

THE FEATHER'S PUSH

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Chapter One

Christopher Everett took a deep breath and let the rays of the setting sun burn into his mind. He loved shooting during golden hour, and today's sunset was spectacular. The Charles River meandered west, the molten afternoon light reflecting over the slate gray water. The sun—bloated red, lighting the clouds over Boston in colors that overwhelmed him— would set beyond the Berkshires, gifting the towns beyond with an unspeakably beautiful evening.

He'd been coming out to the Esplanade all week after work, trying to capture what the weather app promised would be a stunning sunset. He might get a better shot from the Longfellow Bridge, but the framing from the southern shores of the river was perfect. The sky

exploded in color over a Charles River pregnant with secrets, while the reserved majesty of MIT and Back Bay hid behind emerald esplanades vibrant with life.

He arrived at his spot late, but for great reason. His company had closed a second round of funding at work — another remarkable day in startup land — and he felt lucky to have even only a few minutes to catch the sunset before dinner with Kate. He couldn't wait to tell her all about the day's events, about what it meant for his job ... and their new future together. There was no time to waste.

He was about to capture his shot when a plain young woman walked into view.

"Hi, excuse me? Would you mind?" She seemed disheveled and clueless, but he tried his best to be polite. He knew a good photographer should never rile a possible subject, even one burning up precious time during golden hour.

The girl stared back, then walked right up to him.

"Miss? I'm sorry, I just need a moment to take this —"

She reached out unexpectedly, almost awkwardly, and touched his forearm. Her hand was warm, soft as a feather, electric.

He realized with a rush that she was beautiful, far more than the gold and pink sunset. He felt an overwhelming urge at that moment, right there, to remember her face forever.

"I—I'm so sorry, miss. Would you... would you mind if I took *your* picture?" He wanted to say *you are the most interesting person I've ever seen*, but words failed him. She was thin, with an auburn mane framing a perfectly delicate face, and honey-green eyes which toyed a secret he could not understand. The sky seemed pretty tonight, but paled in comparison to her smile.

"Thank you," she whispered. Her lips parted in a soft smile that left him speechless. "That is very sweet. I'd love it."

Her voice was high, and he drank it in. His heart soared and he was surprised to feel his insides melt with desire, beyond anything he'd felt with Kate. He asked her to pose with her face lit perfectly by the fading sun, and something inside told him that if he lost everything in life, he'd still have this one perfect picture that he would treasure more than anything, forever.

Click. Click.

"Thank you. You... made my day." He struggled to find words to convey the gratitude of being in her presence. "Could I please have your number? I'd love to send you a copy." He smiled and hoped she would too. "If you don't mind."

"Well," she flashed her mobile phone with a flirt, "I was wondering if you could just let me download it from your memory card?"

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I can't do that." He was terrified for a moment that she'd run away. Of all the days to be a film aficionado, this was the worst. He could see his digital camera sitting on the table back at his apartment, remembering how excited he'd been to leave it behind to finish this roll. "I'm shooting film today. But I can definitely scan it and send it to you—"

The change in her eyes surprised him, beautiful even through her anger. She stepped closer and he felt giddy with expectation. She touched him again with her delicious, soft, warm hand. Her touch was electric.

The afternoon gloom covered him like sand, and he felt endless desperation with no escape. The girl in front of him probably had it all, but she didn't care. She'd never understand why life was so difficult for him. He felt worthless, sick of being a failure, ashamed that all his

life had led to only this. He looked at his stupid camera—*Why the fuck do I even do this? No one cares*—and felt a deep, bitter, all encompassing disgust at himself.

Cars flew by on Storrow Drive. He was a loser, in a dead-end startup job in Cambridge which he knew, deep down, would fail and doom him to misery. His fiancée was probably cheating on him right now, laughing at him while she was having sex with a co-worker. He realized he hated her, but understood. The world was better off without him. He knew, finally and clearly, what he had to do. No one would know and no one would care, but the pain would soon be over.

He glanced over his shoulder as he stepped in front of the truck, barely hearing people screaming at him. The girl with auburn hair stood in a small crowd, staring at him and shaking her head with a terrified look on her face. She seemed to be yelling the word *No*.

His last thought before the truck slammed against him was *it hurts less than I—*

###

They felt like the only people at Tufts University on a glorious day in Medford. The campus lay quiet and still in the summer heat, comfortable being the wrong place to be on a beautiful day. A handful of students ambled across the campus, unable or unwilling to leave. While the rest of the world hoped they could study here, Paula Mendez could not wait to leave.

She felt a knot in the pit of her stomach walking with Harriet Morris—her best friend and fellow teaching assistant a few months prior— towards their old building, a path they'd walked countless times before. It felt surreal to be back so soon after graduation. *Like returning to your childhood home, long after you grew up*. Memories rushed forth in the familiar heat—the desperate race to finish her PhD dissertation, the longing to be anywhere else in the summer lull,

the pride at finally seeing the institution as her *alma mater* instead of someplace to escape from. The cool air spilling from their old office building smelled of yesterday, a respite from the heat she no longer needed. They walked mindlessly to their former office, commenting in hushed tones about tiny details they'd never noticed before. The carpet, the walls, the windows—mute witnesses to years of indentured servitude as teaching assistants—now seemed charming and comforting.

