

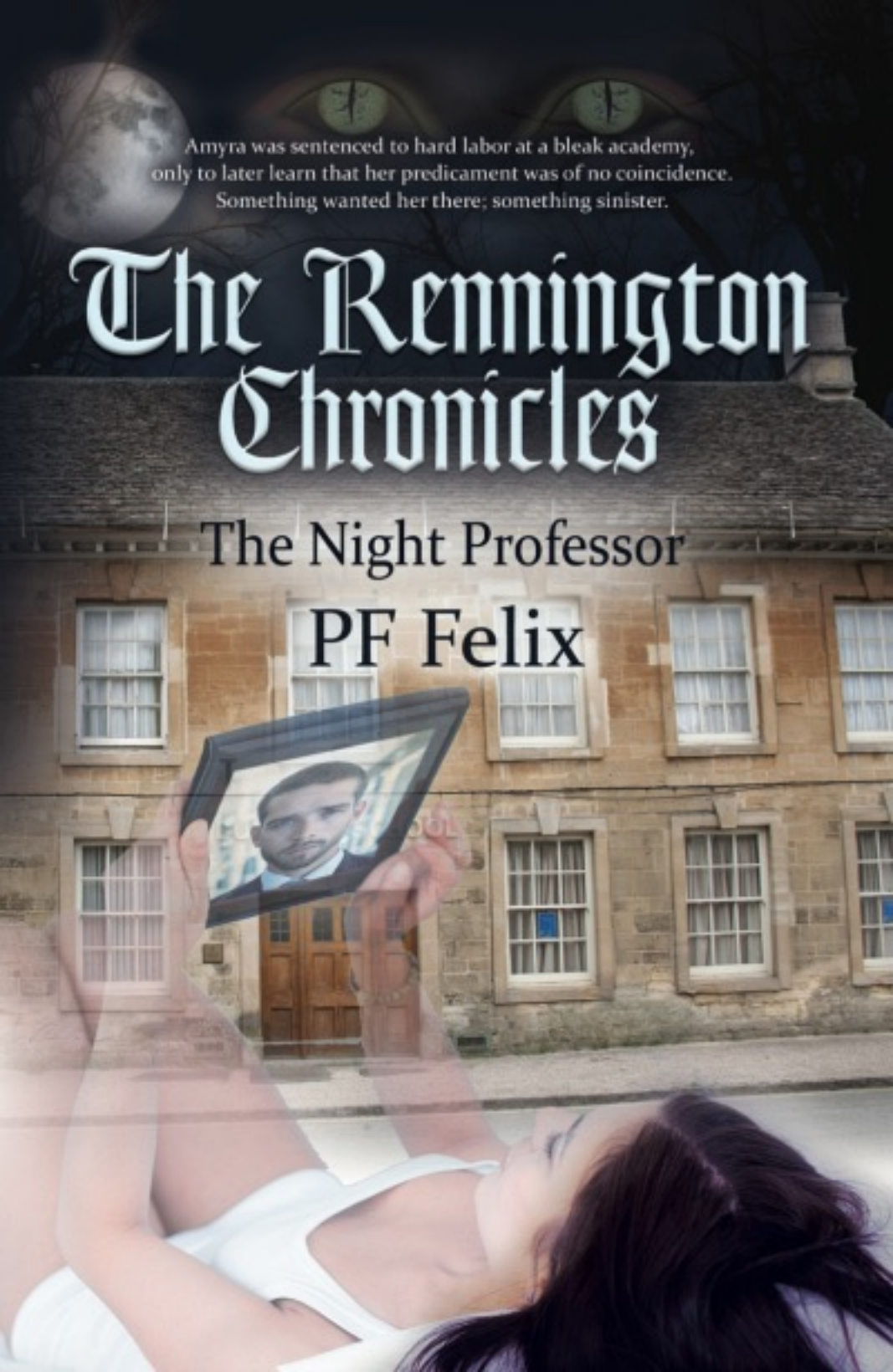
Amyra was sentenced to hard labor at a bleak academy, only to learn her dilemma wasn't random. She was lured there by something sinister; something dark. Love and deceit can often play kindred spirits in a race for your very soul.

THE RENNINGTON CHRONICLES:
The Night Professor
By PF Felix

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Amyra was sentenced to hard labor at a bleak academy,
only to later learn that her predicament was of no coincidence.
Something wanted her there; something sinister.

The Rennington Chronicles

The Night Professor

PF Felix

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CHAPTER TWO “ENCHANTÉ RENNINGTON”



It was an early May morning when Amyra stepped out of the police building in handcuffs, then immediately escorted into an unmarked car for transport. She noticed that it was unusually dreary for 6 am. but quickly sat in the car, as directed. The paperwork given to the security escort read "MYRA BENJAMIN," as this was her new identity while in the program. Then the man assigned to transport her loaded the probationer's bags in the car while she sat in the back seat staring aimlessly at the metallic barrier in front of her. She sadly turned to her mother one last time but was met with a resentful gaze, causing her to revert back. Then she took a deep breath and exhaled her frustrations into the ether, trying to avoid thinking about the inevitable. Tired of constant contemplation towards surviving this abysmal nightmare, she realized that the most challenging work she had ever done prior was using a communal sorority-house dishwasher. Still, she hired maid services to perform her pledgee responsibilities. Accordingly, the mere thought of doing God knows what with no means of survival, no money, and no access to any tech while under house arrest seemed beyond *ill*-humane. Not to mention the fact that her shifts were

mandatory **ten** hour-days, **six** days a week with only Sundays off to check in with her PO, for urine-testing, and possibly getting strip-searched weekly. *Shit*, she thought. *I might as well have gone to prison; how the hell is this any different?* The only thing keeping her centered was if she finished her probation timely with no violations, she had a shot at getting her records expunged and possibly could apply for re-entry back into law school in the future, an actual fresh start.

Mayor Moore-Braun then walked over to the car window to say her farewells. She signaled to the man driving the vehicle to roll down the rear passengers' window to speak with her daughter privately. She then leaned in to whisper, saying, "Remember what we spoke about? Any problems, and it's the end-of-the-line for you got it! Should you fail, not only will you serve your full sentence in prison no less, but you will have no chance of parole, and you will be deemed unfit to gain access to your trust fund, ever. You will be disowned, losing my support for good, and probably end up like that dead negro-prostitute you cared so much about. You have one shot with this," she warned with a stern look in her eyes. "**DON'T FUCK THIS UP!**" Then she sealed her admonishment with a Judas-kiss on the cheek. As she stepped away, she stated, "I love you, pumpkin, and I know you can do this," smiling gently in her daughter's direction.

It was now time for them to go. With a long trip ahead, the vehicle slowly pulled out from the station and towards their destination. Myra didn't even budge; she just sat there, glazed eyes staring forward in a catatonic state. As the car drove off, she didn't turn back but kept moving forward, ignoring her Mother's ill-spoken threats, having already endured it for years; and now it was all behind her, at least for a little while. *Just keep it together*, she thought. *It will all be over soon, one way or another.*

The driver gazed in the rear-view mirror at the young probationer behind the metallic separator. Despite her bargain basement clothing, poor choice of wig, and lack of cosmetics, he could tell that she was trying to hide her identity, even without knowing her whole story. Such a shame though, she was pretty, regardless. Feeling empathy towards her, he commenced with some conversation. "Don't know bout chu baby gurl, but I'm sure glad dat's over. You real lucky to have a mother like dat," said the happy-go-lucky man.

She turned towards his direction, still looking morose with a melancholy demeanor, responding with, "You think so?"

The driver looked back to see her profoundly depressed face, with puffy, red eyes from probable lack of sleep, and how could he blame her. Any kind of unwanted confinement is incarceration in his book, but at least it wasn't 'real' prison. To change the mood, he pulled out a CD labeled "Old School Tunes" and then looked back at the probationer, saying in a chipper tone, "Hope you don't mind, but a brother needs his tunes." He placed the CD in the media player. "Child, if dis won't lift you, don't know what will." Within seconds, the energized sounds of James Brown's hit, "Living in America," echoed in the car. Initially, she found it annoying; it was too loud with senseless screaming and inaudible verses. And after hearing that same CD over and over again, she realized that this was the last thing she needed; a lyrical *death-sentence* executed by the "**Godfather of "Soul."**"

Yet as the hours lingered, she found solace in the melodic trance that could only be served right via **R&B**. In some ways, it reminded her of the time when she and Em drove around Lake Tahoe for a romantic tryst last summer. By day's end, the R&B tracks were memorized, and she and the driver bonded over singing "A Man's World" in harmony. She didn't mind swapping driving responsibilities with him, allowing him to

rest when tired, which was very irresponsible of them, but he didn't care, as she had too much to lose if she even thought about escaping. Looking at the road ahead, she made her peace with her lingering predicament. With only one day left till drop off, she took her last breath as a free civilian on the open route. Just a few more hours left. As the GPS led her off the highway, she noticed a familiar spot and smiled. "**Ou... Burger World,**" she wondered out loud. "I wonder if drive-thru is open?"

Welcome to the Pride...



They were now pulling into the town of Rennington and right on time. Myra was in awe of her new surroundings, as it seemed that nothing matched what she pinged before the police confiscated her tech. *I thought this was cow country*, she told herself. Watching the townsfolk roaming around, seemingly in good spirits, differed drastically from the tubed videos she watched depicting the catastrophe months prior. With grandparents pushing strollers and citizens were walking around. *Where's the devastation?...the tent-shelters?* she wondered. Rennington looked like any other regular emerging city but more modernized and a bit tech-savvier than expected.

There were several cranes in the sky from her vantage point, and from what she could tell, the sites depicted signs of every major business you would expect in a contemporary city but with a twist. Store names were renditions of Rennington's prior businesses, revamped, now favoring leading brands seen in other major cities. Like the *ValueMART* down the road, it was a hodgepodge of every type of farmer's market but also had groceries, home-good items, and other retail products you could find in other major wholesalers. The police station and civic buildings were expanded beautifully, with restaurants built within. And the mall looked like your average Simon's variety but showcased original names like "ZACs Cosmetics" or "Stacys." Other pre-existing structures were fashionably refurbished and newly painted with attractive ornamentation, such as fountains and ancient sculptures throughout. There were uniquely designed torches that encapsulated the city, accenting the scenes perfectly, and there were noticeably well-designed children's and animal parks near residential areas.

Moreover, the farmlands were full of healthy vegetation and perfectly erected structures and barns. The roads were recently repaved too. *Jesus, how did they pull this off so fast? Zoning alone would take forever,* she thought. There were intelligent streetlights with beautifully designed banners advertising the upcoming **THANK YOU BBQ** for the volunteers, hosted by the town's mayor and community, scheduled for tomorrow evening at the school.

They then passed through plush forestry, just up the hillside, which meant the school was close by. *Oh my gosh,* she thought. *Amazing!* She couldn't believe that volunteers solely did this.

They could now see the school emerging ahead. The gorgeous title stood out on the lawn like a landmark.

**“SAINT BARTHOLOMEW ACADEMY OF THE
SACRED HEARTS”**

The title was written with marble and fused with perfectly chiseled white stone and embossed with gold trimmings all around with solar-energized reflectors for fantastic visibility day or night. Even with the continued construction still underway, one would never know that this had been a disaster area. Myra noticed the crowds of volunteers lining up around the building and the influx of cars, supply trucks, and food shipments, crowding all entrances into the estate, leaving mass congestion at every orifice. The lines of newly onboarding volunteers, returning faculty, and visitors were backed up beyond the main gate. The driver looked at Myra with a confusing glare. The sight was controlled chaos; so many barricades that the driver was clueless about what to do. He then turned back to Myra with shrugged shoulders.

“I don’t know how long this will take, but they only gave me a few days to return before my next pick-up assignment,” he said to her.

She told him, “Pull in here. I can walk the rest of the way.”

Pulling over, the trusting driver quickly opened the back door, letting Myra out, then pulled out her roller and duffle bags from the trunk. He also handed her a large, sealed manila envelope, entrusting her to self-register as the school was awaiting her reporting in and were fully aware of her court and house-arrest orders. He then wished her the best, but she surprisingly hugged him, thanking him for making her last few days pleasant. He smiled, telling her, “it’s all good, young-n...just keep your head up, aight?” He then smiled before walking away. As the car slowly drove off, Myra turned around, walking towards the end of the exhaustive registration line.

