



HOMECOMING
LEARNING CURVES



Murph's hits you like a wall of sound and sweat. The bass is so heavy I can feel it in my fillings, and the air is thick with the smell of cheap beer, cheaper cologne, and whatever that weird, sticky shit is on the floor. It's perfect.

"Stay close!" I shout over the music, grabbing Isa's hand and pulling her toward the bar. She's gripping my fingers so tight they're going numb, but I don't say anything. Let her hold on. That's what I'm here for.

The crowd is the usual Friday mix—regulars nursing their spots like territorial cats, groups of girls taking selfies they'll regret tomorrow, dudes trying way too hard to look like they're not trying. Nobody gives us a second glance. Nobody.

I catch Isa's eye and mouth: "See?"

She nods, but her jaw is still clenched tight enough to crack a walnut.

The bartender, Ray, spots me immediately. "Cindy! The usual?"

"Two usuals!" I hold up two fingers. "And make them strong, Ray. It's been a week."

"When isn't it?" He starts pouring without asking what 'the usual' is for my companion. That's the beauty of Murph's—nobody gave a shit

about your story. Ray just poured what you needed and kept the change.

I slide a vodka cranberry in front of Isa. “Drink. Doctor’s orders.”

“You’re *really* not a doctor.”

“No, but I play one when people need to loosen the fuck up.”

She takes a sip. A bigger one. Half the glass gone.

“Easy, tiger,” I say. “We’ve got all night. Pace yourself, or you’ll be puking in the bathroom by ten. I’m not holding your hair. Actually, I styled it, so maybe I would. But I’d bitch about it.”

“Sorry. I’m nervous.”

“You’re doing great. You walked in here and nobody screamed or threw holy water. That’s a win.”

Isa gives another almost-smile. I’m collecting them like shiny bottle caps. I want a whole six-pack by the end of the night.

Marcus appears out of nowhere, because he has a sixth sense for knowing when women are at the bar, nature-made or otherwise. He slides up next to me, beer in hand, flashing that ridiculous grin.

“Cindy baby! You made it!” He looks at Isa, and I watch his face carefully. There’s a flicker of... something. Curiosity, maybe. But it passes in a heartbeat, replaced by his standard-issue charm. “And who’s this?”

“Marcus, this is Isa. Isa, this is Marcus. He thinks he’s smooth. He ain’t.”

“I’m a little smooth,” Marcus says.

“You’re smooth as sandpaper, but you’re harmless.” I elbow him. “Isa’s new to the neighborhood. She’s staying with me for a while.”

“Oh, word? Welcome to Maywood, Isa.” He holds up his beer. “First rule: don’t eat the eggs in the jar behind the bar. Bad things will happen. Second rule: don’t let Cindy request songs from the DJ. She has the worst fucking taste. Third—”

“Third, don’t try to out-drink me.” I finish for him. “It’s a lost cause and you’ll either die or wish you did.”

“I was going to say never bet against the Bulls in this bar unless you want to get stabbed.”

“He’s joking,” I say. “But, yeah, don’t.”

Isa takes another sip of her drink. “Nice to meet you.”

Her voice is good. Steady. The weeks of practice are paying off—she sounds natural, not strained. Marcus doesn’t react to it at all. Score one for vocal training.

“Isa, you like hip-hop?” Marcus asks.

“I—yeah. I do.”

“Good, because that’s all they play here. DJ Kenan thinks he’s a tastemaker, but really he just plays the same thirty songs on rotation. You’ll know every word to every track by midnight.”

Isa laughs. It’s a tiny, surprised thing, like a bird startled into flight. “Okay.”

Marcus drifts back to his boys, and I order us another round. The

bar fills up around us, bodies pressing closer, the music getting louder. Isa sits on her stool like it's a life raft, clutching her drink with both hands, watching the crowd with wide eyes.

"You okay?" I ask.

"Yeah. Just... there's so many people."

"Welcome to Friday night. You want to leave?"

She shakes her head quickly. "No. I want to stay. I just need a minute."

"Take all the minutes you need. I'll be right here getting increasingly drunk and disorderly."

The minutes pass. One drink turns into two, two into three. I watch Isa's shoulders slowly descend from their position near her ears. She uncrosses her arms. Unclenches her jaw. Starts nodding along to the music without realizing.

"You're bobbing," I say.

"What?"

"Your head. To the music. That's a good sign."