“Good morning ladies!”

“Well, good morning boss!” Harriet and Paula ran into the small office and hugged their former advisor, Kelly Austin, Assistant Professor of Mathematics and their mentor until only a few months ago, stepped back and smiled with pride.

“I, my fellow doctors, am no longer your boss.”

“You will *always* be our boss.” Paula said, and felt her eyes well up. She pushed Harriet gently and tried to look away. “What do you say, *Doctor Morris*?”

“Absolutely, *Doctor Mendez*,” Harriet said, wiping her own tears. “Honestly, Kelly. We would have never made it without you.”

Kelly hugged them again. “I’m so proud of you. My first advisees have left the nest. I will never forget you.”

Paula took off her glasses to dab her eyes and smiled. She had seen Kelly only a few times after the graduation whirlwind, six months after the horror of Burlington. Kelly no longer looked like a barista posing as a college professor, almost indistinguishable from her students. Now she looked ... classy, content, and fulfilled. Her previously unkempt bob was cut short and full of sass. She now dressed elegantly, more at home in Newbury Street — or Rome, for that

matter — than a lecture hall in the bowels of Medford. Even in the middle of the lazy summer, she looked sleek and elegant in low cut linen slacks, gorgeous black pumps, a gauzy jade top and an understated, stunning pearl necklace — the latest gift from her boyfriend, no doubt. Of course, she now had to dress the part as one of the public faces of the University. The way she moved, how she carried herself... even how she stood made it clear she was doing this for herself — not for anyone else. A year after meeting Simon Lyons—Kelly’s boyfriend, their new supervisor at work, and the most dangerous person on earth—Paula had never seen her mentor so happy. It filled her with joy.

Goals.

“So, how are your...new jobs?” Kelly asked.

Harriet and Paula flashed knowing smiles. “Well, we’ve barely started. We’ll be in what we politely call ‘the Boston Office.’”

“At Hanscom Field?”

“I think we’ll be at some strip mall somewhere inside of I-95. With access control.”

Paula winked. “Don’t tell anyone.”

“Simon was so excited,” Kelly beamed. “I hope everything is going well with...”

“I would’ve called her ‘Dragon Lady’ before, but now...” Paula sighed and smiled. “She wants us to call her Minerva. She’s still Miss Ayala at work. We head to DC this week for in-processing.”

“Tell your boyfriend that we owe him serious beer money,” Harriet grinned. “This is going to be an awesome job.”

“I’m so happy for you both,” Kelly said, admiring them. “After last year he was

absolutely determined that you had to be on the team. He went there personally to, as he says, 'grease the skids.' He was convinced that without you we would've never found..." her voice faded.

"*Him.*" Harriet said through clenched teeth.

Paula shivered. She'd tried to not think of the name for the last six months.

Owen Lockwood. The psychopath who tried to kill us.

They were silent for an eternity. Kelly's face turned ashen, and Paula could still sense the terror in her gaze. Six months ago she'd been kidnapped at gunpoint, then seen the love of her life almost shot to death before her. She glanced at Harriet, who'd shared the terror of that night. The peaceful calm of their current lives felt like a betrayal of the memory.

"Well, Kelly," she said, "it was you who figured out how to find him."

"Minerva was very gracious about that," Kelly sighed. "But she was mostly impressed with both of you." She looked up, allowing a smile of pride wash away the memory. "I'm so glad this worked out."

Paula shook her head with a soft smile. "Gotta tell you, Kelly, this is not what I thought I'd be doing after graduation. I thought I'd still be here at Tufts. Doing a post-doc. Teaching summer classes and hating it. Not joining some government outfit that not even Harriet can find online."

"Give me a few weeks," she winked.

Kelly reached out and held their hands. "Just...be careful. Please."

"What do you mean?"

She took a deep breath. "Simon thinks some people don't want to be reminded of what

happened last December.” Her smile faded. “It was a huge embarrassment for very powerful people. Keep your eyes and ears open.”

“We will, boss,” Paula said with a wink. “The M&M’s are on it.”

Kelly smiled with what Paula imagined to be sadness and pride. “I miss you both *so* much.”

“We miss you too, boss.” Paula sighed. “Who are you advising now?”

“Actually, this year I was assigned an assistant. To help with classes and the STEM initiative!”

“You have an assistant?” Paula exclaimed and pumped her fists. “Holy shit you’re famous!”

“You mean you get a break from idiot PhD students?” Harriet laughed out loud.

“Oh, come on,” Kelly smiled. “She’s actually very nice. A female veteran. Her name is Amber Drake.”

###

She walked up the creaky steps to her studio, a converted upper floor in a pale green house, tucked away in a yet-to-be-gentrified Medford neighborhood. Her parents, she knew, would be horrified at someone with her condition living like this. The apartment was tiny, somewhere between a one bedroom and a studio, several rungs below “luxurious” in these Boston hinterlands. The few clothes she owned were folded in a pile atop a cupboard across from her futon. She walked to a small corner table and lit a scented candle, a necessary ritual. The flickering orange light was warm and comforting, and after a few moments the soft vanilla scent enveloped her, taming the edges of her room.

