuse to say anatomically correct words.

Her finished edges had not come pre-installed.

Something inside Jessica loosened.

“Anyway,” Abby sighed. “Orangeside’s fine as long as you avoid Dean Resh’s events and any rooms with mannequins.”

“So mark half the campus red,” Nick said. “Also avoid the fountain on game days. And the parking lot at night. And the Econ building in general.”

“Such a glowing review,” Jessica said. “Truly selling me on higher education.”

“Real talk,” Abby said, softer now. “Community college isn’t a downgrade. It’s just... a different path. Less debt. More flexibility. You’d still get to write. Still get to be you. My brother Eustace had a great time there before he transferred.”

“Counterpoint,” Nick said. “You deserve a campus that scares your dad a little. Stacks of books, pretentious coffee, professors who argue about art in the quad.”

“Those are my people,” Jessica admitted.

“Then aim high,” Nick said. “If the money doesn’t pan out, you pivot. But don’t lower your bar in advance just because the world’s cheap.”

“You are literally taking money from Alehante to talk about how the world’s cheap,” Jessica said.

“Nuance,” Nick replied. “Look it up.”

Abby laughed, bumping her knee against his. “He’s not wrong, though. You’re allowed to want more, Jess. Even if the spreadsheets scream.”

Jessica felt the warmth of it—Nick’s earnestness, Abby’s quiet certainty, Winona’s approving hum in the background. For once, their attention didn’t feel like a spotlight or a microscope. It felt... shared.

She flipped open her notebook under the counter, letting her pencil move.

CASE FILE #16: BEFORE THE DIVE

Exhibit A: Wetsuits = squeaky funeral clothes.

Exhibit B: Abby Winters, former Condom Demonstration Refuser, current bee-themed streamer.

Exhibit C: Nick Wright, human contradiction, telling me to aim higher while signing with the very giant he’s critiquing.

Status: All systems... weirdly okay.

She looked up.

Nick was mid-rant about Dean Resh’s “abstinence-themed raffle,” Abby was laughing so hard she had to put her latte down, and Winona was shaking her head like she’d seen ten versions of this comedy before and still loved the reruns.

For a moment, Jessica let herself believe this was the baseline.

This was how it would always be:

Silvertounge, the Bee, the barista.

The triangle that somehow didn't stab.

The bell jingled.

Correction: It detonated.

Erica Summers didn't enter Summers' Brew so much as burst through the door like a PR crisis with legs. Her sunglasses were enormous—midnight lenses swallowing half her face—and her ponytail swung like it was auditioning for its own spin-off.

“Wow,” she declared before even clearing the threshold, “look at this place. So quaint. Like Pinterest threw up in here, but, like... politely.”

Jessica didn't look up from the register. “Don't touch anything.”

“I would never,” Erica said, already touching a jar labeled DREAMS and shaking it like it might dispense snacks. “Ugh. Sparkles? Really, Jessica? What is this, a kindergarten fundraiser?”

“It's called community,” Winona called from the far side, serenely restacking mugs.

Erica sniffed the air dramatically. “Smells like coffee and... despair? Is that new? Is that seasonal?”

Nick almost choked on his latte. Abby covered her mouth, laughing.

Jessica deadpanned, “Congratulations. You've discovered 'morning.'”

Erica's eyes narrowed. “You're awfully feisty today. I like it.”

She placed her elbows on the counter—invasive proximity achieved—and squinted exaggeratedly at Jessica's apron.

“That knot,” Erica said, tapping the fabric, “is giving ‘struggling intern.’ Doesn’t your café have a uniform policy? Or, like, dignity?”

“Get out,” Jessica said cheerfully.

But Erica wasn’t listening.

She was scanning.

Eyes sweeping the café, inventorying faces the way some people check fire exits.

“Oh-ho-ho,” she murmured. “Where’s he?”

“Who,” Jessica said flatly.

“The Silver Tounge Man,” Erica stage-whispered. “Tall? Haunted briefcase? Existentially tired but somehow hot? Is he here?”

“No,” Jessica said.

“Lame,” Erica said, pivoting, still searching. “Okay, what about the other one? The vet girl? Abby-Winters-Barbie-Sunshine-Therapy-Girl? I want to see what the competition looks like.”

Abby blinked. “The... competition?”

Erica snapped her fingers like she’d discovered the cure to boredom. “Yes! For Jessica’s tragic goth heart! Don’t you people have drama? I need to witness it firsthand.”

Jessica’s pencil nearly snapped.

Nick put both hands up. “Erica—please—there is no dramatic—”

Erica turned her sunglasses toward him like a judgmental solar eclipse. “Oh there is, Briefcase Boy. I can smell it.”

Abby flushed. Jessica prayed for meteors.

Erica leaned over the counter again. “Honestly, Jess, you should be thanking me. Your café shifts are practically a sleep study. I’m here providing enrichment. Like a zoo, but for introverts.”

Jessica inhaled slowly.

Left loop. Right loop over. Pull.

“Why are you actually here,” she said.

Erica brightened. “Coffee! Obviously. I’m a patron supporting local business. Don’t punish me for spending money while looking amazing.”

Abby hid an embarrassed smile. Nick massaged his temples. Winona muttered a soft blessing under her breath.

Erica added, “Also, I’m bored and Trevor’s in detention, so I need stimulation.”

“Try Sudoku,” Jessica muttered.

“Someone here is stimulating,” Erica said, eyes gleaming as she scanned the room again.

Jessica regretted every moment leading to this one.

But Abby... Abby was soft-laughing into her hand, shoulders shaking, eyes warm as she glanced at Jessica like they were in the same foxhole. And weirdly, that connection—brief, conspiratorial—made the chaos feel survivable.

Jessica flipped her notebook open beneath the counter.

CASE FILE #16B: ERICA: THE INVASION

Exhibit A: Treats café like safari.

Exhibit B: Scents drama like a bloodhound.

Exhibit C: Calls it ‘quaint’ = psychological warfare.

Exhibit D: Abby laughed. Nick suffered. I survived.

Verdict: God help me, this is my family.

She clicked the pen shut.

The bell chimed again as someone new entered, but Jessica barely heard it.

Erica had already started reorganizing the pastry display “for visibility.”

The invasion had begun.

Erica planted herself between Abby and Nick like she was about to host a talk show nobody asked for. Her sunglasses slid down her nose, revealing eyes glittering with predatory curiosity.

She studied Nick first.

Not looked. Studied.

Like a scientist who'd been handed a rare, slightly pathetic specimen.

"Ohhh," Erica breathed, leaning in with exaggerated revelation, "I see it now."

Jessica's stomach dropped. "Erica. Don't."

Too late.

"The 'acquired taste' guy."

Nick blinked. "The what now—"

"Thirty-two," Erica continued, circling him like a shark with charm issues, "tired but moisturized, fails at shirts but wins at brooding. Yes. Yes, I get it. Jess has a type."

Jessica's soul attempted to exit her body through her shoes.

Nick froze, a half-formed grin dying on his mouth. A tiny sound escaped him—somewhere between a cough and a mortal wound. "Wait—Jess... had...?"

Had. Have. Currently combusting over.

Jessica stabbed a receipt with her pen like it insulted her family.

"Moving on," Erica announced, whipping toward Abby with the grace of a catapult.

Abby straightened, polite, cautious. She was used to nervous cats, not Summers sisters.

"And you," Erica said, eyes narrowing in cheerful malice, "must be the 'Anti-Goth.'"

Abby blinked. "The... what?"

“Anti-Goth. Sunshine Edition,” Erica clarified, gesturing in a circle around Abby’s entire existence. “Cute. Compact. Optimized. I see why he picked the finished product over the rough draft.”

Silence hit the café so hard Jessica swore she heard the air flinch.

Jessica went cold. Then hot. Then cold again.

Her ribs cinched inward like her own skeleton was trying to erase her.

Nick’s face shifted—shock → guilt → something painfully close to regret.

He looked at Jessica, and suddenly the invisible thing they’d never talked about sat between them like a spotlight.

“Erica,” he said sharply, voice low, “that was—”

“Accurate?” Erica offered, smug.

Abby didn’t flinch outwardly, but Jessica saw it—the little crumble in her posture, the soft fall of her eyes. The delayed realization that a storm existed behind Jessica’s jokes, behind their playlists, behind the way Jessica always tried a little too hard not to care.

Abby swallowed. “Jess... I didn’t know.”

Her voice was small in a way Jessica had never heard before—soft but wounded. Not offended. Hurt. Like she thought she should’ve seen it. Like she thought she’d been foolish not to.

Jessica felt flayed open.

Her throat tried to work around words that simply weren’t there.

She opened her notebook instead.

Closed it again.

Too loud. Too revealing.

Nick rubbed the back of his neck, jaw tight, eyes darting anywhere but at either of them. “Okay. Can we—maybe—not do this here? Or ever?”

Erica folded her arms triumphantly. “I’m helping communication.”

“Leave,” Jessica croaked.

Erica blinked, surprised. “Jess—”

“Now.”

Something in Jessica’s voice—raw, shakier than she wanted—made even Erica back up.

Abby exhaled, slowly.

“Jess,” she said quietly, “I never meant to... I thought... we were okay.”

Jessica stared at the register like she could bury herself under the numbers.

“We are,” she lied.

Nick looked at her, really looked, and she hated that he suddenly understood the thing she’d kept armored for months.

The triangle didn’t hum now.

It cracked.

In the corner, Winona whispered to the tea leaves, as if trying to stitch the air back together.

Jessica tied her apron knot too tightly and whispered the only thought she could register:

This is why secrets stay secret.

Once sunlight hits them, everything burns.

The silence after Jessica fled was thick enough to chew. Even the espresso machine seemed to hold its breath.

Erica stood in the middle of Summers’ Brew like she’d just won a prize she didn’t understand. Nick was frozen,

stunned. Abby stared down at her hands like they had betrayed her.

Then Winona moved.

Not fast.

Not loud.

Just with purpose—quiet, deliberate, terrifying purpose.

She stepped out from behind the tea counter, her long scarf trailing like a warning flag. She did not smile. She did not glow. She became still water—dangerous if disturbed.

She walked to the front door.

Erica frowned. “Um... where’s Jess? Should I—”

CLICK.

Winona flipped the sign to CLOSED in the middle of the Saturday rush.

Every head in the café lifted. A couple at a corner table blinked. A college kid with a laptop froze mid-keystroke. Even Nick looked alarmed.

Winona’s voice, when it came, was soft as snowfall—soft enough to scare any sane person.

“Everyone,” she said calmly, “finish your drinks... and leave.”

Her tone was polite.

Her eyes were not.

The room emptied in record time. Chairs scraped. Mugs clinked. The espresso machine hissed once, like even it knew better.

Erica blinked, confused. “Wait, why are we—”

Winona turned to her.

No smile.

No softness.

Just quiet, devouring disappointment.

“Erica Summers,” she said, using the full name with surgical precision, “you have mistaken this place of peace for a stage.”

Erica tried a laugh. It died immediately.

Winona stepped closer—not threatening, but unblinking. The scarf at her shoulders trembled like it could sense emotion.

“This,” Winona said, gesturing around them, “is a sanctuary. A place for gentle hearts to grow. Not for your theater of cruelty.”

Erica actually backed up. “I—I wasn’t trying to—”

“You were careless,” Winona said. “And careless people burn down what they don’t understand.”

Erica went pale.

Winona pointed toward the door—not dramatic, not angry, just absolute.

“Leave.”

Erica didn’t argue. She grabbed her bag and practically sprinted out, as if the shadows themselves might chase her.