... *Several Hours Later*

It felt like days had passed as the line barely moved. Waiting in a shaded area, Myra overheard the onboarding volunteers go on and on about how excited they were to be here and how they couldn't wait to meet the benefactors of the town's reconstruction efforts, as they were rumored to visit at the school's upcoming '**Bonfire**' festivity, the weekend of Student Orientation. The primary benefactor on everyone's minds was none other than *MalCORP*, a lucrative and prestigious European restorative and development firm headquartered in Belgium but with partnerships in Hong Kong and Tel Aviv. When news of the destruction gained international attention, *MalCORP* was one of the first companies to step in and provide aid. They immediately sent in their restorative crews from Asia to Ground Zero to provide food; perform clean-up; build temporary housing during renovations, and much more. They even paid for simple needs like elderly and childcare so that families could get back to work, all in just a few days. They also laid out the development groundwork making it easy for domestic developers to help escalate the reconstruction, which many hailed as sheer genius, permitting everyone to profit equally. Yet, when all other companies left the scene, *MalCORP* remained till even now.

Hearing everyone bragging about them as if this were a super-humanitarian agency made Myra sick to her stomach. *Fucking morons*, she seethed inside. *No one does anything for free*. She also noticed that the volunteers all had onboarding packets with team names referenced on the folder. *This must be how they're organizing us... but why didn't I receive one?* She didn't even get a stupid campus map. *Maybe it's in the envelope*, She thought. So she opened it

and found the usual court documents inside. It contained her profile with mug shot; her piteous court-mandated work schedule; the name and contact of her Probation Officer; mandatory urine examination schedules; and her prohibition orders outlined to the ‘T.’ Her skin started to boil when reading it; it listed everything she was barred from using; doing; getting. No TV’s or media devices, and under no circumstances was she permitted to use or procure any smart or analog phones for personal use, like an actual incarcerated individual. *Really*. This was annoying as hell. *Jeez... Why don’t you really make it interesting and add no vibrators...* She then turned to the next page, where more items were listed. CHRIST, IT’S HERE!”

In looking through the packets, she found a small white envelope stuck in between the pages, with a note on the cover saying, ‘4-Baby Gurl’. Smiling, Myra thought, *What in hell?* She then opened it, finding cash inside. It wasn’t much, but that wasn’t the point. She just couldn’t believe that this man whose assignment was to transport her to her place of punishment, a perfect stranger, would bestow more sympathy than family or friends. “You crazy fool,” she whispered to herself. This was the first act of kindness she’d received since her arrest. *What a sweet man*, she thought. His gesture was genuinely heartfelt and would never be forgotten. She then placed the money-filled envelope into her duffle bag.

... *In the Building*

The line finally found its way into the AC-controlled building. *Thank God*, she thought. Water bottles and boxed meals were being distributed in line with onboarding gift bags

and campus-themed paraphernalia post-sign-up. Over 144 volunteers were waiting to receive their new assignments. Team leaders from all areas of the campus acted swiftly to gather their new recruits who were seemingly eager to embark on this journey, as many were excited to be captured via the media exposé on **'Rebuilding Rennington'**, broadcasting nationwide. On the walls, there was historical literature showcasing SBA's history dating back to the Salem atrocities of the sixteenth century. SBA was originally a convent turned refuge, harboring victims of the witch trials seeking asylum. Even though she was rooted in Catholicism, the school evolved in allowing students to practice their faith, culture, and even sexual orientations freely, as long as it didn't discriminate against others' God-given rights. This seemed truly evolved to Myra but somewhat confusing; however, she was elated to see the progressive evolution. *Good*, she thought. *It's about damn time someone got it right*. As Myra moved further in line, she never kept her eyes off the clock, as she had until 5 pm to check-in. Knowing that her predicament was heavily monitored, she knew it was the simple mistakes that were costliest; and being arrested for a late check-in would surely be one of them.

Seemingly agitated, having waited all day, she had to use the restroom and quickly stepped out to do so. However, when she tried to hurry back, she found herself lost in the enormous halls. **"SHIT!"** she exclaimed. Nervous due to the time, she went in every direction before her but didn't see the line she left. She then felt nauseated from the overpowering smells of powerful cleaning agents, yet followed the strong chemical scents, hoping to find help. She then noticed a custodian mopping a few corridors down and reached out to him. "Hi. Um..." Feeling queasy. "I'm new here, and I was wondering if you could help me..."

Cutting her off with a frustrated tone, the custodian said, “Man, can’t you see I’m busy?” Scoffing as he saw her reaction, he said, “What... my work bothering you? Just get the hell out of my face.”

Seeing the man’s agitation, she humbly replied, “Please... I’m super lost; I just need some help...”

With an angrier tone, he snapped, “Not my problem, boo! Now, go on. **GET!**”

A livid Myra stared him up and down angrily but walked away because he wasn’t worth getting into further trouble. She then continued to move through the halls until she luckily found the school’s Registration’s Office, which housed the office of the Chancellor. Too tired to turn back, she went in and asked the receptionist for help. At first, the woman advised her to get back in line with everyone else, but with 15 minutes on the clock, there was no way Myra was going back out there. Hoping to engage her, she handed the woman her file. Then the agitated receptionist proceeded to review it quickly. As soon as she saw her name, she stared intensely at the young girl before rapidly turning back to make a call. Holding on to the documents, she kindly told Myra to “Please, take a seat.” As a tired Myra walked over to the lounge area, she distinctly overheard the receptionist whisper, “she’s in here,” then looked up to find the woman eyeing her directly while taking instructions over the phone. The receptionist then hung up and told Myra that Mother Mags would be with her shortly.

Myra was relieved and aggressively retreated onto the comfy brown chair. Several minutes have transpired, and a tired and hungry Myra began to fluster; it was now 5:04 pm. She didn’t know what to expect. Then the young woman started to become paranoid, thinking *maybe they called the cops... that’s why she was looking at me so strangely*, she said inwardly. Suddenly, the office door abreast from reception

opened, and a calm, very mature woman wearing a nun's habit with sweats underneath came out, looking directly at Myra. She then signaled for Myra to come in with a kind smile. *Finally*, Myra thought. As she sat down, she noticed that they were in the prior Chancellor's office, as his photo was still hanging on the wall with the date of the catastrophe, as his expiration. The woman was attractive; she had a kind of Ellen-D flavor, particularly her gentle smile and kind eyes. Her demeanor seemed humble, but Myra mainly focused on the boxed lunch the woman pulled out from the fridge and walked over in her direction. She then handed Myra the food, which she took quickly and started eating.

"I take it they didn't feed you yet?" Mother Magdalene said.

After some bites, Myra realized her rudeness, then looked up to see the Mother staring directly at her. "Not yet. Thank you!" Myra said. She noticed before her a desk plate with the name **Doctor Magdalene Graeves, MD**. The woman then sat in the Chancellor's seat, reviewing Myra's file then looking back towards Myra to see her with a confused look towards the nameplate.

"Yep, that's me," she said, sounding jovial. "I prefer Dr. Mags. Have a thing against the Magdalene Sisters, you know!".

Then Myra recalled that name; it was on her reporting instructions. She knew that she was late reporting in and hoped that Dr. Mags could contact her PO, telling him she checked in on time.

"Just in case you're wondering, you need not worry. I already told him you've checked in; since 9:00 am. You're all good"

Now Myra was staring at her face carefully. *Can she read minds?* she thought.

“I just figured you’d ask. Now finish your meal,” Mother Magdalene said.

She whispered, “Thanks!” Then Myra calmed down and continued eating.

“I see you’ve gotten yourself into a bit of a pickle, hmmm?” Seeing the girl’s discomfort, she told her, “Don’t worry. I don’t judge... after all; we’re all fallen one way or another, right?”

Myra shrugged her shoulders.

“And don’t let the cloth scare you; it’s for the free coffee, trust me!” Dr. Mags quipped.

Then, with a sigh, she said, “Look, I’m not one of those with the I know how you feel... I can tell you’re on edge, and I want to say you have no worries here. My job is not to punish you; life has done so already... but I will help you in any way I can. I can assure you that the only way things will go sideways is if we’re no longer on the same page. And I don’t think that will happen.”

With a smile, she added, “All I ask is that you do your part and try to keep out of any trouble, and I’ll do my best to help you where I can. Okay?”

Myra took a deep breath and nodded in complete agreement. Then Dr. Mags handed her an onboarding packet and gift bag. *Oh shit*, Myra thought. It read **KITCHEN DUTY**. Dr. Mags then explained to Myra how she was to move around. Although she was restricted to a no wage status (because her pay was transferred to a foundation), she still set Myra up with a school cash card account mainly created for students, for essentials only. She also reviewed the remaining of her provisions with her.

“Lastly, this package contains everything you’ll need to navigate around here. Your badge is also your employee ID, your access card, and your cash card, so you’ll be credited

through it. Since you're volunteering, room and board are covered with all amenities; however, all the newly renovated apartments were taken, so you'll have to live in an older version of the building. No biggy! It will be fixed up soon enough and is more private than the dorms.

"Now, there's no way I'm monitoring your every move. The devotion life's getting out of me is prayer. I trust you can get your supplies yourself and, in the bag, you have a restricted cell phone to use; however, a copy of your statement will go to your PO, so be careful whom you call."

Smiling, Dr. Mags said, "This campus has its own 24-hour shuttle with transportation to these lists of approved neighboring stores. Anything beyond the confines of these locations will automatically activate your ankle bracelet. So don't venture far."

Myra looked at the antiquated but operable flip phone and then back at Dr. Mags.

In gratitude, she said, "Thank you; for everything."

Dr. Mags smiled. "I feel good about you; you'll do fine here," she said. "Welcome to Saint Bartholomew Academy!"

It was late when Myra and the doctor left for the evening. The halls were emptied and immaculately cleaned as if no one was there. Dr. Mags walked Myra to Security to register her ankle bracelet. She then instructed a security guard to take her go-cart and escort Myra to grab dinner on the house before taking her to her on-campus apartment. The guard drove Myra to the campus Bistro, which was opened late nights, seven days a week. She then provided Myra with a quick tour around the enormous campus, highlighting everything from the new athletics building with an Olympic-sized pool to all campus emergency spots and ATMs. She also showed her how to find all the campus shuttles that traveled everywhere within the school, connecting to external transportation within the city.

After retrieving some necessary supplies and dinner, the security guard then took Myra to her new home.

Welcome Home...

As Myra walked into the two-story loft, she was immediately flabbergasted by its ridiculous furnishings and petite size. *What in hell? Seriously?* she exclaimed. If this wasn't a cell, it was impeccably close. The freakishly small kitchenette was tightly abreast from the entrance and living room. The stove had two burners and a dated toaster oven sitting on the area's only counter table.

To make matters worse, the bedroom, located on the upper floor loft, was the most depressing view of all. The bedroom closet was just a cheap curtain covering a corner space. And the bathroom was a pathetic sight to look at. It was elevated above the living room, hanging perpendicular to the base level floor, of the 900 *sq. ft.* prism. "It's kinda cute," said the security guard, placing Myra's bag on the dated tile floor, but a shocked Myra didn't respond. As the door closed behind her, Myra slowly walked into the living room and sat down on the wretched couch, congesting the center space. But she was too tired to care. After a long-drawn-out day, Myra just wanted to rest. As she looked up towards the ceiling, her tired eyes drifted towards the mid-sized sunroof above and large industrial-sized windows on the west side of the room, as they were the only silver-linings in the pathetic apartment. As she drifted in thought, she hoped to sleep and never awake. She was exhausted, tired from all the betrayal, the threats, and the loneliness. "Em," she whispered. "Why did you lie to me?" She was so tired, yet sleep did not come instantly. The empty,

ominous room provided no comfort, yet she had to endure it, seemingly alone.

Day Two...

As Myra started to settle in, cleaning up her new apartment, she heard a rustling at her door. When she opened it, she found a flyer taped on it advertising tonight's appreciation BBQ. *Yay, freebies*, she thought, throwing the flier in the trash before walking it to the dumpster. Heading back, she noticed groups of people hanging around or playing games, simply having fun. She then saw someone looking in her general direction, waving towards her but she turned back, promptly walking to her apartment, then locking the door behind her. "No distractions, thank you!" she said.

... Later That Evening

As Myra stepped off from the trolley, she walked over to the campus BBQ, which to her looked more like a mini-county fair. There were all kinds of activities and foods there, some of which were made by townspeople who wanted to showcase their signature dishes or promote their farms or restaurants, all free in gratitude for the re-opening that saved their humble town. The entire community was there; some came with their families or fellow townsfolk. Mr. Wilson walked hand-in-hand with his grandchildren, all of whom returned with their parents to stay for good in the newly revamped city. After an excellent welcome speech and opening prayer by Interim Chancellor Dr.

