



The needle plunger pulls back and a rush of orange chemical fills the barrel. Lifting it to her sight, Sarah plucks at the barrel twice making sure the air bubbles get to the surface. Sticking the needle into another container, she grasps the flange and pushes down on the plunger, pushing the orange chemical into a yellow chemical, and watching as both twist into each other and slowly turn black.

Behind her, a 14 year old Colombian Lesbian named Reggie snacks on a brown sugar pop tart, eyes wide with amazement. Sarah grasps the bottle in her hand, thumb on the bottom and index finger on the top, and shakes it back and forth slowly.

“ That’s got me shook. It’s giving venom. ”

“ ..You know what you’re giving? ”

“ Yeah yeah. What is **that**? ”

“ **This? This is my ‘black shit.’** ”

“ That’s the stuff you spit? I thought it was like, hatred from your heart or something? ”

“ That’s the work version. Truth is it’s just a few chemicals that I mix to get the wanted effect. Some parts numbing agent, some part irritant, and another part that turns gaseous in the open air and forces you to gag, plus another component that expands like spray foam. If I could produce this naturally, I’d be King. ”

“ How do you get it in your mouth? ”

Sarah smirked and a flood of comments that someone should not say to a 14 year old came flooding in; Top 3 being ‘you ask nicely.’ ‘you buy a few drinks first’ and of course ‘hopefully with some force.’ Sarah told herself she’d tell this situation to someone eventually and get a laugh out of them, but it wouldn’t ever happen.

“ **With this.** ” Sarah pulls out a small black plastic case. Inside is a metal and glass contraption with gaps in a half circle and a bulbous center. “ **It’s a modified retainer. These two bumps are actually storage compartments. It’s fashioned after an assassin’s teapot.** ”

“ ...what? ”

“ In ancient China they had these teapots with multiple compartments. Depending on where you put your finger when pouring, different compartments would empty. You could also combine any of the three by plugging the holes at the same time.” Sarah points to the object on the table before her. “Same difference. Except if I plug the center holes with my tongue,

it shoots forward. But if I suck on my top lip and plug the front one; it empties into my mouth and I can coat my fingers in it. Took me a while to perfect it. ”

“ What’s it taste like? ”

“ The devil’s taint. ”

“ ..you taste the devil’s taint every time you fight? On purpose? ”

“ You’d be surprised what you get used to. ”

Sarah picked up the filled retainer, gently placing it into a form fit container and carefully snapping it closed. Sliding the container toward the other several at the left side of the table.

“ How many do you need? ”

“ Need? One, maybe two. Want? One for every man, woman, and child in the world. But it’s time consuming. I usually make about 10 at a time. ”

Sarah grabbed the next vessel and began the process again. Regina’s eyes widened as something occurred to her. She was still in the room. Because she had yet to be told to leave. Sarah pulled the magnifying glasses away from her face, looking at Regina. A nagging feeling that she was forgetting something she was meant to tell her. When you’re as secretive as Sarah, that could be any number of things. Sitting there for a moment, she could feel it on the tip of her tongue, but felt it scurry back into hiding as Regina asked yet another question.

“ ...why’re you being nice? ”

“ Who said I’m being nice? ”

“ ..you’re totally being nice right now? You’ve not told me to get out, to go die, choke on a bag of glizzy’s or nothing? ”

“ ...your basis for niceness has been seriously altered. ”

“ Yeah, by you! ”

“ Fair point. ” *Sarah spun around on her little stool and looked at the girl. Pop Tart crumbs gathered on her ratty t-shirt and in the corner of her mouth. She wished she had somewhere to send this kid where she wouldn’t have to see her. And then she recalled. She*

did. Sarah spun her body toward Regina, and leaned forward, waiting for the tears to start.
“ I’m going back to work. ”

“ Sick. ”

“ But you’re not coming with me. ”

“ No! you know the deal! ”

“ I know, you’ll blackmail me. I remember. But here’s the part **you** need to remember. ”
Sarah placed the bottle of mixed chemicals down gently, giving Reggie the bulk of her attention. “We need money. And we barely have any. So if you wanna eat **those**, I gotta use **these**. ”