The door shut.

Silence settled back over the café like dust.

Nick exhaled shakily. “Winona, I—”

Winona raised one hand without looking at him.

Not now.

Not him.

She walked to the back room, soft footsteps carrying the weight of storms.

The back room smelled like dish soap and lemon cleaner and the end of the world.

Jessica sat on an overturned milk crate, apron bunched in her fists, breathing like she’d outrun a marathon through shame. The edges of her vision buzzed.

Winona slipped in quietly and closed the door with a soft click.

She didn't hover.

She didn't pry.

She simply sat beside Jessica on another crate, hands folded in her lap, presence warm without being intrusive.

For a full minute, neither spoke.

Then Jessica broke.

"I didn't want her to know like that." Her voice cracked on the last word. "I didn't even want to know like that."

Winona tilted her head. "Tell me what 'that' is."

Jessica wiped her face with the heel of her palm. "It started as a crush. A dumb, stupid crush on a guy who smiled like he saw people. And he was older, so it felt... safe. Like liking a celebrity. No stakes."

She swallowed hard.

"But then... things changed. He became—" She searched for the word, chest tight. "—a brother. Someone I'd fight for, not flirt with. And Abby..."

Her breath hitched.

"Abby became everything."

Winona didn't react with surprise. Of course she didn't. She'd already seen it.

Jessica continued, voice breaking:

"I don't want him. I don't. I haven't in forever. I just wanted to be near them. I wanted to belong in the little world they were building together."

Her shoulders collapsed inward.

"And now she thinks I'm a threat. Or a joke. Or a child. And Erica just—just ripped my insides out and threw them on the counter for everyone to look at."

Winona placed a hand over Jessica's—light, warm, anchoring.

"Feelings," Winona said softly, "are rarely tidy little boxes. They overlap. They shift. They evolve. What matters is the truth you hold now."

Jessica stared at the floor. "And the truth is... we have concert tickets. Plans. A whole thing. I'm supposed to drive us. How do I get in a car with Abby after this? What do I even say?"

Winona brushed a stray curl from Jessica's forehead with motherly precision.

"Awkwardness," she said, "is just feelings without a map."

Jessica blinked.

"You," Winona continued, "get to draw the map. You decide where your lines are, and where the bridges go. Show up. Be honest. Let the people who care about you care."

Jessica's throat wobbled. "...And if they don't?"

Winona smiled gently—the kind of smile that could reboot a heart.

"Then they weren't your people. But I think," she added, squeezing Jessica's hand, "they are."

Jessica inhaled shakily.

Winona squeezed her hand once more.

"Up," she said softly. "Stand on your feet again. You're steadier than you think."

Jessica stood—unsteady, but upright.

Her apron knot clicked together.

Not armor this time.

Not a wall.

A beginning.

Chapter 17 — Slidegrade

Jessica Summers had converted her bedroom into a bunker.

The shades were drawn. The overhead light stayed off. The only illumination came from the glow of her clock—7:14 p.m.—and the blue, accusing rectangle of her silent phone.

Two days.

Two days of not stepping foot in Summers' Brew.

Two days of replaying Erica's voice like a cursed audio file you couldn't delete:

“Rough draft.”

“Acquired taste.”

“He picked the finished product.”

Two days of feeling like she had crashed a party that was never hers to attend.

Jessica curled tighter under her quilt, the fabric pulled over her head like a shield. Her notebook lay closed on the nightstand. She couldn't open it—not when every page would accuse her of believing she had a place in their dynamic. Their orbit. Their family.

She had had a family for a minute there. A strange one. A mismatched one.

But one that made her feel... held.

Now she felt like static.

Her phone lit again.

Incoming call: Abby Winters.

The name alone made her chest seize. Hearing Abby's voice right now felt impossible—too bright for the dark she was sinking in.

Jessica pressed the side button. Silenced it. Watched it dim.

Immediately, guilt prickled behind her ribs. Abby hadn't done anything wrong. She hadn't even reacted when Erica threw that emotional grenade. Abby had just looked hurt, confused, worried in a way that made Jessica feel like she'd personally kicked a puppy.

The phone buzzed again—it wasn't a call this time. A text.

Jessica forced her eyes open.

Abby:

Pick up.

Please.

I miss my friend.

And my driver for the concert.

Jessica's breath caught.

The first three words felt like a lifeline tossed through her window.

The last five—the driver for the concert—hit a separate, fragile place.

Their joke. Their bond. Their orbit that didn't belong to Nick.

Her resolve cracked like a hairline fracture under pressure.

She wiped her palms on her blanket. They were shaking.

Jessica swallowed hard, staring at the phone as if it might explode.

Her thumb hovered. She pressed call before she could think herself out of it.

The phone rang once.

“Jess?” Abby’s voice was soft, terrified, hopeful. “Oh thank God. Are you okay? Can I come over? Can I bring muffins? Do we need muffins?”

Jessica’s eyes burned. Her throat tightened.

She didn’t trust her voice yet.

But she breathed.

And for the first time in two days, the bunker walls shifted—not open, not safe, but no longer airtight.

She managed a whisper:

“I’m here.”

Abby’s voice came through the line gentle but... strained. The kind of gentleness you used when someone was wounded and pretending not to limp.

“Okay,” she breathed out, half-relief, half-exhale of nerves. “Good. You’re alive. I was starting to think Erica had stuffed you into a locker.”

Jessica groaned into her blanket. “Don’t joke.”

“I’m not joking,” Abby said. “Erica scares me. She has that smile people wear when they know where the bodies are buried.”

Despite herself, Jessica let out the tiniest, broken laugh. Abby caught it immediately—pounced on it like it was proof the world hadn’t ended.

“You’ve been quiet,” Abby went on softly. “Too quiet. The café isn’t the same without the Registrar judging everyone’s milk-foam textures and life choices.”

Jessica swallowed hard. Being missed—it hurt more than being ignored ever could.

“And,” Abby continued, voice dipping in something like fond exasperation, “Nick misses you too. He keeps looking around like he’s waiting for someone to make fun of his tie. I’m just... too nice to insult him properly.”

Jessica's breath snagged.

Oh.

Oh, that was unfair.

Forgiveness shouldn't come wrapped in affection and warmth she didn't deserve.

"Abby..." she whispered.

"Jess," Abby said, and the softness there nearly split her in half. "It's okay."

It wasn't.

Not in Jessica's head.

But Abby was offering normalcy like an olive branch, like a lifeline, like a hand reaching down into the well Jessica had thrown herself into.

Jessica closed her eyes.

Maybe they could survive this.

Maybe the world wasn't broken—just cracked in the places where light could still get through.

For the first time since the incident, something inside her unclenched.

Just a little.

Just enough.

Abby cleared her throat on the other end of the line—bright, but with an undertone Jessica had learned to recognize as bracing for impact.

"So... okay, I have bad news and good news."

Jessica sat up slightly, blanket still over her head like a makeshift bunker. "Which one is going to ruin my morning?"

"Bad news first," Abby said. "Scuba is off. Eldorado's pilot has—quote—'scheduling conflicts.' The jet's grounded."

Jessica sagged back against her pillows, muscles unclenching all at once.

No ocean.

No private jet.

No terrifying AIM stunt weekend.

“Oh,” she said, trying not to sound too relieved. “That’s —tragic.”

Abby snorted. “Don’t celebrate yet.”

Jessica froze. “...Why would I celebrate?”

“Because,” Abby continued, “Eldorado felt guilty and decided to make it up to us. He upgraded us. Or... is it a slidegrade if it’s sideways but still fancy? Anyway—”

“Abby.”

“We’re going to the Poconos!” Abby declared, cheerful and oblivious. “He gave us the keys to one of those new VIP cabins. Fireplace. Lake view. Totally secluded. Like something out of a brochure you steal from a doctor’s office.”

Silence.

Jessica’s lungs forgot how to work.

Cabin.

The word didn’t land—it detonated.

Her dream slammed back into her skull in a single, violent montage:

The forest.

The cabin swallowed in flames.

Abby pounding on windows that wouldn’t open.

The invisible wall keeping her trapped.

Giant ants blocking Jessica’s path.

Nick being wheeled away into darkness.

“...Jess?” Abby’s voice softened. “You still there?”

“Y-yeah,” Jessica managed. “Just... buffering.”

Abby laughed gently. “It’s not far. We’ll be staying in Pennsylvania, so no flight delays, no turbulence, no ocean trying to kill us or manatee trying to hump Nick. We’ll definitely be back in time for the concert. Eldorado swears.”

Pennsylvania.

Close to home.

Safe.

Except it wasn’t.

Not for Jessica.

Not after the dream.

Not after Snakes’ warning—sharp and sour in her memory:

Cabins catch fire, too.

She gripped her blankets tighter, knuckles whitening.

“Jess?” Abby repeated softly. “It’s okay. It’ll be fun. Really.”

Jessica forced a breath through her teeth.

“Yeah,” she whispered. “Fun.”

But the invisible wall from the dream still pressed against her ribs—cold and sure and waiting.

Jessica didn’t realize she’d stopped breathing until the room tilted.

“Abby,” she said, voice thin. “No. You— you can’t go. Not a cabin. Anywhere but a cabin.”

A small, confused laugh crackled through the phone.

“Jess... it’s fine. It’s a luxury cabin. Fireplace, lake view, all the fake-rustic nonsense. This isn’t some horror movie shack—”

“No,” Jessica said sharply. “No! You don’t understand— Abby, you can’t go.”

The laugh died instantly.

“Jess?” Abby’s tone shifted, puzzled, cautious. “Where is this coming from?”

Jessica’s hands shook. The dream burned behind her eyelids—the fire, the ants, the invisible barrier trapping Abby as she screamed.

“You were inside,” Jessica blurted. “You were trapped. The windows wouldn’t open—Nick was gone—Eldorado took him—and then the cabin—Abby, it burned. I saw it burn.”

Silence.

Jessica’s breath tumbled out faster, words tripping over themselves.

“And Snakes—he warned me, he said cabins catch fire, traps, and the ants—Abby, it’s all connected, can’t you see? Eldorado gave you a cabin right after that dream? It’s a trap, Abby! It’s a trap—”

“Jess,” Abby said, finally. Slowly. “Please stop for a second.”

But Jessica couldn’t stop. The panic had already slipped past the guardrails.

“I’m serious! You can’t go! Please, I’m—Abby, listen to me, I’m telling you it’s dangerous—”

“Jess.”

Abby’s voice was no longer soft. No longer confused. No longer warm.

Just... tired. Bruised at the edges.

“This isn’t you trying to protect me,” she said quietly. “This is something else.”

Jessica stumbled over her own breath. “No, it’s— I’m serious. I’m not—”

“You’re doing it again,” Abby whispered. And somehow, that hurt more than shouting. “You’re making this about you.”

“What? No, I—”

“You’re trying to stop us from going because of the crush.”

That word—a stone thrown straight at the center of her chest.

The line hummed, cold and accusing.

“Abby—no—that’s not—”

“You don’t get to dictate our weekend because you feel weird about things,” Abby said, voice tightening. “Nick and I need this. We’re going. A dream is not a reason. A feeling is not a reason.”

Jessica’s pulse roared. The walls pressed in.

“I’m telling you, it’s real! Something bad is going to happen! You have to believe me—”

And then Abby snapped.

“IT’S NOT DANGEROUS!” she shouted, the words sharp enough to slice. “It’s a weekend away! God, Jessica—stop acting like a jealous kid with a crush! It’s over. Grow up!”

The sentence hit Jessica like the flaming beam from her nightmare—swinging down, unstoppable.