Mags, visitors cheered heavily for their new fearless heroine and leader, the one that never let the town down. Listening to the gossiping patrons, Myra learned that Dr. Mags was the reason SBA was still standing, even after the threat of closure ensued. She kept the farms going by forcing investors to buy from the community. She worked diligently with all organizations to help manage the triage of supplies, resources, and support needs for families so that the community could continue going. She even worked with returning families to see that they received aid too. She performed marriages and encouraged the Archdiocese to bless all the dead, regardless of cause, which touched so many affected dearly. Yes, she was a true angel to the people, and all believed Rennington would have fallen if it were not for her. *Extraordinary!* she thought.

Good music played throughout, and everyone was having a good time. Myra had to admit, the smell of the food was truly sublime, especially the vegan line. Luckily, it was not congested, like the others. With so much variety, there was literally something for everyone. *Truly inclusive!* In waiting in line, Myra heard a familiar voice right behind her. She then turned around to see that piece of shit janitor from yesterday. Not recognizing her initially, he asked her for a little favor in helping him package food for later.

Smiling, expecting her to help, he was shocked when she dropped the Tupperwares to the ground, staring him directly in the face. Pissed off, he started to curse her out but then remembered who she was, calming down.

The custodian said, “Look, man. That was not about you. I had my problems when...”

“Not a man; pencil dick, and not my problem.”

Squinting villainously back at him, Myra walked away, smiling as he angrily carried on. “*Don’t worry, baby... you’ll*

need me one day,” he called out to her in a Latin-gangster accent...

Later, after finally grabbing her dinner, she noticed a secluded spot towards the back of the bleachers, away from the bonfire and the majority of guests. The place was entirely tucked away. She quickly sat there, not noticing that someone already claimed the area. While eating, she then saw a fresh pair of sneakers staring back at her. When she looked up, it was a cute, spunky little young Latin woman standing there wearing an assistant cheerleading coach jacket. She also had a tattoo on her ring finger, the kind someone would get in prison to show partnership. The two shared a quick smile while the lady was getting off the phone.

Tari said, “You must be new, huh?”

“Yup. I’m Myra M... Benjamin.”

“Okay, M... Benjamin. And you’re also in my seat, boo!” Laughing kindly, she then told her, “It’s all good. Don’t worry bout it. (sitting next to her) I’m Ataria Cruz, but people call me Tari.”

The women immediately hit it off, talking about little nothings, where they lived, worked, and the *‘how goes its’* people generally do in first introductions. As the two shared the evening, Myra made sure to keep her past guarded; *this is temporary*”, she thought. She just needed to survive this. Yet, she felt comfortable with Tari. She was easy to talk to and funny, with her quirky sensibility and comedic take on every topic discussed. The two women eventually exchanged contacts, and Tari offered to help Myra take some things back to her place. It was nice to make a friend, even if it’s for a little while.

Meanwhile, as the two women were walking away, staring at Myra across the courtyard was the Interim Chancellor. She was elated to see Myra out, assimilating, and

in better spirits than prior. And she couldn't ask for anyone better for her to meet. Tari would definitely play a perfect distraction. *There was something about her*, Mag's thought. Even before Myra arrived, Dr. Mags sensed something in the air; something was coming. As soon as Myra's transport vehicle pulled up, Mags was there, watching from afar. She watched Myra exit the car, humbly exchange farewells, then walked to the back of the line for check-in. She never took her eyes off her, secretly studying the lovely assailant. Mags then realized that Myra was not like the others; she was different, blessed perhaps, and although she couldn't put her finger on it, she knew that somehow SBA would not be the same. Yes, she was forced to come, and she was the daughter of a conniving diplomat with influential tentacles reaching abroad to avoid prison time for her baby creatively. However, that wasn't it either. *Destiny was in play; it brought her here. But only time would tell this tale*, Mags thought. *Yes, indeedie; for now, you're one of us.*

Just Another Day! ...

As the days lingered, Myra felt she was getting nowhere fast, and the longer she was here, the slower things took. The dreary monotony of waking early and going to bed late was slowly draining the life from her. Without any healthy distractions, she felt captive fast, shrieking inwardly and alone. With all the money she had with her now gone, she felt destitute and didn't know how much more of this she could take. Too proud to ask for help, she suffered silently but only took freebies from Tari when she believed no one was watching. Yet, as abysmal life was to her when she would

observe her equally unfortunate coworkers, they were the opposite in demeanor. They always seemed cheerful and laughing. Day by day, they would come to work just before her, all packed into one truck like sardines but full of energy and life. They worked hard, taking pride when listening to their cultural tunes while singing and dancing at a moment's notice. They enjoyed playing dominoes during their reoccurring 15 turned 33-minute breaks but somehow managed to always get their work done and leave timely.

One Afternoon...

When Myra was putting away the last of the dirty dishes into the dishwasher, Maricela Nunez, a 24-year veteran, was carrying some clean racks of dishes back from the dishwasher when she slipped and almost fell, but Myra caught her. Seeing the lady was still in pain, she helped her to the breakroom to rest and cleaned up the mess before completing her shift. Seeing Myra's compassion (the next day), Maricela found her during break-time sitting alone in the stockroom. She then asked her to join her for lunch, and Myra gladly agreed. When it was time to eat, Hector, Maricela's nephew, snuck in a few extra serving containers for the team. The area was set up almost like a Thanksgiving feast, but unbeknownst to Myra, blinded by the scheme, she innocently pulled out her re-used brown paper lunch bag from her backpack while the others started to serve. Seeing Myra was oblivious in the moment, Maricela shouted to the group to "cállate" [*hush*]; then the room became surprisingly still. Only the sounds of the radio and a rusty blowing fan could be heard. As Myra continued to spread honey on her peanut butter sandwich with dated apple

slices, the others watched in amazement like she was an episode of Animal Planet. “*Que diablos esta haciendo ella?* [What the hell is she doing?]” said Leo. The others couldn’t believe that she would eat so wretchedly when there was so much food here. Maybe no one told her about the break-room code, or was she being petty? Some whispered. No one ever brings their lunch in here, not even the bigot managers... Then, Maricela (the seeming matriarch of the group) silenced their whispers, then walked over to Myra and took her lunch from her.

Throwing it in the trash, Maricela turned back to Myra, saying, “It’s okay, baby.”

“Um.... okay,” Myra replied, seeming confused.

Maricela then spoke to Cesci and asked her to make Myra a plate. Pronto!

“Ju eat with us; no?” Maricela asked.

Nervously, Myra responded, “Ummm...I don’t have any money to pay....”

“Neither do we!”

EVERYONE LAUGHING!

Then Myra noticed the room; all eyes were on her. Maricela smiled at the young woman. She knew Myra wasn’t stupid, nor was she a rat. She could’ve told the boss that she punched out late finishing her chores because she helped Maricela, but she took the loss. Unbeknownst to Myra, Hector overheard the scolding words from Mitch (their ass-wipe manager), yet Myra didn’t budge. She knew that Myra wouldn’t sell anyone out to save her skin, and even though the young girl was a bit naïve, she was a survivor. And a survivor will always trump the strongest or smartest because you need both to be one. Then Myra graciously took the plate and dined with everyone that day and onward.

As that day was ending, Maricela came over to Myra with a few bags of grocery items from the kitchen.

Maricela asked, “Ju take this home, si?”

“Um. It’s okay. I’m fine.... really. Thank you!”

Pulling Myra aside, Maricela said, “How much do ju think these kids really eat? They no eat, and we here all days.”

“I know,” Myra told her, “but I can’t afford any more problems. It’s complicated.”

Maricela said, “Baby. I don’t know why they put a smart girl like ju here, but ju’re one of us now. Like ju, we make pennies with no overtime. Sure, we have a union, but that’s to keep the cops from sending us home. So we find our own way. Tu comprendes?”

Myra slowly nodded, then reluctantly took her offerings. “Thank you,” she said softly.

Maricela smiled. At that moment, Myra realized that she could do this the hard way but for what reason; besides, they had just as much to lose as she did. She was tired of merely getting by, so she took Maricela’s help.

As the days went by, Myra bartered chores for favors. She started with Maricela’s work; then she offered to review school homework for some of their kids, as many of the staffers were new English speakers... Maricela quickly took a liking to the young genius, immediately seeing her potential, so she kept her close and protected her like she was her own, which meant no harassment from anyone or else. One day, she followed Myra home to see how she lived and was shocked. The cheap linens, the poorly constructed loft... “Que en Jesus,” she exclaimed. She then turned to Myra and told her that her cousins in South America lived better than this, and they don’t have consistent running water. “I gonna help ju, okay? It’s no problem.” Looking around, she said, “Ay Mi Madre.”

As days followed, she started showing Myra the ropes of how the other half lived. How the illegals survived under the radar and how her uneasy situation could be lessened. From helping her get necessities to showing her the tricks of how they split incoming inventories amongst themselves. Any time before today, she would have jumped at the chance to judge blindly, but now, she was the destitute criminal in need; how ironic.

A few weeks after had passed, and life wasn't so bad. Things were finally becoming easier. One day, Myra was coming back from the bathroom for lunch. She sat down to eat when Julio started losing his mind at the lunch table, knocking down Cesci's lunch offering. He was served a court order for his third DUI and would undoubtedly be deported for this. This would be a travesty seeing that Julio was their daily ride. As they all sat nervously contemplating what to do, Myra innocently picked up the paper he angrily threw on the floor, analyzing it carefully. When done, she quickly got up, looked on the board for the on-call union attorney number, and called him. Seeing Myra take action, Maricela asked everyone to quiet down again, to listen. Myra said something to him based on the paperwork and quoted law. She then called over Julio and told him to speak to the attorney. At first, he didn't, cursing her out in anger, telling her to mind her own damn business..., but Maricela told him to shut the fuck up and do as she says. Grabbing the phone angrily and speaking with the guy in Spanish out of spite, his anger dissipated in a matter of seconds. He swiftly turned to Myra in shock and told the guy he was on his way. Then he kissed Myra on the cheek, then ran out the door shouting, "Gracias, mi hermosa genio blanco. [Thank you, my white, beautiful genius]."

A confused Myra turned to Maricela to find her smiling and winking back at her. It turns out he was served an illegal

ticket, as the date of the infraction occurred after the disaster, making it illegal to prove or convict. He was also to be restored financially for the unlawful arrest, as the situation confirmed he possibly suffered a hate crime. By week's end, they expeditiously cut him a check for \$ 9,600.00 which was ten times what he paid to get out of jail. In gratitude, he gave a large sum to Maricela, but she told him to give it to Myra.

“What the hell?” Myra said. “I can't take this, Julio.”

Maricela knew that Julio's family was in construction and said, “Myra, maybe there's another way.”

Word underground was that Maricela had a new legal eagle who could get anyone off. In the past, employees started complaining about personal legal matters to the union's on-call lawyer, who was supposed to provide fifteen hours a week of free legal support but didn't; too lazy to help fight personal matters, many thought. Except for immigration and employment issues because terminated members don't pay dues. Word got out about Julio's fortune, so Maricela convinced Myra to help but through her, for obvious reasons. As Myra started to look at their issues, she realized that they were being wrongfully exploited, and she worked hard to get their charges reduced to petty infractions or got rid of them altogether. She then worked with the attorney by prepping the complaint files for him, making it seamless to execute, which increased his win ratios. As the success rate grew and Maricela became her gatekeeper, Myra slowly got everything she needed, which was a win-win. Whatever Maricela said to work on, Myra did so privately while the team protected her interests, keeping her new role a closely held secret. Everything from getting her apartment patched up to providing her with state-of-the-art tech with untraceable encryption, so she could continue to help. Her code name was "chica dorada," and only the kitchen crew was allowed to use it. She was their

ace-in-a-hole, and even the kitchen manager had to go through Maricela to get in on the action, as long as he agreed to give Myra every other weekend off, secretly. By the end of the week, the team set up a little office for her to use in the old make-out pantry. As time went by, Mitch reported to Dr. Mags how well Myra was doing and how the staff adored her. But their adoration didn't end there.

A Month Later...

