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VICIOUS

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I



WATER, BLOOD, AND
THICKER THINGS

I



LAST NIGHT

MERIT CEMETERY

VICTOR readjusted the shovels on his shoulder and stepped gingerly over an old, half-sunken grave. His trench billowed faintly, brushing the tops of tombstones as he made his way through Merit Cemetery, humming as he went. The sound carried like wind through the dark. It made Sydney shiver in her too big coat and her rainbow leggings and her winter boots as she trudged along behind him. The two looked like ghosts as they wove through the graveyard, both blond and fair enough to pass for siblings, or perhaps father and daughter. They were neither, but the resemblance certainly came in handy since Victor couldn't very well tell people he'd picked up the girl on the side of a rain-soaked road a few days before. He'd just broken out of jail. She'd just been shot. A crossing of fates, or so it seemed. In fact, Sydney was the only reason Victor was beginning to believe in fate at all.

He stopped humming, rested his shoe lightly on a tombstone, and scanned the dark. Not with his eyes so much as with his skin, or rather with the thing that crept beneath it, tangled in his pulse. He might have stopped

humming, but the sensation never did, keeping on with a faint electrical buzz that only he could hear and feel and read. A buzz that told him when someone was near.

Sydney watched him frown slightly.

“Are we alone?” she asked.

Victor blinked, and the frown was gone, replaced by the even calm he always wore. His shoe slid from the gravestone. “Just us and the dead.”

They made their way into the heart of the cemetery, the shovels tapping softly on Victor’s shoulder as they went. Sydney kicked a loose rock that had broken off from one of the older graves. She could see that there were letters, parts of words, etched into one side. She wanted to know what they said, but the rock had already tumbled into the weeds, and Victor was still moving briskly between the graves. She ran to catch up, nearly tripping several times over the frozen ground before she reached him. He’d come to a stop, and was staring down at a grave. It was fresh, the earth turned over and a temporary marker driven into the soil until a stone one could be cut.

Sydney made a noise, a small groan of discomfort that had nothing to do with the biting cold. Victor glanced back and offered her the edge of a smile.

“Buck up, Syd,” he said casually. “It’ll be fun.”

Truth be told, Victor didn’t care for graveyards, either. He didn’t like dead people, mostly because he had no effect on them. Sydney, conversely, didn’t like dead people because she had such a marked effect on them. She kept her arms crossed tightly over her chest, one gloved thumb rubbing the spot on her upper arm where she’d been shot. It was becoming a tic.

Victor turned and sunk one of the spades into the earth. He then tossed the other one to Sydney, who unfolded her arms just in time to catch it. The shovel was almost as tall as she was. A few days shy of her thirteenth birthday, and even for twelve and eleven twelfths, Sydney Clarke was small. She had always been on the short side, but it certainly didn’t help that she had barely grown an inch since the day she’d died.

Now she hefted the shovel, grimacing at the weight.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” she said.

“The faster we dig, the faster we get to go home.”

Home wasn’t home so much as a hotel room stocked only with Sydney’s stolen clothes, Mitch’s chocolate milk, and Victor’s files, but that wasn’t the point. At this moment, home would have been any place that *wasn’t* Merit Cemetery. Sydney eyed the grave, tightening her fingers on the wooden grip. Victor had already begun to dig.

“What if . . .,” she said, swallowing, “. . . what if the other people accidentally wake up?”

“They won’t,” cooed Victor. “Just focus on *this* grave. Besides . . .” He looked up from his work. “Since when are *you* afraid of bodies?”

“I’m not,” she snapped back, too fast and with all the force of someone used to being the younger sibling. Which she was. Just not *Victor’s*.

“Look at it this way,” he teased, dumping a pile of dirt onto the grass. “If you do wake them up, they can’t go anywhere. Now dig.”

Sydney leaned forward, her short blond hair falling into her eyes, and began to dig. The two worked in the dark,

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only Victor's occasional humming and the thud of the shovels filling the air.

Thud.

Thud.

Thud.

II



TEN YEARS AGO

LOCKLAND UNIVERSITY

VICTOR drew a steady, straight, black line through the word *marvel*.

The paper they'd printed the text on was thick enough to keep the ink from bleeding through, so long as he didn't press down too hard. He stopped to reread the altered page, and winced as one of the metal flourishes on Lockland University's wrought-iron fence dug into his back. The school prided itself on its country-club-meets-Gothic-manor ambience, but the ornate railing that encircled Lockland, though *striving* to evoke both the university's exclusive nature and its old-world aesthetic, succeeded only in being pretentious and suffocating. It reminded Victor of an elegant cage.

