

Writing exercise
Enemies to Lovers Prompt
9/10/25

“Get behind me,” he growled.

He had appeared out of nowhere. Generally, I feel as though I can hold my own on the streets at night. I grew up here, I’m comfortable in the dark and alone, in fact I slept just two streets up in my car last night, but I did as he said. It was instantly clear to me just how threatening the two men approaching us were, and the urgency in his voice confirmed my gut feeling. I had been seeing these men around, a crew of them, all with the same strip of black cloth tied around their arm. And just two nights ago, I watched them take out a homeless man with a smart mouth a few streets over..

I adjusted myself to fall in behind Jared and my small 5’1” frame was immediately concealed behind him. His broad shoulders and muscular body easily eclipsed all of me and although I could feel my heart pounding loudly in my ears as the men brushed past us, it was like we didn’t exist at all. Not a turn of their heads or acknowledgment of our existence. One of the guys was so close to us that I could have sworn that he and Jared grazed each other.

“How...” I started to speak but the words caught in my throat as Jared looked back and sharply and swivelled, turning his back to the brick wall and quickly tucking me behind him.

My voice must have caught the attention of one of the guys, as he turned back ever-so slightly and tapped the other’s arm. They paused, looking back and in the same moment Jared made himself even larger than he already was, broadening his shoulders and accentuating his chest. I peeked through a small gap under his arm and watched them as they looked back in our direction blankly. It is as though they couldn’t see us at all. As if the street was empty behind them.

They turned the corner and Jared exhaled in relief, the sound of him relaxing allowed me to do the same.

“Okay,” he sighs, turning towards me. The light from the streetlamp above us shone through his dark hair. His strong jawline, the only part of his face visible in the shadow, “questions?”

A sharp, staggered breath is all that escapes as I place a hand on my hip, biting my lip. My words are lost even though I have so many things to ask. What the fuck just happened? Who are those guys? Or more importantly, why is he even here right now? On Samson Blvd at

11pm? I have never once seen him in this neighborhood, and he just appears out of nowhere? How did he know I was here? How did those guys not see us?

I furrow my brow as I try to decide which question to ask first. I paused just a little bit too long.

“Okay...” He smirks. I can’t see his full expression but I know the look he’s giving me even when it’s hidden in the shadows. The same knowing, smug look he’s given me a dozen times before. He turns and starts down the street, “let’s get you something to eat.”

Before I can answer, he is already passing the stoop of my dad’s apartment building. I had planned to sit on that stoop to smoke my cigarette before Jared had appeared tonight, and as I quickly jumped into motion to catch up with him, I looked up to see the light on in my dad’s window. He’s probably up there, none the wiser, eating his usual, a can of chunky soup and not even registering my existence down below. I look up, and smile knowing that he’s up there, safe and then quicken my pace to catch up to Jared, locking into pace with him. His casual stride puts me at a light jog. As he looks down at me now, his face is fully illuminated by the lights above us and I try not to meet his eyes but, fuck, the golden flecks in the emerald green catch and dance. I have to look away so as to not trip over myself.

I see him look down at my legs, observing how fast they turn in order to keep up and he smirks before stopping abruptly.

“I know you have questions, Kimmy.”

I breathe in deeply, catching my breath. Silently thanking him for stopping before responding, “I do.”

He raises an eyebrow and nods back towards the illuminated window behind him, City Diner.

I nod, okaying the restaurant choice and follow him in, the door chime ringing loudly as we step inside. The sound calls the attention of a small stout woman sitting in the corner. She’s the only person in the restaurant and is reminiscent of a tiny hedgehog, round, with a pointed face. Her short spiky hair shoots up in every direction.

As she stands the woman wipes her hands on her apron and gives Jared a full once over before settling on me and winks, “anywhere you want Kimmy, baby.”

“Thanks June,” I smile at her before pursing my lips and rolling my eyes. She walks behind the counter to grab a single menu.

“We need two, please,” Jared tries to correct.

“No, it’s okay,” I lightly touch his arm, steering him towards the booth behind us and as I pull my hand away, examine my fingertips which now tingle with warmth after touching his skin.

"You're not eating?" Jared looks at me questioningly as he slides in.