Her throat closed. No air. No words.

Just the sound of Abby’s breath—angry, exhausted, hurt.

The silence after Abby’s outburst wasn’t silence.

It was impact.

It was the ringing in Jessica’s ears after something important shattered.

Kid.

She'd heard Nick toss that word around a hundred times—casual, careless, affectionate in the way grown-ups were with someone they thought they understood. But from Abby's mouth, in that moment, it was different.

It wasn't a nickname.

It was a verdict.

"Jess—" Abby's voice returned suddenly, breathless, breaking at the edges. "Jess, wait. I didn't mean—I'm sorry. I'm so tired. I didn't mean that. I'm just—everything is so much right now and I—please don't—"

Jessica didn't trust her voice.

It felt like trying to speak with a throat full of broken glass.

Her hand trembled as she held the phone to her ear.

She wanted to say I know.

She wanted to say I'm sorry too.

She wanted to say I wasn't trying to sabotage you.

She wanted to say I saw fire.

But no sound came.

Just her heartbeat—hard, uneven—like the world was knocking from the inside.

She lowered the phone a few inches, Abby's muffled, frantic apologies dissolving into distant, shapeless noise.

Then Jessica's thumb moved.

Click.

Call ended.

The bedroom became a sealed bunker again—dark, airless, too small to hold the weight of what she'd just lost.

She closed her eyes, swallowing hard, then opened her notebook with the stiffness of muscle memory.

She wrote slowly—like every letter might splinter:

CASE FILE: Slidegrade

Exhibit: Warned them about the fire.

Exhibit: They saw the smoke and thought it was just my
jealousy burning.

Verdict: I am the boy who cried wolf.

But the wolf is real.

And he has a lighter.

Chapter 18 — Flawed Phoenix

Summers' Brew opened to the soft rattle of blinds and the hum of a register that had decided chaos was a lifestyle choice.

Jessica Summers stood behind the counter, apron knotted tight—not armor today, just responsibility. Winona was off “tracking down a Cassandra in the wild,” which might’ve meant an actual person or a hurricane with eyeliner. Either way, the shop was hers.

Unfortunately, so were her helpers.

The espresso machine hissed, then sputtered like it was coughing up a lung.

Sabrina Plumber knelt in front of it, goggles on her forehead, half her arm shoved into the side panel. She muttered to herself, hands moving in nervous, brilliant choreography.

“It’s not broken,” she said, voice sharp with disdain. “It’s offended. Whoever wired this thought electricity was a loose suggestion.”

The power button flickered in response. Sabrina glared at it. “Yeah, I felt that. Don’t sass me.”

Jessica leaned an elbow on the counter. “Can it, uh... make coffee?”

“Sure,” Sabrina said, tightening a screw without looking. “If you want your latte served with a side of electrical fire.”

The steam wand buzzed angrily. Sabrina smacked it with a wrench. It went quiet. “Good girl.”

Jessica hid a smile. She liked this girl called Sabrina—sarcastic, competent, allergic to praise.

Across the café, Chico Swan was reorganizing the sugar packets at velocities bordering on illegal. He talked while he moved, flipping a coin over each knuckle with perfect rhythm.

“Okay, so listen, Jess,” he said without pausing. “These muffins? Not expired, they’re vintage. I told the Chess Club lady they’re ‘artisanal throwbacks’ from a limited run. She bought two.”

“How,” Jessica asked, genuinely baffled, “does someone your age hustle harder than every adult I know?”

He shrugged with faux modesty. “Born gifted. Destined for greatness. Blessed by probability.”

The coin flipped, hit the table, and landed on its edge—spinning lazily. Chico smirked. “See? Told you.”

Jessica didn’t know whether to be impressed or scared.

The bell chimed, soft as a question.

Abby Winters walked in.

Not ABeeWin. Just Abby. Cardigan, tote bag, hair slightly wind-tousled from the morning. She carried warmth with her—warmth Jessica hadn’t felt in days.

Jessica’s grip tightened on the receipt paper.

Chico immediately straightened, slipping into full gremlin charm. “Welcome to Summers’ Brew, home of moral support and questionably legal baked goods. What can I interest you in? Latte? Muffin? Lifelong bad decision?”

Abby laughed—a real one, not a polite one—and it lit the room.

Sabrina popped up from the machine, wiping her hands on her cargo pants. She squinted at Abby. “Your audio interface is dying, by the way.”

Abby blinked. “My what?”

“She means ‘good morning,’” Chico translated.

“No,” Sabrina said, “I mean your audio interface is dying. I could hear the stress buzz through your stream yesterday. You probably thought it was ambience.”

Abby smiled, charmed and overwhelmed. “I—uh—thanks?”

Chico hopped over (literally hopped) to the doorway, offering Abby a perfectly wrapped straw. “On the house. It’s not a bribe. Unless you like bribes.”

Jessica could see Abby relaxing—actually relaxing—in the chaos of these two kids. And somehow, unbelievably, they adored her.

This was the new dynamic.

Jessica wasn’t alone anymore.

She had reinforcements—two gremlins from different dimensions.

Abby lingered just inside the doorway, one hand wrapped around the strap of her tote bag like she was still deciding whether she had the right to step fully inside.

Jessica felt her throat tighten.

Okay. Here we go.

The dreaded sequel to a phone call she wished she could burn out of existence.

“Morning,” Abby said, voice small but trying. Trying mattered.

“Hey,” Jessica managed. Neutral. Safe. Not an invitation, but not a barricade either.

They hovered—two planets that used to orbit effortlessly now stuck in a gravitational glitch. Jessica wiped a counter that was already clean. Abby adjusted a cardigan that didn’t need adjusting.

Finally, Abby exhaled.

“Jess... about the other night.”

Her voice dipped into something soft and scraped raw. “I shouldn’t have said what I said. The ‘kid’ thing. It wasn’t fair. I was stressed and scared and... wrong.”

Jessica stared at the grain of the counter.

Kid.

It had ricocheted in her ribs since that call.

Abby stepped closer, carefully, like approaching a startled animal. “You’re not a kid, Jess. You’re my friend. One of my closest. And I hate that I hurt you.”

Jessica’s mouth went dry. “I wasn’t trying to... sabotage anything,” she said quietly. “I just—”

“I know.” Abby’s smile was small but real. “I do.”

The air softened between them. Not quite warm yet, but no longer brittle.

Then—

Chico’s head popped up from behind the pastry case like a gremlin summoned by emotional vulnerability.

“WAIT. HOLD UP.” He pointed dramatically at Abby. “You’re ABeeWin?”

Abby went pink. “Um. Yes?”

Chico threw both hands in the air like someone had just proposed marriage.

“Bro. Your Naruto review? Lit. Actual fire. Peak analysis. You should do One Piece next—though you’d probably be doing that till you’re Ninety.”

Abby laughed—flustered, delighted. “That’s... really nice, thank you.”

Jessica blinked, surprised at the sudden swell of pride in her chest.

Someone watched Abby’s streams.

Someone liked them.

Not because Eldorado forced it, but because Abby was good.

Chico turned to Jessica, whispering loudly: “Your friend’s famous. You should probably get her autograph before she hits a million subs.”

Jessica rolled her eyes, but the tension in her shoulders eased. Abby looked at her—not with pity, not with discomfort, but with a gentle, hopeful question:

Are we okay?

Jessica nodded, slow but certain.

“We’re good.”

And she meant it.

She let the nightmare go—the flames, the invisible walls, the ants with their terrible logic.

She chose this moment instead.

She chose Abby’s laugh over fear.

Abby exhaled in relief, the cardigan softening around her.

“Good. I really missed you.”

Jessica swallowed the sudden flash of warmth. “Yeah. Same.”

The day felt brighter.

Not healed.

But healing.

And sometimes, that was enough.

The bell over the door gave its usual half-hearted jingle, like it wasn’t fully committed to announcing anything this early. Jessica looked up from wiping down the counter.

Nick Wright stepped inside — hair wind-tossed, tie loosened, the faint scent of chlorine still clinging to him from the scuba fitting. He looked exhausted. Not defeated, just heavily lived in. But there was still that Wright signature: the

crooked grin that tried to apologize for bringing the weather with him.

He barely got one foot inside before Summers' Brew erupted.

“MR. WRIGHT!!”

Chico Swan launched himself out of nowhere — a blur of red beanie, backpack straps, and unearned confidence. He skidded across the floor like someone who trusted friction more than physics.

“THE LEGEND RETURNS!” he declared, arms thrown wide like he expected Nick to catch him in a dramatic dip. “You look tired, my guy. I have a cure for that. Costs five bucks. No questions asked.”

Nick blinked, then burst out laughing — a real one, not the tired “I’m still employed” laugh he’d been giving Jessica lately.

“Five bucks?” Nick said, ruffling Chico’s beanie. “Inflation hit your scams too?”

“It’s not a scam, it’s a wellness initiative,” Chico said, already pulling pamphlets from nowhere. “I have tiers. Silver, Gold, and the Premium Knight Bundle.”

“Absolutely not,” Nick muttered, still smiling.

Across the room, a screwdriver clinked against metal.

Sabrina Plumber didn't even bother standing up. She was half inside the register cabinet, shoulder-deep in wires like she was defusing a bomb no one else could see.

She poked her head out just enough to squint at Nick.

“You’re alive,” Sabrina announced flatly. “We thought the corporate overlords ate you.”

Nick put a hand over his heart. “They tried, Palzy. I gave them indigestion.”

Sabrina snorted — the kind of snort she saved only for people she respected. She tightened a screw with unnecessary emphasis. “Good. I’m not fixing this place for ghosts.”

Jessica watched it unfold with a strange ache of *déjà vu*.

This wasn’t Lawyer Nick.

This wasn’t Scuba Nick.

This wasn’t “Almost Moved In With Abby” Nick.

This was the Nick that played substitute teacher one, a version of him that must’ve been his purest form — the Nick who treated kids like equals, who understood misfits, who saw their chaos not as inconvenience but as potential. The man who’d become a legend to them without ever meaning to.

Chico hopped backward and landed on a stool backward, arms draped over the back like he’d been born to sit incorrectly.

“So, serious question,” Chico said, voice dropping theatrically, “did you beat your case?”

Nick blinked. “What case?”

“The case of looking like you slept in your car,” Chico said.

Sabrina didn’t look up, but she muttered, “Objection. Sustained.”

Nick pointed at her. “Traitor.”

She shrugged. “I learned from the best.”

Jessica couldn’t help it — she laughed.

It was too easy with him like this. Too familiar.

This was the rhythm before everything went sideways.

But something else warmed the moment, something quieter:

Nick wasn’t just happy to see the kids.

He relaxed around them, shoulders dropping, mask slipping.

He belonged to them in a way he didn't belong anywhere else.

And Jessica saw it — in the spark behind Chico's grin, in Sabrina's deadpan approval, in Nick's softened eyes.

This wasn't admiration.

It was family.

Chosen family. Earned family. The kind of connection that rewired timelines and saved futures.

Jessica swallowed around the sudden tightness in her throat.

She didn't say it out loud — but she felt it:

They weren't just coworkers or neighbors or café regulars.

They were all little pieces of a life Nick didn't know he was building.

Nick settled onto the stool between Chico and Sabrina, still wearing that softer, unguarded smile he only ever used around Harrison Home kids. He rubbed the back of his neck like he was bracing for another round of teasing — and then his expression shifted, warming with something gentler.

“So,” Nick said, voice dropping into that familiar mentor cadence, “how's William? Surviving the ‘Academy upgrade’? Still too smart for his own good?”