Myra returned home, escorted by Tari and Maricela, blindfolded. As they walked through her door, Myra smiled, expecting a birthday cake and the new bathroom Julio's cousin promised for weeks now, but her new comrades had something else in mind. As coworkers and friends stood around quietly, waiting to capture her reaction, Maricela could not hold back her suspense and pulled the blindfold off from Myra's eyes. "Now, Myra," said Maricela

Before today, Myra was never the easily emotional type. Tears could fall from time to time but lament; NEVER. She was much too proud. When she got into Bradford Law, she didn't wince once, as it was expected. Even when she graduated in the top 1% of her male-dominated Poli-SCI and Pre-LAW studies, she didn't bother to attend the ceremony. She was so used to getting what she wanted that gratitude became oblivious to her. Yet, that wasn't the case this evening, and Myra wasn't the same person anymore. "**SURPRISE**" everyone shouted. She turned to Maricela's shoulder, crying, filled with so much reverence, hugging her and then everyone else around.

They celebrated her birthday with a completely made-over apartment, showcasing newly walled-in appliances and all the lavish fixings, giving the once tight-knit place a roomier look and feel, ultimately taking her breath away. On the new kitchen table were a sea of coconuts filled Pina Coladas with *horchatas and rum blends* on pirate ship coasters to match the navy-blue, sailboat-themed apartment. Even her birthday cake was in the shape of a sailboat. “*How did they know I loved boats,*” she thought. She could not have asked for a better birthday gift or housewarming. Suddenly, the same small-ass apartment didn’t bother her so much. It was so beautiful with fresh paint, new flooring, and even a built-in electric fireplace under a 50-inch wall-mounted TV with a hutch disguised as a painting, just in case she needed to hide it. The living space was perfectly complemented with gorgeous new furniture and wooden flooring. The upper loft-style bedroom was now fully designed like a boat with new built-in drawers below and wind-sail curtains to match for privacy. The empty walled closets now had shelving with wicker baskets for beautiful storage.

She brushed her hands on the built-in desk and smiled at the brand-new island-themed living room set. She could smell the sweet scents of fragranced candles hanging in her new soaking tub while staring down at the smiling faces downstairs dancing to music and enjoying the new place with her, thinking, *Oh my God, I really love you guys*. As Hector and his boys started playing some music, Julio grabbed Myra, pulling her downstairs to dance with him. Tari was making out with Raul in the corner by the patio while everyone partied and drank thru the night. From jelly shots to dance battles, the night couldn’t have resolved more perfectly.

As the evening aged, Maricela noticed Myra happily straightening up her place and got angry. “Aye, Myra, sit down,” she exclaimed. “You don’t get a present to clean it

yourself the same day... it is a curse where I'm from. Celaya; Novella and Cesci, An dela; epa, epa!"

The women happily grabbed the cleaning items from Myra and finished up for her.

"Myra," said Maricela. "Come here." She was now sitting near her SBA godmother, of sorts. "Myra, ju know me, si? I no get into people's problem, but you must let go," she whispered to her whilst knitting.

"What do you mean?" Myra said, perplexed.

Maricela pointed to the upside-down crucifix she had tucked in her shirt. Myra looked back at her in shock. "How did you... I don't understand?" she said.

But Maricela didn't say anything beyond that; she just put Myra's head on her shoulders as they sat, staring at the mini outdoor fire pit before them. She didn't have to say much more; somehow, Myra knew what she meant.

After everyone left, a sleepless Myra walked down towards the patio where the fire pit was still lit in the dead of night. She sat down in front of the pit, staring purposelessly at the flames. With the crucifix in her hand, rubbing it over and over, yet nothing happened while she sat rapt by the sounds of crackling firewood. As she drifted to sleep; her memories of that night started to come back; thoughts she'd hoped were blocked for good.

Reminiscing about Em's death, Myra started to recall that the drink Em gave her was laced. Then there was a room with the six men standing around her. Then waking up to the stench of feces and death with no shoes or panties, and those same men, all dead and laid out around her, symbolically. She later recalled going to the bathroom to throw up, finding Em's face-down on the putrefied, filthy bathroom floor. Her throat sliced, which damn near terrified the shit out of her. As she looked closer, Em's eyes were staring aimlessly at the ceiling. Myra

saw herself holding her dead body, her socks now soaked from the bloody floor. Upon looking down at her face, the dead Em quickly stared back at her, saying, “You happy now, Bitch?”

Myra screamed... then immediately awoke from the night terror. She looked down to find Em’s crucifix burning in flames but couldn’t get to it. *Shit!* Her mind howled, freaking out. As it burned, she thought, just like Em, she couldn’t save it. She just had to watch it burn. *Now there’s nothing left. How did this happen? How did it fall from over here?* So many questions, yet no answers would come tonight. She then turned to the clock, 3:33 am. *Fuck!* she thought. *A few hours left.*

She swiftly went back to bed, quickly passing out. As she slept, a dark figure emerged from her wall mirror, watching her. Its wall-to-wall fluorescent green eyes glowed at the sleeping beauty, watching every breath she took while an 80’s love song played on the radio.

CHAPTER FOUR

“BON^DFIRE”



It was another dreamy weekend in Rennington; the mountainous air was slightly chilling with brisk winds offering a perfect prelude to the much-anticipated fall semester. On-campus, students and families were still getting settled in. The excitement of SBA’s new amenities and semi-public facilities was currently being swarmed with guests scoping with curiosity. Some students and adults were lined up for the new on-campus job openings, especially at the new illustrious dome-covered in-outdoor 3-D theater. With classes officially starting next week, Registration was forced to stay open all weekend to catch up with late enrollment. SBA was busier than it had been in decades. The same busyness could be said around town. Many stores, desperately trying to remove old merchandise, were selling their current inventory on-the-cheap to make way for new inventory when the fall started. These businesses benefited greatly from *MalCORP*’s free renovations and wanted to be prepared for the slew of tourists destined to come, even before the town fully relaunches, next spring.

The stores and strip malls were packed with shoppers taking advantage of the incredibly ridiculous deals too good to pass up. The atmosphere was so fierce that many started fighting over non-essentials, direly. As Myra and Tari were leaving, they witnessed a physical altercation break-out, allowing many to loot the store needlessly. It was nothing short

of insane. Laughing at the ordeal, the two women ran to Tari's car to unload again, stuffing what they could in the back. Myra started looking around, taking in the sweet autumn air before getting in the car. As Tari drove off, Myra was reassembling her ankle bracelet, then noticed the sign for SBA's Bonfire event at the school, sponsored by *MalCORP*. *What?* she thought. *This is the second biggest event the school has had in just a few weeks from the re-opening and BBQ. Strange...*

Myra asked, "Hey, is the Bonfire open to everyone in the town?"

Tari said, "Yeah? It's a thing here. Why?"

"Don't you think it's a little funny?" Myra speculated. "The same company that's paying for the renovations is also sponsoring this event too. I mean, it's a bit much, right?"

Tari laughed. "Girl, you think too much. People don't care how things get done; if it's free, we wit it."

Myra said, "Free, huh... Tell that to the Haitians who got screwed after the 2010 earthquake."

"Yeah, Girl. You got me with that one?" Tari retorted.

The two women laughed over Myra's wisecrack, then quickly changed the conversation back to gossiping about the latest work rumors and drama. They carried on until they got to the entry gate, where even more congestion could be felt. Myra was shocked at the amount of police on-site searching about. *Uh no*, she thought. *Why are they here?* As Tari pulled up, they were asked for IDs that were taken to the security booth for vetting. As they ran ID checks, Myra's heart stopped. If they were here for her, she was going down. As the cops looked back towards the car, another officer followed the check-in attendant to talk with the women. He directed the ladies on where to park and waited for them to exit the vehicle. The security clerk said, "Hi, ladies. Sorry about all the confusion, but we had to make sure that you were employees

or students. No one else can enter or leave the premises this weekend until the cops finish their sweep.”

Myra asked, “So, we’re okay?”

Tari replied, “Girl chill... of course. Why you trippin?” Then, looking back at the security guard, Tari asked, “Why duh cops?”

“I’m afraid I can’t answer that,” he told her. “Officer Daniels will escort you both past the media into the building. Gather your things now cause you won’t be allowed back out.”

The women did as instructed, and the relieved Myra quickly proceeded inside the building, covering her face with a hoodie before entering. Tari noticed the cops focused on the back of the building and had set up barricades to ensure no one moved back there. “Myra, look?” Tari exclaimed.

Myra followed Tari, and they noticed the police apprehending a homeless man with clothes saturated in blood and something even more wretched as he seemingly soiled himself. The man was shouting all types of nonsense that the women couldn’t make out, as they were too far away. The Sergeant was talking to Dr. Mags, whose demeanor was solemn yet infuriated. As the two watched the man get handcuffed, then later seated in the police car, he never took his terror-filled eyes off the woods that reared the school. Myra saw the petrified look on his face but was confused about why they needed so many officers to apprehend just one feeble homeless man. As the students crowded the breezeway window, Myra left to go back to her apartment, as she had an early day tomorrow.

The Week of the Bonfire...

The week felt endless, especially for the kitchen staff. The long days of preparations and organizing were beginning to take a toll on everyone, and the nights were even worse. With all the extra work she was doing, Myra felt very fatigued but never relented, as she found creative ways to keep herself amused with her irksome day-in and day-out routine. All she heard was gossip, mainly about the new professor and how he was stuck leading the **NIGHT SCHOOL PROGRAM**, SBA's haven for campus degenerates, and academic losers of the academy's secondary section. Several students found this unfair, as only the worst of the worst could benefit from his highly sophisticated noesis. Many wrote emails of incongruity with the Interim-Chancellor's decision, some demanding her reconsideration. But there was nothing she could do, as many of the tenured faculty were unwilling to share their academic programs with the new popular professor. With this, only students needing to graduate or severely failing were auto-enrolled, no exceptions. Myra thought the idea was sort of brills. At a minimum, this would keep the teachers happy and comply with SBA's labor agreements. Besides, the students who should get the most help, the ones often disenfranchised, would now get the support they needed, theoretically; yet the bitching continued.

It was the night before the bonfire, and the kitchen was busier than ever. The Olympic size firepit was finally fashioned, beautifully garnished with decorations. The stage was constructed, and DJ-ARK tested the sound system early to ensure the music is set for tomorrow, enthralling students ready for the pending event. With the all-day buffet finally completed, the cafeteria could be officially closed tomorrow as

planned, leaving staff free to participate in the festivities. For the regular full-time staff, this meant a free day schedule which they appreciated. Still, the volunteers were not allowed to participate and had to work a mandatory full day where needed. As Myra walked out of the kitchen, she was confused about why she was being called to clean up in the front when she was on-call with the union's attorney settling a grievance. "What the hell, Mitch?" she exclaimed.

But her manager noted that since the Interim-Chancellor and other leaders were possibly coming, she had to be present; otherwise, someone could get curious, and the jig would be up. An angry Myra stormed over to the cashier's station, preparing for the evening's pending closure, taking over for Lula, who was there prior. Both ladies were clearing up the area, lifting the remaining serving trays onto the mobile rack for dishwashing. As they toiled, both heard the stampede of stilettos and turned to see the cause. They noticed a group of faculty vixens dressed slightly seductive enter the room, quickly seating in unison while facing the entrance in a desperado momentum. It was evident that they were waiting for someone to enter and take immediate notice. "Seriously," Myra exclaimed. Seeing this, Myra and Lula began laughing as they found this behavior too comical for words. Afterward, a group of men walked through the door, some with hard hats and drawings in their hands. The men seemed uneasy, worried about the inspection findings like they were guilty of something. Entering last was Dr. Nolan and his retinue of *MalCORP* engineers and developers; all there to consult him.

As *MalCORP*'s high-ranked representative, Nolan was in charge of signing off on all construction, and final improvement builds. Any failures would result in payments being held in escrow until further notice. As he looked around, his face seemed unimpressed with the design executions, as

were his colleagues. He was staring at the construction materials used, then speaking to his fellow associates in German while Rennington's on-site Building Inspectors waited in great anticipation. As he turned to them to consult, he noticed Myra dumping ice into the serving stations to cool them off for cleaning. He quickly smirked, watching her comically entertain her coworker, as it was apparent the grouped women in the room were at odds. Unbeknownst to them both, the vixens noticed his gaze and proceeded to rectify the damage immediately. Amongst the women sitting in the cafeteria were:

- Krystina (Krys) Whyte; Head of **Academic Affairs** and beloved niece of the town's mayor. She wasn't your typical Northern belle. Although she was somewhat of a 'girl-next-door' hottie, with her sexy smile and perfect blonde up-dos, she was a super snob with all the right connections that made her feel like the real prize here. Everyone in Rennington knew her family's name, and unlike her other colleagues, Krys came from real money. So, in her eyes, the other women didn't stand a chance, as a man like Dr. Nolan would only seriously look in one direction when it came to choosing.' Of course, there were the others:

- Jessica (Jes) VanBete – The okay-enough, looking, bobble-head **Social Studies** teacher and Head Cheer Coach. She was Krys' 2nd in command. The one destined to get her best leftovers.

