

**PLEASE,  
YOU'RE SAFE HERE**

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# MELISSA

Too many tequila shots would unravel me, so I let the liquid linger, rolling the sharp taste across my tongue before swallowing. The burn was grounding, a tether in a room that felt too loud and too full of movement. My sister Veronica was different, unshaken and effortless. Her laughter rose above the bass-heavy music, bright and sure, as if she belonged to the rhythm itself. I envied that about her, the way the world seemed to mold itself around her presence rather than the other way around.

She had always been the one people noticed first. Since we were kids, it had been that way. With her warm caramel skin and a frame that could make the simplest outfit look like it belonged on the cover of a magazine, Veronica existed in a way that made others stop and take in the sight of her. Even now, in nothing more than a worn-in t-shirt and jeans, she carried herself like the main event without ever trying. It was in the way fabric draped over her like if it had been designed just for her, the way a flick of her wrist or a tilt of her head could command attention without a single word.

Men in the room had already tried their best lines and their best smiles, each hoping to carve out a moment of her time. Tonight, she was here for me. Her focus never wavered and never drifted. That was the thing about Veronica. She gave freely only to

those she chose. And tonight, she had chosen me.

Then there was me, the quiet one, sipping carefully through a straw and keeping to the edges of the room. I was Veronica's sister, so some of her beauty had trickled down to me, though I never carried it the way she did. She wore her confidence like a second skin, while I often felt like I was borrowing mine, unsure if it fit just right.

I barely owned a pair of heels. The ones I had on weren't even mine. They were Veronica's, a last-minute addition to my outfit that felt more like a challenge than an accessory. I never craved attention, my petite frame and short stature always seemed to invite it. Men loved to test their strength by lifting me up, calling me fun size. It made me squirm every time.

I had been out of the dating scene for so long that I hardly remembered how to carry myself in spaces like this. My fingers wouldn't stay still, twisting and tugging at my curls until one coil looped itself around my ring, trapping me in my own nervous habit. The noise around me was overwhelming, a tangle of laughter, clinking glasses, and music that vibrated through the floor. Another heel crushed mine, and a careless shoulder brushed hard against me, I barely noticed.

Veronica had caught me tugging at the hem of my dress again. It hugged my frame so tightly that even the thought of lifting it to pee felt like an ordeal. Her sharp eyes caught everything, this time, she wasn't focused on the dress.

I had lost track of the moment, my eyes dropping to the ring on my finger. The same ring I had worn for almost eight years. It had once been a promise, a symbol of love from a man I had been so sure of. My thumb ran over the worn band, tracing the grooves I knew by heart. The metal was cool against my skin, steady in a way nothing else felt right now.'

"Take off the damn ring, Mel." Veronica demanded, her hands already reaching for me. Her push sent me stumbling, and she caught my waist before I could tip over completely. "Sorry." she whispered, her grip stayed firm, as if she were afraid I might disappear if she let go.

I didn't answer her right away. The ring, the years, the memories, all pressed hard on my chest at once.

"It's time, Mel," she said again, softer this time.

I hesitated, twisting the ring one last time around my finger. It slid off easier than I expected, the absence of it leaving my hand feeling bare. Without overthinking, I tossed it into my purse.

Relief should have been immediate, it wasn't. Something uncurled inside me, lighter than before, yet guilt still clung to the edges. I had carried that burden for so long, held onto it like proof of something real. Charles was not the man I had once believed in.

He deserved whatever came his way.

If I hadn't left that morning, I was certain the next time Veronica saw me, it would have been to identify my body.

I had braced myself for life after divorce, expecting the

worst. Society painted a grim picture of lonely nights and regret, that only seemed to apply to people who hadn't married a narcissistic, abusive asshole. The moment I signed those papers, it felt like chains falling away. I no longer worried if his dinner was hot enough or if something small would send him into one of his rages. For the first time in years, I was no longer under his control.

Today, I was finally free.

My emotions were everywhere, tangled in a storm of fear and excitement. The unknown stretched before me, both thrilling and terrifying. I had spent so long surviving that I wasn't sure I even remembered how to simply live.

