

I jolted awake to Harry shaking my shoulder, his grin plastered with mischief. I'd only been at university a week, and already the struggle to settle in was real. The droning voice of the psychology professor at the front of the room wasn't helping either—it was dull at best, torturous at worst. Psychology wasn't even my thing. Economics? Sure. But this? This was a favour to my mom, who insisted it'd "complement my true passion." If anyone was thriving here, it was Harry. Criminal psychology was his dream, and this class was practically his playground.

"Almost got caught that time," Harry whispered, his breath warm against my ear.

I smirked, stifling a laugh. "That makes twice today."

The professor shot us a glare, and we stifled ourselves long enough to ride out the rest of the lecture. When the bell rang, I couldn't have escaped fast enough, slinging my bag over my shoulder. Harry and I joined the throng of students funnelling out of the lecture hall, our steps falling into an easy rhythm.

This place still felt too good to be true. A prestigious university, the kind of place you'd dream of but never think you'd get into. My grades were fine—decent, even—but not genius level. Harry, though? He was the real deal. Everyone knew it. The guy was a walking brain with a knack for making everything seem effortless.

As we passed two girls chatting in hushed tones, their conversation cut off like someone had pulled the plug. Sophie and Amy—heads of the cheerleading squad, self-declared campus royalty—glared at us like we'd personally offended them.

"Did you hear that?" Harry muttered, glancing over his shoulder. "Something about someone 'getting what's coming to him.'"

I shrugged, uninterested. "Probably about that guy you mentioned. Super-jock of the year or whatever."

"Jason," Harry supplied. "Total rich-kid jerk. Thinks he owns the place."

"Never met him. Don't plan to."

Class was done for the day, so I made my way to the university gym—my sanctuary. Harry tagged along only as far as the cafeteria; he wasn't exactly gym material. My dad had always been big on the whole "healthy body, healthy mind" philosophy, and over time, I'd bought into it. The hard work paid off—I was lean, fit, and good enough to snag invitations to multiple sports teams. Basketball had my heart, though.

On my way out of the gym, I stopped by the supervisor's desk. "Hey, Scarlett," I said.

She glanced up from her clipboard with a faint smile. Scarlett was petite, her crimson hair pulled into a loose braid that spilled over one shoulder. She always seemed in control, calm and collected, even during the gym's busiest hours. Her sharp features gave her an almost ethereal quality, though she carried herself with the kind of confidence that didn't need frills.

"Hey, Ethan. Another day, another grind?"

"You know it." I waved as I left.

Back at the dorm, Harry was already on his bed, nose buried in a thick textbook. The room smelled faintly of the instant coffee he swore by, the empty mug sitting on his desk. His wire-rimmed glasses perched at the tip of his nose, and his mop of sandy-blond hair looked like he hadn't touched a comb in days.

“Big plans, Professor?” I teased, tugging a towel from the closet.

“Some of us have ambitions,” he quipped without looking up.

The hot shower worked wonders. Back in the dorm, I stood in front of the mirror, towel slung around my hips. My dark hair, damp and heavy, clung to my shoulders. I wasn’t much to look at—decently toned, sure, but not the type to turn heads. Still, Sophie and Amy always said there was something mysterious about my eyes, though they could never agree on what it was.

“So, about Saturday,” Harry called from his bed. “The club’s called Halo. Jake’s bringing his girlfriend, but they’re still fighting. I swear, it’s exhausting.”

I laughed, tossing my towel onto the chair. “What are friends for, if not to referee?”

We traded a few more jabs before I finally climbed into bed. The day had been long, and the prospect of the weekend ahead lulled me into sleep.

The weekend had finally arrived. No alarm blaring, no schedule pressing. I might have had a chance to sleep in properly if it weren’t for the muffled thuds of Harry stumbling around. He always tried to be quiet, bless him, but for someone as light a sleeper as me, it was a losing battle.

“Shit, sorry,” he whispered as I stirred, his voice thick with guilt.