Chico lit up like someone had plugged him into an outlet.

“Oh, William?” Chico said, practically bouncing. “Dude's basically the prince of the penthouse now. Alehante adopted him. For real. Signed papers and everything. He's living that movie life — chauffeured rides, real meals, a

bedroom bigger than the old dorm wing. He's safe. We all are."

Jessica's jaw nearly hit the floor.

She knew Nick had helped with the paperwork. She'd seen him march William into the café once, the kid clinging to him like gravity. But hearing it out loud — that William was safe, secure, adopted — it felt unreal. Like hearing a fairy-tale ending slipped into a Tuesday morning.

Nick exhaled, a quiet, private relief softening the edge of his voice.

"Good," he murmured. "He deserves that."

Sabrina didn't look up from the register, but her voice carried a rare warmth.

"He told us you drove him to the estate," she said. "Said you kept the radio low so he could 'emotionally prepare.'"

She smirked. "You made a thirteen-year-old feel like royalty."

Nick looked away, embarrassed in that way that only came from genuine kindness.

"He was nervous," Nick said. "Big changes are scary. Someone had to make it less... huge."

A pause opened — gentle, expectant.

Then Abby straightened, eyes widening slightly.

"William?" she repeated softly. "Quiet kid? Dark hair? Intense eyes?"

She blinked. "I met him. At the park. Before the reunion. He's the one who... who inspired me to go. He reminded me of an important person in my past."

Her voice thinned with wonder. "He reminded me of you."

Nick turned to her, stunned.

"Wait — that was William?"

Abby nodded slowly, realization blooming like a sunrise.

“I had no idea he knew you. I just... talked to him. He said he was waiting for something big to happen, and that I looked like someone who needed inspiration.”

She laughed softly, shaking her head. “I guess that inspiration lead to you.”

Chico gasped, delighted.

“No way. That’s wild. William out here doing side quests connecting the cast.”

Sabrina muttered, “He’s the only one of us with main-character energy,” but her smirk betrayed affection.

Jessica stood behind the counter, cloth in hand, completely still.

This moment — this perfect, ridiculous, impossible puzzle piece sliding into place — felt like the world briefly revealing its gears. Like the universe had been quietly threading these people together long before any of them noticed.

Her chest tightened, not painfully, but with something tender.

Bittersweet.

Like watching magic that she wasn’t sure she got to keep.

Abby glanced at Jessica, eyes shining.

“Isn’t that crazy? One kid. One conversation. And suddenly... everything changed.”

Jessica swallowed.

“It’s... pretty magical,” she managed.

Because it was.

Because even with all the warnings and nightmares and fears, the world still found ways to tie people together with golden thread.

For just a breath, the group felt invincible —
connected, charmed,
like the universe itself was rooting for them.
And Jessica let herself believe it.

Just for a moment.

The café felt lighter than it had in days — like someone had cracked a window in the universe and let fresh air in. The bitterness of the phone fight, the humiliation from Erica's ambush, the nightmare's lingering smoke... it all felt strangely far away.

Today was optimism.

Soft, warm, golden-proof optimism.

Abby drifted toward the register where Sabrina was mid-lecture about “electrical gremlins,” while Chico tried to upsell a stale blueberry muffin as “limited edition.”

For a moment, Jessica and Nick were left in a rare pocket of quiet.

Nick leaned his elbows on the counter beside her, studying her face the way only someone who had known her long enough could.

“You okay?” he asked softly. Not performative. Not teasing. Just... Nick.

Jessica exhaled through her nose. “Define okay.”

He gave a crooked grin. “Not actively setting me on fire with your mind.”

She huffed. “Low bar.”

A beat passed — the kind that could go tense, if someone didn't choose honesty.

Nick chose honesty.

“Jess... about everything.” His voice lowered, gentled. “The crush thing. Erica blowing up your spot. You avoiding us like we had rabies.”

She winced.

He continued anyway. “I didn’t handle it right. I should’ve checked on you sooner. I just... didn’t want to make it worse.”

Jessica picked at a chipped spot on the counter. “It wasn’t your job to fix it. And it wasn’t—” She swallowed. “It wasn’t even about you, Nick. Not really.”

He nodded like he already suspected. “Then tell me.”

Jessica looked him in the eyes. Really looked.

“It started as a crush because you were safe,” she said quietly. “You didn’t make fun of me. You didn’t treat me like a kid. I latched onto that. But then... everything changed.”

Nick’s brow softened. “Changed how?”

“You became family,” Jessica said simply. “A big brother. The annoying kind who thinks he’s hilarious. And Abby...” Her breath hitched, but not painfully anymore. “Abby became the person I wanted to be brave around. The person who made me feel seen.”

Nick blinked, the corners of his eyes warming. “Like a sister.”

Jessica nodded. “Yeah. Like a sister I actually like.”

He nudged her shoulder with his. “Good. Because that’s what you are to me. I’d go to war for you, Jess. Even a metaphorical one, which is the only kind I’m qualified to fight.”

She snorted, half-laughing, half-sighing. “You’re really bad at metaphors.”

“I’m great at metaphors,” Nick protested. “I just deploy them irresponsibly.”

Jessica smiled at him — small, real, steady.

“I’m glad we’re okay,” she said.

“We were never not okay,” he replied. “We just needed a recalibration.”

Jessica rolled her eyes. “Nerd.”

“Registrar,” he shot back.

They bumped shoulders again — an unspoken truce sealed with the language they knew best: banter and barely concealed affection.

Across the café, Abby laughed at something Chico said, her face bright and unguarded. For the first time in days, Jessica didn’t feel the sharp twist of jealousy or the sting of inadequacy.

She just felt... included.

Part of something.

Safe.

Nick followed her line of sight. “She’s one of the good ones,” he said softly.

Jessica nodded. “She really is.”

And somehow, it didn’t hurt at all.

Not anymore.

Seeing Nick and Jessica reconcile brought Abby back into their little huddle together.

Nick stretched his arms over his head, joints cracking like a man twice his age, and declared:

“Poconos,” he said with the flourish of someone unveiling a treasure map. “Fireplace. No cell service. Just us... and whatever ghosts Pennsylvania hasn’t bothered evicting.”

Abby elbowed him. “Ignore him. It’s not haunted. Probably.”

Then she turned to Jessica, eyes bright. “And we’re back Sunday night. Monday is Twenty One Pilots. You’re still driving us, right?”

Jessica leaned on the counter, arms crossed like she had been planning this for months.

“Try and stop me.”

Nick blinked. “Driving? Wait—Jess, did you finally get a car?”

Jessica and Abby shared the slow, synchronized you sweet summer idiot look they had apparently developed behind his back.

Abby chimed in first, too cheerfully:

“Oh no. She volunteered your car.”

Nick’s soul momentarily left his body.

“My—my TLX?” he sputtered. “My 2019 Acura TLX? With actual leather seats? Absolutely not. No way. That car is—”

“A glorified Honda Accord?” Jessica offered.

“—a precision-engineered adult automobile,” Nick continued, ignoring her entirely. “And you drive like a raccoon on Red Bull.”

Sabrina snorted from the espresso machine.

Chico whispered to a customer, “He’s not wrong.”

Jessica folded her arms tighter. “Relax. Your Acura will survive my expert handling.”

“Expert?” Nick said. “You scraped a curb at the drive through.”

“Character development,” Jessica countered.

Abby stepped beside Jessica — shoulder to shoulder — and delivered the final blow:

“Nick... let her take the car. It’s important.”

Something in her voice gentled him immediately. Melted the resistance right out of his posture.

He loved Abby. And he trusted Jessica, whether he liked admitting it or not.

Nick exhaled in defeat, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

“Fine. But if either of you so much as sneeze on those leather seats—”

“We’ll bury the evidence,” Jessica promised.

Chico raised a fist. “Concert road trip! Let’s go!”

Sabrina didn’t look up from the register. “If you crash it, I call dibs on the scrap metal.”

Nick pointed at her. “Palzy, not helping.”

But even he was smiling now — the good kind. The kind that didn’t need armor.

The plan was set.

The itinerary fixed.

The future — for once — felt bright.

Abby slipped her hand into Nick’s, fingers lacing with his like they always belonged there.

They leaned toward each other, shoulder to shoulder, warm and easy.

Safe.

Happy.

Untouchable.

“See you Monday, Registrar,” Abby said, giving Jessica a small, hopeful wave.

“See you Sunday night,” Jessica corrected automatically. “Alive. Both of you. That’s mandatory.”

Nick laughed as he pushed open the café door. “We’ll try not to die in a luxury cabin, Jess.”

Jessica’s smile faltered for half a heartbeat — the nightmare flickering —

but she forced it steady.

They walked out together, framed by morning light.

Two silhouettes she wasn't ready to lose.

Jessica watched them go, hands still on the counter, chest tightening with something she couldn't name.

For the first time in days,

she let herself believe this:

Things were finally okay.

Everything was going to be okay.

Golden hour slid through Summers' Brew like honey poured over wood.

The café had seen storms, awkward silences, Snakes' philosophy, and teenagers armed with too much caffeine — but right now, it felt soft. Held. Warm in a way that made Jessica want to press the moment in a scrapbook and label it Proof Things Get Better.

Chico and Sabrina were mid-argument over the last blueberry muffin — "It's stale." "It's vintage." — both hovering over the pastry like vultures in training.

"You can split it," Jessica said from behind the counter.

"We tried," Chico said. "Palzy ripped it weird. Now it's uneven."

"It was uneven when nature made it," Sabrina snapped. "Entropy exists, Chico."

Jessica folded her arms, leaning on the counter like a very tired, very amused parent.

"You two know this is a café, right? Not a court of law?"

Chico pointed at Sabrina. "She started it."

Sabrina pointed at the muffin. "It started it."

Jessica shook her head, smiling despite herself.

This — this ridiculous, chaotic bickering — felt like home.

For once, she wasn't the anxious observer in the doorway or the girl scribbling notes to survive the day.

She was... the adult. The steady one. The protector of two brilliant, feral middle-schoolers who somehow trusted her.

Her heart shifted in her chest — not painfully, but like something finally settling where it belonged.

Nick's laughter echoed faintly from the sidewalk beyond the glass, where Abby was teasing him about something. They were silhouetted in gold, shoulder to shoulder, framed by the setting sun like a portrait of simple, unguarded happiness.

Jessica didn't flinch at it anymore.

She felt connected to it.

Because she was part of it.

Because Abby didn't just pull Nick into her orbit — she pulled all of them.

And Jessica realized, quietly, that she wasn't watching life happen anymore.

She was living in it.

She pulled her notebook from her apron, flipping to a fresh page.

Ink glided across paper like a sigh.

CASE FILE: THE GOLDEN HOUR

Exhibit A: Nick is loved by kids who trust no one.

Exhibit B: Abby is the reason we're all here.

Verdict: The bridge held. We made it across.

She closed the book gently.

Turned the sign to CLOSED.

Swept up the crumbs of Chico and Sabrina's muffin war.

As she locked the door behind her, the last streak of golden light brushed her face.

It made her feel lighter than she had in years.

Chapter 19 — House of Bards

Jessica's phone vibrated against her cheek before her brain fully rebooted.

She groaned, face still mashed into the pillow. Morning light leaked around her blinds like a slow, apologetic intruder.

She answered without looking.

"Jess?" Winona's voice came through, tinny but urgent. "Good morning, starshine. The earth says... 'I need a favor.'"

Jessica squinted at the ceiling. "It's seven a.m., Winona."

"Time is a construct," Winona replied. "Destiny is not."

