

LUCY SCORE

Things We Never Got Over

  
HODDER

# I

## Worst. Day. Ever

*Naomi*

I wasn't sure what to expect when I walked into Cafe Rev, but it sure as hell wasn't a picture of myself behind the register under the cheery headline "Do Not Serve." A yellow frowny face magnet held the photo in place.

First of all, I'd never set foot in Knockemout, Virginia, let alone done anything to warrant a punishment as egregious as withholding caffeine. Secondly, just what did a person have to do in this dusty little town to have a mugshot hanging in the local cafe?

*Ha. Mug shot.* Because I was in a cafe. Gosh, I was funny when I was too tired to blink.

Anyway, thirdly, it was an incredibly unflattering picture. I looked like I'd had a long-term threesome with a tanning bed and cheap eyeliner.

Right about then, reality penetrated my exhausted, dazed, bobby-pinned-to-within-an-inch-of-its-life head.

Once again, Tina had managed to make my life just a little bit worse. And considering what had gone down in the last twenty-four hours, that was saying something.

"Can I help . . ." The man on the other side of the counter, the one who could give me my precious latte, took a step back and held up hands the size of dinner plates. "I don't want any trouble."

He was a burly guy with smooth, dark skin and a shaved, nicely shaped head. His neatly trimmed beard was snow white, and I spotted a couple of tattoos peeking out of the neck and

sleeves of his coveralls. The name Justice was stitched on his curious uniform.

I tried my most winning smile, but thanks to an overnight road trip spent crying through fake eyelashes, it felt more like a grimace.

“That’s not me,” I said, pointing a finger with a wasted French-tip manicure at the photo. “I’m Naomi. Naomi Witt.”

The man peered at me with suspicion before producing a pair of spectacles from the front pocket of his coveralls and slipping them on.

He blinked then gave me a head-to-toe scan. I saw the realization begin to hit.

“Twins,” I explained.

“Well, shit,” he murmured, stroking one of those big hands through his beard.

Justice still looked a little skeptical. I couldn’t exactly blame him. After all, how many people actually had an evil twin?

“That’s Tina. My sister. I’m supposed to meet her here.” Though why my estranged twin asked me to meet her in an establishment where she clearly wasn’t welcome was another question I was too tired to ask.

Justice was still staring at me, and I realized his gaze was lingering on my hair. Reflexively, I patted my head, and a wilted daisy fluttered to the floor. *Whoops*. I probably should have looked in the mirror at the motel before I set foot in public looking like a disheveled, unhinged stranger on her way home from a role-playing festival.

“Here,” I said, reaching into the pocket of my yoga shorts and thrusting my driver’s license at the man. “See? I’m Naomi and I would really, really like a gigantic latte.”

Justice took my ID and studied it, then my face again. Finally, his stoic expression cracked, and he broke into a wide grin. “I’ll be damned. It’s nice to meet you, Naomi.”

“It’s really nice to meet you too, Justice. Especially if you’re going to make me that aforementioned caffeine.”

“I’ll make you a latte that’ll make your hair stand on end,” he promised.

## *Things We Never Got Over*

A man who knew how to meet my immediate needs and did it with a smile? I couldn't help but fall just a little bit in love with him right then and there.

While Justice got to work, I admired the cafe. It was decked out in what looked like manly garage style. Corrugated metal on the walls, shiny red shelves, stained concrete floor. All the drinks had names like Red Line Latte and Checkered Flag Cappuccino. It was downright charming.

There were a handful of early morning coffee drinkers seated at the small round tables scattered throughout the place. Every single person was looking at me like they were *really* not happy to see me.

"How do you feel about maple and bacon flavors, darlin'?" Justice called from the gleaming espresso machine.

"I feel great about them. Especially if they come in a cup the size of a bucket," I assured him.

His laugh echoed through the place and seemed to relax the rest of the patrons who went back to ignoring me.

The front door opened, and I turned, expecting to see Tina.

But the man who stormed inside was definitely *not* my sister. He looked to be in more dire need of caffeine than I was.

Hot would be a decent way to describe him. Hot as hell would be even more accurate. He was tall enough that I could wear my highest pair of heels and still have to tilt my head up to make out with him—my official categorization of male height. His hair was in the dirty blond range and was cut short on the sides and swept back on top, which suggested he had good taste and reasonable grooming skills.

Both of those criteria landed high on my List of Reasons to be Attracted to a Man. The beard was a brand-new addition to the list. I'd never kissed a man with a beard and I had a sudden, irrational interest in experiencing that at some point.

Then I got to his eyes. They were a cool blue-gray that made me think of gun metal and glaciers.

He strode right on up to me and stepped into my personal space like he had a standing invitation. When he crossed tattooed

forearms across a broad chest, I made a squeaky sound in the back of my throat.

*Wow.*

“Thought I made myself real clear,” he growled.

“Uh. Huh?”

I was confused. The man was glaring at me like I was the most hated character on a reality TV show, yet I still wanted to see what he looked like naked. I hadn’t exhibited such poor sexual judgment since I was in college.

I blamed my exhaustion and emotional scarring.

Behind the counter, Justice stopped mid-latte creation and waved both hands in the air. “Hold on now,” he began.

“It’s okay, Justice,” I assured him. “You just keep making that coffee, and I’ll take care of this . . . *gentleman.*”

Chairs pushed back from tables all around us, and I watched as every last customer beelined for the door, some with their mugs still in hand. None of them made any eye contact with me on their way out.

“Knox, it’s not what you think,” Justice tried again.

“I’m not playing any games today. Get the fuck out,” the Viking ordered. The blond god of sexy fury was rapidly plummeting lower on my sexy checklist.

I pointed at my chest. “Me?”