I cracked an eye open, glanced at the clock: 9:30 AM. Early enough to get things done, but the lure of a proper lie-in was too tempting. I pulled the blanket over my head and drifted back into a blissful haze.

By the time I checked the clock again, it was 12:30 PM. Stretching lazily, I rolled out of bed. Harry was, of course, long gone. He always had something on—the library, a study group, or some obscure student event he’d drag me to if he could. My phone buzzed on the nightstand, jolting me out of my thoughts.

### **Group Chat:**

*“Tonight’s the night!”*

One of the guys was bringing a new girl along. He said she was hot, but the way he worded it—like he didn’t want anyone else making a move—made me smirk. He probably liked her but didn’t want to admit it. Classic.

Basketball tryouts were at 2, so after throwing together some semblance of brunch, I headed to the locker room. A few of the seniors were already there, chatting and joking around like they owned the place. I recognized some of their faces but not their names. It was easy to tell who’d make the cut and who wouldn’t—the hopeful but hopeless recruits stood out like sore thumbs. You had to admire their determination, though.

The team captain, a stocky guy with an easy grin, gathered us into a line. His energy was contagious, and he chatted with each of us like we were old friends. I was starting to feel pretty good about this—until the gym doors slammed open.

A tall, blonde guy strolled in like he owned the place, a pack of cronies trailing behind him. He didn’t need an introduction; the room practically whispered his name: Jason.

Jason didn’t bother with pleasantries. He swept his gaze over the new recruits, his lip curling in disdain. “You, you, and you,” he said, jabbing a finger at some of the bigger, more muscular guys. “Get out to the football field. Time to play a *real* sport.”

The captain stepped forward, clearly about to interject, but Jason cut him off with a smirk. “Know your place,” he said coldly. “First picks are mine.”

The room deflated as Jason left, his entourage trailing behind. The captain's scowl mirrored my own, but there was nothing to be done. This wasn't the first time Jason had pulled something like this, and it wouldn't be the last.

Despite the rocky start, the tryout turned out all right. The drills were intense, but it felt good to be back on the court. By the end, the captain called it a day and laid out the plan: a few weeks of training, then the team roster would be finalized two weeks before the first game. As people started heading to the showers, I hung back to chat with him.

He was surprisingly candid. "Jason's the reason we've been struggling. Keeps poaching our best guys for football," he grumbled. "And Madison—his girlfriend—she's no help. A cheerleader with more chest than brains." He sighed, shaking his head. "Anyway, good job today. You've got potential."

The compliment buoyed me through the rest of the day. I decided to hit the nature walk just off campus before heading back. The place was quiet, peaceful, the kind of place where time seemed to slow. I was lost in thought when I nearly collided with someone.

"Sorry!" I blurted, stepping back.

She wasn't much shorter than me, with piercing blue eyes that seemed to look right through me. Her dark, gothic style stood out, from her choker to the oversized hoodie barely containing her... assets. I caught myself staring and quickly looked away.

"It's fine," she said, a sly smile tugging at her lips. "I'm Kate."

I introduced myself, fumbling over my words. Before I could say anything else, she glanced at her watch. "I've gotta run. See you around, Ethan." And just like that, she was gone.

The odd encounter lingered in my mind as I finished my walk. By the time evening rolled around, I'd almost forgotten about it—until Harry dragged me to Halo, our go-to nightclub. As usual, he insisted we arrive thirty minutes early. I didn't mind. We'd been best friends since we were five, and his quirks were just part of the package.

A few friends trickled in, including Harry's brother, who announced his girlfriend wasn't coming. No surprise there—they were always fighting. The last to arrive was one of our friends and the girl he'd mentioned earlier.

"Kate?"

She grinned, a knowing look in her eyes. "Small world," she said.

Our friend looked between us, confused. "You two know each other?"

"We bumped into each other earlier," I explained, still trying to wrap my head around it.

As our friend headed to the bar, he pulled me aside. "She's bad news, man. Don't even think about it."

"I wasn't planning to," I said quickly, though something about her had already gotten under my skin.