"I'm not—" She catches herself mid-bob. "Oh."

"Don't stop! That's the whole point. Let your body do what it wants."

She rolls her eyes but doesn't stop bobbing.

A girl named Tamika—one of Marcus's rotating cast of female companions—comes over and compliments Isa's dress. "Oh my God, that print is so cute! Where'd you get it?"

"It's my friend's," Isa says, glancing at me.

"Cindy's? Girl, Cindy doesn't own anything that classy. She's all Forever 21 and clearance rack."

"Excuse me, I own, like, one nice thing," I say, putting a defensive hand on my chest. "And I let Isa borrow it because I'm a giver."

Tamika and Isa laugh. Together. Like normal people having a normal conversation. And I feel this weird pride well up in my chest, warm and strange and heavy—like heartburn but good.

"Come dance with me!" Tamika grabs Isa's hand.

Isa looks at me, panicked. I shrug. "Go. I'll watch your drink."

"But—"

"Go, Isa. I'll be right here."

She lets Tamika pull her toward the tiny dance floor—which is really just a corner where people have pushed the tables aside. The music shifts to something with a heavy beat, and Tamika starts moving, pulling Isa along. At first, Isa is stiff, mechanical, moving like someone who's been told to dance at gunpoint. But Tamika is patient, guiding her, laughing with her instead of at her.

After three songs, something happens. Isa starts actually dancing. Not like a pro or anything, but like she remembers that she has a body and it's allowed to move. The curls bounce. Her arms loosen. The wrap dress flares. She even does that thing where you close your eyes for a second and let the song roll through you.



She looks... free. For the first time since I've known her, she looks like someone who isn't calculating every movement, isn't monitoring every expression, isn't bracing for the next blow. She's just... dancing. In a bar. On a Friday night. Like a normal fucking person.

I signal Ray for another drink and watch her from my stool. I should be happy. I am happy. She's my project, my student, and she's out there killing it. But there's this other feeling underneath—this bitter, sour taste in the back of my mouth.

Because it took me a year to get to where Isa is right now. A year of catching my reflection and not recognizing the woman staring back—the sculpted cheekbones that used to be square, the narrow jaw that used to be wide, the hips that sway because Bella pumped me so full of estrogen that my skeleton literally rearranged itself. A year of panic attacks in public bathrooms because I'd reach down to pee standing up and there was nothing to aim with anymore. A year of walking the streets, of learning how to fold myself small and pass as someone else.

And here's Isa, three weeks in, already getting compliments on her dress and making friends with girls who never would've talked to her in her old life. I don't know. Maybe I'm just jealous that she's going to be

better at this than me.

The song changes, and Tamika spins Isa around, and Isa laughs and for a second the whole bar seems to lean toward her, drawn by the gravity of someone absolutely alive in the moment. I knock back my drink so fast I get brain freeze.

Shut the fuck up. This isn't about you, for once. Tonight is about Isa.

Marcus slides back over, nodding toward the dance floor. "Your girl's got moves."

"She's learning."

"Nah, that's natural talent right there." He takes a swig of his beer. "She seems like good people. Quiet, though."

"She's been through some shit."

"Haven't we all." He clinks his bottle against my glass. "Good looking out, Cin. Not everybody would take someone in like that."

What I don't say: Taking care of Isa is better than the alternative, which is thinking about myself. About the body I shower with and try not to look at but fail. About the estrogen I inject every Tuesday because if I stop, the hot flashes start within a week—my sex-changed body screaming for the hormones it can no longer make on its own.

What I do say: "Don't make me out to be some kind of saint, man. I'm just a drunk with a spare couch."

Marcus sighs, running a hand over his close-cropped hair. "Fuck, why do you do that? Why can't you just take a damn compliment? Look, all I'm saying is you're good people too. That's it."

I shift on my stool and feel my bra dig into the flesh underneath. Three years and I still haven't gotten used to needing one. "You trying to make me Clare Danes ugly-cry? I'll leave. I can only handle so much sincerity in one night."

He laughs. "Fine. You're a terrible. A complete bitch. Better?"

"Much." I drain my glass and slam it down.

Marcus disappears back into the crowd. I order another drink. My fourth? Fifth? I've lost count, which means I should probably stop counting.

On the dance floor, Isa is laughing *again* at something Tamika said. I can hear it over the music, over the crowd, over everything. It's a little deeper than she'd probably like it to be, but honest. Real. I want to bottle that sound and save it for later. Proof of life.