“I’ve had enough of your games. You got five seconds to walk out this door and never come back,” he said, stepping in even closer until the tips of his boots brushed my exposed toes in their flip-flops.

*Damn.* Up close, he looked like he’d just stormed off a marauding Viking vessel . . . or the set of a cologne commercial. One of those weird artsy ones that didn’t make any sense and had names like Ignorant Beast.

“Look, *sir*. I’m in the midst of a personal crisis and all I’m trying to do is get a cup of coffee.”

“I fucking told you, Tina. You are not to come in here and harass Justice or his customers again, or I’d personally escort your ass out of town.”

“Knox—”

The bad-tempered, sexy man-beast held up his finger in Justice’s direction. “One second, bud. Looks like I gotta take out the trash.”

“The *trash*?” I gasped. I thought Virginians were supposed to be friendly. Instead, I’d been in town barely half an hour and was now being rudely accosted by a Viking with the manners of a caveman.

“Darlin’, your coffee’s up,” Justice said, sliding a very large to-go cup onto the wooden counter.

My eyes darted toward the steamy, caffeinated goodness.

“You even think about picking up that cup, and we’re gonna have a problem,” the Viking said, his voice low and dangerous.

But Leif Erikson didn’t know who he was messing with today.

Every woman had her line. Mine, which was admittedly drawn too far back, had just been crossed.

“You take one step toward that beautiful latte that my friend Justice made especially for me, and I will make you regret the moment you met me.”

I was a nice person. According to my parents, I was a good girl. And according to that online quiz I took two weeks ago, I was a people pleaser. I wasn’t great at doling out threats.

The man’s eyes narrowed, and I refused to notice the sexy crinkles at the corner.

“I already regret it, and so does this whole damn town. Just because you change your hair doesn’t mean I’m gonna forget about the trouble you’ve caused here. Now get your ass out the door and don’t come back.”

“He thinks you’re Tina,” Justice cut in.

I didn’t care if this ass thought I was a serial killing cannibal. He was standing between me and my caffeine.

The blond beast turned his head toward Justice. “What the hell are you saying?”

Before my nice friend with the coffee could explain, I drilled my finger into the Viking’s chest. It didn’t go very far, thanks to

the obscene layer of muscle under the skin. But I made sure to lead with the nail.

“Now *you* listen to *me*,” I began. “I don’t care if you think I’m my sister or that weasel who jacked up the price of anti-malarial drugs. I am a *human being* having a really bad day after the worst one of her life. I do *not* have it in me to stuff down these emotions today. So you’d better get out of my way and leave me alone, Viking.”

He looked downright bemused for a hot second.

I took that to mean it was coffee time. Side-stepping him, I picked up the cup, took a delicate sniff, and then shoved my face into the steaming hot life force.

I drank deeply, willing the caffeine to perform its miracles as flavors exploded on my tongue. I was pretty sure the inappropriate moan I heard came from my own mouth but I was too tired to care. When I finally lowered the cup and swiped the back of my hand over my mouth, the Viking was still standing there, staring at me.

Turning my back on him, I flashed my hero Justice a smile and slid my emergency coffee twenty dollar bill across the counter. “You, sir, are an artist. What do I owe you for the best latte I’ve ever had in my life?”

“Considering the morning you’re having, darlin’, it’s on the house,” he said, handing my license and cash back to me.

“You, my friend, are a true gentleman. *Unlike some others.*” I cast a glare over my shoulder to where the Viking was standing, legs braced, arms crossed. Taking another dive into my drink, I tucked the twenty into the tip jar. “Thank you for being nice to me on the worst day of my life.”

“Thought that day was yesterday,” the scowling behemoth butted in.

My sigh was weary as I slowly turned to face him. “That was before I met you. So I can officially say that as bad as yesterday was, today beat it out by a slim margin.” Once again, I turned back to Justice. “I’m sorry this jerk scared away all your customers. But I’ll be back for another one of these real soon.”

“Looking forward to it, Naomi,” he said with a wink.

I turned to leave and smacked right into a mile of grumpy man chest.

“Naomi?” he said.

“Go away.” It felt almost good to be rude for once in my life. To take a stand.

“Your name’s Naomi,” the Viking stated.

I was too busy trying to incinerate him with a glare of righteous anger to respond.

“Not Tina?” he pressed.

“They’re twins, man,” Justice said, the smile evident in his voice.

“Fuck me.” The Viking shoved a hand through his hair.

“I worry about your friend’s vision,” I said to Justice, pointing at the mug shot of Tina.

Tina had gone bleach blonde at some point in the past decade-plus, making our otherwise subtle differences even more obvious.

“I left my contacts at home,” he said.

“Next to your manners?” I quipped. The caffeine was hitting my bloodstream, making me unusually feisty.

He didn’t respond with anything other than a heated glare.

I sighed. “Get out of my way, Leif Erikson.”

“The name is Knox. And why are you here?”

*What the hell kind of name was that? Was it a hard Knox life? Did he tell a lot of Knox Knox jokes? Was it short for something? Knoxwell? Knoxathan?*

“That’s none of your business, *Knox*. Nothing I do or don’t do is your business. In fact, my existence is none of your business. Now, kindly get out of my way.”

I felt like screaming as loud as I could for as long as I could. But I’d tried that a couple of times in the car on the long drive here, and it hadn’t helped.

Thankfully, the beautiful oaf heaved an annoyed sigh and did the decent, life-preserving thing by getting out of my way. I swept out of the cafe and into the summer swelter with as much dignity as I could muster.

If Tina wanted to meet up with me, she could find me at the motel. I didn't need to wait around and be accosted by strangers with the personalities of cacti.

I'd head back to my dingy room, take every last pin out of my hair, and shower until the hot water ran out. Then I'd figure out what to do next.