"Junie knows what I have, I don't need a menu," I look down to avoid his eyes, sliding into the bench across the table.

I can see through my lashes that his broad frame barely fits into the booth, and I look down to find a full one and a half foot gap between my own small chest and the table. The sweatshirt I'm wearing is worn and baggy, faded from the amount of times I've washed it on too hot of a setting at the laundromat. I lightly trace the small holes at the wrist and wish that they weren't there, wish that my circumstances were different, that time would just stop and let me catch up.

Sighing, I look up and find him watching me. He's clearly waiting for me to start my line of questioning.

All I can think is that I wish I wasn't so attracted to him.

"Why the fuck are you here?" The words burst out of me with an aggression that I didn't realize I had.

"That's how you're going to talk to me after what just happened?" He's smirking again.

What is so funny? I feel even more heat rise up in me.

"Sure," I raise my eyebrow, "that too, what the fuck just happened? What the fuck was that? Who were those guys? Did they just *not see us*?" Once I start, the questions pour out. He doesn't have a chance to answer before I shake my head and adjust myself in my seat, "no, actually, start at the beginning. WHY were you on my street? How did you find me? What do you want?"

"Your street? What do you mean?" his eyebrow lifts, "found you?"

"There's no reason for YOU, the top sales exec at LTC, to be down here on Samson BLVD at this time of night. I know you don't live around here, I know there's no fancy gyms nearby or good restaurants. *Your* type of people, don't come down here unless they have a reason. So what's your reason?"

"What's YOUR reason, Kim?"

"Don't answer my questions with questions! I have never once pretended to be some bigshot. I answer the phones at reception, make sure all you fancy pants swipe your key cards before entering the building, and greet clients. You think they pay me something great? It should be pretty obvious to you why I'm in this neighborhood, JARED."

"Right," he looks down at his own beautifully manicured hands now, the first time I've ever seen him look anything close to embarrassed.

"So?" I goad.

"I wasn't here to find *you*," his dark hair falls ever so slightly over his green eyes and I resist the urge to reach out and tuck the hair back, to touch him. When he looks up at me, the gold in his eyes is more prominent and it glistens as he adds, "I was here to find them."

"Them?"

"Those guys."

"Okay... but you found them, and you didn't do anything. What was the point of finding them?"

"Well I came across you."

"What - " I shake my head with confusion.

"What'll you have, handsome," June interrupts and looks down at Jared with a smile. She's not much taller than he is as he sits in the low booth. "This here is our top seller," she points into his menu with her pen tapping at something within the plastic covered pages, "you look like you might enjoy protein."

She looks over at me, giving another exaggerated wink and I shake my head at her and scowl. I am trying to show her we aren't on a date but she ignores my signals, smiles and continues in a southern accent that seems thicker than it ever has been, "now, Kimmy here usually just gets some buttered toast, *but* since I'm sure you're paying, I'm going to go ahead and get her something that can put some meat on her bones." Her smile is now so broad that you can hear it in her voice, "You'd like that right?"

"Fuck! JOAN!" My eyes are wide and wild with embarrassment.

Jared's eyes appear over the top of his menu as he looks at me intently for a moment. I can feel him look over all that he can see of me and I wish I had a menu in my hand to hide behind.

"I would like that, yes." He has that god damned smirk on his face again, I can tell by the way his voice lifts and that sexy crinkle that forms next to his eye. He looks back down at the menu for a moment more before laying it down flat on the table and closing it dramatically, "and sure, I'll take the one you suggest, thank you June." As he thanks her, he's staring intently at me.

"I thought so," she sounds pleased as she takes the menu out from under his hand and walks away.

"I may have to take this to HR," I cross my arms.

"HR? We're not at work right now," he looks around at the empty booths.

"I don't need meat on my bones. I don't need you to buy me a meal. I don't need anyone to take care of me. I didn't need you tonight. I don't need you!"

"You did need me, you don't know what you're talking about," Jared remains cool as he watches me get more and more flustered, "don't get upset."

"I'm not fucking upset!" I slide myself out of the booth, and stand at the end of the table where June had just been a moment ago. I may be just inches above his head, but looking down on him at all I finally feel like I have the upper hand. I take a deep breath before exhaling slowly.