I realize I'm smiling again. That stupid, involuntary smile that keeps ambushing me lately.

And then my phone buzzes. I glance down, expecting nothing. A promotional email, maybe. Or a text from Keesha reminding me to pick up product on Monday. The screen shows: Unknown Number. My blood goes cold before I even read the message.

Quarterly check-in. Tomorrow. 8 PM. Usual place. Don't be late. -C



The bar noise fades. The music becomes muffled, distant, like I'm hearing it through water. The phone nearly slips from my fingers.

One text. Nine words and an initial. And just like that, the leash snaps tight.

I haven't thought about the Cunt in weeks. That's a lie—I think about her every day. But I'd managed to push her into the background, to file her away in the same mental drawer where I keep the basement and the surgery and the taste of strange men. Background noise. Manageable trauma.

But now she's in my phone. In my bar. In my Friday night.

Tomorrow. Eight PM. The "usual place"—a parking garage on Roosevelt where she makes me stand under the fluorescent lights while she inspects me like livestock. Takes photos. Asks questions designed to humiliate. "Show me your tits, Cindy. Prove you're still taking the hormones. Good girl. Now turn around. Wider stance. That's it."

I flag Ray down. "Shot. Tequila. The cheap shit, I don't care."

"You sure? You've had—"

"Ray. Shot. Now."

He pours. I drink. It burns and I want it to burn more.

Another shot. And another. The world goes soft and fuzzy at the

edges, which is exactly where I need it to be. I can still see Isa on the dance floor, still laughing, still free, still blissfully unaware that our shared captor just reached across the city and grabbed me by the throat. I want to scream. I want to throw my glass at the wall and watch it shatter into a thousand pieces. I want to find the Cunt and—

Another shot. Four? Five? I've lost count again, but this time it's not funny.

Marcus reappears, frowning. "Yo, Cindy, you good? You're hitting it pretty hard."

"I'm fine."

"You don't look fine. You look like someone—"

"I said I'm *fine*, Marcus. Fuck off."

He holds up his hands and backs away. That was mean. He didn't deserve that. Add it to the list of things I'll hate myself for tomorrow.

The room is starting to tilt. Good. Let it tilt. Let the whole fucking world tilt until I slide right off the edge.

I order another shot. Ray hesitates. I give him the look—the one that says "pour or I'll come back there and do it myself"—and he pours.

The tequila is doing its job. The text is still there, still glowing on my phone, but it's getting blurry. Manageable. I can deal with the Cunt tomorrow. Tonight, I'm going to drink until I forget she exists. Until I forget *everything* exists. Until the only thing left is the warmth of alcohol and the bass in my chest and the—

"Cindy?"

Isa is standing in front of me. When did she stop dancing? Why? Her face is flushed from exertion, her curls slightly wild, and she looks so goddamn happy that I want to cry and scream.

"Hey!" I say, and my voice is too loud, too bright, too obviously wrong. "You were amazing out there! Tamika's been trying to get me to dance for months and I always say no because I have the coordination of, like, a drunk giraffe, which, actually, right now I *am* a drunk giraffe, so maybe I should—"

"What happened?" Isa says. She's not smiling anymore. "You're wasted."

"Well, see, that's sort of my deal."

"Cindy. Your hands are shaking."

I look down. They are. Fuck.

"It's nothing. I'm fine. Go dance! Have fun! This is your night, remember? Your big debut!"

She snatches the shot glass from my hand and sets it on the bar. Firmly. Like she's done this before. And now, suddenly, the scared, tentative girl from the apartment is gone. In her place is someone harder. Someone who knows how to take control. I'd be impressed if I wasn't so fucking terrified.

"What's wrong?" she asks, lowering her voice.

"Nothing. Everything's great." My tongue feels too big for my mouth. "You were having fun! Did I fuck it up? I fucked it up, didn't I."

“We’re leaving,” she says.

“What? No! We just got here! Well, we got here like two hours ago, but the point is—”

“Now, Cindy.”

“You can’t tell me what to do. I’m the teacher. I’m in charge. I’m—”

“You’re about to fall off that stool.”

She’s right. I’m listing to the left like a sinking ship. When did the room start spinning? The room shouldn’t spin. That’s rude.

Isa flags down Ray. “Can you close her tab?”

“Sure thing. She okay?”