It was a solid plan. It was only missing one thing.

My car.

*Oh no. My car and my purse.*

The bike rack in front of the coffee shop was still there. The laundromat with its bright posters in the window was still across the street next to the mechanic's garage.

But my car was not where I'd left it.

The parking spot I'd squeezed into in front of the pet shop was empty.

I looked up and down the block. But there was no sign of my trusty, dusty Volvo.

"You lost?"

I closed my eyes and clenched my jaw. "Go. Away."

"Now what's your problem?"

I turned around and found Knox watching me intently, holding a to-go coffee cup.

"What's my problem?" I repeated.

I wanted to kick him in the shins and steal his coffee.

"Nothin' wrong with my hearing, sweetheart. No need to yell."

"My *problem* is while I wasted five minutes of my life getting to know you, my car was towed."

"You sure?"

"No. I never have any idea where I park my car. I just leave them everywhere and buy new ones when I can't find them."

He shot me a look.

I rolled my eyes. "Obviously, I'm being sarcastic." I reached for my phone only to remember I no longer had a phone.

"Who pissed in your Cheerios?"

*Things We Never Got Over*

“Whoever taught you to express concern for a person did it wrong.” Without another word, I stalked off in what I hoped was the direction of the local police station.

I didn’t make it to the next storefront before a big, hard hand locked around my upper arm.

It was the sleep deprivation, the emotional rawness, I told myself. Those were the only reasons I felt the jittery *zing* of awareness at his grip.

“Stop,” he ordered, sounding surly.

“Hands. Off.” I flailed my arm awkwardly, but his grip only tightened.

“Then stop walking away from me.”

I paused my evasive flailing. “I’ll stop walking away if you stop being an asshole.”

His nostrils flared as he stared up at the sky, and I thought I heard him counting.

“Are you seriously counting to ten?” *I* was the one who was wronged. *I* was the one with a reason to pray to the heavens for patience.

He got all the way to ten and still looked annoyed. “If I stop being an asshole, will you stay and talk for a minute?”

I took another sip of coffee and thought about it. “Maybe.”

“I’m letting go,” he warned.

“Great,” I prompted.

We both looked down at his hand on my arm. Slowly he loosened his grip and released me, but not before his fingertips trailed over the sensitive skin inside my arm.

Goose bumps broke out, and I hoped he wouldn’t notice. Especially because, in my body, goose bumps and pointy nipple reactions were closely related.

“You cold?” His gaze was most definitely not on my arm or shoulders but my chest.

*Damn it.* “Yes,” I lied.

“It’s eighty-four degrees, and you’re drinking hot coffee.”

“If you’re finished mansplaining internal temperature, I’d like to go find my car,” I said, crossing my free arm over my

traitorous boobs. “Perhaps you could point me in the direction of the nearest impound lot or police station?”

He stared at me for a long beat, then shook his head. “Come on then.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’ll give you a ride.”

“Ha!” I choked out a laugh. He was delusional if he thought I’d willingly get in a car with him.

I was still shaking my head when he spoke again. “Let’s go, Daisy. I don’t have all day.”

## A Reluctant Hero

*Knox*

The woman was staring at me like I'd just suggested she French kiss a rattlesnake.

My day wasn't even supposed to be started yet, and it had already gone to shit. I blamed her. And her asshole sister, Tina.

I also threw some blame in Agatha's direction too for good measure, since she'd been the one to text me that Tina had just walked her "trouble-making ass" into the cafe.

Now here I was, at what counted as the asscrack of dawn, playing town bouncer like an idiot and fighting with a woman I'd never met.

Naomi blinked at me like she was coming out of a fog. "You're kidding me, right?"

Agatha needed to get her fucking eyes checked if she mistook the pissed-off brunette for her bleach-blonde, baked-tan, tattooed pain-in-the-ass sister.

The differences between them were pretty fucking obvious, even without my contacts. Tina's face was the color and texture of an old-ass leather couch. She had a hard mouth bracketed by deep frown lines from smoking two packs a day and feeling like the world owed her something.

Naomi, on the other hand, was cut from a different cloth. A classier one. She was tall like her sister. But instead of the crispy fried look, she went in the Disney princess direction with thick hair the color of roasted chestnuts. It and the flowers in it were trying to escape some kind of elaborate updo. Her face was

softer, skin paler. Full pink lips. Eyes that made me think of forest floors and open fields.

Where Tina dressed like a biker babe who'd gone through a wood-chipper, Naomi wore high-end athletic shorts and a matching tank over a toned body that promised more than a handful of nice surprises.

She looked like the kind of woman who'd take one look at me and high-tail it to the safety of the first golf shirt-wearing board member she could find.

Lucky for her, I didn't do drama. Or high maintenance. I didn't do doe-eyed princesses in need of saving. I didn't waste time with women who required more than a good time and a handful of orgasms.

But since I'd already stuck my nose into the situation, called her trash, and yelled at her, the least I could do was bring the situation to a fast conclusion. Then I was heading back to bed.

"No. I'm not fucking kidding you," I stated.

"I'm not going anywhere with you."

"You don't have a car," I pointed out.

"Thank you, Captain Obvious. I am aware I don't have a car."

"Let me get this straight. You're a stranger in a new town. Your car disappears. And you're turning down the offer of a ride because . . ."

"Because you stormed into a cafe and screamed at me! Then you chased me down and you're *still* yelling. I get in a car with you and I'm more likely to get chopped into pieces and scattered about in a desert than end up at my destination."

"No deserts here. Some mountains though."

Her expression suggested she didn't find me helpful or amusing.

I exhaled through my teeth. "Look. I'm tired. I got an alert that Tina was causing trouble at the cafe again, and that's what I thought I was walking into."

She took a long hit of coffee while looking up and down the street like she was debating escape.