Her tiny, two burner kitchen was excessively neat, mostly because she had an inordinate fear of vermin, and cleanliness kept them at bay. She looked around and let shame wash over her. Others with her condition would exhibit some level of OCD, useful if you were doomed to live your life alone and required neatness. Few knew the link to her condition, but she did: her parents had reminded her constantly. *Your sister is obsessive about neatness, why aren't you?* She often wondered if they ever complained about anything Audrey had ever done. Maybe that's what made her leave.

No. She left because of me.

I never did understand.

Now that she was living alone she could focus more on creating her own place, her sanctuary. She glanced at her poetry books and her journals, still collecting dust on her desk. Over in the far corner, boxes of her cosplay gear—wigs, vintage clothing, all manner of props, stage makeup—lay undisturbed, a remnant of a useful past she nonetheless avoided. *Someday*, she thought, *I'll do something for me and not embarrass myself.*

She tried to distract herself to stop thinking about Christopher, the boy she'd killed. She could still feel the nausea from that evening on the Esplanade, still taste the bile from when she'd lost it and vomited in the middle of Boylston as passers-by sneered at her in disgust. She was still haunted by his beautiful eyes, empty windows into a soul she'd broken. She looked away, shaking away the image of his battered body laying broken on Storrow Drive, all because of a misunderstanding. Her misunderstanding.

If I was brave, she thought, I'd end it now.

She almost cracked her molars trying to stem the tears, and distracted herself by making

mint tea. A few minutes later she sat down with the warm cup in front of the window and opened up her tablet.

The evenings were different this late in the year. A few mornings ago she'd felt the first whisper of autumn during her morning run. She'd run faster — something she was still good at — feeling the heat in her hips and belly and chest as she tried to escape herself. The day had cooperated after all, and when she returned to her apartment, fate had awarded her another beautiful day, a temporary reprieve from the depression and darkness of winter. She shivered, thinking this would be the second winter after the accident, another year and season removed from who she once was.

She felt the mug cool to a tolerable level, and brought up the app to communicate with work. Her new “job”—both of her “jobs”—were going surprisingly well. Both were modest roles—the real one, and the cover— but they made her feel useful. And it felt wonderful to use her real name, not the one they gave her after the accident. She texted her real boss — *just got back, ready whenever*— and sat back.

After four minutes the unmistakable *boop* tone broke the silence. She leaned into the tablet camera to ensure a good look at her iris, placed her warm thumb, then index finger, then ring finger on the touch sensor, and recited the nonsense phrase — *Dickens sue outwardly shoe set* — used to authenticate her voice. She always thought the voice of the AI suspected something bad about her. The image took a few seconds to build to full resolution, an artifact of signal compression and encryption. She could see the outline of his glasses before the image finished building.

“Miss Drake, can you hear me?”

“I have you loud and clear, Major Lockwood. How about me?”

Chapter Two

“We have new team members,” Minerva Ayala said, and stood up from her desk. “They’ll be based out of the new Boston office.”

Justin Asher and Marcy Bennet stood up with their boss and placed their hands behind their back out of habit. He felt lightheaded, still unable to believe his luck.

“Asher, you and Miss Bennet will be traveling up there weekly to follow up on the Lockwood incident, and help them stand up operations.” Ayala, head of forgotten programs inside the nondescript Defense Special Activities Office, paused for a moment and looked Justin straight in the eye.

“Don’t fuck this up.”

He looked down and shame washed over him. It took an eternity for him to answer. “Yes, ma’am.”

It happened every time he heard the name.

Owen Lockwood, he thought, and felt hate burn him from inside.

They walked out silently and headed back to the common room, the one open work area in the unremarkable building in the outskirts of Washington. Justin stared a few feet ahead, feeling Marcy's pale eyes burning into him.

"Hey, you okay?" After a year of working together, he'd become adept at decoding Marcy's southern accent. He'd seen her stop buffoons in their tracks with a slicing *sure, honey*; and change idiotic minds with a sweet *oh that's precious*. This tone was different: soft, expectant, soothing. This time he heard a friend.

"It's been eight months Marcy," he whispered. "I'm never gonna live it down."

"Justin, c'mon," she said, stopping in the middle of the hallway and grabbing his arm.

"The boss knows what happened. She brought you back."

Months ago he would have avoided direct eye contact with Marcy in a futile effort to hide a raging crush. Today, shame had the same effect.

"I thought I'd be in a Federal prison for the rest of my life," he looked down the hallway and shook his head. "Then he sat next to me."

He looked up, and this time Marcy looked away.

"Remember what he looked like?"

"I do," she whispered.

"He was all torn up, Marcy. Bleeding all over the damn car. I thought he was gonna die right there. And he never even looked at me." The memory still shocked him. Simon Lyons, clothes ripped and shredded, barely able to move, the sick, metallic smell of someone else's blood pooling around him. Police sirens, strobes. The cold metal of handcuffs on his wrists. The inevitability of a colossal mistake.