“She will be.”

She sounds so certain. So steady. Like she’s the one who’s been surviving out here for three years and I’m the one who’s been hiding in an apartment for three weeks. Had I slipped between dimensions?

Isa wraps my arm around her shoulders—she’s got six inches on me, which makes this easy—and steers me toward the door. I try to protest but the words come out jumbled and stupid.

“M’fine. Don’t need help. I don’t need help from anyone.”

“I know,” Isa says, pushing the door open.

The air hits like a wet towel to the face—humid, heavy, reeking of exhaust and the taco truck that parks on the corner. Streetlights bloom into starbursts. Desiree is still at the door and says something, but I can’t process words right now. Isa replies—polite, smooth, covering for me—and then we hit the sidewalk, walking. Well, Isa is walking. I’m being gently dragged.

“I can walk,” I insist, attempting to stand straight and immediately stumbling off the curb.

Isa catches me. “Sure you can.”

“I just need—the sidewalk is... uneven. That’s a *city* problem, not a *Cindy* problem.”

“Uh-huh.”

We walk in silence for a while. Or I walk and wobble and occasionally blurt things that are probably not as profound as I imagine. Isa keeps her arm around me, steady, patient. The neighborhood is quieter now—Mrs. Patterson’s stoop is empty, Ahmed’s store is dark, Marcus’s building is just a building.

“She texted me,” I say suddenly. The words fall out like they’ve been waiting at the edge of my lips.

“Who texted you?”

“The Cunt.” I laugh, and it sounds unhinged even to me. “That’s what I call her. The Cunt. Capital C. Did you have a nickname for her? She’s Bella’s... enforcer. Handler. Whatever. She’s the one who grabbed me off the street and brought me to the basement. She’s the one who grabbed Kris, who grabbed you. She’s the fucking... the fucking leash.”

Isa’s arm tightens around me. “What did she say?”

“Quarterly check-in. Tomorrow. Eight PM.” I’m crying now, goddammit. “She makes me stand in this parking garage and takes



photos of me. Makes me prove I'm still... still being a good girl. Still taking my hormones. Still performing the role they assigned me. Like a fucking parole officer from hell.”

“Cindy...”

“And I have to go. I have to fucking go, because if I don't, she'll come here. She'll come to *my* neighborhood, to *my* apartment, and she'll see *you*, and then you'll have to do it too. Stand in some shitty cold garage while she photographs you like meat.”

Great, now I'm sobbing. Full-on, snot-running-down-my-face sobbing. So much for my reputation.

“Two years,” I choke out. “Two fucking years since I got out and she still owns me. I dress myself up, go to work, make friends, build this little life like it means something, and then one text—one *fucking* text—and I'm right back in that basement. Right back on that table—”

I double over and vomit on the sidewalk. Tequila and vodka cranberry and whatever dignity I had left, all splashed across the concrete. My hair falls forward and my tits swing and I'm doubled over in heels and a dress, retching into the gutter, and somewhere in the back of my alcohol-soaked brain I think: *David never puked in heels. David puked in sneakers like a normal guy. David didn't have to*

worry about his fucking cleavage while dry-heaving.

Isa holds my hair back. She doesn't say anything. She just holds my hair—the hair I'm so vain about, the hair I spend thirty minutes styling every morning—and waits for me to finish.

When I'm done, she hands me a napkin from her purse. My purse, technically. The sequined one with the taser and the lipstick.

"Sorry," I say. "This was supposed to be your night. Your big moment. And I ruined it because I can't handle one stupid text."

"You didn't ruin anything."

"I did. You were dancing. You were happy. You were—"

"Cindy." She stops walking and turns me to face her. Under the streetlight, her face is luminous—the makeup I applied hours ago still holding up, the curls still bouncing, the dress still draping just right. She looks beautiful. She looks like a woman who belongs in the world. "Can I tell you something?" she says.

"Yeah," I say, wiping my nose with the napkin like the classy lady I am.

"I... Yeah, I was having fun in there. Tamika was making me laugh so hard... God, it felt so good. To just be a..." She takes a deep breath. "...a girl at a bar, dancing with another girl, not thinking about the basement or the hormones or what's between my legs." Her voice cracks. "And then I felt guilty. Because Isaiah wouldn't have been caught dead dancing in a bar in a dress. Isaiah would've been home studying. Isaiah would've been with Destiny, planning their future, being normal. And here I am, in his body, wearing your dress, dancing to Megan Thee Stallion like none of it happened. Like he didn't exist. Like I just... replaced him."