*Things We Never Got Over*

“Don’t even think about it,” I told her. “You’d spill your coffee.”

When those pretty hazel eyes went wide, I knew I’d hit the mark.

“Fine. But only because this is the best latte I’ve had in my entire life. And is that your idea of an apology? Because just like the way you ask people if something’s wrong, it sucks.”

“It was an explanation. Take it or leave it.” I didn’t waste time doing things that didn’t matter. Like making small talk or apologizing.

A bike roared up the street with Rob Zombie blaring from the speakers despite the fact that it was barely seven a.m. The guy eyed us and revved his engine. Wraith was knocking on seventy years old, but he still managed to nail an astronomical amount of tail with the whole tattooed, silver fox thing he had going on.

Intrigued, Naomi watched him with her mouth open.

Today was not the day Little Miss Daisies in Her Hair would take a walk on the wild side.

I gave Wraith the fuck off nod, snatched Naomi’s precious coffee out of her hand, and headed down the sidewalk.

“Hey!”

She gave chase like I’d known she would. I could have taken her by the hand, but I wasn’t exactly a fan of the reaction I’d had when I touched her. It felt complicated. “Should have stayed in fucking bed,” I muttered.

“What is wrong with you?” Naomi demanded, jogging to catch up. She reached for her cup, but I held it just out of reach and kept walking.

“If you don’t want to end up hog-tied over the back of Wraith’s bike, then I suggest you get in my truck.”

The disheveled flower child muttered some uncomplimentary sounding things about my personality and anatomy.

“Look. If you can stop bein’ a pain in my ass for five whole minutes, I’ll take you to the station. You can get your damn car, and then you can get out of my life.”

“Has anyone ever told you you have the personality of a pissed-off porcupine?”

I ignored her and kept walking.

“How do I know you aren’t going to try to hog-tie me yourself?” she demanded.

I came to a stop and gave her a lazy once-over. “Baby, you’re not my type.”

She rolled her eyes so hard it was a miracle they didn’t pop out and fall to the sidewalk. “Excuse me while I go cry myself a river.”

I stepped off the curb and opened the passenger door of my pickup. “Get in.”

“Your chivalry sucks,” she complained.

“Chivalry?”

“It means—”

“Jesus. I know what it means.”

And I knew what it meant that she’d use it in conversation. She had fucking flowers in her hair. The woman was a romantic. Another strike against her in my book. Romantics were the hardest women to shake loose. The sticky ones. The ones who pretended they could handle the whole “no strings” deal. Meanwhile, they plotted to become “the one,” trying to con men into meeting their parents and secretly looking at wedding dresses.

When she didn’t get in by herself, I reached past her and put her coffee into the cup holder.

“I am really not happy with you right now,” she said.

The space between our bodies was charged with the kind of energy I usually felt just before a good bar fight. Dangerous, adrenalizing. I didn’t much care for it.

“Get in the damn truck.”

Considering it a small miracle when she actually obeyed, I slammed the door on her scowl.

“Everything all right there, Knox?” Bud Nickelbee called from the doorway of his hardware store. He was dressed in his usual uniform of bib overalls and a Led Zepplin t-shirt. The

ponytail he'd had for thirty years hung down his back, thin and gray, making him look like a heavier, less funny George Carlin.

"All good," I assured him.

His gaze skated toward Naomi through the windshield. "Call me if you need help with the body."

I climbed in behind the wheel and fired up the engine.

"A witness saw me get in this truck, so I'd think long and hard about murdering me at this point," she said, pointing to Bud, who was still watching us.

Obviously she hadn't heard his comment.

"I'm not murdering you," I snapped. *Yet.*

She was already buckled in, her long legs crossed. A flip-flop dangled from her toes as she jiggled her foot. Both her knees were bruised, and I noticed a raw scrape on her right forearm. I told myself I didn't want to know and threw the truck into reverse. I'd dump her at the station—hopefully it was early enough to avoid who I wanted to avoid—and make sure she got her damn car. If I was lucky, I could still grab another hour of shut-eye before I had to officially start my day.

"You know," she began, "if one of us should be mad at the other, it's me. I don't even know you, and here you are yelling in my face, getting between me and my coffee, and then practically abducting me. You have no reason to be upset."

"You have no idea, sweetheart. I've got plenty of reasons to be pissed, and a lot of them involve your waste-of-space sister."

"Tina may not be the nicest of people, but that doesn't give you the right to be such an ass. She's still family," Naomi sniffed.

"I wouldn't apply the label 'people' to your sister." Tina was a monster of the first degree. She stole. She lied. She picked fights. Drank too much. Showered too little. And had no regard for anyone else. All because she thought the world owed her.

"Listen, whoever the hell you are. The only people who can talk about her like that are me, our parents, and the Anderson-town High graduating class of 2003. And maybe also the Andersontown Fire Department. But that's because they earned

the right. You haven't, and I don't need you taking your problems with my sister out on me."

"Whatever," I said through gritted teeth.

We drove the rest of the way in silence. The Knockemout Police Department sat back a few blocks from Main Street and shared a new building with the town's public library. Just seeing it made the muscle under my eye twitch.

In the parking lot was a pickup truck, a cruiser, and a Harley Fat Boy. There was no sign of the chief's SUV. Thank Christ for small miracles.

"Come on. Let's get this over with."

"There's no need for you to come in," Naomi sniffed. She was eyeing her empty coffee cup with puppy dog eyes.

On a growl, I shoved my own mostly untouched coffee at her. "I'm getting you to the desk, making sure they've got your car, and then never seeing you again."

"Fine. But I'm not saying thank you."

I didn't bother replying because I was too busy storming toward the front door and ignoring the big gold letters above it.

"The Knox Morgan Municipal Building."