- Alice (Al) Salmon – SBA's **IT Manager & Head of the Tech Club**. She was the wiz of the group. A former SBA student that went all the

way academically but found herself stuck, career-wise. The cute enough brunette was no more than a lackey to Krys, as Krys' family sponsored her through college.

• Sabrina (Bri) DeVaine – By far the least attractive of the bunch. She had a shrewish look to her that made her appear ‘off’ from her comrades; however, as the ‘**Receptionist**’ to the Chancellor with access to all employee and student records, she proved by far to be the most resourceful.

• Nancy (Nan) Jones – The second to last woman in the row; and SBA's **Guidance Counselor**. She was the latest addition to the Rubies. Although she was a bit dim-witted, this sweet socialite was mildly recruited because her family owned the largest farm in town, which proved advantageous, especially since the fire.

Then seated at the end of the same table was...

• Elizabeth (Liz) Cartier – If anyone could give J. Alba or Lo- a serious run for their money, it would be her. No one could quite understand how SBA found this gorgeous former teen model, but she gave the women a run for their money and men since her arrival. All anyone guessed of her was that she was possibly linked to a Latino Mafia and that Father Flynn brought her here on his return from a sabbatical from the Republic of Honduras. No other records of her past existed, but then again, no one dared to

look, as she was too gorgeous for anyone to care.

Initially, Liz was the least accepted of the group as many of the women looked down on her and tried to oust her, but their efforts failed thanks to her secret lover and champion, Father Flynn. The former Chancellor forced everyone to accept her and made them recognize her or else... and when she got her degree, he placed her on an SBA pedestal that made her socially equal to Krystina. Still, Liz never deviated from the Ruby's script. When the women (re)solidified the League of Rennington Rubies (*Rennington's Beauties*), the goal was to ensure all members' success or happiness, starting from top to least. One's rank was based on one's current wealth and power when initiated, and since the league was the closest thing to an official sisterhood in town, the rules were simple; the highest-ranked was the leader. You were a member for life, even if you no longer found it opportune, and like any true sisterhood, your secrets stayed and died with the group or else. Krystina was the highest-ranked; therefore, she was the first in line for the spoils, so she had first dibs on the new beau, which restricted the others unless she failed. Anyone outside the spectrum was considered casualties, ones that had to be mitigated as soon as possible.

Krystina whispered to Liz, "Take care of the construction cartel, will you."

Cartier replied, "Roger that!"

Then she turned to Jess, telling her to "Watch out for the kitchen staff. I'm going in."

Jessica concurred, saying, "On it."

Then Jessica walked over towards the kitchen manager, speaking flirtatiously with him in private. At the same time, Liz talked to the lead Inspector, a fellow Latino who'd gladly

follow her, anywhere as she lured him away from the group for a private conversation. Unbeknownst to Myra, who was washing down her workstation, a chubby student walked over to her.

With a macho swagger, Jorge demanded, “Hey? Get me a cake!”

Myra grunted, “Get lost, Jorge.”

“I’m starving, biotch,” Jorge retorted. “Now get me the freaking cake, CHICA!”

Standing up, angered, Myra told him, “Listen, Horchatabreath. We go over this every fucking day. The system says no desserts for you. It’s bad enough I sneak you shit every once in a while, where might I add, I could get in trouble if caught so” she chided, moving in close, with a dark, low tone, “**BACK THE FUCK UP.**”

As he lowered his head in shame, Myra began to feel crappy. She didn’t mean to hurt his feelings but knew that he was a diabetic seizure waiting to happen. She then took a pre-wrapped angel food cake with fruit toppings from the rack and slipped it on the edge of the counter. After shoving the concealed snack to the floor in front of him, she then whispered, “Five-second rule,” then winked. Jorge smiled graciously, quickly grabbing the snack, then left. As Myra shook her head, smiling (with a pity-filled brow) in his direction. She then turned and noticed the good Dr. Nolan slightly smirking in her path. She deflected, looking down to avoid making further eye contact, but Krystina walked towards her to her discontentment. “Well, shit on me,” she whispered to herself.

Myra couldn’t stand Krystina; she was always preaching that *non-publican* secular bullshit where “Wall Lovers” and “*ConFUCKERates*” would hail to incite more hate than true patriotism, which they claim to love so much more. Plus, her

Schlafly ideology was far too distressing for the West Coast feminist. As she approached Myra, she mentally prepared herself for the sure-to-be annoying encounter.

Krystina asked, “A fresh cup-of-Joe please?”

“Sorry, we’re closed!” Myra said brusquely. “I’m literally shutting down right...”

Krys cut her off. “I didn’t ask you if you were closed. I asked for a cup of coffee, or do I need to report this to Mags, too?”

Myra then noticed Krys turning around, smiling coquettishly at the distant Dr. Nolan and him responding with a polite nod. Then she started posing like a typical Barbie, which pissed Myra off. She wasn’t jealous, just disgusted as she believed that women were too accomplished today to still play these types of petty belittlement games in the hope of having mystic meat for dinner.

Smirking at Myra’s agitated face, she leaned in closer and said, “I’m all for reform, sweetie. It’s what keeps this country so great, but only if the illegals or, in your case, criminals remain obedient. Got it? Now get me my fucking coffee, and I want it really hot, K?”

Dumbfounded by Krystina’s boldness, usually, she would try to be the bigger person but felt that this was an opportunity to remind this bitch of why so many women sacrificed so much for equality. After all, *a lesson yearned is a prank earned*. Altering her demeanor to fictitiously subservient, Myra said, “You know what, Krystina; you’re absolutely right. What the fuck was I thinking? Let me order you a fresh batch from the back; the shit up here is old and not good enough for you.”

Myra then yelled out to the kitchen staff, placing the order, “Oye Héctor! Un café **ESPECIAL** por favor para la Perra-Barbie” [Hey Hector! One **SPECIAL** coffee for Bitch-Barbie]? He looked up at her, shocked, saying, “Qué fue eso?”

[What's that]?" He realized that she must be really pissed to request this, so he repeated her request, just to be sure. "Si, mi amor. **MUCHO ESPECIAL** mi hombre," she answered with a serious gaze, grinning in his direction. He winked back at her and proceeded with the order, taking a coffee pot with him in the back. Secretly observing, Nolan was laughing internally at the poor woman's soon-to-be misfortune. After serving it to her, Myra proceeded to ring her up, but she walked away, mocking Myra's statement from earlier, *Can't charge if you're closed, right? Ta Ta*, she exclaimed, snickering back to her seat. Yet, Myra wasn't upset at all. Watching Krystina and her minion's finally exit the now closed cafeteria... Myra happily watched while she enjoyed the perfectly prepared libation, thinking (in her best moronic bumpkin accent). *Yes-sir-re Bob; you enjoy that creamy brew right there, buddy. A regular Joe, for a stupid...*. Whistling happily, she then returned to complete her chores. After cleaning all the main stations, she kneeled to unplug the machines when someone rang the register bell. Agitated, she yelled, "WE'RE CLOSED"! (whispering) Jesus, can't you read?" she exclaimed.

"My apologies," said a profoundly soothing yet unfamiliar voice. Which caused her to look at who it was.

"Oh," she whispered, shocked by the customer...

Smiling, Dr. Nolan said, "Although, you forgot to display your closed sign."

Feeling silly, Myra responded, "Right!". Nervous but in control. "Sorry bout... What can I get you?"

"A black coffee, please, but um (leaning in) if you could hold the '**especial**, I'd appreciate it," he said with a disarming grin.

Shit, she thought. [Smiling]. "Coming right up," Myra announced with a nervous smirk.

Myra turned to see the coffee pot behind her empty. She checked to make sure the backroom staff left, then proceeded to make a new batch. As she was preparing his coffee, Myra noticed his reflection on the silver-plated coffee machine. She caught the intensity in his eyes as they suggestively roamed her body, but when she turned, he was face down reading his tablet. *Weird*, she thought. Then she took his mug and proceeded to pour in the new brew. Before he could ask, she refused to take any money. “Don’t worry about it. We’re closed anyway, so!” she said. As she passed the mug to him, their fingers slightly touched, and a warm sensation rushed through her like a tidal wave, but she managed to keep her calm. Their eyes quickly locked, but then her supervisor called her back. **“MYRA, TODAY!”**

“COMING!” she yelled. She then noticed Mitch was still talking to one of those Rennington Rusties (as she called them) and became angered towards the useless summons.

“What... you stupid muthafu...?” Catching herself, she then turned back to see Nolan smirking.

Dr. Nolan said, “Myra, is it? Nice to meet you. My name is...”

She nodded. “I...” she stammered, cutting him off. “I know who you are.”

Dr. Nolan, slightly smirking, said, “Hmmm... Well then. See you around”; he then nodded and calmly walked away with his team following behind him. Myra watched him strut away; his confidence alone was hypnotic, but she thought to herself, *what the fuck are you doing? Questioning her motives at this point. Why the big thrill over some dude?*

As Myra entered the back room to wait for Mitch, Lula brought back the emptied register for lock-up. After Jessica left his office, she and Myra exchanged a brief stare-down before Myra entered the room. As she inquired, “What is it?” he gave

her the supplies Maricela left her with a list of other assignments for her to work on in private. There was also an envelope with a few prepaid debit cards for her as payment. “Big tippers, huh?” he said.

Myra was confused; she knew she checked with Maricela before she left. There was no new work. Huh? Changing the subject. “What did that one want?” she asked.

“Who? Jess? She was asking about our talents for the showcase tomorrow, but I told her not to worry. No one is performing here,” said Mitch.

Myra asked, “Why not?”

Mitch took a deep breath and replied, “Politics... plus, I have a date tomorrow night with her and don’t feel like supervising if you must know.” But Myra knew better; he was lying. The Kitchen team was purposely being excluded. *Bitches*, she thought.

“By the way... you’re working clean-up duty tomorrow?” said a reluctant Mitch. “Really, MITCH? Really?” Myra said.

The Bonfire...

The stage was filled with a slew of unique performances by the SBA faculty and staff. It was the school’s way of giving back to the students, their families, and the community by entertaining them for one night before school was fully in gear. Krys’ voice was horrendous. Her poor attempt to resurrect a Valli classic song [Greece] was somehow well received, as the crowd seemed to take a liking to the poorly constructed routine. Shaking her head laughing, Myra was elated that she was not allowed to participate. “These people aren’t ready for **The WC?**” she exclaimed. Although she was not happy to be on

clean-up duty for the rest of the event, it beats this superficial bullshit. As she waved at Tari and a few other coworkers, seeing her kitchen comrades, not on stage bothered her. Although not said, it wasn't hard to guess why they didn't want them to perform, **INEQUITY**. Sure, they can perform for smaller or specific cultural events but not when media was present, as they would clearly outshine the others. It was times like this that Myra was proud to be from a Semite nation-race, as the cruelty of discrimination in a place where up 'til the fire had no consistent Wi-Fi feels pretty damn lame.

But it was SBA's loss, as she remembered from her birthday party that not only was Hector a great singer, but his band was spectacular. As she was walking around picking up trash with her garbage stick, she smelled a distinct aroma in the air which quickly exhilarated her otherwise grim predicament. *Oh God, yes, please. Just need a hit*, she pondered. She quickly followed the familiar fragrance to the back of the outside bleachers. Myra was on a mission; neutralize target; confiscate joint. As she approached the pleasantly pungent location, she found herself below the back bleachers, deep in the heart of the ominous area, making it hard to see who was there. She moved in closer to get a better look and found someone she didn't expect.

Surprised, Myra asked, "What... what are you doing here?"

Smiling uneasily, Dr. Nolan said, "Praying!" Then he laughed. "What does it look like?" Slowly blowing the smoke in the air, he added, sarcastically, "You're not going to tell on me, are you?"

Myra, slowly smirking. "Depends," she quipped. "Are you going to share?"

Dr. Nolan offered a slight laugh, then turned in her direction. "But of course."