We returned to the group, drinks in hand, but my thoughts kept circling back to Kate. Something told me this wasn't the last I'd see of her.

The night was everything you'd expect—loud music, too many drinks, and endless banter. Harry and his brother were locked in some debate about the best drink on the menu, while a couple of our friends worked their usual charm on the girls at the bar. One of them, a brunette with sharp features and a coy smile, had everyone hanging on her every word. The other, a tattooed redhead, seemed less interested in conversation and more in nursing her drink with an air of detached coolness.

Then there was Kate. She stuck close to our friend—the one who'd brought her. They moved together like shadows, her arm draped lazily over his shoulder, though her eyes seemed to track everyone else. There was something magnetic about her, but it didn't sit right with me. The way she lingered, almost predatory, made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

As the night wound down, things unravelled. The friend who'd brought Kate—already too drunk by the time we arrived—was barely coherent by the end of it. He'd been staggering into tables and slurring his words until the bouncers finally had enough and kicked him out. Naturally, the rest of us followed. Harry and his brother hauled him out, the two of them trying to decide who'd take him home.

"We'll sort him out," Harry said, patting me on the shoulder. "You good?"

I nodded. "Yeah. See you tomorrow."

That left just me and Kate. She stood a few feet away, watching the others disappear down the street before turning to me with a sly smile. "Walk with me?"

I hesitated, her request catching me off guard. "Where to?"

"Anywhere," she said, shrugging. "Clear our heads a bit."

The night air was cool, and the buzz of the club still hummed faintly in my ears as we walked. We didn't say much at first, but eventually, the words started to flow. She didn't go to the university—she made that clear. "Not my scene," she said with a laugh, though she didn't elaborate much on what *was*. Her presence was magnetic, drawing me in despite myself.

We found ourselves back on the nature trail, the one I'd visited earlier. Moonlight filtered through the trees, casting silvery shadows along the path. It wasn't until then that I noticed her outfit—tight, gothic, and strikingly provocative. The black dress hugged her figure like it had been sewn onto her, the fabric shimmering faintly in the moonlight. The neckline plunged daringly low, revealing more than enough to make me question how I hadn't noticed before. Her curves, her figure, even the way the dress swayed with her movements—it was impossible to ignore.

"You didn't notice earlier?" she teased, catching my lingering gaze. Her voice was playful, but there was an edge to it.

I stumbled over my words, unsure of what to say. She just smiled, her eyes glinting in the darkness. "Come on," she said, walking ahead. "This way."

We stopped in a small clearing, the grass soft beneath our feet. She lay down, gesturing for me to join her. The night was warm, the air soothing, and I could feel the alcohol beginning to fade from my system.

"Your friend," she said suddenly, turning to me. "He thought I was trouble, didn't he?"

I hesitated, then nodded. "Yeah. He said you were... bad news."

She laughed, a low, throaty sound that made the air around us seem heavier. "He wasn't wrong," she said, rolling onto her side to face me. "But it's funny, don't you think? Everyone assumes he brought me here. That I'm *his* trouble." Her eyes glinted, the faint glow returning. "But I'm not *his* bad news. I'm yours."

The words hung in the air, and before I could process them, she moved. In one fluid motion, she was straddling me, her legs pinning me in place. Her glowing eyes locked onto mine, and her grin widened, revealing teeth that looked sharper than they should have.

“You’re perfect,” she whispered, her voice softer now, almost reverent. Then she leaned down, her lips brushing mine.

The kiss was intoxicating. Her lips were soft, warm, and impossibly inviting. Her tongue flicked against mine, teasing, before it slid deeper. Too deep. My chest tightened as I realized it wasn’t stopping—it slid past my throat, impossibly long, winding its way deeper. I tried to pull away, but her hands were iron on my shoulders, her strength inhuman.

I struggled, panic rising, but it was useless. Her tongue coiled in my throat, choking me, as her glowing eyes filled my vision. My strength drained, my limbs felt heavy, and her smirk was the last thing I saw as the world faded to black.