“That was the worst night of my life,” he whispered. “And it was my fault. People almost died because of me. Because. . .” his voice lowered with a hate he realized he’d carry his entire life. “Because of fucking Owen.”

“Justin, I know, it’s okay that—”

“Do you know how hard it is to see you every day?” he snapped. “Knowing that motherfucker made me point a gun at *you*?”

She looked away for an instant. When their eyes met, Justin was unprepared.

“How do you think I felt when we found out that motherfucker was the guy I was dating?”

“You guys were *dating*?”

“Friends, mostly,” she shook her head. “No benefits.”

“Really?” he whispered, surprised he felt no jealousy.

“I was starting to like him,” she replied with a sad smile. “Enough to make it special.”

She took a deep breath and glared at him. “Then that pervert used me as a damn wiretap. Do you know how violated I felt? How embarrassed?”

“I. . .never knew,” he whispered. “I’m sorry. I guess we both—”

She surprised him with a hug. She was strong and warm, and smelled like honey and flowers.

“You were a gullible frat boy. So was everyone in this damn town,” she tried to smile.

“And I was the stupid blonde. I fell for the asshole. Again.”

He squeezed her hands, her perfect eyes inches from his. Months ago he’d be ecstatic to be this close to the most gorgeous woman he’d ever known. Now he only wanted to prove

himself by staying away.

He tried to change the subject, and let a smile light up his face. “Did I ever tell you what the boss told me when she cleared me back in?”

“I heard it was pretty bad,” she whispered back.

“It was. We’ll save it for a beer.”

“I’m counting on it. Next trip to Boston.” She winked at him and walked away, the delicate scent of her skin and hair lingering in her wake.

He looked back toward Ayala’s office, remembering the day a few months ago when he was officially reinstated. Only Mister Lyons accompanied him. In graphic, profane and anatomically clear terms, Ayala told him that she’d personally rip his fucking head off and shit on the stump of his neck if he was ever that stupid again. He was surprised to see pity on Mister Lyons’ face. Before she dismissed him, Ayala told Justin he had promise, and that if he managed to keep his head out of his ass, he would have a bright future in government service.

What he’d never forget, however, was Mister Lyons’ response.

“We all do things we’re ashamed of, Justin,” Simon told him. “It’s how we recover from them that makes us who we’ll be.”

Lyons would never rid himself of the scars that crossed his face and haunted his nightmares, and Justin would never overcome the shame of betraying his friends. He could only stand numb in the hallway, trying not to cry. Lyons must’ve known: he squeezed his shoulder, like a father, and walked away. Justin barely made it to the bathroom. He hid in a stall and cried for a long time, quiet and alone, not fully understanding what he felt. He was sure of one thing.

I will not fuck this up. I promise.

###

Amber walked out of the Central Square subway station into the sticky evening. The smell of vomit and urine, mixed with the relentless noise of traffic, shocked her. She'd been here only a few times before, and always thought it strange that such a dirty stretch could exist between the stuffiness of Harvard and the techies of MIT. She glanced at a closing coffee shop and a shiver of guilt ran down her spine.

It felt spiteful and needless the first time she'd pushed someone on purpose at a coffee shop just like this. It had happened shortly after the horror with Christopher, and it reminded her too much of him. The harried barista had screwed up her order, and she only noticed after she'd stepped away. He was unexpectedly mean, and she only wanted to know why. When he grabbed the cup from her they touched, almost without thinking. It had been almost accidental.

The intensity of his anger and disgust surprised her. She couldn't tell if it was directed at her, but it didn't matter. Without thinking she felt a wave, relentless as a thunderstorm, pushing from the back of her neck into his hand.

I am right.

The change in him had been immediate and striking. He looked at her apologetically, and she could immediately sense the regret and embarrassment through her touch. "I'm so sorry... Amber," he struggled to read his own writing on the paper cup. "I'll fix this right away for you."

That was the first time she controlled it.

She'd walked out in a daze, hungry and shocked, looking blankly at strangers and wondering *would it work with them?* It was difficult for her to have physical contact with anyone, especially strangers, so she had to find a place where casual contact was socially

permissible.

Over the past few days she'd tried the subway, more cafes, and the bodegas around Medford. Once she dared to touch a guy playing the guitar on the street. In each case she'd stay long enough to prove that the push worked, then run away. They were all different, based on what she thought they might feel.

You're happy. I'm pretty. You're sad.

I'm scary.

The last one, where she made someone fear her, came at dusk. She made the mistake of thinking about fear when she touched an old lady reloading her subway card at Haymarket Station. The woman had shrieked, and hurriedly grabbed her bags to get away. It took her a split second to understand why, and several hours to wonder *what if*. She had to discover if it would work on someone else. Somewhere with faceless transients—preferably with substance abuse and credibility problems—seemed like the right place. She smiled bashfully, like a middle schooler cutting class, thinking that her time at the Office had been useful after all.