“ Why can’t I come? ”

Thrilled at the chance to say what she was about to say, Sarah wanted to grab the phone off the bed to her right and record it, but she got too giddy too fast and blew the load too quickly. “ It’ll interfere with school. ”

“ I HAVE TO GO TO SCHOOL? ”

“ You do. You’re 14 and you’re not very smart. I’ve done more damage to you than even I’m comfortable with. ”

“ ..where are you going? ”

“ SCW. ”

“ Again? Didn’t you **womp-womp** outta there? ”

“ I don’t **do** whatever *that* is. I prioritized differently. It was a mistake. SCW is where my name needs to mean something. I refuse to not let it. ”

“ So you’ll just be on the road and I’m here? With Asher? How do I know you’re coming back? ”

“ You don’t. I could vanish forever like I intend to every night.” *The shock on Regina’s face reminded Sarah that she had never told Regina of her nightly and sometimes bi-nightly habit of walking out of this double wide trailer with the intent of never coming back, but always deciding against it and turning back around. It was a glorious look of fear that it created, and one Sarah would probably wish she’d gotten framed.* “ What? Do you think I

love it here? No. I can't stand it. I can't stand the idea of leaving and then CHOOSING to come back. But I will. I'll hit the event and bounce right back. And, if timing allows, you can come with. But not if you have school the next day. "

" I don't get it. "

" It isn't for you to get. Now go get dressed, we gotta get school supplies. "

" now? "

" Did I say to get dressed **now**? "

" ...where are we shopping? "

" **Town**. "

" TOWN? No. not happening. I'm not wearing khakis like the rest of these hicks. "

" You'll wear what we can afford and you'll be glad I'm not throwing your giant head through a window naked. "

" That's like two counts of child abuse in one sentence. "

" **Bi-** " *Sarah took a breath. Her eyes slamming shut for a moment in an effort to remain calm.* " **We have a very small amount of money. We don't have a choice.** "

" You say that but I know you're rich. I've seen your instagram. You've got money, you just don't wanna spend it because of some feud with your brothers. "

" **Feud? You think this is about a feud?** " *Sarah grabbed her iphone 11 with the cracked screen and moved her thumb furiously around it. Pointing the phone toward Regina showing her a picture of a home in the middle of nowhere surrounded by what appears to be buried lines of some sort all along the property.* " **This is the home of Evan Driel. Evan made the mistake of reviewing my brother Kal's protein brownies as 'inedible torture for the mouth' in a 2 ply magazine that no one reads. Kal spent upwards of about half a million dollars buying the area around this man's house, and then another couple hundred thousand dollars installing buried speakers that would play 'the song that doesn't end' from the lambchop show on a constant loop. Evan abandoned his house because Kal refused to turn the song off, even after Evan tried to sell it. No one stopped him, no one questioned him.** "

Sarah moves her hand around the phone again, finding another photo and again pointing the camera at Regina. It's a simple awning with an address on it, and no other information.

“ Back in 2017 my brother Jack made an appointment at a chiropractor in Manhattan. It took him a while to find the building because there was no address on it. He missed his appointment. When he told them why, they told him it wasn't a good enough reason and that he had to pay for the appointment as part of their policy. Jack spent the next 5 months lobbying every politician and law maker he could to start making sure buildings had addresses displayed. Which would have been enough. Jack didn't think so, and started reporting the building for not having an address. Daily. This is a man who ran a company. He was taking time out of his day to get revenge over a \$150 copay. No one stopped him, no one questioned him. ”

Sarah once again scrolled through her phone, this time into the web browser and to a saved link from the Miami Herald. In the headline we see “COTTON CANDY CHAOS” with a picture of a health warning sticker over the label of the store with a biohazard symbol dead smack in the middle.