She wipes her eyes. The mascara holds. I really am good at my job.

"Not hating every damn moment of this," she says, gesturing down at herself, "feels like a betrayal. Like I'm spitting on everything Isaiah was. Everything he wanted to be." She swallows hard. "But tonight, on that dance floor... I didn't hate it. I didn't hate *me*. And that scares me more than the Cunt ever could."

We stand there on the sidewalk, two crying messes under a flickering streetlight in Maywood, Illinois, at eleven-something on a Friday night. Somewhere behind us, Murph's is still thumping. Somewhere ahead, my apartment waits with its leaky faucet and its lumpy couch and its illusion of safety. And between those two points, there's just us. Two women who used to be someone else. Two women who didn't ask for this. Two women who are trying so goddamn hard to live anyway.

"Isaiah didn't die." My voice is wrecked—hoarse, wet, ugly. "He's not gone. He's just... he got folded into you. All the parts of him that mattered—the studying, the caring, the wanting a future—that's still in there. You didn't replace him. You absorbed him."

"You don't know that."

"Fuck you, I do know that. I know because I was somebody before

too. I was a dumbass named David who was going to law school to try to help people.” The name feels strange in my mouth. I almost never say it. “And David didn’t die. He could have, but he didn’t. He’s in here somewhere, underneath the lashes and the lip gloss and the hair. Not all of him, not the parts I had to cut away to stay sane, but the core of him. The part that gives a shit. The part that stays up all night worrying about some scared girl he barely knows.” I hiccup. Very dignified. “That’s David. David’s the one who held your hand in the bathroom while you cried about your voice. Cindy just did your makeup.”

Isa stares at me. A tear rolls down her cheek, catches the streetlight, and for a second it looks like a diamond on dark velvet.

“We’re both haunted houses,” I say. “But we’re still standing. That counts for something.”

She laughs—a broken, pretty sound. “Haunted houses. Jesus, Cindy.”

“What? I’m drunk and poetic.”

We stand there under the streetlight, two crying women in nice outfits, surrounded by the quiet hum of Maywood at midnight. It should be pathetic. It is pathetic. But it’s also the most honest moment I’ve had in months. Shit, maybe years.

“You know what?” I wipe snot from my upper lip. “We’re a mess.”

“Yeah.”

“Like, an absolute disaster pair.”

“Pretty much.”

“I’m supposed to be taking care of you and instead I’m puking on the sidewalk while you hold my hair.”

“It’s nice hair. Someone should hold it.”

I laugh. It turns into another sob. Then back into a laugh. I’m a goddamn emotional slot machine tonight. “Isa?”

“Yeah?”

“Having fun doesn’t erase him. It doesn’t mean he’s gone. It means you survived. And I think surviving is the biggest ‘fuck you’ to Bella and the Cunt and everyone else who tried to destroy us. If you can dance in that bar and laugh with strangers and feel even a little joy in this body they forced on you? That’s you winning.”

“Then why does it hurt so much?”

“Because winning isn’t the same as being okay,” I say. “Nobody tells you that part. They tell you to survive, to keep going, to be strong. But they don’t tell you that surviving feels like dragging yourself through broken glass every single day and then having to smile about it because at least you’re still breathing.”

The streetlight above us buzzes and flickers. A car passes, bass rattling its windows, and for a second we’re illuminated in headlights—two women frozen on a sidewalk like a photograph.

“Come on,” Isa says gently. “Let’s get you home.”

She takes my arm again and we walk. I’m steadier now, somehow. The crying and the vomiting have burned off some of the drunk, leaving

me in that awful purgatory between wasted and sober where everything is too clear and too sharp and you can feel every single feeling you were trying to drown.

We pass the corner store where I buy my coffee every morning. We pass the bus stop where I wait in the dark at 5 AM for the route that takes me to the salon. We pass the alley where, six months ago, some guy followed me for two blocks before I ducked into the laundromat and pretended to be on the phone until he got bored and left. We pass all the landmarks of my little life, and each one feels both permanent and fragile, like a sandcastle at low tide.

“I’m sorry about Marcus,” I mumble. “I told him to fuck off. He was just being nice.”

“You can apologize tomorrow.”

“He’s going to give me shit about it.”

“You deserve shit about it.”