She crossed to the south side of Massachusetts Avenue and walked past a large bus lane, where panhandlers and stoners did their best to keep the Central Square vibe going despite startups popping up like mushrooms all over the city. She crossed a smaller street, and noticed with a chill that the smell was different a mere two blocks away from the square, towards the Charles River. It would be a great place to put her back to the wall, and wait.

She noticed an older man stumble awkwardly towards her. His hair was oily and gray, his clothes disgusting, and she could not tell if he had any teeth. In the middle of the neighborhood's resurgence, she could tell he hadn't showered in days. As he got closer the

stench confirmed her suspicion. He saw her and produced a torn paper cup out of nowhere.

“Change?” The few teeth he had left were rotten and black, and his voice was high from hunger, desperation, or something else.

She summoned every ounce of courage to put out her hand, dreading the man’s filthy touch. She looked around nervously and saw a fat woman a few yards away, sitting crosslegged on the sidewalk, looking at the scene and smiling.

“Leave her alone you piece of shit!” the fat woman cackled through missing teeth, and spit something disgusting on the sidewalk.

“Fuck you, you fat whore!” The man yelled then laughed, and Amber felt repulsion at the thought of his spit landing on her. Disgust rose within her and without thinking she put out her hand.

“You wan’ me ta read yer fuckin’ palm?” The man looked at her hand, looking for money and finding none. The smell of stale urine was nauseating. Slowly, almost numb, she touched him.

He was confused, his mind as vile as his stench. She willed the thoughts away from her mind and felt the push, dark and oily and clear, like a wave.

Fear me.

The man recoiled and stumbled back, falling to the ground. He shrieked as if he had seen an apparition, his face peeling back in terror, and she thought he’d gag on his tongue. The fat woman on the sidewalk laughed and yelled at him, throwing a crumpled cup at him in disgust.

“You’re fucking high as a kite, you piece of shit! Leave her the fuck alone!” She slapped her fat knee and shook her head, and coughed up something that looked black in the yellow street

light.

There was nothing else to do. She turned back to the safety of the intersection, away from the laughing cough of the fat woman, from the gagging yelps of the old man. Her heart raced and she felt the familiar, ravenous hunger as she tried to catch her breath. The world came back into focus and she saw the car lights, the blur of people on the street, felt their presence and noise around her, but this time, it did not close her in. The chaos — the sensory overload that her parents had told her so many times would be so difficult for her — suddenly surrounded her like water; comfortable, familiar, and safe. No one would notice her. She could hide in plain sight. No one would ever know what happened.

I can do it, she smiled, and looked for someone to do it again.

###

“Please buckle your seatbelts,” the pilot said over the cabin loudspeaker. “We’ll be departing in about five minutes.”

Harriet looked outside. She had never been at a military airfield before. Until this morning, she had never been in a business jet in her life. This was their new reality, and it excited and scared her.

Paula sat across from her, looking out her window, lost in thought.

“Long way from Tufts, huh Paula?”

She looked up slowly at her, eyes far away, and flashed a wan smile. “Yes.”

“You okay?”

Harriet could feel the power of the engines rise just behind them. Paula looked away as the aircraft gently lurched forward, out of the chocks, the power quieting back down as they

taxied to the runway. “Just thinking about today.”

“Whadya think?”

Paula took a deep breath. “Everyone was very nice. Almost everyone.”

“Are you talking about Justin?”

She said *yes* without a word.

“Marcy told me they read him the riot act. Reinstated, but with a really serious warning.”

She leaned in with a shared secret. “Marcy told me Dragon Lady almost fucking killed him.”

“She should have,” Paula snapped.

“She told me he had a really tough road to get back but that he’s gone above and beyond, doing everything they’ve—“

“He pointed a *fucking* gun at you, Harriet! He was choking Kelly and was going to hurt her!”

Harriet looked out the aircraft window, breathless from the memory. “It was terrifying. I didn’t know what to do when Marcy shot his gun away. I thought we were all gonna die. . .” She shuddered, shaking the image away. “And then when he started crying when he realized what he’d done. . . I felt like shit. Made me hate that fucker Owen even more.”

Paula stared outside with a huff. “That’s a big damn mistake, Harriet. I don’t know how I can work with someone like that.”

“Well, at least we’re working at a place where you get a second chance.”

Her nostrils flared and her eyes drilled into Harriet. “Just because he’s a pretty boy they shouldn’t cut him so much slack.”

“He’s really not that cute. Kind of looks like a young Simon after a bad day.” She

shrugged and smiled. “Like everyone else down here.”

“If he thinks he can waltz around with that frat boy smile and those eyelashes and think everyone will forgive him, he’s going to get a *fucking* surprise.”

“*Eyelashes?*” Harriet laughed. “What the hell are you *talking* about?”

“Nothing,” Paula huffed and looked away. “I’m sure he waxes his eyebrows. That little...” She shook her shoulders in rage.

The aircraft accelerated off the runway and they saw the Northern Virginia woods fall away. Harriet was entranced by the speed, the clouds, the brilliant blue sky. She felt a strange rumbling, which she recognized as the landing gear retracting, then all was smooth. She could hear — *feel* — the whine of the engines somewhere behind them. The thrust and speed gave way to serenity, and the problems of the world suddenly became tiny, frivolous and inconsequential from up high.