“ This was a place in Florida that sold Cotton Candy Cakes. Cakes that were just cotton candy wrapped around other candy. Innocent enough. Not to my brother Vin. Vin hated it. Hated it so much that he went out of his way and paid someone to make a similar looking sugar as the one they used, with an ipecac base. Over 100 people, children included, threw up for hours after eating the cotton candy from this store. My brother came clean and ended up settling out of court, but at the end of it; he spent close to 2 million dollars on damages alone. No one stopped him. No one questioned him. ”

Sarah again turns her phone toward herself and flips through until she finds a picture of Xavier, her other brother.

“ This is Xavier. He's never done anything wrong ever, in his life. But he has spent more money on 'ideas' that've gone nowhere than all of us combined. And yet, no one stops him, no one questions him. Tell me why, Rej. ”

“ Because you're a woman? ”

“ Because I'm a woman. I'm not my own person they way they are their own person, I'm a detail. Something they have to control. They had the audacity to tell me that if I wanted to use the money I had earned, all I had to do was ask. Ask to use **my** money. I am many things. I am capable of many things. I can suffer any fate with glee because I know I'll get mine. But to beg for what I earned?. ”

“ ...fine. I get it. ”

“ Do you? ”

“ Yeah. If they can take it from you then it was never yours at all. ”

“ ..exactly. Go get dressed. ”

I make mistakes (*you're shocked, I know*). I'm not so proud that I **can't** admit it. I refuse to, but I can admit being wrong. The mistakes I make can be attributed to a few different things. I get tunnel vision about certain things and lose sight of other things that should matter more than I acknowledge. I get angry and decide things aren't worth my time as a defense mechanism. Mostly though it's because I am, as they say; Absolutely insane.

Of all the choices I've made with regrettable outcomes, or decisions that have lead me to settle for an outcome less than what I feel I deserve; not a single action I've taken in the last few years has stuck in my teeth like my inability to make it **here**.

SCW is not some fly by night operation that pops up, throws a bunch of money around, and vanishes just as quickly. It has staying power. The titles here, the fighters, the very name, has weight to it. I wanted this so badly. But I talked myself out of it. Told myself I could hang, but didn't want to. Denial is a strong tool and I used it like I use every other tool at my disposal; to **perfection**.

Like acid does to the container it's put in; It **ate** at *me*. Every now and again I'd have someone from the front office reach out to me, and I'd tell them I'm too busy. Too bogged down with other commitments. Too concerned with this or that, that or this. All the while I'd pick up the phone to call and ask for my job back. To promise to do better; be better than I was before, only to lose the nerve the second after.

As these things tend to do; it got worse before it got better. I signed up to tournaments and fly-by-nights, and all the while I watched as SCW went on without me. The viewers didn't miss me. They didn't make a big deal about my release like they do for all of these other half-wits with half the skills I've got. They hardly noticed.

It's not going to go that way again. If and when I walk away this time there will be rubble in my wake that tells the tale of my time here. There will be puddles of gore spilled and bones broken that lead to wherever it is I go to do whatever it is I'll do.

And it starts with Deanna Frost.

Deanna, I won't do what we (*the royal we*) tend to do in situations such as this and try to compare myself to you. ***It wouldn't be fair to either of us.*** It would be like comparing...Not apples to oranges. More like a lioness to a shark.

You are so family oriented it makes my taint itch. This whole life you've built upon the needs and wants of others. It lessens you in ways you're not smart enough to realize. Your dear sister who has sat before you and casted a shadow over you for how long now? Is it really 4 years? That's 4 more years than I've allowed that to happen, Deanna.

My brothers have been successful in almost every corner of this business. I did my best to hide who I was so as to not have to deal with that. But all things that are born in the dark eventually come to light. And so here I am, just another Wolf they way you're just another Frost.

I could have used it, I guess. Contrast and compare myself to them and their accomplishments, behaviors, and so on. I didn't though. It was never about being the next 'them' for me, Deanna. It was always about being the realest me. Truthfully speaking If I were you I'd have snapped Selena's neck a long time ago. Thankfully my siblings were smart enough to get out of my way. It's an absolute shame that's a trait you don't share with them.

I know, I know. I've got this reputation of not really being reliable. And it's one I deserve, no question. But it's not the only one.