“Wow, tough love already? You’ve been my student for three weeks and you’re already roasting me. They grow up so fast.”

Isa snorts. “Shut up and walk.”

We reach my building—a six-story brick box that the landlord keeps threatening to renovate but never does. The front door sticks, like always, and Isa hip-checks it open while keeping me upright. A skill she’s apparently mastered in one night.

The stairs are the hard part. Three flights, no elevator, because affordable housing in Maywood doesn’t come with amenities. Isa takes them slowly, letting me lean on the railing and on her, alternating. My heels are killing me. I’m a fucking idiot.

“Cindy?” Isa says.

“Yeah?”

“Tomorrow. The check-in.” She squeezes my hand. “I’m coming with you.”

I stop climbing. “No. Absolutely not. No way.”

“You just told me that surviving is the biggest ‘fuck you’ we can give them. So let me help you survive tomorrow.”

“It’s not the same. The check-in is... it’s degrading. It’s humiliating. She makes me—”

“And I’m sorry. But... Well, she’ll probably start doing it to me too, eventually. So let me see it. Let me know what’s coming. And let me stand next to you while it happens.”

“Isa, you don’t understand. If she sees you—”

“She already knows I’m here. She knows where I am, who I’m with. If she wanted to come for me, she would have already.” She takes a deep breath. “I’m done hiding. Or, at least, I think I can start to choose what I’m brave about. And this? Standing with you? That’s my choice.”

I open my mouth to argue. To list every reason this is a terrible idea. To explain that the Cunt will use Isa against me, will find new ways to twist the knife, will take one look at this beautiful, fragile, barely-hatched woman and see nothing but leverage.



But Isa's eyes are steady. She stands taller. "So tomorrow, I'm going with you. And I'm going to stand right next to you and tell the Cunt to fuck off."

"You can't tell her to fuck off."

"Maybe not out loud. But I'll be thinking it really hard."

Despite the vomit, the tears, the existential crisis, I smile. "You're sure?"

"I'm sure."

"It'll be awful."

"I know. But awful with company is better than awful alone."

I look at her standing on the stairwell landing with one hand on the railing and the other still holding mine, mascara barely smudged, chin tilted up like she's daring the universe to knock it back down. Three weeks ago, this woman couldn't make eye contact with her own reflection and now she's standing in a stairwell at midnight, offering to walk into hell with me. Goddamn.

"Okay," I whisper. "Okay."

"Good."

We climb the last flight in silence, our breathing the only sound in the stairwell besides the thrum of someone's TV bleeding through the

walls. Inside the apartment, the remnants of our makeover session are everywhere. Brushes on the counter. Eyeshadow palette open on the couch. Deborah the mannequin head lying face-down on the floor where she fell hours ago. I can relate.

I collapse on the couch and everything hurts. My head, my heart, my feet, my pride. “I need to take this off,” I mumble, gesturing vaguely at my face. “But I can’t move. My bones are, like, liquified.”

“Hold still.”

Isa disappears into the bathroom. I hear water running. A cabinet opening. She comes back with a warm, damp cloth and a bottle of micellar water.

“Close your eyes,” she says.

I close them.

She sits beside me and presses the cloth against my face. Gently—so gently I almost start crying again. She dabs the micellar water onto a cotton pad and starts removing my makeup. Foundation first, then the eyeshadow, the mascara, the lipstick. Layer by layer, she takes apart the mask I built.

Her hands are steady and careful. Clumsy, yeah—she hasn’t practiced this part yet—but careful. She holds my chin the way I held hers this afternoon. Turns my face the way I turned hers. The student, cleaning up the teacher.

“You’re doing it wrong,” I murmur, because I can’t help myself. God, I’m such a bitch.

“I’m doing it anyway.”

I keep my eyes closed and let her work. Each stroke of the cotton pad peels away another layer. Not just makeup—the bravado. The control. The illusion that I’ve got my shit together, that I’m the strong one, the man-turned-woman with the plan. But under the foundation, I’m just skin. Under the skin, I’m just... scared. That’s all. I’m just a scared idiot from Blaine who got kidnapped and woke up in a basement with an IV in his arm and a stranger’s voice saying, “You are going to be beautiful” in a way that made it clear that wasn’t a compliment, it was a sentence. A boy who watched his body betray him month by month—the softening of muscle, the budding of breasts, the slow erasure of every physical thing that made him *him*—until one day he looked down and there was nothing left to erase.