Jessica sat up slowly. "Okay, what does destiny want?"

"A few more hours," Winona said. "I'm still trying to locate Casandra."

Jessica rubbed her eyes. "The amusement park girl?"

"The loner with a heart anomaly girl," Winona corrected cheerfully. "Long story short, I'm close to finding her, but not that close. Meaning I can't open the shop."

Jessica let her head fall back onto the pillow dramatically. "So you want me to do it."

"I would never want you to wake up early," Winona said solemnly. "But I desperately need you to. The ants have voted. Democracy wins."

Jessica snorted. "You don't have ants."

"You don't know my life."

She sighed, pulling herself upright. "Fine. I'll handle the café."

“Bless you. Chico and Sabrina will help you out again. They’re excited.”

Jessica stretched her legs over the side of the bed, already feeling the weight of responsibility settle onto her shoulders like a familiar, slightly bossy cat.

“Yeah,” she said. “That tracks.”

Sabrina: younger, sharper-edged, muttering at machines like they insulted her family.

Chico: chaos with a heartbeat, enthusiasm weaponized at all times.

They were nothing alike, but both in their own way made Jessica feel... not alone.

“I’ll open,” she said. “But you owe me coffee for a week.”

“Put it on my tab,” Winona said. “And Jess?”

“What?”

“You’re doing great.”

Click.

Jessica stared at the dead call for a moment, absorbing the pulse of warmth beneath Winona’s words.

She wasn’t used to being the one people depended on.

She wasn’t used to being... capable.

She grabbed her apron from the chair, tied it with a decisive tug, and headed for the door.

Temporary boss.

Kids at her side.

Summers Brew waiting.

Whatever the day wanted, she’d show up.

The key turned in the lock with a soft click, and Summers’ Brew exhaled the faint, warm scent of old espresso grounds and yesterday’s cinnamon. Jessica stepped inside

first, flicking on the lights. Morning gold spilled across the counter, bathing the clutter in a kind of gentle permission.

Behind her, Chico bounced in like gravity owed him money.

“All right, Captain Summers!” he announced, saluting with a dishrag. “Today’s the day we dominate the local caffeine economy. I can feel it in my bones.”

“You’re thirteen,” Jessica muttered. “Your bones feel nothing.”

Chico grinned. “They feel profit.”

Sabrina trudged in last, clutching a toolkit and yawning like a cat that had seen too much. “The register made a grinding noise when I logged in. If it crashes, I’m not fixing it until I get a muffin.”

“You don’t get a muffin until the register works,” Jessica said.

Sabrina squinted at her. “You sound like a manager.”

Jessica froze. “No I don’t.”

“Yes you do,” Chico chimed. “Boss energy. Big clipboard vibes.”

“I don’t even have a clipboard.”

“Not with that attitude.”

They moved around each other as they unlocked fridges, filled pitchers, wiped tables, and set out pastries. It shouldn’t have felt natural—this trio, this odd little morning crew—but it did. A strange, quiet rhythm settled into place, like they’d been doing this for months.

Sabrina crouched by the espresso machine, tightening something with a screwdriver. “Hey, Jessica?”

“Hm?”

“Is this... good?” Sabrina asked, gesturing to the now-silent machine. Her voice softened a millimeter—barely noticeable unless you were listening.

And Jessica was listening.

Sabrina wasn’t asking about the machine.

She was asking for approval.

Her approval.

Jessica blinked, caught off guard by the sudden weight of it.

Sabrina—who trusted no one, who rolled her eyes at authority, who fixed things because she didn’t trust anyone else to—was looking at her like she was the barometer for whether the world was functioning correctly.

Like...

Like Jessica had once looked at Abby.

The thought lodged in her chest like a swallowed ice cube.

She cleared her throat. “Uh. Yeah. That’s great, Sab. It sounds perfect.”

Sabrina brightened—subtly, in that way kids like her did, where pride hid behind a shrug. “Cool. I thought so. And I told you my nickname is ‘Palzy’.”

Jessica turned away quickly, suddenly needing distance from the warmth gathering behind her ribs.

She grabbed the broom and slipped into her “temporary boss” voice. “Chico, flip the sign to OPEN. And stop reorganizing the sugar packets into a ‘spirit animal grid.’ Customers think it’s witchcraft.”

“It is witchcraft,” he said, flipping the sign with a flourish. “That’s why the tips go up.”

Jessica fought a smile.

Routine.

Rules.

Tasks.

Safe things—unlike the feeling climbing up her throat:
I'm becoming someone they look up to.

She tightened her apron knot and hid inside the role that demanded nothing of her heart.

“Positions, people. Let's open this place before the universe throws something weird at us.”

Chico gasped dramatically. “Jess! You NEVER say that out loud—”

The bell over the door jingled violently, as if on cue.

Jessica glared at the ceiling.

Of course.

The café had settled into that fragile mid-morning quiet—soft jazz humming through the speakers, the espresso machine purring instead of hissing, sunlight ribboning across half-cleaned tables. It was the kind of peace Summers' Brew rarely held onto for long.

Jessica wiped down the counter with the confidence of someone who had not checked her notebook yet today. Progress, she told herself. Minimal emotional spiraling before noon. Winona would be proud.

And then Sabrina stopped moving.

Not paused—stopped.

Mid-reach, mid-breath, mid-sentence. Frozen like someone had unplugged her from the wall.

Her fingers hovered over the tamper. Her eyes went sharp, glassy, distant.

Jessica opened her mouth to ask what she was doing, but Chico beat her to it—except his own voice cracked halfway through her nick name.

“Palzy?”

Sabrina's hand drifted to her chest, clutching the fabric over her heart like she wasn't sure it was still beating correctly.

"It's—" She swallowed. "Do you feel that?"

Chico was already pale, his usual spark dimming like someone turned down his internal brightness slider.

"Yeah," he whispered. "Yeah, I feel it."

He wasn't joking. Chico—patron saint of chaos confidence—looked genuinely spooked.

Jessica blinked from behind the register. "What, did Starbucks steal our menu again?"

Neither kid laughed.

Chico fumbled for his phone, thumb trembling as he opened the local feed—a reflex for someone whose Spark bent the world around probabilities and intuition.

He scrolled once.

Then his whole face broke.

Color drained. Eyes widened. Breath hitched.

The phone slipped from his hand and hit the tile with a sharp crack.

Sabrina lunged down instantly. "Chico—hey, hey, what is it? Are you okay?"

Jessica, still oblivious to the severity, called out from the counter, "Gravity works, Einstein! Also: phones aren't coasters. Or yo-yos."

Neither kid responded.

Sabrina's eyes darted from the shattered phone to Chico's expression—an expression she had never seen on him before:

Not fear.

Not dread.

Something worse.

Recognition.

Jessica finally noticed the silence—the wrong kind. The heavy kind. The kind that made the air taste metallic.

She stepped around the counter, wiping her hands on her apron.

“Guys? What’s going—”

Sabrina lifted the phone as though she was holding a detonated mine.

Her voice was barely a whisper.

“Jess... you need to see this.”

Sabrina didn’t hand Jessica the phone.

She read it—like she needed one more second to process it herself, like speaking the words might make them behave differently.

Her voice wavered.

“There’s... an article. From AIM NewsWire.”

Jessica stopped halfway across the café floor. The stillness in the room told her it was bad—worse than bad. Sabrina only read aloud when she was too shaken to summarize.

Sabrina swallowed hard and forced the words out.

“‘Tragedy Strikes AIM Stars.’”

Chico winced like he’d been punched.

Jessica took another step closer. Something cold slid down her spine.

Sabrina’s eyes glossed as she kept going.

“‘Beloved streamer ABeeWin—real name Abigail Winters—was lost in an overnight cabin fire. Officials confirm a structural collapse.’”

Chico’s breath left him in a sharp, wounded gasp.

HEADLINE: Authorities suspect a gas line malfunction contributed to the rapid spread of the fire.

Jessica stopped moving.

The world tilted—quietly, politely—as if giving her space to fall apart.

Sabrina continued, voice breaking:

“Her partner and co-streamer SilverTongue—Nicholas Wright—was involved in a vehicular collision shortly after. Authorities speculate he had left to retrieve supplies before returning to the scene. He is currently hospitalized in unstable condition.”

Jessica’s vision blurred.

No.

No no no no—

The nightmare. The fire. The invisible wall. Abby pounding on the glass. Nick being rolled away.

It hadn’t been a warning.

It had been a preview.

Sabrina’s hands trembled as she lowered the phone. “They... they said it’s a ‘giant blow to AIM’s roster.’ Like they’re—like they’re products.”

Chico’s voice came out small—far too small for someone who usually lit rooms on fire with enthusiasm.

“Abby...” He touched the cracked screen gently, as though it might hurt her if he pressed too hard. “She was my... I mean—she was everyone’s fairy dreamgirl. She was funny and sweet and—and—”

He slammed his fist against his forehead, furious at himself for crying.

“I can’t—Jess, I can’t believe—”

Sabrina reached for him, her fingertips shaking. “Nick... he always said stuff nobody else would. He actually cared. And Abby—she was so cute, like a dorky bee from a JRPG —”

Her voice collapsed.
Jessica couldn't breathe.
She stared at the headline, the letters swimming:
ABeeWin Lost in Cabin Fire
Her throat closed around the truth she didn't want:
She had warned them.
She had begged them.
And no one listened.
Her legs buckled. She caught herself on the edge of a
chair.

A sound escaped her—small, broken, almost childlike.
Because it wasn't just grief.
It was recognition.
The dream was real.
The fire was real.
The invisible force keeping her out was real.
And somewhere—in the ashes of the Poconos—
Her world had burned down.
The café wasn't silent.

It held silence—tight, brittle, like a glass of water filled
to the brim. One movement and it would spill everywhere.

Jessica stood frozen in the doorway between the counter
and the floor, Sabrina hovering at her left, Chico at her right
—or what felt like his ghost, because he was barely
breathing.

Her phone buzzed.
WINONA across the screen.
Jessica answered without thinking.

“Jess!” Winona said, breathless. “Update: I found
Casandra. She's being stubborn as a—”

“She's dead.”

The words left Jessica before she could soften them. They thudded into the open space between them, and Winona heard the hollowness—heard that this wasn't Jessica being dramatic, or clipped, or annoyed. This was Jessica speaking from a crater.

"...Jess?" Winona whispered, voice cracking around the edges. "Honey... what happened?"

"Abby," Jessica said. Her jaw trembled but she forced the syllables out. "A cabin fire. Last night. She's gone. And Nick is in the hospital. Critical."

"They think it was a gas leak," she added, voice thinning. "One of those... silent failures. It just went up."

Winona didn't react for a second. It was as if time jammed in the gears between them.

Then—

A long, shaking inhale.

"Oh sweetheart," Winona breathed. "Oh... sweetheart."

Jessica couldn't respond. She stared at the far wall, pupils unmoving, like she'd been dropped into her own body but the controls weren't working.

"Gas leaks happen so fast," she whispered. "Sometimes there's no warning at all."

Winona's voice changed—steel sliding under the softness.

"I'm rescheduling everything. I'm coming right now. Do you hear me? Right now."

Jessica closed her eyes. Relief tried to surface but hit the grief wall and dissolved.

"You should let the kids go back to the Academy," Winona continued, gentler. "Be with their people. This... this is too big to carry alone."

That broke Chico.

He didn't say a word.

He didn't whimper or shout.

He moved.

One second he was standing next to Sabrina—small, trembling—

The next he was gone, a blur of wind and motion that hummed the air as he sprinted out the door with a speed no normal kid could manage. A lone sugar packet fluttered off a table in his wake.