He shifted his weight and repositioned the book on his knee, wondering at the sheer size of it as he twirled the Sharpie over his knuckles. It was a self-help book, the latest in a series of five, by the world-renowned Drs. Vale. The very same Vales who were currently on an international tour. The very same Vales who had budgeted just enough time in their busy schedules—even back before they were best-selling “empowerment gurus”—to produce Victor.

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V.E. SCHWAB

TITAN BOOKS

GENESIS



SIX WEEKS AGO

THE MERIT SUBURBS

THE night Marcella died, she made her husband's favorite dinner.

Not because it was a special occasion, but because it *wasn't*—spontaneity, people insisted, was the secret to love. Marcella didn't know if she believed all that, but she was willing to try her hand at a home-cooked meal. Nothing too fancy—a good steak, edges seared with black pepper, slow-baked sweet potatoes, a bottle of merlot.

But six o'clock came and went, and Marcus wasn't home.

Marcella put the food in the oven to keep it warm, then checked her lipstick in the hall mirror. She freed her long black hair from its loose bun, then put it up again, teasing a few strands out before smoothing her A-line dress. People called her a natural beauty, but nature only went so far. The truth was, Marcella spent two hours in the gym six days a week, trimming and toning and stretching every lean muscle on her willowy five-foot-ten frame, and she never left her bedroom without her makeup expertly applied. It wasn't easy, but neither was being married to Marcus Andover Riggins—better known as Marc the

Shark, Tony Hutch's right-hand man.

It wasn't easy—but it was worth it.

Her mother liked to say she'd gone fishing and somehow bagged a great white. But what her *mother* didn't understand was that Marcella had baited her hook with her prize in mind. And she'd caught *exactly* what she'd wanted.

Her cherry red heels clicked across the wood floor before being swallowed by the silk rug as she finished setting the table and lit each of the twenty-four tapers in the pair of iron candelabras that framed the door.

Marcus hated them, but for once Marcella didn't care. She loved the candelabras, with their long stems and branching limbs—they looked like the kind of thing you'd find in a French chateau. They made the home feel luxurious. Made new money feel old.

She checked the time—seven, now—but resisted the urge to call. The fastest way to kill a flame was to smother it. Besides, if Marcus had business, then business always came first.

Marcella poured herself a glass of wine and leaned back against the counter, imagining his strong hands closing around someone's throat. A head forced underwater, a jaw cracking sideways. Once he'd come home with blood on his hands and she'd fucked him right there on the marble island, the metal shaft of his gun still in its holster, the steel hard against her ribs.

People thought Marcella loved her husband in spite of his work. The truth was, she loved him because of it.

But as seven became eight, and eight neared nine, Marcella's arousal slowly turned to annoyance, and when

the front door finally swung open, that annoyance hardened to anger.

"Sorry, darling."

His voice always shifted when he'd been drinking, slowing to a lazy drawl. It was his only tell. He never stumbled or swayed, his hands never shook. No, Marcus Riggins was made of stronger stuff—but he wasn't without his flaws.

"It's fine," said Marcella, hating the edge in her own voice. She turned toward the kitchen, but Marcus caught her wrist, pulling her hard enough that she lost her balance. His arms folded around her, and she looked up into his face.

Sure, her husband's waist had widened a little, while hers had narrowed, that beautiful swimmer's body bloating a fraction with each passing year, but his summer brown hair hadn't thinned, and his eyes were still the rugged blue of slate or dark water. Marcus had always been good-looking, though she wasn't sure how much of that was his tailored suits or the way he moved through the world, as if expecting it get out of his way. It usually did.

"You're gorgeous," he whispered, and Marcella could feel the press of him, hungry against her hip. But Marcella wasn't in the mood.

She reached up, nails dragging down his stubbled cheek. "You hungry, sweetheart?"

"Always," he growled against her neck.

"Good," said Marcella, stepping away and smoothing her skirt. "Dinner's ready."



A bead of red wine slid like sweat down the side of the raised glass, tracing its way toward the white tablecloth. Marcella had filled it too full, her hand made clumsy by her worsening mood. Marcus didn't seem to notice the stain. He didn't seem to notice anything.

"To my beautiful wife."

Marcus never prayed before meals, but he always made a toast, had since the night they met. It didn't matter if he had an audience of twenty or if they ate alone. She'd found it endearing on their first date, but these days the gesture felt hollow, rehearsed. Designed to charm instead of being genuinely charming. But he never failed to say the words, and perhaps that was a kind of love. Or perhaps Marcus was simply a creature of habit.