I start again, this time in a calmer tone, "I'm not upset. I'm going to the bathroom." I turn on my heels and walk away.

I can feel his eyes on me and I hate how much I love him watching me. I, the front desk receptionist, had always felt as though I was merely a tiny blip on his radar and I would be lying if I didn't admit that I hadn't had a chip on my shoulder about it. This feels better than it should.

Let him watch.

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In the bathroom I stand at the mirror, observing my hollow cheek bones. My muddy brown eyes are dark and get lost in the shadow of my thick sideswept bangs. I push them back out of my face and observe myself for a moment, thankful that my dollar store makeup still looks good from this morning and use my middle finger to lightly dab under each eye, ensuring mascara hasn't become smeared underneath.

I lift my arms, watching myself in the mirror as I take a quick sniff under each armpit and then sigh. *Thank god I don't smell.*

I bare my teeth in the mirror, looking to make sure there's nothing stuck and then look up to the ceiling as I try to remember what food could even be stuck in there. When was the last time I ate? On cue, my stomach audibly creaks in anticipation of the hot meal I know June will be bringing out for me, something with actual fat and protein.

"Okay," I focus in and lean over the sink to give myself a pep-talk, "Kimberly. You got this. It seems like his intentions are good. Hear him out. Buying you food doesn't mean you depend on him. You won't owe him anything. It doesn't mean you need him. It doesn't mean anything."

I shake my head and look down into the chipped porcelain sink. It's been so long since I allowed myself to let anyone in. June is the closest thing I have to a family any more, the only one that seems to care. She has never once handed me a bill after I've eaten here, yet I still can't bring myself to order more than buttered toast. With years of history between us, I still don't want her to think I depend on her for food, even though I know I'm not fooling her.

I'm sure if I could go to therapy, they'd tell me that I need to let myself lean on people, but that's so much easier said than done. No college educated therapist has had to live *this* life. They don't know what it's like to have an unreliable, wreckless, self-centered, asshole of a father. To go through the repeated loss and abandonment I did. To have lived in their car since they were 16. My own mother's last words to me were "*never depend on anyone, Kimmy. Nobody can be trusted.*" I watched her walk away from me, not even looking back with remorse, with sadness, with emotion at all, as she disappeared into the crowd. Those words have been etched into my heart for over a decade now, and as of last week, they are also in ink on my forearm.

I pull up my sleeve and trace the tattoo lightly. It's still sensitive but the redness has gone down and the fine lines are lightly raised under my fingertips. They curl and wrap around each other in a pattern of my own design. It looks like another language to anyone else, even the artist didn't know what he was putting into my skin, but I know. I will always know.

Pulling down the sleeve of my sweatshirt, I tuck it into my fist and take a deep breath before heading back out into the restaurant. As I step out into the small hallway, the smell of cooking oil and sausage patties wafts by and my stomach groans again. I peek my head around the corner and see the back of Jared's head sitting in the booth.

He's looking out the window into the night or maybe back at his own reflection in the glass. Jesus, he's so fucking gorgeous, I'd stare at myself all night too if I looked like him. His green eyes, chiseled jaw and ever-present 5 o'clock shadow are just the tip of the iceberg and I find my eyes wandering to the nape of his neck, imagining myself grazing him there with my lips, breathing him in.

Suddenly, he turns and finds me watching him. I jump back, knocking over a high chair and losing my balance. A hearty laugh rings out, filling the entire restaurant and my face bursts into flames, heat rising in my cheeks as I steady myself by touching the wall next to me.

I stomp my foot, disappointed for getting caught and lean down to hide my face and pick up the toppled high chair. When I look up, he's coming towards me. Within seconds his hand is on mine taking the wooden seat out of my grasp and that same tingling from earlier erupts

through my hand where our skin touches. I look down at the connection, sure there must be something tangible causing this sensation but there is nothing but his hand against my own.

I look up at him, hoping to find that he confirms the feeling, that it's not just me, but I get nothing, not seeming to notice. He continues to take the chair from my hand and places it against the wall and turns back to me, chuckling. Whether he's laughing with me or at me, I'm not sure and I feel the heat rise back up in my gut.

I stomp around him and head back to the booth.