Myra sat down next to him, back-to-back, in the dark corner, sharing a joint. For Myra, the quality was genuinely superb. She could feel the Sativa purifying her like a heavenly waterfall; even the taste of the smoke was exceptional.

Myra asked, “My God! Where in the hell did you get this?”

“Romania, I think.”

“Seriously?”

Dr. Nolan replied, “Yes. They do sell weed worldwide; you know.”

“Smart-ass...” she quipped whilst laughing at his cynicism. As the two talked over a spliff, she realized he was surprisingly down to earth, which she did not expect. This coming from a man whose shoes were worth more than her entire wardrobe, yet he needed a joint just to center. It’s incredible how limiting perceptions can be.

Myra told him, “Don’t worry. You don’t have much competition.”

Dr. Nolan laughed. “Thanks, but that’s not what I’m worried about.”

“What then?” she asked.

“Didn’t expect all of this excess... I don’t like spotlights...”

“Whelp Sherlock; it’s a little late for that right now,” Myra said, smirking.

“How observant of you,” Dr. Nolan said, smiling. “By the way, you read palms too?”

Myra laughed. “Ah, ouch much. Excuse me, Doctor Andr...”

Cutting her off, he said, “You can call me Malik.”

“Malik. I thought your name was Andr...”

“It is, but I prefer Malik. Let’s just make this our little secret, k?” he mocked whispered to her.

“Okay, Malik? Or whatever you choose to call yourself,” Myra said. “However, I’m sad to inform you that I must confiscate all drugs as a covert member of the security detail.”

Dr. Nolan laughed again. She liked his laugh a lot. “Really? So, I’m guessing if I comply, this infraction stays between us?”

Myra nodding in agreement with his terms, smirking at her wicked deed.

He handed over his platinum-cased cigarette container with 20 junctions inside. Then the Announcer called his name, “**PAGING DOCTOR NOLAN.**” The two turned to each other and laughed. “It’s showtime,” she said. Then she stood up, offering to hoist him up, too. He stood over her like a tower, staring directly at the stage to their right, shaking his head, then looked back at Myra smiling.

“Thank you again, madam security detail,” he said with a smile.

Myra, shaking her head and smiling, replied, “I’m not really security.”

“Oh, I know,” he said.

He then skirted past her, hands in pockets heading towards the stage. As he turned the corner, Myra shouted, “Don’t break a leg, aight!”

He turned back, grinning, and tipping his skully cap, then proceeded onward. As he approached the stairs, one of his comrades threw him a soccer ball as he was getting ready to showcase his chosen talent, but unbeknownst to him, one of the professors changed his itinerary as a cruel prank. *Let’s see how Doctor Do-me-Right likes this shit!*

The Announcer said: “And now taking the SBA stage for the first time, we have our very own Dr. Nolan performing a guitar solo.”

Myra could see the shocked look on his face as Dr. Nolan looked over to the Interim Chancellor, who also was seemingly confused. Still, he continued, either way, throwing his celebrity signed soccer ball into the excited crowd. He then walked over to the musician's section, noticing the villainous grins of his SBA fellow-teachers, and smiled back towards them, indicating he'd figured out their plan. Then he walked up to the lead performer and whispered something that got him excited. The man then handed over his guitar to the good doctor; then, he signaled others to join them on stage.

Calculus Teacher Jonathan Mueller exclaimed, "You have got to be shitting me! Son-of-a-gun plays the guitar too. Seriously?"

Suddenly, Hector and his band were on the stage as a backup for the intro and further melodies. Myra screamed and clapped as she was elated to see that. Hector had been dying for better promotion of his band, and now they would get the well-deserved coverage for sure. Myra laughed as Mitch sat helplessly at the ordeal with an angry Jessica walking away from him.

From the moment Nolan's fingers played the first chord, the crowd ruptured in pure delight. The mashup songs he chose were perfect: 1 [Heaven (*Spanish*)], 2 [Life is a Highway], & 3 [Power Of Love]. With Hector and his boys executing the intro Latin composition nicely, the Hispanic crowd rose in full appreciation for the inclusive music, especially since it was being played out at an event that seemed all too limiting for black and brown townfolk in the past. The crowd couldn't contain their sheer fervor anymore; it was indeed something special. They couldn't believe how moving it all was and when the Rennington choir and SBA glee clubs ran onstage to back him up, it rocked the event down. That moment was so well-orchestrated that Myra noticed many people tearing up in the

crowd. *Who is this guy?* She thought. This was all too phantasmagoric, yet the nostalgia didn't end there.

During Nolan's encore, he walked over to the audience and took the hand of a kindhearted, elderly nun, and gently escorted her onstage. She was one of the oldest and dearest members of the town and a spiritual pillar of the community, but today, she was romanticized by the town's newly beloved and most eligible bachelor. It was a charming gesture; with all the women present, he picked her. She was just another Sister to the church and a devout servant. Now she was swaying with SBA's new beau, making it hard for many to look away from their beauteous encounter. The move was unquestionably the most compassionate act that anyone has ever seen. With the media coverage and other video recordings uploaded, the feed circulated more quickly than anything SBA has ever produced; now, no one would ever forget the lovely night that became a part of Rennington's history forever. Later that night, sitting on her bed wearing a tank-top and sexy boy-shorts, Myra watched the Bonfire video repeatedly (blushing uncontrollably) while studying his every move, focusing on the sexy man dancing; entertaining, and wooing the crowd with his melodic gifts. *Jesus*, she thought. As she found it was all so sensual. She then took another joint and began smoking it to cure her heated arousal but to no avail, realizing that the taste wasn't nearly as sweet as the one the two had shared together.

She smiled, recalling the flavor of his lips. She then closed her eyes to revel in it until she fell asleep. Yet, she was not alone in her room. The mirror was watching her again, but this time an invisible grotesque arm reached out towards her, unable to grasp her flesh but hovered regardless. As she smiled in her sleep, she felt a gentle breeze caress her body, brushing over her back, then hips... downward, tingling her in her

The Night Professor

slumber. The darkness was with her always, never leaving.
Never!

CHAPTER FIVE “SWIM M[E]AT”



It had been a week since the school opened, yet people were still talking about the bonfire. The success of that event spread beyond the community, giving residents hope that Rennington was thriving once more. Staff and faculty were in the midst of ‘first week,’ looking forward to the much-anticipated successful academic year. Still, everyone was excited to see what other surprises lurked around the school’s quarters. Students could be seen walking about, listening to prior generational goldies, inspired, and anxiously trying to rekindle the musical memory of that special evening. One could hear SBA’s various singing clubs practicing in the halls, adding their unique rendition of prior generational hits from cherished artists, filling the halls with a new multicultural sound, originally foreign to this region. And none of this would’ve been possible if not for him.

There wasn’t a single hall, REC-room, or pavilion on campus that didn’t utter his name. The women could not stop talking about his magnetic charm as he artistically wooed the crowds with his stage presence. His unique raw talent was nothing short of stellar, but what took their breath away was his dance with the sweet-hearted elder-sister nun, Sister Katheryn (Ryn) Kroger. Sister Ryn, the virgin nun (as many knew of her), apparently lost everything when the fire spread through the academy, destroying her on-campus home and precious family’s artifacts. As a pillar of the community, she had lost so much over the years but never gave up hope. She

seemed to keep joyful in a town fighting against insurmountable odds, full of faith that things would always turn around.

Yet, that night, on camera, it appeared that he ostensibly serenaded her during his encore, filling everyone with absolute glee, as she repeatedly whispered something to the effect of, “I’m ready...”, back to the charismatic entertainer. To see her happily riveted by Dr. Nolan made it seem all the more nostalgic. Yet, unbeknownst to all, those moments would be her last. For the next night, she was found dead in her apartment, gently passing in her sleep. To many, the 81-year-old ‘town angel’ died the way God intended, in a sweet slumber, after being swept in the arms of a perfect gentleman the night prior. For unintended reasons, the act of kindness was heavily revered, even for Nolan’s sake.

Furthermore, the meager woman was not meager as perceived. Although she had devoted her life to the church, she was in possession of several estate properties that were entrusted to the Archdiocese until she made a last-minute change the week of her death. Now, these properties were tied to many development projects that suddenly were bestowed to *MalCORP*’s Restoration Foundation, as written in her will, a few days before her death. Her estate lawyer informed the Archdiocese that she had no loved ones, and without cause or reason, she called him to redo her will that week. Yet even with a compelling story, Dr. Nolan wouldn’t comment, letting the media outreach stall during their inquest at the wake. Instead, he honored her memory by commissioning gardens for her in the town’s square and on-campus. Now all could pay their respects, as these gardens would showcase lovely photos of the nun during her life. As Myra read the article to the kitchen crew, they all felt dumbstruck by the genuinely magnificent gesture.

Faculty Session...

During a routine faculty planning meeting, Dr. Nolan was discussing *MalCORP*'s plans with the additional properties and assured the worried bunch that *MalCORP* will give the extra revenues to the school first to help put SBA back in the black, then later, the town's most vulnerable and financially impacted areas. The increase would surely secure SBA's deficits and restore all lost wages for the overworked staff and faculty, as *MalCORP* didn't want or need the excess funding. With that relief, the focus was still on how SBA would ensure that the pending seniors matriculated **by December** due to last spring's shutdown? It was too late to ship them to other schools. The problem became a virtual town hall discussion, as many parents were concerned about their child[ren]'s lost time or opportunities. In that board meeting, Dr. Nolan attended remotely (via jet), as he was traveling back to the area after finalizing Nun Ryn's will logistics with the Archdiocese. The meeting solidified that all students who did not matriculate during the prior year must report to Dr. Nolan for all makeup and pending graduation credits, starting next week. As the parents expressed concerns, he assured them that he would focus on putting the seniors and academically challenged students back on track within one semester. The idea seemed both absurd and quite genius, as it was too aggressive to work, but he had a plan.

In the Cafeteria...

Myra worked full days and night shifts for a while, as Lilly was out on (unofficial) maternity leave, leaving Myra alone to cover the register during those weeks. Day in and day out, she sat there listening to privy details of all the happenings at SBA: from break-ups to staff quarrels and sometimes business intel. Everything that was discussed in the food lines became her daily newsfeed. Sometimes, listening to their issues kept her distracted from her worries of praying that she didn't fail the prior week's drug test. The only highlight of her day was when Malik would stop by, which was always on time; 6:00 p.m.

When time, he would often come in with either his T-A's or business associates, as he would have planning sessions with them there instead of his Faculty office. She would always close after 6:00, as it became routine for him to walk up and ask for the non-special coffee, to which she would respond by making him a fresh batch. They would sometimes make small conversation, laughing, and if she heard something interesting, she would share in code; and he always understood. And like clockwork, the SBA Rubies (or Myra's version: Rusties: Krys, Jes, Al, Bri, Nan, and Liz) would all descend, too. These scandalous vultures seemed to have quickly figured out his pattern and would always try to arrive just before he would leave to catch a glimpse of him as he never seemed to use his on-site office. However, there was a reason why they called him the 'tactician.' Nolan would always signal for his staff or constituent to interrupt just before they would fully engage, permitting him a safe-out in their midst, but he would never leave without getting a refill. As much as Myra tried to play dumb, the Rubies knew better. He always came in and was in

some way, shape, or form engaging with that wretched *fair-Lesb* and they just had to know why.

As the dinner rush dissipated, she grabbed her bucket to commence cleanup. Unbeknownst to her, Malik walked into the room early (5:13 p.m.) and sat down near her station to order as usual, but this time he was alone. Surprised at the timing, she could see him looking over towards the register then back at his tablet. She came out with her cleaning supplies, carting them towards the front by the register before they caught eyes. He then walked over to her with his same coffee mug, smiling.

With a curious brow, Myra asked jokingly, “Let me guess... Cognac, right?”

“Ah, no. Not today,” Malik replied. “How’s the food here?”

“Well, the kitchen is technically closed, but I’ve been known to make miracles.”

Smiling, Malik told her, “Surprise me.”

As she went in the kitchen and started to prepare something, the group of horny Rubies entered thereafter, springing into action, as they were finally alone with the dreamy beau. Noticing the change of events, Myra was eavesdropping on the women as they surrounded their prey like fevered wildebeests. Each taking turns flirting with the man about things, less his body parts. As they continued, Krys dismissed her fellow hens and proceeded to talk with him privately. Myra then overheard her telling him Myra’s personal information, records that were supposed to be sealed, yet she divulged Myra’s recent past like it was yesterday’s tea. A now mortified Myra was too nervous to come out. She then asked Mitch to bring the order to him. He did so but mentioned that no one was there when he stepped out.