Veronica hadn't known what I was going through until the morning I showed up on her doorstep with a hastily packed bag and tear-streaked cheeks. Since then, she had been my lifeline, always checking in, always ready with a warm meal or a silent hug when words wouldn't do. Tonight, she wanted to stay in and binge-watch lighthearted romances, yet I insisted on going out for a drink. That was all it took. She was by my side, no questions asked.

I needed to be among people, to drown out the thoughts creeping into my mind, the ones that told me I didn't deserve to be happy. When you trust someone to care for you, to handle you like something delicate, and they shatter you instead, how do you ever open up again? How do you let someone close when all you can hear is the feeling of past wounds?

Maybe I would die alone, and maybe that was okay.

Because no matter what, I would always have Veronica.

My sister. My safe place.

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Veronica had her own way of coping. When life felt unsteady, she sought comfort in the familiar, often revisiting old flames like worn-out love letters she could not quite throw away. It never surprised me to see Vincent, one of her exes, slipping out of our place in the early morning light, moving his car from the driveway as if that small act of discretion made a difference. Why he could not just park on the street, I never understood. It was not like she lived in a rough neighborhood. That was Veronica, bold in some ways and careful in others.

I had bigger things on my mind.

Tonight, I was meeting with a few realtors to look at apartments, something that felt surreal even as I made the plans. I had not settled on anything yet, the change pressed against me, undeniable and certain. Soon, this chapter would close, and a new one would begin. Whether I was ready or not, things were about to be different.

**Melissa:** *Sis, do you mind being a little quieter? I think the neighbors and myself want to sleep.*

**Veronica:** *OMG! I'm so sorry, sis! I will really try this time. I mean what can I say he is a generous lover.*

**Melissa:** *Ugh, stop! You're gonna make me gag.*

**Veronica:** *Stop texting me, come to the room for a bit.*

**Melissa:** *Coming.*

The room was still a reflection of what had happened the night before. The sheets, now wrinkled and askew, bore the marks of passion, creased in places where bodies had pressed close, the fabric twisted as if unwilling to let go of the remaining warmth. The scent of perfume and something deeper still remained. The pillow cases were moved, one of them pushed to the side, barely hanging on the edge of the bed.

The comforter lay half on the floor, the edges frayed and disheveled, like if it had been tossed aside in the heat of the moment.

I sat on the chair, as a safety precaution. Veronica, with that knowing look of hers, looked at me, the sheets still in her hands, a small frown creasing her brow as she noticed the hesitation in my posture.

“How are you, Mel? Come lay with me.” She spoke softly, yet there was an authority in her voice.

I glanced at the bed, my eyes moving from the tangled sheets to her face. She caught my glance at me and smiled.

“Mel, they’re new sheets. I just changed them before he left. He even helped me. Why would I let you sit on these sheets? Girl, come here.”

I collapsed beside her, her arms wrapping around me as if she were shielding me from the world. She ran her fingers through

my hair, soothing me with her touch, grounding me in the moment.

“You know we’ve been through so much. Our parents died when you were 5 and I was 8. Going into the foster care system only to be separated and never losing contact. I know you think that right now you won’t make it out of this, Mel. Listen to me. I got you. I’m always going to get you.”

Her words washed over me, and the dam I had tried to hold back finally broke. Tears welled up in my eyes, spilling over as all the emotions I had been pushing down for so long came rushing forward. I cried, letting the grief, fear, and relief mix into a storm I could no longer contain.

“I love you, sis. You’re my everything, you know that? I wish I could call off today and we can do something fun. I’m aiming for a promotion and I need to get my own place.” I said, sitting up slightly to look at her.

She didn’t let go, her hands still gently cradling me as I looked into her eyes.

“It’s okay Manta, we have our whole lives to make memories together.”

I hated when she called me that, *water baby*. It was true though. I loved water. When everything else felt overwhelming, water was my escape, my safe place. It was the one thing I could count on to calm me, to clear my mind when the noise of the world got too loud. I could swim for hours, the coolness of the water wrapping around me, and I’d never want to leave. My fingers and

toes would get pruney, that was the only sign I needed to know I had spent too much time submerged in the world that only water seemed to understand.

Growing up, our foster families were good to us. They made sure we had what we needed, that we were safe. We got to see each other weekly, and it was like nothing had ever changed.