Jessica didn't chase him. She didn't call his name. She knew that kind of pain—raw, impossible, flammable. You ran before it swallowed you.

Sabrina didn't move at all.

She stayed right beside Jessica, spine stiff, hands clasped so tightly her knuckles blanched.

Her voice was barely audible.

"He loved her," she whispered, eyes wet but refusing to let tears fall. "He doesn't say it like that, but... Abby was his... his dream character. The real girl at the end of the level."

Sabrina looked up at Jessica—really looked at her—and in her expression was something new:

Recognition.

"You're not going anywhere, are you?" she asked.

Jessica swallowed, throat thick.

"No," she said. It came out steady somehow. "No, I'm right here."

Because someone had to be.

Because a fourteen-year-old was staring at her with the same terror Jessica felt inside.

Because the Registrar didn't get to collapse—not yet.

They stood together in the quiet ruin of Summers' Brew.

Jessica reached for her notebook out of habit.

Then stopped.

What could she possibly write?

No ledger existed for this.

No case file could hold it.

There was no Exhibit, no Verdict—only the sound of a young girl breathing through her grief beside her.

So Jessica closed the book.

And held the silence.

The world had burned.

And she was still here.

Chapter 20 — Ashes of Reconciliation

The Summers house had always hummed—appliances, footsteps, Erica’s theatrical sighs, Dick narrating football highlights even when no one asked. But that week, after Winona pressed Jessica’s hands and told her she was “off duty until her soul stopped wobbling,” the house fell into a strange, airless silence.

Jessica drifted through it like she wasn’t fully occupying her own outline.

She tried sitting at the kitchen table.

She tried lying on the couch.

She tried pretending to read a book in the living room.

Every room felt like a paused video.

Every wall felt like it was waiting for her to hit “resume.”

Eventually she ended up at the hallway window, staring out at nothing—just the flat gray of Harrisburg midweek, the kind of sky that didn’t even bother threatening rain. She didn’t move for so long her hand went numb on the windowsill.

She wasn’t thinking about anything specific.

Or maybe she was thinking about everything at once.

A reflection bloomed beside her—soft sweater, soft eyes.

Martha.

She carried no laundry basket, no dish towel, no chore as an excuse to enter. She came empty-handed, which was how Jessica knew this wasn’t about cleaning or reminders. It was the “mom sense” version of showing up unarmed.

“You’ve been standing here awhile,” Martha said gently. Jessica blinked, surprised she was even visible. “Just... thinking.”

A lie. She wasn’t thinking. Thinking required direction. She was just stuck.

Martha didn’t challenge it. She stepped beside her, close but not crowding, her presence warm in the chilled quiet.

“You know,” Martha said, looking out the window too, “people talk a lot about heartbreak. Boys, girls. Who’s dating who. Who dumps who.” She shrugged lightly. “But the worst heartbreaks I ever had were losing friends.”

Jessica’s throat tightened. Her fingers pressed against the windowsill until they tingled.

Martha continued, her voice a calm current:

“You build whole little worlds with people. Inside jokes, plans, routines... and then suddenly that world goes quiet.”

She paused. “Silence can be its own kind of grief.”

Jessica inhaled shakily. “It’s stupid. I shouldn’t be this... this—”

“Hurting?” Martha finished softly.

“No,” Jessica said, jaw tightening. “Attached.”

Martha’s smile was sad and full of understanding.

“Oh, sweetheart. Attachment is what makes us human. Losing someone—no matter the reason—that leaves a mark. You don’t have to justify it.”

Jessica felt something inside her crack—just a little, just enough to let breath in.

“I didn’t even lose a boyfriend,” she muttered. “Just... friends.”

Saying the word “friends” hurt more than she expected. Past tense, against her will.

Martha shook her head gently.

“Doesn’t matter what shape love takes,” she said. “Losing someone you cared for—someone who changed your world—that’s real. That counts.”

Jessica’s eyes stung. She hated crying. She hated being seen crying even more.

But Martha didn’t push. Didn’t hug her without asking. Didn’t offer a casserole.

She just stood there, steady, the way you stand near someone who’s learning how to breathe again.

For the first time in days, Jessica exhaled.

“It’s just quiet,” she whispered.

Martha squeezed her shoulder.

“I know,” she said. “But you don’t have to fill the quiet all at once.”

Jessica nodded, small but sincere.

For a moment, the house hummed again—not loudly, not cheerfully—but in a way that reminded her it was still alive around her.

And that she was, too.

Jessica didn’t hear Erica come in.

She only noticed when a faint rustle—fabric shifting, not the usual glitter-jangle of bracelets—broke the static.

Erica hovered in the doorway of Jessica’s room, leaning her shoulder against the frame like she wasn’t sure she was allowed to enter. Her eyeliner was smudged from the day before, hair tied back in a plain ponytail instead of the usual battlefield of curls and accessories.

She looked... smaller.

Unarmed.

Human.

“Hey,” Erica said softly.

Jessica sat up a little on her bed. “Hey.”

Erica swallowed. She wasn’t holding her phone. She wasn’t posing. She wasn’t even doing her patented “I’m here but I’m too cool to be earnest” slouch.

“I, um... wanted to talk about the café,” she said.

Jessica felt a flicker in her chest—something like shame, something like exhaustion. She braced herself for another joke, another jab.

But Erica’s voice cracked.

“I messed up,” she said. “Bad.”

Jessica blinked.

Erica stepped inside, wringing her hands—hands, not a glittery purse.

“I thought it was just drama. You know? Fun. Like I was poking at one of your little—whatever—teen angst storylines. I didn’t know it was...” She shook her head, lips trembling. “I didn’t know it was real life.”

Jessica’s breath hitched.

Erica met her eyes, sincerity shining through a layer of guilt.

“I embarrassed you. I made everything weird before—”

She stopped. Couldn’t say the word end.

She tried again.

“Before things got bad. I’m sorry, Jess. Really. I—I wouldn’t have said any of it if I knew...”

Jessica stared at her sister.

The girl who once held her down and tried to feed her rainbow sprinkles because “goth kids need more color.”

The girl who once told her she was “too intense” to ever make real friends.

And here she was.

Apologizing.

Not because a parent told her to.

But because she understood—finally—what had been lost.

Jessica inhaled slowly, the ache behind her ribs spreading warm instead of sharp.

“It’s okay,” she said quietly. And for the first time, she meant it.

“We... we were all messed up that week. Everything was messy. And now it feels stupid to hold onto any of it.”

Erica nodded, relief softening her shoulders.

“Still,” she murmured, “I don’t want you thinking I don’t care. You lost... people. And I was an idiot. I’m trying not to be an idiot. It’s a process.”

Jessica snorted. “Yeah. I can tell. The lack of glitter is alarming.”

Erica cracked a weak smile. “Don’t get used to it.”

A beat passed—not awkward, just... fragile.

Then Erica stepped closer and sat on the edge of the bed.

She didn’t hug Jessica.

She didn’t reach out.

She just sat there—close enough to mean I’m here, far enough to say only if you want me to be.

Jessica let her stay.

In the quiet, the Summers sisters started stitching back together—not perfectly, not immediately—but with enough thread to matter.

The rumble hit the street before Jessica even registered it—an uneven, throaty growl that sounded like a lawnmower trying to imitate a race car. She was on the couch, staring at nothing, when the sputtering engine cut off outside.

Dick Summers burst into the doorway a second later, practically vibrating.

“Jess!” he called, a little too bright for a Wednesday. “C’mere a sec!”

Jessica dragged herself up and stepped onto the porch.

And there it sat in the driveway:

A 2004 Acura TSX.

Painted a violent, unmistakable yellow.

Not soft sunshine-yellow.

Not pastel.

Bumblebee yellow.

Streaked slightly in places where the previous owner had clearly been overconfident with a spray can.

To Jessica, the car looked like it wanted to apologize for existing.

Dick, however, was beaming.

“Picked it up from a coworker,” he said, slapping the hood with fatherly pride. “Needed a beater for work. Good price. Uses the Honda K24 their most reliable engine.”

The hood rattled at the impact as though disagreeing.

Jessica stared at the car.

She felt... nothing.

Or everything, packed so tightly it registered as static.

It should’ve been funny.

The unintentional ABeeWin yellow.

The cheap brightness loudly clashing with her grief.

Her dad smiling like he had pulled off a miracle.

But her world was too cracked for the joke to land.

“That’s... yellow,” she said flatly.

Dick nodded enthusiastically. “Sure is!”

They stood in silence for a beat.

He shifted his weight, suddenly awkward—an uncommon look on him.

“You, uh... wanna come for a ride? Test the suspension? Might as well make sure the shocks aren’t shot.”

Jessica knew what he was really asking.

Want to get out of this house? Want to breathe somewhere that isn’t full of ghosts?

She swallowed.

“Yeah,” she said quietly. “Fine. Let’s... go.”

Dick brightened like she’d given him permission to exist again.

“Great! You ride shotgun. I’ll start her up.”

Jessica climbed in. The interior smelled faintly of stale citrus air freshener and whatever sadness the previous owner left behind. Dick turned the key, and the engine let out a choking cough before catching.

As they pulled out of the driveway, Jessica leaned her forehead against the cool window glass.

She didn’t care about the suspension.

She didn’t care about the shocks.

She didn’t care about the stupid yellow paint.

But the movement—the rumbling, imperfect motion—felt better than sitting still.

Better than sinking.

Dick glanced at her, trying to read her expression without prying.

“Glad you came,” he said softly.

Jessica didn’t answer.

She didn’t need to.

The yellow beater carried them down the street, buzzing like a tired bee doing its best.

They drove.

The yellow beater hummed like a wasp with sinus issues, rattling a little every time they hit 45. The world slid by in muted greens and grays, trees crowding the road, the occasional billboard blurring past. Jessica didn't speak, and Dick didn't push.

Silence wasn't awkward today.

It was breathable.

But slowly, in the periphery of her drifting thoughts, a shape sharpened.

A familiar exit sign.

Then another.

Then the green-and-white cluster that made her stomach drop like an elevator cable snapping.

Route 80 East.

Pocono Summit.

Lake Naomi.

The air inside her chest seized.

They weren't circling the neighborhood.

They weren't testing suspension.

Her father was driving north—toward the cabins.

Toward that place.

The one from the news.

And from her dream.

Jessica sat bolt upright, grip tightening on the armrest until her fingers went white.

“Dad—no. No. Turn around.”

Her voice cracked on the last word.

Dick didn't flinch. He kept his hands steady on the wheel, eyes ahead.

“Jess—”

“Dad, I’m not kidding! I can’t go there. I can’t—” Her breath snagged, panic blooming sharp and fast in her ribs. “Turn the car around. Please.”

He exhaled through his nose. The patient sigh of a man who’d coached nervous teens through championship games and late-night emotional avalanches.

But he didn’t slow down.

“You can’t run from that road forever,” he said gently. “Not this one.”

Jessica shook her head hard, vision blurring. “You don’t understand. I had a nightmare—before it happened. Abby was trapped inside a burning cabin. I tried to get in and I couldn’t. And then everything—everything I saw—happened.”

Her voice collapsed into a quiet, terrified whisper.

“I can’t see it in real life. I can’t.”

Dick absorbed this with a silence that was strangely respectful.

Not dismissive.

Not patronizing.

Then, softly:

“You can’t drive around the wreckage forever, Jess.”

The beater buzzed on, yellow hood vibrating.