Marcella lifted her own glass.

"To my elegant husband," she answered automatically.

The rim was halfway to her lips when she noticed the smudge on Marcus's cuff. At first she thought it was only blood, but it was too bright, too pink.

It was lipstick.

Every conversation she'd had with the other wives came rushing back.

His eyes start to wander yet?

Keeping his stick wet?

All men are rotten.

Marcus was busy cutting into his steak, and rambling on about insurance, but Marcella had stopped listening. Behind her eyes, her husband traced his thumb across a pair of stained lips, parting them around his knuckle.

Her fingers tightened on the wineglass. Heat was flushing

her skin even as a cold weight settled in her stomach. "What a fucking cliché," she said.

He didn't stop chewing. "Excuse me?"

"Your sleeve."

His gaze drifted languidly down toward the bloom of pink. He didn't even have the decency to look surprised. "Must be yours," he said, as if she'd ever worn that shade, ever owned anything so tacky and *twee*—

"Who is she?"

"Honestly, Marce—"

"Who *is* she?" demanded Marcella, gritting her perfect teeth.

Marcus finally stopped eating, and leaned back in his chair, blue eyes hanging on her. "Nobody."

"Oh, so you're fucking a ghost?"

He rolled his eyes, clearly tired of the subject, which was ironic, considering he usually relished any topic that revolved around *him*. "Marcella, envy really doesn't suit you."

"Twelve years, Marcus. Twelve. And *now* you can't keep it in your pants?"

Surprise flickered across his face, and the truth hit her like a blow—of course this wasn't his first time cheating. This was only the first time he'd been *caught*.

"How long?" she asked icily.

"Let it go, Marce."

Let it go—as if his cheating were like the wineglass in her hand, something she'd just happened to pick up, could just as easily set down.

It wasn't the betrayal itself—she could forgive a lot, in the interest of this life she'd made—but it was the look in

the other women's eyes that Marcella had always taken for envy, it was the stoic warnings of the first wives, the twitch at the corner of a smile, the realization that they all *knew*, had known, for god knows how long, and she—hadn't.

Let it go.

Marcella set the wineglass down. And picked up the steak knife. And as she did, her husband had the nerve to scoff. As if she wouldn't know what to do with it. As if she hadn't listened to all his stories, hadn't begged for details. As if he didn't go on and on about his job when he was drunk. As if she hadn't practiced with a pillow. A bag of flour. A steak.

Marcus raised a single brow. "What do you plan to do now?" he asked, voice dripping with condescension.

How silly she must look to him, with her perfectly manicured nails gripping the monogrammed hilt of the blade.

"Dollface," he crooned, and the word made Marcella seethe.

Dollface. Baby. Darling. Was that how he really thought of her, after all this time? As helpless, brittle, weak, something *ornamental*, a glass figurine designed to shimmer and shine and look pretty on a shelf?

When she didn't let go, his gaze darkened.

"Don't you turn that knife on me unless you plan to use it . . ."

Perhaps she *was* glass.

But glass is only brittle until it breaks.

Then it's sharp.

"*Marcella—*"

She lunged, and had the thrill of seeing her husband's eyes widen a fraction in surprise, the bourbon spilling as he jerked backward. But Marcella's knife had barely skimmed his silk tie before Marcus's hand cracked across her mouth. Blood poured across her tongue, and Marcella's eyes blurred with tears as she tumbled back into the oak table, rattling the china plates.

She still had the knife, but Marcus had his hand wrapped around her wrist, pinning it to the table so hard the bones began to grind together.

He'd been rough with her before, but that had always been in the heat of the moment, signaled by some unspoken pact, and she'd always been the one to signal it.

This was different.

Marcus was two hundred pounds of brute strength, a man who'd made his living breaking things. And people. He clucked his tongue now, as if she were being ridiculous. Blowing things out of proportion. As if she'd made him do this. Made him fuck another woman. Made him ruin all that she'd worked so hard to build.

"Ah, Marce, you've always known how to rile me up."

"Let me go," she hissed.

Marcus brought his face close to hers, ran a hand through her hair, cupped her cheek. "Only if you play nice."

He was smiling. *Smiling.* As if this were just another game.

Marcella spit her blood into his face.

Her husband let out a long-suffering sigh. And then he slammed her head against the table.

Marcella's world went suddenly white. She didn't