I pretended I didn't hear her and let the glass door swing closed behind me.

"Is there more than one Knox in this town?" she asked, wrenching the door open and following me inside.

"No," I said, hoping that would put an end to questions I didn't want to fucking answer. The building was relatively new with a shit-ton of glass, wide hallways, and that fresh paint smell.

"So it's your name on the building?" she pressed, jogging again to keep up with me.

"Guess so." I yanked open another door on the right and gestured for her to go inside.

Knockemout's cop shop looked more like one of those co-working hangouts that urban hipsters liked than an actual police station. It had annoyed the boys and girls in blue who had taken pride in their moldy, crumbling bunker with its flickering fluorescent lights and carpet stained from decades of criminals.

Their annoyance at the bright paint and slick new office furniture was the only thing I didn't hate about it.

The Knockemout PD did their best to rediscover their roots, piling precious towers of case folders on top of adjustable-height bamboo desks and brewing too cheap, too strong coffee 24/7. There was a box of stale donuts open on the counter and powdered sugar fingerprints everywhere. But so far nothing had taken the shine off the newness of the fucking Knox Morgan Building.

Sergeant Grave Hopper was behind his desk stirring half a pound of sugar into his coffee. A reformed motorcycle club member, he now spent his weeknights coaching his daughter's softball team and his weekends mowing lawns. His and his mother-in-law's. But once a year, he'd pack up his wife on the back of his bike, and off they'd go to relive their glory days on the open road.

He spotted me and my guest and nearly upended the entire mug all over himself.

"What's goin' on, Knox?" Grave asked, now openly staring at Naomi.

It was no secret around town that I had as little to do with the PD as possible. It also wasn't exactly news that Tina was the kind of trouble that I didn't tolerate.

"This is Naomi. Tina's twin," I explained. "She just got into town and says her car was towed. You got it out back?"

Knockemout PD usually had more important things to worry about than parking and let its citizens park wherever the hell they wanted, when they wanted, as long as it wasn't directly on the sidewalk.

"Imma come back to that whole twin sister thing," Grave warned, pointing his coffee stirrer at us. "But first, it's just me in so far today, and I ain't towed shit."

*Fuck.* I shoved a hand through my hair.

"If you didn't, do you have any idea who else would have?" Naomi asked hopefully.

Sure. I swoop in to save the day and drive her down here, but

grizzled Grave was the one who got the smile and sweet words.

Grave, the bastard, was hanging on her every word, smiling at her like she was a seven-layer chocolate cake.

“Well now, Tin—I mean Naomi,” Grave began. “Way I see it, there’s two things that coulda happened. A—You forgot where you parked. But a gal like you in a town this small, that don’t seem likely.”

“No, it doesn’t,” she agreed amicably without calling him Captain Obvious.

“Or B—Someone stole your car.”

I kissed my hour of sleep good-bye.

“I parked right in front of the pet shop because it was close to the cafe where I was supposed to meet my sister.”

Grave slid me a look, and I nodded. Best to just get this part over with, like ripping off a damn bandage.

“So Tina knew you were coming into town, knew where you’d be?” he clarified.

Naomi wasn’t picking up what he was putting down. She nodded, all wide-eyed and hopeful. “Yes. She called me last night. Said she was in some kind of trouble and needed me to meet her at Cafe Rev at seven this morning.”

“Well now, sweetheart,” Grave hemmed. “I don’t want to cast aspersions, of course. But is it possible—”

“Your asshole sister stole your car,” I interjected.

Naomi’s hazel eyes sliced to me. She didn’t look sweet or hopeful now. No. She looked like she wanted to commit a misdemeanor. Maybe even a felony.

“I’m afraid Knox here is right,” Grave said. “Your sister’s been causing trouble since she got into town a year ago. This probably ain’t the first car she’s helped herself to.”

Naomi’s nostrils flared delicately. She brought my coffee to her mouth, drank it down in a few determined gulps, then tossed the empty cup into the waste basket by the desk. “Thank you for your help. If you see a blue Volvo with a Nice Matters bumper sticker, please let me know.”

*Christ.*

“Don’t suppose you’ve got one of those apps on your phone that’ll tell you where your car is, do ya?” Grave asked.

She reached for her pocket, then stopped and squeezed her eyes shut for a beat. “I did.”

“But you don’t no more?”

“I don’t have a phone. Mine, uh, broke last night.”

“That’s all right. I can put a call out so officers will be on the lookout if you give me the license plate,” Grave said, helpfully shoving a piece of paper and pen in her direction.

She took them and started to write in neat, swoopy cursive.

“You could leave your contact info too, where you’re staying and such, so me or Nash can update you.”

The name set my teeth on edge.

“Happy to,” Naomi said, sounding anything but.

“Uh. You got maybe a husband or boyfriend whose contact info you can add?”

I glared at him.

Naomi shook her head. “No.”

“Maybe a girlfriend or wife?” he tried again.

“I’m single,” she said, sounding just unsure enough that my curiosity piqued.

“Imagine that. So’s our chief,” Grave said, as innocent as a six-foot-tall biker with a rap sheet could sound.

“Can we get back to the part where you tell Naomi you’ll be in touch if you find her car, which we all know you won’t,” I snapped.

“Well, not with that attitude, we won’t,” she chided.

This was the last fucking time I was riding to the rescue of anyone. It wasn’t my job. Wasn’t my responsibility. And now it was costing me sleep.

“How long are you in town?” he asked as Naomi scrawled her information on the paper.

“Only as long as it takes to find and murder my sister,” she said, capping the pen and sliding the paper back. “Thank you so much for your help, Sergeant.”

“My pleasure.”

She turned to look up at me. Our gazes held for a beat.  
“Knox.”

“Naomi.”

With that, she swept right on out of the station.