So this is why people love flying.

“Helluva view. Maybe this job won’t suck that bad, Paula.”

Paula let out her breath in a huff, her eyes far away. “He’s going to get a big *fucking* surprise.”

Chapter Three

“You ready, professor?” Simon Lyons whispered and smiled.

Kelly Austin clutched her boyfriend’s arm outside the gym entrance, an anonymous door to an unremarkable building in a forgotten industrial park twenty miles north of Boston. She felt sick despite the beautiful late summer day. Staying out in the warm daylight seemed far better than going into this dark, stuffy cave, with a bunch of people she knew would laugh at her. She felt silly, out of place, and desperate to run away.

Why am I doing this? she thought, and set her jaw tight.

Of course. I asked him.

Two weeks ago they’d enjoyed a magical weekend together, discovering new coffee shops in Cambridge during a stunning late summer day. Kelly brought a little soccer ball in her picnic bag, and taught Simon the basics of *the beautiful game* every time they passed a patch of grass. She’d marveled at him—he was gorgeous, in complete control of his body, smiling broadly and enjoying every moment. Something inside her broke. *I used to be that happy in my*

body, she thought. She hadn't felt that way since her senior year in college.

He'd caught her at home a few nights later as she checked out her arms in the mirror. He fawned over her, telling her how beautiful she looked — but she didn't want to believe him. *I don't feel strong*. She'd tried to do a pushup in front of him and failed. Between kisses and fondling — *how can he be so horny when I feel so weak?* — she made him promise to work out with her. He reminded her she was already gorgeous and perfect, but promised he'd take her to the new gym, the one from work, as soon as it opened.

Today was the day. *No turning back*. She nodded, lips tight. “Let's go.”

The gym was cavernous, dark and utilitarian, with industrial lights suspended from the ceiling. The floor was covered in black rubber mats. Stacks of barbells, dumbbells and plates covered an entire wall, and cage-like rigs held people doing pull-ups and gymnastics. It seemed alien, and smelled like energy drinks, stale sweat and car tires.

This was not a normal gym, with people struggling for fitness on strange machines. This was where the new team from the Office worked out. The guys ranged in size from lithe-soccer-player to football-running-back, and the women all looked like fitness models with pixie cuts and chalked-up hands. Everyone looked brutally fit.

Kelly felt soft, vulnerable, and desperate to leave. *I'm weak. They know*. She turned to Simon to tell him *I changed my mind. Let's leave. Please*.

Then she noticed something strange.

When they walked in, the building went quiet.

Huge dudes and tough chicks, all of them younger than Simon, stopped whatever they were doing and stood, alert and unblinking, acknowledging him with respectful nods as he

passed.

They all know him.

When she first met Simon's coworkers at "the Office," as they all called it, everyone seemed scared of him. She'd soon learn why. In the year since, she'd seen his harsh exterior melt away, revealing the tender soul of the man she loved. The people chiseling themselves to perfection in this yawning cavern, however, were not afraid. They were deferential and quiet; so focused on Simon that Kelly wondered if they were holding their collective breath, primed for something unknown.

Say the word, they seemed to say. We are ready. It felt comforting and terrifying. She squeezed his arm tighter, avoided their gaze, and looked ahead.

They walked to the back of the gym, up to an enormous bald man standing outside a small alcove that served as an office. With his hands on his hips, he seemed wider than he was tall. He was barely younger than Simon but a hundred pounds heavier, all of it muscle and menace. His skin seemed made of leather, with faded tattoos on his chest and shoulders. He flashed a wide smile through a perfect goatee as they walked up to him.

"This place looks like shit," Simon put out his hand and smirked.

"I need to do a better job of keeping scumbags like you out," the man grinned, "But *this* young lady is welcome any time." He shook Simon's hand and slapped him on the shoulder.

"You lookin' good, Seb. Thanks for everything."

"You outgrew the last place. I like this one a lot better, Gonzo."

"Boss got serious about moving stuff up here after your speech," he shrugged. "You're not gonna hear *me* complain." Gonzo looked past him with curious ferocity. Kelly clutched

Simon's arm, desperate to disappear. "Is this ..."

"Yes. Doctor Kelly Austin. My—"

"Doctor Austin," Gonzo interrupted, completely ignoring Simon. "My God, what an honor. I'm Hector Gonzalez, and I am at your service. Welcome to your gym." His handshake was warm, enormous and welcoming.

"Thank you, Mister Gonzalez. I'm..."

"Ma'am, please. Everyone calls me Gonzo." His eyes lit up in a comforting smile. "You are my personal guest. All of this is yours."

"I'm here two minutes and you're already hitting on her," Simon shook his head. "I'm taking back every lie I said about you."

Gonzo mimed *Don't pay any attention to him* and chuckled. Kelly giggled at the incongruity of this huge, dangerous-looking man melting her with a dazzling smile and teddybear eyes. She could easily imagine him as a terrifying presence in the wrong place, an image completely at odds with his playful banter, the one Simon shared only with his closest friends.