The Next Day...

It was now 6:09 p.m., and Malik didn't show. It was the same way for the following days. Myra felt exploited. The hateful bitches used her dirty laundry against her, and there was nothing she could do about it. She was thus exposed, which heavily angered her, but that was that. Suddenly, as Myra was closing, Liz entered the room, walking over to her. In anger, Myra accidentally knocked over a bottle of salt that Liz caught and held in her hand.

"Hey? How goes it?" Liz said. "Myra, is it?"

"We're closed," Myra told her coldly.

"Just wanted to say sorry for earlier this week," Liz said. "Krys can be a serious asshole, sometimes."

Myra shrugged. "Don't care. Plus, it's always CHOICE to watch chicken-heads fight fair."

"Look." Liz's voice became grave. "She can be a bitch, but she can make your life either easier or harder. Take it from me; if I were you, I'd avoid being her enemy."

Myra smiled with contempt. "Thanks. But we're still closed."

Liz smiled back and placed the fallen seasoning on the table. She then walked away but turned around one more time. "I don't blame you. For being angry," she said. "He is a dream, and if I were you, I'd..."

Myra cut her off. "Again, I don't know what you're talking about. Men aren't my flavor, remember?"

With a knowing smile, Liz just said, "Okay. If you say so," and walked out.

A mortified Myra could not believe it. Krys abases her in front of a fucking stranger; then she sends her hench-witch to

pry for intel. How dumb does she think I am. Fuck! Reminiscing on her first interaction with Kry's.

Kry's had somehow learned that Myra was Maricela's secret eagle and wanted in or to at least kill the middle man. As Myra was working the weekend after Orientation, Kry's stepped into the unauthorized breakroom and found Myra organizing inventory. While sorting that week's shipment, Myra heard some stilettos clicking on the concrete floor.

"Well, if it isn't the sneaky eagle," Kry's chided. "Nice side hustle."

"Que es?" Myra snapped, hoping to throw her off.

Ignoring her, Kry's said, "Oh, please... I know who you are. Plus, I don't speak 'domestics.' This is a social visit, and since you're new here, I might as well show you the ropes. You see, I'm a Ruby."

Myra laughed. "What, no Diamonds?"

Kry's rolled her eyes. "I don't know who you think you are, but you better learn your place and quick. You don't make a move here without my knowing or getting a cut in the action."

Walking around, Kry's continued. "You see, Myra, my problem is when people like you don't know your place in the food chain. Rubies are like the first ladies of everything in SBA; hell, even the town. And if you're going to offer a service, we need to know about it. Got it!"

Myra just glared at her, remaining silent for the moment.

"Now, according to my source," Kry's said, "you're not really a volunteer, so if you don't want any issues, I suggest you fall in line or else."

Myra kept her composure. "Again, I don't know what you're talking about."

"Careful, tribade," Kry's warned. "Wouldn't want our pasts to leak out, would we? Fall in line."

“Please leave, **NOW**,” Myra said, trying hard not to lose her temper.

Afterward, Krys spoke with Mitch, threatening him to keep Myra on a short leash. He then agreed to put Myra back on her original schedule, full-time and promised to keep a closer eye on her. In learning this, Myra told Maricela about it, but she warned Myra to lay low, noting that the Mayor's niece was merciless. She often flexed her muscles, so the staff did particular jobs for her or her uncle, free of charge. If/when anyone would refuse, somehow they were either harassed, received deportation threats, or worse. Myra just sat there, listening, having *deja vu* about her mother. Krys' unbeknownst visit made the kitchen crew nervous, so they all had to be extremely careful, as they didn't know how she found out or why she was focused on Myra.

In ruminating about this, Myra realized that it was only a matter of time before they'd start pimping her out like a prison skirt. Now distressed, she knew she had to do something eventually.

...Later That Night

While on the phone with Tari, Myra told her what happened during that week. Since Tari just returned from a cheer-dance competition, she wasn't around during those events. On the phone, Tari tried to console her friend.

“Man, fuck that stupid [Ho]otch,” Tari said. “She's just jealous, boo.”

“You don’t understand,” Myra explained. “It’s like she read my case file. My records were supposed to be sealed here. She knew; **EVERYTHING!**”

“Look, she must have reached out to her cop ex-boo for that intel,” Tari reasoned. “You know how people get here. But don’t let that get you down. And since you don’t want him anyway, it shouldn’t matter, right?”

Avoiding Tari’s indirect question, Myra said, “You’re not getting the issue here. She’s violating the law with that shit. I don’t care about some fucking phallus. But she threatened me; I can’t go for that T..”

“You’ve gotta let this go, girl,” Tari warned. “It’s not worth it. She’s not worth it. Don’t worry. I’ll ask around, okay. Chill, I got chu!”

As Myra went on, Tari became nervous. *What if Myra finds out...?* So she let Myra vent until they both were too tired to continue and disconnected. Then later that night, Tari got a call. At first, she was reluctant to pick-up but knew she had no choice.

A familiar voice said, “Hello, Tar... so what did she say?”

Swim Meet...

It was a spirited Saturday afternoon and the school year’s first swim match; the gym was packed. The game commenced at 2:07 p.m., and Myra only had 15 minutes to completely set up her food cart. As she was working, she noticed the desperate vultures entering the facility, which meant he must be nearby. No sooner than she turned around to plug in the popcorn machine, there he was, standing near the back entrance, alongside Dr. Mags and a few SBA board members. As he

pointed towards some of the building redesigns, he spotted Myra and attempted to wave at her, but she quickly ignored the greeting, then turned to her left to see Krys moving in her direction.

Krys said, “Hi, Amyra. Oops, I meant Myra. Huh; so damn close.”

“Oh, fuck you bitch!” Myra snarled.

“No thanks,” Krys said cheerily, “I’m **straight**. Literally!” Smirking, she taunted, “You seem on edge. Don’t worry... you won’t be with us long, one way or another.”

Myra exclaimed, “Look, I don’t want that fucking man. You can have him; just leave me the hell alone?”

Krys responded, “Talk is cheap. We’ll see. Till then, watch your back.”

Krys laughed as a nervous Myra walked away angrily to get more supplies from the freezer in that building. As she approached that area, she was quickly pulled into the bushes with someone’s hand over her mouth. Then the person let her loose when she promised not to struggle. She couldn’t believe it. What was he doing here?

“Heathcliff? What in sack-shit are you doing...”

Heathcliff cut her off. “Shh... Quick, we don’t have much time. We’ve gotta fucking jet.”

Watching from a distance, as he tried to listen to the board’s comments and praise towards the new construction, Dr. Nolan watched Myra arguing with the strange boy. He didn’t recognize the man but noticed that he appeared dirty and destitute, as if homeless.

Myra huffed, “You can’t be here.”

“Don’t you think I know that shit?” [**Scoffing**] Heathcliff immediately countered. “I’m here because your mom knows that you perjured yourself.”

“What?”

“She reopened the case and found my DNA at the crime scene,” Heathcliff informed her. “She’s looking for me now.”

“What does this have to do with me?” Myra asked.

“If they find me, the shit I saw... we’ll both be backer-acted.”

Myra’s eyes showed her confusion. “That doesn’t make any sense. I don’t remember anything; was drugged, remember”

“Listen,” Heathcliff said, losing his patience, “I don’t have time for this shit, Amy. You can either come with me or wait around for your mother to take action, and you know how that bitch operates. The choice is yours.”

“I have to get back to work,” Myra told him, trying desperately to process all that she had just heard.

Heathcliff called out to Myra a few times, but she ignored him, so he stood by.

As she started her shift, she noticed two police officers enter the room. They had a photo in their hands and started inquiring about it. *Shit!*” she thought. *Cliff was telling the truth.* She turned back to him, and Cliff nodded his head in agreement. Myra then forgot about the supplies, returning to her cart to immediately shut it down. As she started packing her things, seeing Myra’s demeanor, Malik sensed something was wrong and walked over to her counter.

“Coffee, please,” Malik said with a kind grin.

Nervous and agitated, Myra stammered, “Sorry, we’re out!”

Seeing her distracted as there was a fresh pot of coffee next to her, Malik persisted. “Well, what do you have then?” he asked.

“Look, we’ve closed alright... sorry, but I have other things to do, and I can’t be bothered with this right now.”

Her reaction was surprising, so he then backed off. Myra immediately felt terrible but didn't want any more trouble. She could see Krys across the room, nodding with a smile in her direction and standing near a security guard who was talking to the police. A heightened sense of anxiety immediately kicked in; *Great; now I'm fucked!* It's a damn shame how this meager-hearted bitch had her on edge for her stupid-ass vanity. Once Myra covered the snack cart, illicitly shutting down operations, she proceeded to leave. Then she signaled Heathcliff to come around the corner, as she tried desperately to get to him, but there were too many people around, including the lurking cops. As Myra moved in closer, she saw the lineup of swimmers taking their marks. Then she noticed one of the students looking very sickly and terrified, simultaneously. As Myra slowed down, she detected a black aura behind him and turned around to see if anyone else noticed before looking back. Then the vision became more apparent to her, sending shock signals up and down her spine. It was Em! In demonic form. She had fangs and claw-like nails. Her neck still lacerated; her eyes reptilian-green and hungrily fixated on the sickly boy. Myra couldn't believe it, quickly dropping everything to the floor.

Em's spirit entered the boy's body as the gun went off, causing him to lunge in, sinking towards the bottom. Myra tried to yell for help, but the crowd was too loud to hear her. Malik saw Myra's freaked-out expression and left the bleachers moving towards her, accidentally knocking down Krys' libation offering to him. Without thought, Myra jumped in the pool to save him and saw the boy being held down by the demonic-Em smiling and waiting to devour his soul. As Myra swam towards him, Em's force grew enraged, attempting to attack her if she got close, but for some reason, it couldn't harm her. Seeing this, Myra grabbed the suffocating victim

swimmer, but the demonic Em tried to pull the boy down again; yet Myra screamed in anguish, which somehow blasted the apparition away from the swimmer.

After seeing the commotion, Heathcliff quickly took Myra's purse and proceeded to leave but felt compelled to turn around. Once Malik was in range, their eyes met. Then a terrified Heathcliff began freaking out, running away swiftly, leaving his old friend behind once more.

When they broke the surface, the two gasped for air, breathing heavily on the tiled floor. As Myra pushed the student up, she noticed Em's bloody feet before her. As she slowly looked up, she screamed at the grotesque vision of her former beloved, but the vicious demon took control of the swimmer's leg, powerfully kicking Myra directly back into the pool. Her nose ran bloody, and unconsciousness blanketed her. As her eyes began to dim, she saw the evil spirit grinning maliciously at her as she sank further into the depths of the pool. Then the darkness set in. Pivotal moments from her prior life started to flash before her eyes. Being shipped to boarding school as a child; her mother missing her grand recital; her father's funeral; graduating with Ducque and Fi; falling in love with Em, then finding out Em was a drug addict and escort. Lastly, holding a sweet dead Em in her arms as she took her last breath. Myra knew she was never going home again. It was now the end. Yet, she welcomed the peaceful solace.

Then all of a sudden, she felt a flash of light spring before her sealed eyes. Water was gushing out of chlorine-filled lungs, giving her a sting-like burn all through her chest. She suddenly was shivering uncontrollably, faintly hearing someone call out to her. Myra felt a steep chill consume her flesh as the walls of death started to recede. Then she choked violently as the rest of the water was expelled entirely from her

throat. She quickly gasped for air as someone cuddled her back to life.

In a concerned tone, an ominous voice droned, “She’s alive.”

The room cheered. “I’ve got you!” Myra heard someone say in her ear.

As she opened her eyes, it was Malik. She couldn’t speak, but he held her close. “I got you,” he said again. He was warm and strong. She felt his sweet caress on her face; so gentle. As she terrifyingly looked back at the pool, she noticed her wig floating in the water, then she fainted. He carried Myra onto the campus stretcher and escorted the Medic to the infirmary. A livid Krys stormed out of the room in blood-red anger, with her vixens swiftly following behind her.

... *Later that Evening*

As Nolan was leaving Mags’ office, Liz was waiting for him near the exit.

“Evening, Dr. Nolan,” she greeted.

“Ms. Cartier,” he returned.

“Please call me Liz,” she said, batting her eyelashes at him.

Slightly distraught, Nolan started to say, “I apologize, but I have to...”

“It was Krys,” Liz said.