“How can two sisters look that much alike and have nothing else in common?” Grave wondered.

“I don’t want to know,” I said honestly and headed outside after her.

I found her pacing and muttering to herself in front of the wheelchair ramp.

“What’s your plan?” I asked in resignation.

She looked at me and her lips puckered. “Plan?” she repeated, her voice cracking.

My fight or flight instincts kicked in. I fucking hated tears. Especially tears of the female persuasion. A crying woman made me feel like I was being ripped to shreds from the inside out, a weapon I’d never make public knowledge.

“Do not cry,” I ordered.

Her eyes were damp. “Cry? I’m not going to cry.”

She was a shit liar.

“Don’t fucking cry. It’s just a car, and she’s just a piece of shit. Neither’s worth crying over.”

She blinked rapidly, and I couldn’t tell if she was going to cry or yell at me again. But she surprised me by doing neither. She straightened her shoulders and nodded. “You’re right. It’s just a car. I can get replacement credit cards, a new purse, and another stash of honey mustard dipping sauces.”

“Tell me where you need to go, and I’ll drop you. You can get a rental and be on your way.” I jerked my thumb toward my truck.

She looked up and down the street again, probably hoping for some suit-and-tie-wearing hero to appear. When none did, she sighed. “I got a room at the motel.”

There was only one motel in town. A single-story, one-star shithole that didn’t warrant an official name. I was impressed she’d actually checked in.

*Things We Never Got Over*

We walked back to my truck in silence. Her shoulder brushed my arm, making my skin feel like it was heating up. I opened her door again for her. Not because I was a gentleman but because some perverse part of me liked being close.

I waited until she'd belted in before shutting the door and rounding the truck. "Honey mustard dipping sauces?"

She glanced at me as I slid in behind the wheel. "You hear about that guy who drove through a guardrail in the winter a few years back?"

It sounded vaguely familiar.

"He ate nothing but ketchup packets for three days."

"You plan on driving through a guardrail?"

"No. But I like to be prepared. And I don't like ketchup."

### 3

## A Pint-Sized Criminal

*Naomi*

“What room are you in?” Knox asked. I realized we were already back at the motel.

“Why?” I asked with suspicion.

He exhaled slowly as if I were on his last nerve. “So I can drop you at your door.”

Oh. “Nine.”

“You leave your door open?” he asked a second later, his mouth tight.

“Yeah. That’s the way it’s done on Long Island,” I deadpanned. “It’s how we show our neighbors we trust them.”

He gave me another one of those long, frowny looks.

“No. Of course I didn’t leave it open. I closed and locked it.”

He pointed toward number nine.

My door was ajar.

“Oh.”

He put the truck in park where it sat in the middle of the lot with more force than necessary. “Stay here.”

I blinked as he climbed out and stalked toward my room.

My weary eyes were drawn to the view of those worn jeans clinging to a spectacular butt as he stalked toward my door. Hypnotized for a few of his long strides, it took me a hot minute to remember exactly what I’d left in that room and how very much I didn’t want Knox, of all people, to see it.

“Wait!” I jumped out of the truck and ran after him, but he didn’t stop, didn’t even slow down.

## *Things We Never Got Over*

I turned on the speed in a last-ditch effort and jumped in front of him. He walked right into the hand I held up.

“Get your ass out of my way, Naomi,” he ordered.

When I didn’t comply, he brought a hand to my stomach and walked me backward until I was standing in front of Room 8.

I didn’t know what it said about me that I really liked his hand there. “You don’t have to go in there,” I insisted. “I’m sure it’s just housekeeping.”

“This place look like it has housekeeping?”

He had a point. The motel looked like it should give out tetanus shots instead of mini bottles of shampoo.

“Stay,” he said again, then stalked back to my open door.

“Shit,” I whispered when he shoved it open. I lasted all of two seconds before following him inside.

The room had been unappealing, to say the least, when I’d checked in less than an hour ago.

The orange and brown wallpaper was peeling in long strips. The carpet was a dark green that felt like it was made out of the scrubby side of a dish sponge. The bathroom fixtures were Pepto Bismol pink, and the shower was missing several tiles.

But it was the only option within twenty miles, and I’d figured I could rough it for a night or two. Besides, I’d thought at the time, how bad could it be?

Apparently pretty freaking bad. Between the time I’d checked in, stowed my suitcase, plugged in my laptop, and left to meet Tina, someone had broken in and ransacked the room.

My suitcase was upended on the floor, some of its contents strewn all over the carpet.

The dresser drawers were pulled out, closet doors left open.

My laptop was missing. So was the zippered pouch of cash I’d hidden in my suitcase.

“Sucker” was scrawled across the bathroom vanity mirror in my favorite lipstick. Ironically, the thing I didn’t want my grumpy Viking to see, the thing that was worth more than whatever else had been stolen, was still there in a crumpled heap in the corner.

Worst of all, the perpetrator was sitting on the bed, dirty sneakers tangled in a clump of sheets. She was watching a natural disaster movie. I wasn't good at guessing ages, but I put her solidly in the Child/Pre-Teen category.

"Hey, Way," Knox said grimly.

The girl's blue eyes flitted away from the screen to land on him before returning to the TV. "Hey, Knox."

It was a small town. Of course the town grump and the child felon knew each other.

"Okay, look," I said, side-stepping Knox to stand in front of the thing in the corner that I really didn't want to explain. "I don't know if child labor laws are different in Virginia. But I asked for an extra pillow, not to be robbed by a pint-sized criminal."

The girl spared me a glance.

"Where's your mom?" Knox asked, ignoring me.

Another shrug. "Gone," she said. "Who's your friend?"

"That'd be your Aunt Naomi."