And that’s the thing about armor. You don’t realize how much weight you’ve been carrying until someone takes it off. Every layer Isa removes lets something else seep through—not air, not relief, but the cold draft from somewhere deeper. Somewhere I keep locked. The place where the gas flows in and the lights go out and the darkness closes in from the edges like curtains on the last act.

Because the pit is still there. It’s always there. Beneath every good day, every smile, every moment I let myself believe I’m okay. I tell myself I’m standing on solid ground, but really I’m balanced on a wire over the void, and one text, one word, one wrong breath could send me



falling, falling, falling with no one to catch me.

“Hey,” Isa says softly. “Stay with me.”

I open my eyes. She’s leaning over me, cotton pad in hand, her face close enough that I can see the tiny scar on her jawline—the one she told me was from a bike accident when she was twelve. When she was Isaiah. When scars came from normal things.

“Sorry,” I say. “Went somewhere.”

“I know. Come back.”

She finishes with my left eye—the mascara’s always stubborn on that side—and moves to the right. I lie there, face half-naked, staring at the ceiling. Water stain number seven. My old friend. Still looks like a middle finger.

“There,” Isa says quietly. “All done.”

I open my eyes. She’s looking at me with this expression... Tender, maybe. Grateful. Something.

“Your turn,” I say, reaching for the cotton pad.

“I can do it myself—”

“Shut up and let me.”

She sits still. I take the cloth and start wiping away her makeup the way I applied it—in reverse order. Lipstick first. Then the mascara,

careful around the falsies. Eyeshadow. Contour. Foundation. Each layer coming off reveals the face underneath. The face Bella reshaped, the cheekbones that aren't quite where they used to be, the skin that's smoother than it should be.

When I'm done, we sit there looking at each other. Two bare faces. No armor. No masks.

"Hi," I say.

"Hi," she says.

"We look terrible."

"I think we look alive," she says.

And yeah. I guess we do. We sit in the quiet for a while. My head is already pounding and my mouth tastes like my half-digested dinner. But Isa's next to me, bare-faced, real, and the apartment feels less like a cage and more like a foxhole. Two soldiers, post-battle, catching their breath.

"Water," Isa says, standing.

"Yes, ma'am."

She comes back with two glasses and a bottle of ibuprofen. I take three pills and drain the water in one go. She refills it without being asked. Somewhere along the line, she learned how to take care of someone. Maybe she always knew. Maybe that's the Isaiah part—the pre-med student who was going to spend his life looking at other people's insides, making sure everything was where it should be.

"You should sleep," she says.

"Can't. If I close my eyes right now, the room's gonna spin like a fucking washing machine."

"Then we stay up."

She says it like it's nothing. Like sitting on a dirty couch at one in the morning with a drunk, crying mess is exactly how she planned to spend her first night out. She grabs the remote and turns on the TV.

I pull my knees up to my chest. The dress rides up and I don't care. There's nobody here but us and Deborah, and Deborah's seen worse. "Isa?"

"Hmm?"

"That name. The one I made up at the door. You don't have to keep it. I panicked. I just—Isaiah starts with 'Isa' and... yeah..."

She's quiet for a long moment. Runs her fingers along the hem of the wrap dress, tracing the pattern. "I don't hate it," she says finally.

"You don't have to like it either. It was improv, not a christening."

"I know." She shifts on the couch, tucking her legs underneath her. "But it feels... I don't know. Like a bridge, maybe. Between who I was and... whatever I'm becoming."

The TV flickers, casting blue shadows across our scrubbed-clean faces. On screen, some cooking competition where everyone's stressed about soufflés. My phone sits on the coffee table, the Cunt's text still glowing on the screen. Tomorrow is going to be hell. But right now, in this moment, with Isa's arm around me and the remnants of our night



scattered around us, I feel something I haven't felt in a long time. Not happy. Not healed. Not fixed.

Safe.

And maybe that's enough. Maybe that's the whole lesson. That you can hate the cage and still find comfort in the person trapped in there with you. That you can be terrified of tomorrow and still be grateful for tonight. That surviving alone is surviving, but surviving together is something else. Something almost like living.

"Isa?"

"Hmm?"

"Next Friday. Same thing?"