"Good to see you today, Doctor." The voice behind her was unmistakable.

"Marcy?" Kelly turned around and beamed. Of course, she fit in perfectly here. Marcy Bennet, Simon's understudy and work partner, the most badass woman Kelly had ever met, looked stunning as always. She dressed like all the other gym babes—a sports top and shorts—but Marcy somehow managed to look classy and feminine even in the dark bowels of the gym. Kelly's heart sank. *She's so fit and strong*, she thought. *I'm going to look like an idiot.*

Marcy surprised her with a hug, a clear signal to everyone in the gym, then bumped fists

with Simon.

“Time for the ladies to leave the little boys to their conversation,” she smirked.

Simon rolled his eyes. “Why do I have to put up with this shit?”

“Don’t look at me, *mano*,” Gonzo laughed, putting his hands up. “You picked her!”

Marcy stepped back and smiled at Kelly. “Ready to work out?”

“Marcy, I’m...”

“Trust me,” she winked. “Let’s go.”

They walked off, smiling like schoolgirls, and did not wonder why Simon and Gonzo’s laughter faded into concern.

###

Amber ducked her head and stepped into the used bookstore a block away from the Mystic River, happy to escape the sun and enter the familiar, cool, and musty comfort. She barely nodded at the lady at the cash register and beelined to the back part of the shop, hoping to unearth another poetry gem.

Staring at the shelves of books always caused a pang of regret. *Too many books, too little time. I can’t finish. Why should I start?* But cracking into the hidden treasures was less an act of luck, and more a devotion to the art. She could’ve made the search more useful by asking the shop owner, but that would be terrifying and would involve speaking to another person. She felt somehow disrespectful to do any shopping online—and justified her reluctance as impositions from her job. Amber turned back to see the shop owner glance at her and smile, and quickly looked away.

“Can we just go?” A big man in a sweaty t-shirt with a profane slogan and wearing a

greasy Red Sox hat rolled his eyes at a pale girl with thick glasses and stringy black hair.

“Colin, please,” she said in a timid voice as she rummaged the used romance section.

“Just be nice. I’ll be just a moment.”

“Why do you fucking need to read this shit?” Colin asked. “Don’t you get enough at home?”

The girl’s chalky skin turned pink and blotchy. “I like to read,” she whispered, scowling at the man before turning away.

“Just get the one with the biggest guy in the cover. You know he’s gonna fuck the chick in the first few pages. C’mon. Let’s go.”

“Colin, please,” The girl snapped. She glanced behind her at the owner of the store, who shook her head with a look Amber could only interpret as disapproving. “Just give me a minute.” The girl said, trying her best to hold her ground.

Colin took too much space even standing still. Amber imagined he had no idea how much he stank, how he’d shamed the pale girl, how much others despised him.

“Jeez. Just grab one and let’s go. If you weren’t such a fat bitch you wouldn’t need to read that shit. You’d get everything you need at home.”

The girl recoiled at the words, and glared at Colin in disgust. Without a word, she carefully placed the book on a shelf, stood up, and wiped a tear. She turned away from Colin and for an instant her eyes met Amber’s.

Without thinking, Amber reached out and offered her the book she’d been perusing.

“Have you read this one?” Amber asked.

The girl tilted her head and smiled, as if thanking Amber for her help, letting her know

her life was hopelessly past any acts of kindness. Her face twisted in a sad grimace and she turned away, past Colin and out the door, without a glance at the shopkeeper.

Something hurt inside Amber, perhaps the violation of the sanctity of the bookshop. When Colin approached, she was not surprised.

“Hey, you,” Colin growled. He was big and mean and Amber hated him. “This wasn’t about you. Mind your own fucking business.”

Outside, on the street, she would’ve felt fear at someone so big and so disgusting yelling at her with so much hate. But this was her sanctuary, the only place where beauty and calm lived, and his disrespect was a desecration.

“This one,” Amber whispered. “This is the one she wants.”

“Fucking poems?” Colin laughed. “You can’t get laid either?” He didn’t bat the book away, and instead reached out for it, aiming to embarrass her.

That’s when she touched him.

In an instant she knew: the high school bully, thrust into a world where his meanness no longer meant power; someone too blind to realize he purposefully hurt the only person who’d ever love him. She sensed an anger and disgust so powerful and deep that the only way to survive was to shunt it out into the world, which Colin did with the desperation of a man drowning far out to sea.

The tragedy caused her no trepidation. She pushed him, holding her anger at bay, not wanting to repeat the terror she was certain she could cause.

Make amends.

“This one,” Amber whispered, and leaned past him to collect the book the girl had put

down after Colin's torment. "And this one. Now."

Colin seemed to teeter. His eyes locked on Amber, unable to force words out. She sensed him wanting to fight her, to hold on to whatever shred of dignity he felt he retained, to be the man an abusive father had so perfectly demonstrated too long ago.

You idiot, she thought. You think strength is about hurting others.

His eyes opened wide, his breaths became shallow. He clutched the books as if his life depended on it, and with a dozen storms raging in his mind, turned to the register.