“Sometimes,” he continued, “you have to look at it. Deal with it head-on. That’s how you get past it. That’s how you get stronger.”

Jessica stared at the approaching mountains, jagged and dark against a graying sky.

Her heart raced.

Her pulse stung her throat.

Every instinct screamed to bolt.

But the road—long, inevitable, humming under the tires—pulled them forward.

And she didn't tell him to stop again.

They drove.

The yellow beater hummed like a wasp with sinus issues, rattling a little every time they hit 45. The world slid by in muted greens and grays, trees crowding the road, the occasional billboard blurring past. Jessica didn't speak, and Dick didn't push.

Silence wasn't awkward today.

It was breathable.

The yellow beater rolled to a stop on the gravel shoulder.

Jessica didn't move at first.

The world outside looked... wrong.

Still.

As if even the forest was holding its breath.

What used to be a cabin was now a blackened ribcage of beams jutting toward the sky—bone structures of a life cut short. The police tape fluttered weakly in the breeze, no longer guarding anything. No ambulances. No fire crews. Just the echo of what had happened here.

Dick put the car in park and turned off the engine.

He didn't touch her shoulder.

He didn't give a speech.

He just said, quietly:

"I'll be right here when you're ready."

Jessica nodded once, throat tight, and stepped out into the cold morning air.

The scent hit her first.

Ash. Wet earth. Pine.

A ghost of smoke that wasn't there anymore but had soaked into the soil.

She walked toward the ruin, shoes crunching over scattered debris—glass that had melted into warped shapes, nails twisted by heat, the vague impression of where walls used to stand.

She stopped at the edge.

And the weight of it hit her all at once.

All the wasted time.

All the jealousy she clung to like a habit.

All the fear of being “the kid” in the room.

All the moments she had, but didn't use.

She could have spent them loving Abby for real—

not wanting to be her,

not wanting to have what she had,

but just loving her.

Her vision blurred. She balled her fists at her sides.

In her mind, she saw flashes—

Abby handing stickers to a little girl.

Abby laughing at the playlist joke.

Abby calling her “my friend.”

Abby reaching across the counter and saying, “Send me your case files.”

A future bloomed—

one she'd never let herself picture until now.

Abby's wedding.

Teasing Nick about his crooked tie.

Standing beside them as Maid of Honor.

Being “Aunt Jessie” to kids who inherited Abby's kindness and Nick's sarcasm.

The ache of that un-lived future hollowed her chest.

Jessica inhaled sharply, then spoke to the silent ruin:

“Thank you. For being my best friend.
For choosing me when you didn’t have to.
For seeing me when I didn’t know how to be seen.”
Her voice wavered but didn’t break.

“I promise I’ll watch over Nick. I’ll keep him steady. I’ll drag him back from whatever cliff he tries to sprint off. You know he’ll need it.”

A gust of wind stirred the ash, swirling tiny flecks upward—like snow that forgot how to fall.

“And I’ll be the woman you inspired me to be,” she whispered. “Braver. Kinder. Softer where it matters. Sharp where it counts.”

She closed her eyes.

Sabrina’s face flashed in her mind—fourteen, brilliant, guarded, carrying too much weight for her age.

Jessica felt something shift inside her—
a quiet click.

Recognition.

Oh.

This is what Abby gave me.

What I can give Sabrina.

What she will give someone else someday.

A link in a chain.

A lantern in the dark.

A legacy of chosen strength.

Jessica wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her hoodie, took one last look at the charred remains of the cabin, and stepped back toward the car—toward her father waiting patiently.

Toward whatever came next.

Jessica walked back toward the car slowly, wiping her eyes with the back of her sleeve, but her steps were steady now. The wreckage was behind her. Literally. Figuratively.

Burning a hole she would carry forever—but not dragging her under anymore.

Dick was leaning against the Acura, arms folded, pretending the view of the trees was the most interesting thing in the world. He looked up when he heard her approach.

Before he could speak, Jessica stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him.

A real hug.

Not the half-hearted one-arm tap.

Not the sarcastic lean.

A full, desperate anchor.

Dick froze for half a second—Coach brain buffering—then hugged her back just as fiercely.

She didn't let go for a long moment.

Finally she stepped back, voice barely steady.

"It hurts," she said. "But... I'm glad I came."

Dick nodded. "Yeah, kid. Facing the field always beats hiding in the locker room."

Jessica exhaled, shaky. Then:

"Can we go to the hospital?"

A beat.

"To see Nick?"

Dick checked his watch dramatically.

"Aww geez, Jess. I don't know..." He grimaced. "The game starts in a few hours. I really wanted to catch kickoff."

Jessica's face contorted into pure, scandalized disgust.

"Seriously? Now?!"

Dick held the straight face two more seconds—
—then snorted.

He grabbed her hand and closed her fingers around something metal and warm.

The keys.

His keys.

“I’m going to need a ride home,” he said, gently but firmly.

“You take this.

It’s yours.”

Jessica blinked.

“You... what?”

“You heard me.” Dick nodded toward the car. “Go see him whenever you need to. You’re ready.”

She looked down at the keys in her hand.

Then at the car.

A 2004 Acura TSX.

Same bones as Nick’s sleek TLX—just older, humbler.

Painted in the exact yellow shade of Abby’s bee-striped streaming persona.

A fusion of the two people who changed her entire life.

Her throat tightened.

Her heart melted straight down to her sneakers.

Dick walked around to the passenger side without waiting to be asked, opening the door and settling in like she’d been his chauffeur for years.

Jessica climbed into the driver’s seat.

For the first time, it didn’t feel too big.

Or too loud.

Or too adult.

She turned the key.

The engine coughed, then hummed.

Not perfect.

Not sleek.

But hers.

She pulled onto the road, hands steady on the wheel.

She wasn't a passenger anymore.

Not in life.

Not in grief.

Not in whatever came next.

She drove them home.

Chapter 21 — Echoes

One week after the ashes. One week after the yellow car. One week after she stood on the edge of a life that was no longer hers.

Summers' Brew exhaled steam like a waking dragon—soft, predictable, familiar. The bell chimed its morning punctuation as Jessica Summers flipped the sign to OPEN. Not triumphant. Not shattered. Just... present.

It was a start.

Sabrina Plumber was already behind the counter, half inside the toaster like she was trying to perform an exorcism with a screwdriver.

"Your wiring is a hate crime," she muttered at the machine.

"It's a toaster," Jessica said. "It toasts. It doesn't need therapy."

Sabrina didn't look up. "Your bagels says otherwise."

Jessica squinted. "What does that even mean?"

"It means—" Sabrina popped upright, pointing at Jessica's steaming pitcher "—you're aerating it like you hate it."

Jessica smirked. "I'm aerating it with passion. There's a difference."

"Mm-hm." Sabrina tapped the toaster with the pommel of her screwdriver until it gave a defeated click. "Fixed."

"It wasn't broken."

"It was emotionally broken," Sabrina corrected. "I repaired its spirit."

Jessica rolled her eyes, but there was a warmth under it—something new. Something like the sibling energy she'd

once envied, now living behind her counter wearing goggles on her head.

Sabrina grabbed a rag and wiped down the espresso bar with unnecessary aggression. “Chico texted. He’s a block from the school already.”

Jessica blinked. “He left three minutes ago.”

“Yeah,” Sabrina said dryly. “He jogged.”

“Jogged?” Jessica echoed.

“You know Chico. He doesn’t... walk. Or stand still. Or obey the known laws of inertia.”

Jessica huffed a little laugh. “I swear, one day he’s going to shatter the sound barrier while carrying a tray of muffins.”

“And they’ll still arrive intact,” Sabrina added, shaking her head. “It’s like the universe likes him or something.”

Jessica pretended to scoff, but secretly, she believed it. Chico Swan could balance six drinks at once while somersaulting over a trash bin. Fate had favorites, apparently.

The grinder groaned. Jessica thwacked it with the side of her hand.

Sabrina stared at her like she’d just committed a felony. “...Aggressive maintenance,” she said.

Jessica lifted her chin. “I learned from the toaster.”

Sabrina cracked the smallest smile—rare, fragile, but real.

This was the new normal.

Not better.

Not worse.

Just different.

And for the first time in weeks, Jessica didn’t feel like she was pretending to stand upright. She was upright.

Today, she thought, might actually work.
The bell chimed—soft, almost courteous.
Jessica looked up.

William Alehante stepped inside Summers' Brew like a polite ghost. Neatly dressed. Hair parted the same way every time. Eyes too observant for a kid his age.

He carried himself with the kind of calm that didn't belong to childhood. It was the kind Nick used to wear when he was shouldering something enormous and didn't want anyone to notice.

Seeing him hurt.

Not sharply. More like pressing a bruise.

Because William—thirteen, quiet, self-contained—looked exactly like a miniature Nick Wright.

Same posture.

Same soft-but-locked expression.

Same gravity for someone so young.

And when his gaze brushed Jessica, he gave her that familiar, unreadable look.

Not like he was meeting a barista.

Like he knew her.

Like they'd had years she couldn't remember.

She forced her throat to work. "Morning, William."

He nodded, folded with perfect manners. "Hello, Jessica."

He drifted toward the counter where Sabrina was elbows-deep in a disassembled milk frother. Jessica watched them, something twisting softly under her ribs.

It looked like a Mini-Nick consulting a Mini-Jessica.

William with his gentle precision.

Sabrina with her wiry sarcasm and distrustful competence.

It warmed her.

It ached.

It felt like watching an echo of a trio that had barely formed before shattering—Nick, Abby, Jessica—now reflected in kids trying to piece together their own version of family.

Behind her, the kitchen door swung open.

Winona emerged with a pastry box balanced on her palms, carrying it like a sacred offering. “Bunny Hunches are fresh,” she announced, honey-sweet. “Honey, cocoa, dusting of powdered sugar. The whole menagerie approved.”

William blinked politely. “They look very good, Ms. Winona.”

“For Xenia and Spencer?” she asked. “Those two could use sugar therapy.”

William shook his head. “No, thank you. I’m not delivering today.”

Winona frowned. “Then what brings you, sweetheart?”

William turned to Sabrina, straightening like someone reciting a mission brief.

“I’m here to collect Sabrina and Chico,” he said. “We’re meeting Rohan. We’re going to visit Mr. Nick.”

Jessica’s breath caught.

Visit.

Not check on.

Not sit with.

Visit.

As if the hospital room were already normal to them. As if tragedies belonged in their schedule.

Sabrina immediately tossed her rag aside. “Winona, may I clock out early?”

“Go,” Winona said, no hesitation. “Family outranks shifts.”

Sabrina nodded once and grabbed her jacket.

William glanced around. “Where’s Chico?”

Jessica snorted. “Somewhere between here and velocity. He’ll meet you at the hospital.”

Sabrina rolled her eyes. “He’ll run into a street post again.”

William gave a tiny smile. “I’ll catch him.”

He extended his hand toward Sabrina.

Gentle. Protective.

Like Nick used to do with Abby when crossing busy parking lots.

Sabrina took it without looking embarrassed—something Jessica wasn’t sure she herself could have managed at fourteen.

They headed for the door.

The bell gave a soft farewell chime as they stepped onto the sidewalk—Mini-Nick and Mini-Jessica walking into a world far too heavy for kids their age.

Jessica watched until they disappeared, warmth and ache tangled so tightly she couldn’t separate them.

A generational echo, she thought.

And like all echoes, this one felt both inevitable and painfully fragile.

Jessica was still staring at the door long after it stopped moving, long after William and Sabrina had vanished into the morning air.

It wasn’t worry that rooted her there.

It was nostalgia.