She didn't look impressed. I, on the other hand, probably looked like I'd just been shot out of a cannon toward a brick wall.

"Aunt?" I repeated, shaking my head in hopes that it would fix my hearing. Another wilted flower petal fell out of what was left of my updo and flitted to the floor.

"Thought you were dead," the girl said, studying me with vague interest. "Nice hair."

"Aunt?" I said again.

Knox turned to me. "Waylay is Tina's kid," Knox explained slowly.

"Tina?" I parroted on a croak.

"Looks like your sister helped herself to your stuff," he observed.

"Said most of it was shit," the girl said.

I blinked rapidly. Not only had my sister stolen my car, she'd also broken into my hotel room, ransacked it, and left behind the niece I didn't know existed.

"She okay?" Waylay asked, not taking her eyes off the tornado that returned to the screen.

## *Things We Never Got Over*

“She” was probably me. And I was most definitely not okay.

I grabbed a pillow off the bed. “Will you two please excuse me?” I squeaked.

Without waiting for an answer, I hauled ass out the door into the hot Virginia sunshine. Birds were chirping. Two motorcycles drove by, their engines a deafening roar. Across the street, an older couple climbed out of a pickup truck and headed into the diner for breakfast.

How could things have the audacity to look so normal when my entire life had just imploded?

I held the pillow to my face and let loose the scream that had been building.

Thoughts flew through my brain like a turbo-charged spin cycle. Warner was right. People didn’t change. My sister was still a terrible human being, and I was still naïve enough to fall for her lies. My car was gone along with my purse and my laptop. Not to mention the money I’d brought for Tina. As of last night, I had no job. I wasn’t on my way to Paris, which had been the plan a mere twenty-four hours ago. My family and friends thought I’d lost my damn mind. My favorite lipstick had been ruined on a bathroom mirror. And I had a niece whose entire childhood I’d missed out on.

I sucked in another breath and let out one final scream for good measure before lowering the pillow.

“Okay. You can figure this out. You can fix this.”

“About done with your pep talk?”

I whirled around and found Knox leaning against the door frame, tattooed arms crossed over his broad chest.

“Yep,” I said, squaring my shoulders. “How old is she?”

“Eleven.”

Nodding, I shoved the pillow at him and marched back into the room.

“So, Waylay,” I began.

There was a family resemblance in the upturned nose, the dimple in the chin. She had the same colt-like legs her mother and I had at that age.

“So, Aunt Naomi.”

“Did your mom say when she’d be back?”

“Nope.”

“Where do you and your mom live, honey?” I asked.

Maybe Tina was there now, going through her haul, figuring out what was worth keeping and what she wanted to ruin just for the fun of it.

“Over in Hillside Acres,” she answered, looking around me to get a better view of the tornado tossing up cows on the screen.

“Need a minute,” Knox announced and nodded toward the door.

I had all the damn time in the world apparently. All the time and not a single clue what to do. No next step. No to-do list quantifying and organizing my world into nice, neat line items. Just a crisis on top of a hot mess on top of a dumpster fire.

“Sure,” I said, sounding only mildly hysterical.

He waited until I passed him before stepping out after me. When I stopped, he kept walking toward the faded soda machine outside the front office.

“You seriously want me to buy you a soda right now?” I asked, flummoxed.

“No. I’m trying to get out of earshot of the kid who doesn’t realize she’s been abandoned,” he snapped.

I followed him. “Maybe Tina’s coming back,” I said.

He stopped and turned to face me. “Way says Tina didn’t tell her anything. Just that she had something to take care of and she’d be gone a long time.”

A long time? What the hell was a long time in Tina time? A weekend? A week? A month?

“Oh my God. My parents.” This was going to devastate them. As if what I’d done yesterday wasn’t upsetting enough. I’d managed to assure them last night on a highway in Pennsylvania that I was fine and definitely not going through some kind of mid-life crisis. And I’d made them promise not to change their plans for me. They’d left for their three-week Mediterranean cruise this morning. The first big, international vacation they’d ever taken together.

I didn't want my problems or Tina's disaster ruining it.

"What do you intend to do with that kid in there?" Knox nodded toward the open door.

"What do you mean?"

"Naomi, when the cops find out Tina's gone and left Waylay behind, it's straight into foster care."

I shook my head. "I'm her closest living relative who isn't a criminal. I'm responsible for her." Just like all of Tina's other messes until we'd turned eighteen.

He gave me a long, hard look. "Just like that?"

"She's family." Besides. It wasn't like I had a whole lot going on at the moment. I was basically adrift. For the first time in my entire life, I didn't have a plan.

And that scared the crap out of me.

"Family," he snorted as if my reasoning wasn't sound.

"Listen. Thank you, Knox, for all of the shouting and the rides and the coffee. But as you can see, I've got a situation to handle. So it's probably best for you to go on back to whatever cave you crawled out of this morning."

"I'm not goin' anywhere."

We were back to glaring at each other, the silence charged. This time he broke first.

"Quit stallin', Daisy. What are you gonna do?"

"Daisy?"

He reached up and plucked a flower petal out of my hair with two fingers.

I batted his hand away and took a step back so I could think. "Okay. First I need to . . ." Definitely not call my parents. And I didn't really want to get the police involved—again—if I didn't have to. What if Tina showed up in an hour? Maybe the first thing I needed to do was get more coffee.

"Call the damn cops and report the break-in and the child abandonment," Knox said.

"She's my *sister*. Besides, what if she shows up in an hour?"

"She stole your car and abandoned her kid. That doesn't earn a fucking pass."

The tattooed, grouchy bear of a man was right. I really didn't like that about him.

"Argh! Fine. Okay. Let me think. Can I borrow your phone?"

He stood there staring at me, unmoving.

"For Pete's sake. I'm not going to steal it. I just need to make a quick call."