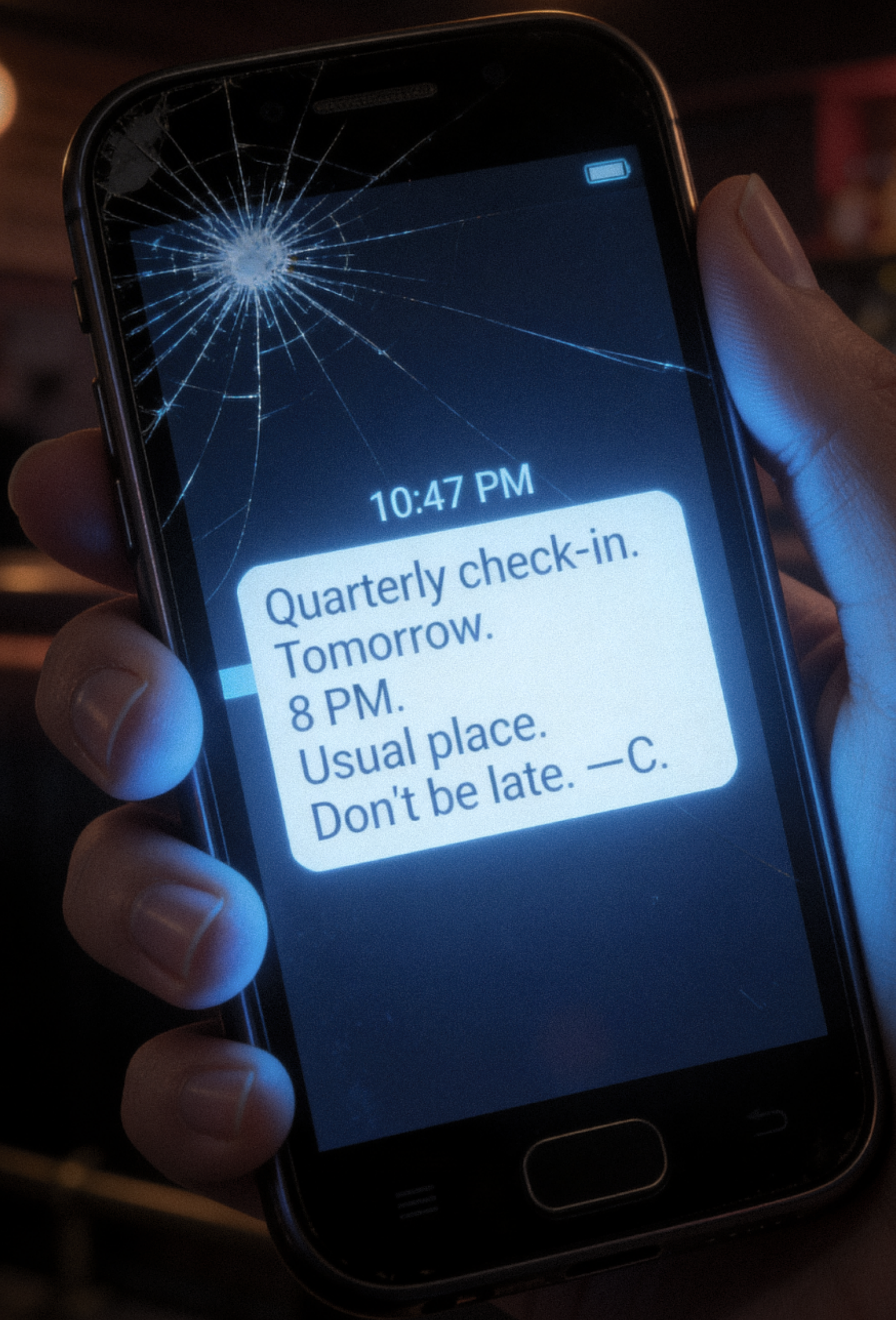
She squeezes my shoulder. "I'll buy the wine."

I fall asleep on her shoulder, bare-faced and broken and not alone. Deborah the mannequin watches from the floor with her hollow eyes and half-finished French braid. Tomorrow, the Cunt will text again. Tomorrow, I'll stand in that parking garage and perform submission. Tomorrow, the leash will tighten and the cage will shrink and the basement will feel close enough to touch.

But tonight, I taught a girl to dance. And she taught me to let go. And if that's not a learning curve, I don't know what is.







10:47 PM

Quarterly check-in.
Tomorrow.
8 PM.
Usual place.
Don't be late. —C.