I've got another reputation that I very much deserve, Deanna. And it is a doozy.

You know what Intrusive thoughts are. That's not a question. We all know what they are. And you're not stupid. Dramatic as hell, but dumb? No. you're very bright. Even when you pretend not to be. Most people in this world, this business, they silence those thoughts. Shake them off like a kid with a friendship bracelet at the Era's tour encore. I do not exclude these from my behavior. I embrace them.

When in the middle of a conversation I don't want to be in, and the thought 'gee I should bite this person on the arm to get them to go away' comes to mind, their flesh comes to contact with my teeth. I don't call this intrusive. I call them inspiration. And Deanna, I'm feeling very inspired.

Inspired to be the person I kept at bay the last time I was here. 'Go along to get along' was the phrase I locked on to. No more. Not once, nor never again. I've done enough damage to my life by pretending to be something other than what and who I am.

When I first started in this business, I did so behind a mask. It was a good mask. Specially designed for me. Got bored of it pretty fast though. I realized that while the mask was scary; it lessened the fear one could feel from my expression, from the way my eyes pierced your flesh long before my nails or teeth did. The mask I thought would give me strength turned out in fact, to be my weakness. I was far scarier outside of that mask than I could ever be in it.

You see the mask hid the hate. It hid the contempt, the rage. The blood red eyes and shaking face snarl that some of you inspired by simply being visible. It protected you from what I really am. And I'm done protecting anyone from anything about any part of me.

Can you say the same? Can you honestly say that you're done placating those around you? Or more accurately, needing to be placated by someone else?

Can you say with any genuine belief that the person you pretend to be is not in fact stronger than who you really are? If you do; do you expect anyone to believe it? I get the feeling that if you did deny this, it would be less about convincing us, and more about convincing yourself.

Again; This is where we do not compare but instead contrast to one another. I know who I am now, Deanna. I know what I am here to do and the means in which I'm meant to do it.

I am here to show you the way I showed everyone else that I've had to climb over or run through to become the person who I am.

I do not ask. I do not beg. I demand.

Not for help. Not for attention. But for a fight. I hope you bring one to me, Deanna. Because I'm bringing one to you.

The 1967 Toyota POS with the rust paint job came to a halting stop. Sarah jerked the shifter into park, and looked at Regina, who was in her usual position of looking down at her phone and not at anything around them. Sarah leaned over and pinched her arm just hard enough to make her yelp and look up. Instead of being in the parking lot of the combination KFC/Goodwill that Bent Fork cherished for obvious reasons, Regina saw the glowing sign of the Rivergate mall.

Regina looked at Sarah confused, as Sarah kept her eyes off of Regina in the hopes to say what she was about to say while maintaining some form of self respect.

“ No one ever did anything for me. I was written off more times than I can remember. I was looked at as a sister, a friend, a girlfriend, a burden. I was never seen as someone who could become something more than just a detail. Until I took that chance, and took what I wanted instead of waiting for someone else to give it to me. If this wasn't a kidnapping situation I'd tell you to get a job in one and buy you're own clothes. But you can't. So what I'll do is I'll give you my credit card. You buy whatever clothes you like, and when this is all said and done and you're back to being some pampered pet for whatever relative that claims you; Maybe you pay me back. Or maybe; Maybe we just chalk it up to payment for all the dinners you've cooked. But either way, You don't look at this as a gift. Or Charity. Those things, that point of view, will mess you up. You are getting this because you deserve to get it. Gifts just make you worthless. ”

“ You really feel that way? Like gifts are bad? ”

“ Everything I am came from a fight. It's the only way I trust it. People don't give you things because they want you to have them. They want you to have a feeling for them associated through that thing. They figure if you value the thing, then you'll value them. It's bribery and it's disgusting. ”

“ Sounds awful. Why would anyone wanna live that way? ”

Sarah threw her sunglasses over her eyes, and stepped out of the car. “ ...you'd be surprised what you can get used to. Now use your phone and see if they have an auntie anne's in here. I'd choke a toddler for a soft pretzel. ”