“What?”

“She threatened Myra because she wants you,” Liz said. “It’s my understanding that Myra was going to make a run...until; well, you know.”

Nolan had no idea what was happening. “Why are you telling me this?” he demanded.

Smiling, all she replied was, “Just thought you should know.”

Nolan watched as the beauty strutted away; then, he quickly placed a call to the Mayor’s mansion. “Joe, it’s Nolan. About that favor?” ...

The Next Day...

Myra awoke in the infirmary with a cop in her room. She noticed she was not handcuffed to the bed, which was a good sign, so she waited for him to speak. The officer explained to her that they were looking for her to see if Heathcliff contacted her. He further reported that Cliff was wanted for questioning regarding the “Hillside Slaughter case,” as new evidence surfaced. But there were also rumors that a West Coast PD Investigator suspects that he is in cahoots with Reverend Blacque, who supposedly put a search out on Myra when he learned that she wasn’t in prison. They wanted to warn that he was potentially working with Blacque, as a former prison-mate of Heathcliff’s divulged that he and Blacque made a deal when he was last in jail in exchange for physical protection. Myra knew that Heathcliff was in violation of his probation by being at that party but now learning that he came to bring her to Blacque angered her. Yet despite the news, she said nothing about seeing him. Myra just asked the cop to please take her home.

As they arrived at her apartment, before leaving, the officer noted that he’d informed her PO of her heroics and that if she sees Heathcliff, to please call the authorities

immediately; then he left. As she dropped her hospital bags onto her living room floor, she crashed onto the couch for a spell as she was exhausted. After a quick nap and a hot bath, Myra looked at herself in the mirror, disgusted by her bandaged nose and puffy eyes. Suddenly, her raven-rouge tresses, dulled by the chlorine, looked stressed and brittle, just like her bruised face. As she reached for her medication, she heard a knock on the door.

Really, what the hell? “Who is it?”

The person knocked again, pissing Myra off even more as walking down the stairs proved difficult. She was exhausted and still in pain. As she opened the door, she was shocked to see who it was.

It was Malik. With a slight, calming grin, he asked, “May I come in?”

Shocked to see him, Myra noticed that he was carrying a sizeable health-store bag with him and moved back, so he could enter. He placed it in the kitchenette then turned to face her.

“What... what do you want?” Myra asked in a scratchy, tired voice.

“I went to see you, but they said you were discharged already. How are you feeling?”

In a scratchy voice, she said, “Wonderful. Can’t you tell?”

“You were very brave yesterday. Crazy! But brave,” Malik said, “saving that student after he’d OD on drugs...”

Myra whispered, “It wasn’t drugs.”

“What? What did you say?”

Realizing how crazy her story sounded, she shrugged her shoulders to conclude. He asked her if he could take a look at her injuries. She nodded, permitting him, then proceeded to sit back in her chair while he administered an unusual holistic remedy. As he applied the medicine, she noticed that the

substance was molasses black and was very pungent. He applied it to her nose and under her eyelids. The application felt strange, and the smell was putrefying. Yet, when he realigned her nose, she felt no pain. She then also felt massive relief set in, massaging her facial tissue therapeutically. Myra slowly walked over to the mirror to see the dark circles lightening and her breathing normalizing. She then turned to see him smile reassuringly.

“Amazing... what is this? How did?” She was stunned by the transformation.

Malik was beaming. “An old family remedy,” he explained. Then with a sigh, he said, “I won’t take much of your time, as I know you’re still recovering... but I wanted to talk to you about something. A proposal if you will?”

Myra tilted her head almost imperceptibly. “What... is it?”

“One of my T-A’s left unexpectedly; something about marrying her partner. In leaving, I am now down a teaching assistant...then I learned that you are an academic giant, so...”

Myra was at a loss. “You want me to work for you?”

“Yes. I’ve already discussed this with the board, and what better way to show our gratitude than to promote you.”

Myra remained hesitant. “But I can’t... I mean, I don’t think I’m allowed... it’s complicated.”

Sitting down beside her, he said, “Listen, I know a little of why you’re here, but I don’t care. The students need someone like you, and I really need the support. It’s as simple as that.”

“But...I have a court order? And Mags can’t just...”

“Let me take care of all that,” he promised. “All I need is an answer.”

[Pause] “You saved my life; twice,” she replied with gratitude. “When do you want me?”

He smiled, elated to hear the news, then he instructed her to fully rest first and continue to apply the remedy until

emptied. When ready, to go to the Bursar's office where the offer would be waiting for her. Then he politely left, bidding her good night.

Myra walked over and looked into the bag of what he'd left her. It was some groceries, hearty soup, a bonsai plant, and some medical supplies. "Wow!" *I think I'm gonna like working for him.*

The Following Week...

Tari and Myra walked to Payroll to get their prior week's checks. She happened to notice the frost on the floor, and it wasn't even October yet.

"Damn, it's kinda early for this, isn't it?" she griped.

Smiling, Myra said, "Maybe this will keep the [ho]tches at bay."

As the ladies laughed it up in line, Payroll handed Tari her check but asked Myra to see the Bursar Manager to retrieve her wages.

"Girl, what kind of medicine did they give you? You're healing faster than Wolverine, damn," she exclaimed.

But Myra just laughed, refusing to share her secret encounter.

"Well, I'm glad you're not going to be working in that kitchen anymore. But if you're gonna T-A, you better wardrobe-up," Tari admonished. "I mean, my cousin can hook you up for about two bills."

"Two hundred... huh! If only I could afford it," she said, shrugging her shoulders, then she turned to the Bursar's secretary. "Hi, I'm here to see Maureen. Payroll told me to speak with her."

A full-figured woman quickly walked out of the back office with a folder in her hand. She had a humble smile on her face and seemed excited to see Myra.

“Hi, I’m assuming you’re Myra Benjamin, right?” Maureen said.

Myra replied, “Yup! That’s me.”

“I have here your offer letter from Dr. Nolan. I need you to sign it before I relinquish both your recent earnings and retro-pay.”

Myra gulped. “Retro? I’m sorry, I don’t follow...”

Looking at the offer letter, Myra froze. Tari crept over her shoulder, and her eyes nearly popped open as well. The offer was *six times* her current rate and was backdated from her arrival date, leaving Myra with a significant 4-figure disbursement.

Maureen told her, “According to this, your regular disbursement to that foundation will still stand, but it will be separate from your new pay, leaving you with approximately 69% of your new salary to keep going forward. Congrats! He must really need you, huh?” Then she handed her the paperwork.

Myra, smiling at Tari, asked, “Where do I sign again?”

Maureen soon gave Myra her entire (new) pay fully loaded to her debit card; then the two women laughed like little girls running out of the candy store. Myra then spent her recovery getting made over from head to toe. She used the few free days she had left to fully prepare for the following week so that Monday would be perfect.

Myra's First Day...

It was 3 p.m., and the evening program had commenced. Dr. Nolan stepped out of his office with new lesson plans for each T-A, readily in hand. Then he projected the final list of T-A's for all to review:

Subject Matter Experts lineup were:

- *[Art History – T-A] – Martie Arnolds*
- *[Consumer Science – T-A] – Aaliyah Felix*
- *[English Literature – T-A] – Derrick Milton*
- *[Foreign Language – T-A] – Jacques DuBois*
- *[Mathematics – T-A] – **Myra Benjamin***
- *[Science General – T-A] – Pim Li*
- *[Social Studies – T-A] – Tony Harris*
- *[US Government – T-A] – Simone Amelio*
- *[World History & Religion] – Dr. Nolan*

Before dismissing the other T-A's and starting his lecture, he had an announcement.

“All right... afternoon everyone, settle down. Good news! We finally have our new Math T-A starting today, and all past assignments will go thru her. Her name is Myra Benjamin, and I need you all to make her feel welcomed. Agreed?”

One of the students pouted, “C’mon, Professor N. Already? Couldn’t you give us a few more days? DAMN!” Nolan smiled at the student’s poor attempt at humor. “Are you done! You know; you can always go back to Mr. Horowitz?”, he said smirking. The student quickly shut up, then Nolan turned to continue reviewing the tutoring and lab schedules with everyone when he noticed the class was surprisingly quiet. “Too quiet back there,” he said.

Dr. Nolan assumed the students were playing around and turned to see. The class focused their faces beyond him. He then turned to see what they were looking at. “What’s going…” and in an instant, he froze. Coming down the staircase was a well-dressed, beautiful Myra. She was perfect like a vision of mystique-scarlet with her raven-rouge mane flowing down her right shoulder, pairing nicely with her red-wine lipstick and matching V-neck blouse. She walked towards him, almost in slow motion, swaying her hips in a form-fitted heather-gray pencil skirt, causing her colleagues to perform a double-take. She looked completely different from before, and he did everything to keep his composure.

As she happily approached him, Dr. Nolan was lost for words. She was simply stunning.

Myra excitedly said, “Afternoon, Dr. Nolan!”

“Hi,” he managed to reply softly.

She handed over her orientation paperwork. “Ready for duty, boss,” she chirped. Then looking around, she asked, “Where do you want me?”

Dr. Nolan stammered, “Huh?”

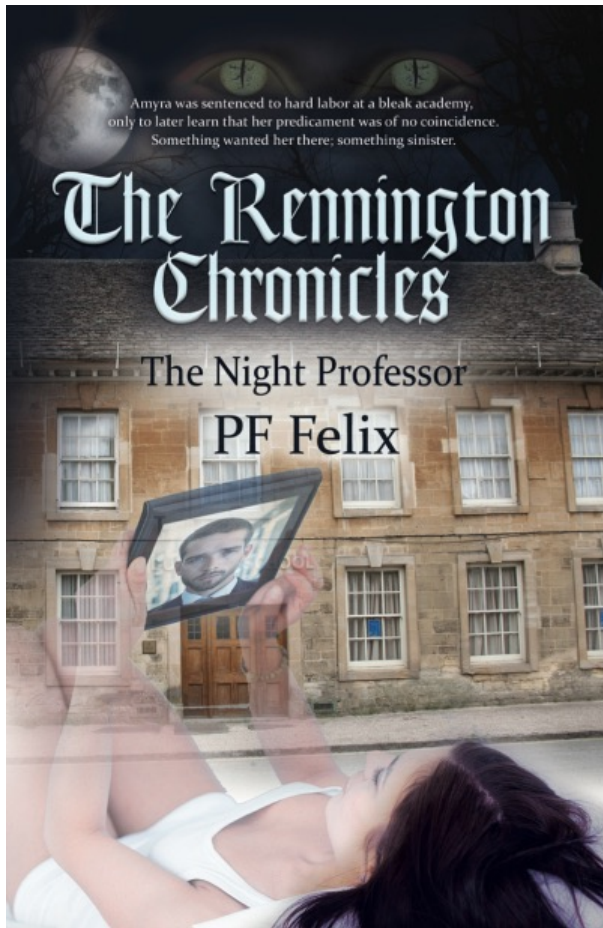
Students started snickering, but he gestured for them to shut up and regained his composure. Realizing the question, he gestured to her to sit in his chair, “Here. Right here,” he instructed.

He pointed at his desk, where she slowly passed him and sat, clueless to his unusual behavior. He tried to focus but kept forgetting things, simple things. When the lecture ended, the students were then broken up into their respective tutoring groups by subjects, affording him time to show Myra around. He broke his own protocol by giving her his access code until he completed hers, something he disallowed even Chancellor Mags to do, regardless of the reason.

The students, meanwhile, were in awe, texting back and forth about what they all assumed was an obvious emerging affair. “Told you, bro! This is gonna be one hell of a fuck-n semester,” said a senior named Greg Allen. His buddies readily agreed, nodding, and laughing.

...Later that Night

Heathcliff was walking to the bus station to get out of dodge. As he sat alone, a man in a black suit approached him, asking if he had the time. At first, Heathcliff told the stranger to fuck-off, but once the man sat next to him, he noticed others were all in ominous corners at the stop, all wearing black. Terrified for his life, he tried to make a phone call sneakily, but the man looked directly at him, then Heathcliff slowly put away the phone out of terror. Then the bus came, but neither party entered. As the bus pulled away, due to no passengers, Heathcliff was seen accompanying the man to a desolate corner of the parking garage near the woods. He terrifyingly followed the man until the woods swallowed them both whole.



Amyra was sentenced to hard labor at a bleak academy, only to learn her dilemma wasn't random. She was lured there by something sinister; something dark. Love and deceit can often play kindred spirits in a race for your very soul.

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