Amber dropped her hands, exhausted from the push, and allowed herself several deep breaths to bring her heart rate back down. She could see into other minds more clearly than hers, but these emotions she knew well enough: fear, exhilaration, relief. Behind them, as if a whisper: confidence, and satisfaction. And anger.

She looked past the register and smiled at the incongruent beauty of the late summer's day. Colin snuck a glance at her for an instant, the terror clear in his eyes. He walked out with the books in a crinkly paper bag which he offered as a token to the pale girl, who stood under the awning outside the bookstore, crying and hiding from the sun.

###

The students filed into the lecture hall in a grumble and sat down. Steve Fullerton sat down one seat from Mark Hemmings, his classmate and longtime Army buddy, the requisite "bro" empty seat between them. Today was the first day of the senior year analytics class, and he needed to stake out his seat for the semester.

"Good morning, class!"

“Is she the professor?” Steve leaned over and whispered. Mark nodded in approval, eyebrows raised.

He had to admit, the professor looked kind of... hot. She was unlike the other denizens of the mathematics department, with their shabby clothes and unkempt hair. She had an innocent girl-next-door vibe, but there was *something* about her...

“*Milf?*” Mark whispered over the empty seat, eyes locked on her.

“Is she a mom already?”

“Not mom. Mathematician.”

Steve chuckled silently and enjoyed watching Professor Kelly Austin turn around.

“Absolutely.”

He'd received enough credits from active duty and night school to comp freshman and sophomore year, which made the academic load steep, but worthwhile. One year after the Army he still felt strange back in a classroom, surrounded by students several years younger than him. He found himself more interested in this skinny and unattainable teacher, closer to his age, than the gullible co-eds around him. He'd slept with enough of them already, and was ready for something more interesting.

He lost his train of thought several times during class, wondering what her underwear looked like, and how loud she'd be in bed. She had him by less than five years, but those young cougars could still be fun. She was still younger than some of the skanks who hung around Fort Drum, looking for their third or fourth ex-husband, horny after endless deployments.

Nice ass for a thirtysomething. Tiny but her tits look spectacular. Needs to show more skin. He briefly fantasized about how fragile she'd feel under him. Maybe he'd be able to turn a

couple of sweaty nights into a better grade in a class he really didn't want to take.

The buzzer rang to end the period, and several of the students walked down to ask questions.

"I'm going to stay and ask a...*question*," he sneered at Mark. "Maybe something else."

"Dude, she's a professor."

"I'm sure she moans all the same."

He stepped out the aisle and made it to the back of the crowd. *You all go ahead. I have a different question.* People were jockeying for position and he felt a few touch him. *Get off me. All y'all nerds are disgusting.*

Someone grabbed him from behind to get his attention.

"Yea, what?" The girl holding Steve's arm had hazel cat eyes that laughed at him. "What do you want?"

"Do you need me to set up office hours with Doctor Austin?" Her accent was rough, tomboyish and blunt, like someone he remembered.

"Nah. I just want to talk to her. Who are you?" For such a skinny chick, Steve thought, she had a surprisingly strong grip. His skin tingled where she grabbed him.

"I'm her assistant, Amber Drake," she said with contempt. "What do you want to talk to her about?"

"Listen, I'm one of the students," he said, trying to loosen her grip. "I just have a question."

She let his arm go. Her smile was sweet and disturbing.

"Her boyfriend gets *really* jealous," she whispered, and the smile got worse. "Works for

powerful people. Rich, crazy and angry. Already took out a few of your classmates. And *they* weren't stupid enough to think they could sleep with her."

He wanted to push her away, but she somehow knew *exactly* what he was thinking. He felt cold. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"You're not the first." Her smile faded. "Make sure your medical is paid up. Get comfortable with a wheelchair." She leaned into him. She was tiny and fragile and thin, yet he felt fear. "Do you know how easy it is to crush a windpipe? Remove an eyeball? Rip off a scrotum?" She tilted her head and her lips parted in a cruel smile, as if she was looking at a piece of meat. "Her boyfriend knows. Go ahead. Hit on her and find out."

He wanted to slap her, but he was next in line. Professor Austin turned away, waving at a student. She was plain but fine: petite, curvy, with a cute smile. He noticed she wore classy jewelry, which made her look elegant and slightly out of place. He looked closer and realized with a sinking feeling that her bracelet and necklace could probably pay for his first car. *In cash.*

Boyfriend's a sugar daddy. Way the fuck out of my league.

"May I help you?" she asked in her polite and nasal tone. She moved in a weird manner, like the girl next door who didn't know she was really hot— because her boyfriend would kill you if you got too close.

Somewhere, the little voice in his brain, the one that had kept him alive in Iraq so many times, was screaming.

It ain't worth it. Get out.

"Nothing, ma'am, nothing. I overheard the answer to my question a few minutes ago."

Her eyes were very interesting. *Green and gray. That's a cool color.*

He flicked his backpack and ran out, not looking at her. The skinny assistant—*she'd be hot too if she wasn't such a fucking nerd*—mocked him with a glance.

Nah, he thought. *That cougar ain't worth it.*

* * *