On a long-suffering sigh, he reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone.

"Thank you," I said pointedly, then stomped back into my motel room. Waylay was still watching her movie, now with her hands stacked behind her head.

I dug through my suitcase to find a notebook and went back outside.

"You keep a notebook of phone numbers with you?"

Knox was peering over my shoulder.

I shushed him and dialed.

"The hell do you want?"

My sister's voice always managed to make me cringe inwardly.

"An explanation for starters," I snapped. "Where are you?"

"Where are you?" she mimicked me in a high-pitched Muppet voice that I'd always hated.

I heard a prolonged exhale.

"Are you *smoking* in my car?"

"Looks like it's my car now."

"You know what? Forget the car. We have bigger things to discuss. You have a *daughter!* A daughter you abandoned in a motel room."

"Got shit to do. Can't have a kid holding me back for the next while. Got something big in the works. Why ya think I named her Waylay? Figured she could hang out with her Aunt Goody Two-Shoes till I get back."

I was so mad I could only sputter.

Knox snatched the phone from my ear. "You listen and you listen good, Tina. You've got exactly thirty minutes to get back here, or I'm callin' the damn cops."

## *Things We Never Got Over*

I watched as his face got harder, his jaw tighter, showing off little hollows under his cheekbones. His eyes went so cold I shivered.

“As always, you’re a real fuckin’ idiot,” he said. “Just remember, next time you get picked up by the cops, you’ll have warrants. That means your stupid ass will be sittin’ behind bars, and I don’t see anyone rushin’ to bail you out.”

He paused for a moment and then said, “Yeah. Fuck you too.”

He swore again and lowered his phone.

“How exactly do you and my sister know each other?” I wondered out loud.

“Tina’s been a pain in everyone’s ass since she blew into town a year ago. Always lookin’ for an easy buck. Tried a couple of slip and fall schemes on some of the local businesses, including your pal Justice. Every time she gets a little money in her pocket, she’s rip-roarin’ drunk and wreaking havoc all over town. Petty shit. Vandalism.”

Yeah, that sounded like my sister.

“What did she say?” I asked, not really wanting the answer.

“Said she doesn’t give a shit if we call the cops. She’s not comin’ back.”

“Did she say that?” I’d always wanted kids. But not like this. Not jumping in one step shy of puberty when the formative years were already gone.

“Said she’d be back when she felt like it,” he said, thumbing through his phone.

Some things never changed. My sister had always made her own rules. As an infant, she’d slept all day and stayed up all night. As a toddler, she was kicked out of three daycares for biting. And once we hit school age, well, it was a whole new ballgame of rebellion.

“What are you doing?” I asked Knox as he brought the phone back up to his ear.

“Last thing I want to,” he drawled.

“Buying tickets to the ballet?” I hypothesized.

He didn't answer, just strode into the parking lot with rigid shoulders. I couldn't hear exactly what he was saying, but there were a lot of *fuck yous* and *kiss my asses*.

I added "phone etiquette" to the growing list of things Knox Morgan was bad at.

He returned looking even angrier. Ignoring me, he produced a wallet and fished out a few bills, then fed them into the soda machine.

"What do you want?" he muttered.

"Uh. Water, please."

He punched the buttons harder than I thought necessary. And a bottle of water and two Yellow Lightnings fell out onto the ground.

"Here." He shoved the water at me and headed back to the room.

"Uh. Thanks?" I called after him.

I debated for about thirty seconds whether or not I should just start walking until I found a new reality that was less terrible. But it was just a mental exercise. There was no way I could walk away. I had a new responsibility. And with that responsibility would come some sense of purpose. Probably.

I returned to my room and found Knox examining the lock on the door. "No finesse," he complained.

"Told her she should've picked it," Waylay said, cracking open her soda.

"It's barely eight in the morning, and you gave her a soda," I hissed at Knox as I resumed my sentry stance in front of the mound in the corner.

He looked at me, then beyond me. Nervously I spread my arms and tried to block his view.

"That some kind of tablecloth?" he asked, peering past me.

"Wedding dress," Waylay announced. "Mom said it was ugly as hell."

"Yeah, well, Tina wouldn't know good taste if it hit her over the head with a Birkin bag," I said, feeling defensive.

"Does that dress mean I have an uncle out there somewhere?" she asked, nodding at the pile of lace and underskirt that had

once made me feel like a fairy princess but now only made me feel like a fool.

“No,” I said firmly.

Knox’s eyebrows raised fractionally. “You just decided to take a wedding dress on a road trip?”

“I really don’t see how this is any of your business,” I told him.

“Hair’s done up like she was going someplace fancy,” Waylay mused, eyeing me.

“Sure looks that way, Way,” Knox agreed, crossing his arms over his chest and looking amused.

I did not like the two of them ganging up against me.

“Let’s worry less about my hair and a dress than what we’re going to do next,” I suggested. “Waylay, did your mom say anything about where she was going?”

The girl’s eyes zeroed back on the screen. Her slim shoulders shrugged. “Dunno. Just said I was your problem now.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. Thankfully I didn’t have to answer because a brisk knock had all three of us looking at the open door.

The man standing in it made me suck in a little breath. Knockemout sure grew them hot. He was dressed in a spotless dark blue uniform with a very shiny badge. There was a nice layer of stubble accentuating a strong jaw. His shoulders and chest were broad, hips and waist tapered. His hair was close to blond. There was something familiar about his eyes.

“Knox,” he said.

“Nash.” His tone was as cold as his eyes.

“Hey, Way,” the newcomer said.

Waylay gave the man a head nod. “Chief.”

His eyes came to me.

“You called the police?” I squeaked at Knox. My sister was a terrible person, and I was definitely going to let her know that. But calling the police felt so *final*.