A deep, aching kind—the kind you felt when you saw someone else carrying the torch you once held, before your own hands burned and you dropped it.

Those kids had purpose.

Momentum.

Somewhere they needed to be.

Jessica felt the ghost of that feeling brushing her ribs, whispering you used to matter like that.

Behind her, soft footsteps creaked across the café floor.

Winona—scarf patterned with tiny indigo moons today—stopped beside her, following her gaze toward the empty sidewalk.

“The door’s not going to swing back open just because you will it,” Winona murmured gently.

Jessica snorted. “I wasn’t willing anything. Just... thinking.”

“Mm.” Winona tilted her head, studying her with those impossible eyes that always seemed to know more than they should. “Thinking is just feeling wearing glasses. Don’t let it trip you.”

Jessica blinked. “That doesn’t even—”

Winona cut her off with a knowing smile. “The floor won’t collapse if you leave, Jess. Today’s a slow day. The rain’s scaring off the latte tourists.”

Jessica finally looked at her. “Winona...”

“You’ve been waiting for permission,” Winona said, voice lower now, warm. “So here it is: go. Go see your friend.”

Jessica’s throat tightened. “I don’t know if I’m ready.”

“You are,” Winona said simply. “This time, you are.”

Something in Jessica cracked open—quietly, like the soft snap of a wishbone.

She reached down, fingers trembling just slightly, and untied her apron. The knot slipped apart without resistance.

Winona took the apron from her hands as though it were a sacred object. "I'll hold the fort. And Jessica?"

Jessica paused. "Yeah?"

"Don't walk there with fear. Walk with intention. Nick doesn't need another ghost. He needs you."

Jessica exhaled, slow and shaky, gratitude blooming warm in her chest. "Thank you."

Winona nodded once, solemn and proud. "Bring back news. And maybe a smile."

Jessica stepped toward the door.

For the first time in days, the bell's chime felt like hope instead of grief.

The Yellow Beater hummed beneath her like a nervous animal, its engine note somewhere between a growl and a cough. Jessica guided it up the hospital driveway, fingers steady on the wheel. The paint—loud, obnoxious bumblebee yellow—caught the late afternoon light and turned it honey-warm.

A fusion of two people, she thought.

Nick's practicality. Abby's vibrancy.

Imperfect.

Reliable.

The kind of thing that shouldn't run as well as it did, but stubbornly refused to die anyway.

Jessica pulled into a visitor spot and killed the engine. Silence fell too quickly—like someone had dropped a blanket over the world. She sat for a moment, hands resting on the wheel, staring at her reflection in the windshield.

The last time she'd walked into this hospital, she'd felt like a trespasser. An intruder in the story of people who mattered more than she did. She had stood beside Nick's bed, throat locked, lungs tight, unable to form a single word beyond the shape of her own guilt.

Today would be different.

She wouldn't let grief make her mute.

Jessica opened the car door and stepped out into the cool air. The sliding doors of the hospital loomed ahead, sterile and bright.

She felt small.

But she also felt... ready.

At the threshold, she paused. Her heart thudded a slow bruise against her ribs.

She wasn't religious.

She wasn't even spiritual, unless you counted caffeine and sarcastic prophecies.

But as she stared up at the pale, indifferent sky, she found herself speaking anyway—soft, shaky words meant for no one and everyone.

"I know she's gone," she whispered. "I know I don't get her back."

The wind nudged the hair at her temple, cool and tender.

"But I want... half the world back. Just half."

Her voice cracked. She swallowed.

"Bring him back. Let him wake up. Let me yell at him again. Let him groan at my terrible coffee. Let him call me kid—just... not like that last time."

Her eyes stung.

"I don't need a miracle. I just need Nick."

A beat of silence.

A breath.

Jessica squared her shoulders, inhaled once, sharp and anchoring, and walked into the hospital.

She wasn't praying for resurrection.

Just survival.

Just something left to save.

Room 304.

The numbers glowed faintly on the placard, washed in the soft fluorescence of the hallway. Jessica slowed as she approached, breath caught between ribs, pulse fluttering against her throat. The door was cracked open—just a sliver—like the room itself wasn't sure if it wanted company.

She touched the frame with her fingertips, grounding herself, and leaned in.

Nick lay in the bed, pale but unmistakably him, cables draped over him like unmoving vines. The heart monitor ticked steadily—stronger than before, but still fragile, like a song missing its bass line.

But it wasn't Nick that held her in place.

It was them.

William stood at the left side of the bed, small hand folded gently inside Nick's much larger one. His eyes were closed, lashes resting like soot on his cheeks. His brow was furrowed—not in fear, but in concentration. Like he was listening to something deeper than the moment, deeper than the room.

Sabrina stood on the opposite side, fingertips resting lightly against the IV pump. She wasn't pressing buttons or adjusting anything—just touching it. Feeling for a pulse. Reading the quiet hum of electricity with the intensity of a mechanic diagnosing a broken engine by ear alone.

Her eyes opened and closed in soft flutters, like she was syncing to the rhythm of the machine.

A young boy who must've been Rohan stood at the foot of the bed—silent, steady, sentinel-like. His hands were in his hoodie pockets, but his posture was sharp, alert, as if daring the universe to try something while he was on watch.

It wasn't prayer.

It wasn't medicine.

It wasn't anything she had vocabulary for.

It was... a ritual.

A strange, gentle one.

Made of quiet breaths and small hands.

Of kids who had seen too much and still believed in doing something.

Jessica froze in the doorway.

Her chest tightened—not from fear, but from awe.

She didn't understand whatever was happening in front of her. To her, it looked like grief wearing a homemade cape—children inventing a coping mechanism because the world refused to give them any better ones.

She stayed where she was, silent and respectful, letting them finish whatever this was.

After a minute, William's eyes opened. Sabrina's hand dropped from the pump. Rohan exhaled and stepped back.

The energy in the room shifted—settling, softening, returning to the mundane.

Only then did Jessica step inside, clearing her throat gently so she wouldn't break the moment with too much force.

They turned toward her—three kids and one sleeping man—forming a picture she'd remember for the rest of her life.

She didn't understand what they were doing.

But she understood why.

And it humbled her.

William noticed her first.

His small, perceptive eyes widened—not in fear, but in quiet recognition, like he'd been expecting her all along. Sabrina turned next, offering a tight, brave little smile. Rohan gave a solemn nod, the kind reserved for people in real grief.

None of them asked why she was there.

None of them questioned her right to be.

William released Nick's hand and stepped toward the door.

"He's listening," he whispered as he passed her. "I think he's listening."

Sabrina squeezed Jessica's wrist gently—an engineer's approximation of comfort—before slipping out. Rohan held the door for both of them, then followed, closing it with the softest click.

Silence settled.

The kind of silence Jessica hated.

The kind that hummed like hospital lights and swallowed everything whole.

She forced herself forward anyway.

Nick looked smaller in the hospital bed—like someone had unplugged the swagger and left only the man. The hum of the monitor kept time, steady but strained, like a metronome beginning to tire.

Jessica swallowed, reached out, and took his hand.

It was warm.

Warm meant alive

“Hey, Counselor,” she whispered, her voice cracking on the second syllable. “It’s me. Your Registrar. The one person in Harrisburg contractually obligated to make sure your tie never escapes scrutiny.”

No laugh.

No groan.

Just the hum.

She tried again—this time softer.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

She pulled a chair closer, sat, and folded both hands around his like she was trying to anchor him to existence.

“You hear me? I’m staying. I’m not... I’m not losing both of you.”

Her breath wavered. She blinked hard until the room settled.

“Abby...”

The name tasted like bruises and honey.

“She made you better. She made me better. She walked into Summers’ Brew and just... rewrote the weather. I didn’t know people could do that.”

She squeezed his hand gently.

“We’re not going to forget her. Not ever. So you owe her too, you know. You owe her a life that matters. A life she would’ve loved watching you live.”

Her throat tightened, but she kept going.

“So you have to wake up. Because I can’t—”

Her voice cracked fully now.

“Nick, I can’t log your mistakes if you don’t make any.”

A trembling laugh escaped her, thin and broken.

“Who else is going to let me roast their entire personality before ordering coffee? Who’s going to pretend not to like

my case files? Who's going to tell me to grow up and then immediately prove why adults are just taller catastrophes?"

She leaned closer, forehead almost brushing the edge of the mattress.

"Please," she whispered. "Come back. Come back so I can annoy you for sixty more years."

The monitor kept humming.

Steady.

Alive.

Jessica didn't let go.

Jessica was still holding his hand when the shift happened.

It was small at first—like the room took a breath.

Then the monitor spiked.

A sudden, sharp, climbing line of green.

BEEP—BEEP—BEEP—BEEPBEEP—

Jessica jerked upright. "Nick?"

His fingers twitched beneath hers.

Then—slow, heavy—his eyelids fluttered.

Once.

Twice.

And then they opened.

Not fully. Not clearly. His pupils fought through the drugs, the trauma, the haze of a world he wasn't supposed to come back to yet. But they opened.

Jessica's heart climbed into her throat.

"Nick," she whispered. "Hey. Hey—"

His gaze drifted toward the sound of her voice. He blinked, struggling to focus on the shape above him. A crooked, shadowed outline. The warmth of a face leaning over him.

His hand lifted—trembling, weak, reaching.

And then—

“Abby?”

It broke her clean in half.

Jessica’s breath vanished. Her chest caved inward. The world spun with grief and relief and devastation all at once.

She swallowed hard, forcing her voice steady even as everything inside her cracked.

“No,” she whispered, shaking her head. “Nick—it’s me. It’s Jess. I’m right here.”

His brow tightened in confusion—but before she could say another word—

The room exploded into motion.

Nurses rushed in first, followed by two doctors, the curtain slamming open like a gust of wind.

“He’s conscious!”

“Heart rate spiked—get neuro on call—”

“Sir, can you hear me? Squeeze my fingers—”

Jessica stood frozen as bodies swarmed the bed, blocking her from him.

A nurse spotted her lingering too close to the chaos and moved swiftly toward her.

“Sweetheart, you need to wait outside,” she said gently, guiding Jessica backward with firm but kind hands. “We’ve got him now. Let us work.”

“But—” Jessica choked, “I—he—”

“I know. I know.” The nurse ushered her through the doorway. “He’s awake. That’s the important part. Give us a minute.”

The door closed.

Right in her face.

Jessica stood there, breath trembling, staring at the thin rectangle of frosted glass. Behind it was shouting, machines, urgency—life.

Her palms hit the wall behind her as her legs gave way, sliding her down until she was sitting on the cold tile floor of the corridor.

Her heart hammered so hard it hurt.

He was alive.

He was awake.

He mistook her for Abby.

Jessica pressed the heel of her hand to her mouth, swallowing the sob she wouldn't let out. Hope and dread tangled in her ribs until she couldn't tell them apart.

She had come to hold his hand.

Now she was waiting—again—to see if her friend would stay in the world with her.

It felt like the whole hospital had gone still.

Jessica closed her eyes, leaned her head back against the wall, and whispered into the sterile hallway:

“Come back all the way, Counselor. Please.”

Because waking up was only the beginning.

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To the readers who choose stories that linger rather than shout—thank you for trusting this one. I hope you found something here that felt honest, or familiar, or quietly understood.

And to the places that feel like home only because of the people inside them—this book is for you.

About the Author

R.C. Crespo is a New England–based author and IT engineer who writes character-driven fiction centered on grief, found family, and personal growth. His stories blend warmth, humor, and emotional honesty, often focusing on the quiet moments that shape who we become.

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