Despite the years, despite the places we were put in, it always felt like home when we were together. It was the same when we went swimming. Veronica would drag me out of the water, and I'd scream and yell, refusing to leave. It was as though I couldn't bear the thought of the water slipping away from me, as if it was the only thing that kept me tethered to a world that didn't always feel safe.

At one point, the family realized how much I resisted, how I would even run away to her house when the anxiety of being separated became too much. They saw that the usual routines weren't going to work, that I needed something different. And that's when they set up an arrangement, one that would allow me to visit her more, to give me the sense of stability and comfort I so desperately craved.

“Oh! I forgot, Vincent's brother Jared is coming into town in like a week or two to visit, and I would love for all of us to go out,” Veronica said, full of excitement. I looked at her, rolling my eyes.

“Veronica, I'm not ready to date,” I replied, trying to make

myself clear.

She let out a deep laugh, her eyes twinkling with amusement.

“Girl, that is a child. He is literally 26 years old. You’re practically a cougar.”

I slapped her arm playfully. “A cougar? Really?” I laughed despite myself. I was only 30, still young, she had a way of making me feel much older with her teasing.

“Even though he’s young, I’m sure he can show you a thing or two. You need to let go of some of that built-up stress. Plus, those military men are trouble. Trust me,” she said with a wink.

“Bye, V, I have to get to work,” I said, standing up from the bed.

“Also, Vincent comes over quite often. Can you make sure he moves his car to the street? He left early today, however a few times last week, he was blocking me in.”

“Sorry, sis, yes. I’ll let him know,” she replied, sounding a little too casual about it.

“Maybe if he’s a good boy, I’ll give him a reward for listening.” She winked at me as she lay back on the bed.

I picked up a pillow and threw it at her, my face contorted with disgust. “Seriously?” I muttered, shaking my head.

I heard her laughing behind me as I walked down the hallway to my room. It wasn’t that I didn’t have desires, but letting a man into my space near my body was uncharted territory. I had only ever been with Charles and had not even explored what I

liked. I wasn't blind, and "*she*" noticed men too, though for her own reasons. She would start throbbing when a man she wanted to explore came near or even smiled our way. She had only been touched by one man. Yes, I referred to my yoni as "she" since I couldn't control her all the time. That part of my life was on hold until I had a place of my own, adding another reason to my list for privacy.

I knew I should have picked out what I was going to wear last night. August in Louisiana always caught me off guard, with its unpredictable moods. The mornings could be scorching, the sun glaring down, making you sweat the moment you stepped outside. By evening, the skies would open up, and you'd be caught in a torrential downpour without a second's warning. It was always like this—one minute, the humidity would wrap around you like a heated blanket, and the next, the breeze would pick up, leaving you wondering if a storm was on the horizon.

I decided on my teal suit with flats, hoping my panty hose would not tear as they had in the past. I figured I'd bring an extra coat in case it cooled down unexpectedly. My umbrella was already in my car, so at least I was prepared for whatever the sky had in store for me. With Louisiana, it was never about *if* the weather would change, more so *when*.

Grabbing my lunch from the fridge and my laptop, I cracked the door open. "Bye, V. I love you. See you later. Let's maybe get Chinese tonight. We can binge-watch movies like you

wanted to do the other night.”

She leaned over the banister, looking down at me with a smile. “Okay, perfect. I’ll wait for you since I know you’re looking for a place to stay, even though you’re forever welcome to stay here.”

I felt the familiar tug of guilt, I didn’t want to go through the list of reasons why I needed my own space with Veronica again. It always seemed to end the same way.

“Okay, bye,” I said quickly, running out the door before another hour could pass convincing her that it wasn’t about not wanting to be with her, I needed to be on my own.

Arriving at work felt like a repeat of every other day. The routine was comforting, a small piece of stability amidst the chaos of my life. Being an accountant didn’t leave much room for surprises, I loved it. Numbers always made sense to me, they were logical and predictable, and math had a way of grounding everything in order. It was the one thing that didn’t change, the one thing I could rely on. This job was my safe space, a way to maintain my independence and avoid slipping into the roles Charles had always wanted for me.

He had always pushed for me to stay at home, to prepare for children that never came, and never would. The thought of carrying his child had once felt like my sole purpose on earth, over time, it had shifted. It became something that made my stomach turn. It wasn’t always that way, eventually, it was.