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Westridge Valley, 2013

Ben parked in front of the local pub and placed his hand over Imani's, he squeezed so ly when she didn't respond. "You okay?" He heard a small

buzzing and looked at her lap.

Snapping into action, Imani moved her hands from under Ben's, she quickly fumbled with grabbing the phone from her pocket. Sliding her thumb across the screen, she answered in a rush, "hey."

' Are you okay, sweetie? You sound out of breath. Her mother's voice came through the speaker and Imani relaxed.

The guilt had come back ten times as strong and she'd been almost convinced it was Richard calling her, now that annoying little feeling wouldn't go away. This was a bad idea, she shouldn't be out with other men, especially when she promised she'd just study. "I'm fine, ma. Going out with a friend." Imani made sure not to classify what gender this friend was but her mother was onto her.

' A boy? Leela questioned as Richard glared at the phone in her hand.

Imani laughed, unaware of the trouble unfolding back home, "maybe. I got to go, we're heading in now." She cut the call just as her mother spoke her name in a slight panic.

No. She needed to do this. She had to get away from the leash that was Richard, so she looked up at Ben's curious gaze and smiled in encouragement. "Shall we?" He questioned and she nodded in response. They both exited the car and Ben grabbed his guitar from the back seat. He placed a leading hand at the lower of Imani's back and directed her to the bar.

A smaller, younger looking man came up to them. "You little shit, I thought you were a no show!" He snapped.

"Shut up, Jesse. I'm here." He grunted back at the lean man.

Jesse turned to look at Imani, "yes you are," he mumbled.

"Hey man, get on stage!" Ben pushed past Jesse with Imani and directed her to a seat just to the side of the stage. "Want a drink?" He asked, leaning down to her ear in the loud room.

She shook her head, "just water, please." Imani replied, knowing if she drank it'd only become another nail in her grave.

"A good girl," Ben grinned.

With a raised eyebrow, she sco ed, "a sober girl."

Ben disappeared and returned moments later with a tall glass filled with ice, "ma'am." He placed the cup down in front of her and turned to the stage where Jesse was checking their equipment. "I should head up, make sure to cheer me on!"

Imani sipped at the cold water as the minutes passed. Jesse and Ben both sat on stools, turned in towards each other slightly. From this angle she could see Ben's corded jaw, then she compared it with Richards. Dammit! Looking away from the stage, she scanned the crowd. Surprisingly, they began moving towards Ben and Jesse, already recognising the duo. There were several cheers and hoots.

She sat back in her seat and folded her arms as Jesse spoke up, "we'd like to thank you all for coming out tonight and hope you enjoy..."

Ben's fingers worked the strings of his guitar and then he opened his mouth, my eyes widened as the words began flowing from his lips. He was good. They sang and play several songs, taking a small interval between each.

Before she knew it, Imani was also clapping and cheering the two on with the rest of the pub.

"Always a great audience, cheers!" Jesse stood up along with Ben.

They made their way o the stage a er packing up their gear. Ben was first to arrive at Imani's table, he slumped down on the seat next to her, "so?"

"A musician," she smirked.

He rolled his eyes, "you got to stop with that!" Moving back to his feet, Ben held his hand out for her, "hungry?"

"Starving!" She replied, her stomach grumbling in agreeance. Thankfully the bar was noisy and the embarrassing sound had fallen on dull ears. With her hand still clamped within his larger one, she trailed behind Ben.

As soon as they le the tavern, the guilt crept back. She'd been distracted by the singing duo but now, she knew she needed to get home before it ate her alive. Her stomach groaned in pain, one meal won't hurt..The devious voice was back. Running her hand down her ponytail she continued a er Ben, he opened the passenger side door for her and she buckled up.

"There's this restaurant a few minutes from the campus," he noted.

She was glad they were heading back in the direction of the university, her nerves eased. They parked out front of a small diner, it was warmly lit and had an indie feel to it. Ben seemed to know his way around so Imani remained quiet behind him. He drew a chair out for her and she sat down, he moved to the pairing seat opposite her. "You'll have to order for me, I don't really know what I want," she mumbled with a small blush coating her almost chocolate skin.

Ben ordered for the two of them and ten minutes later the server placed their food on the table, Imani couldn't help but take a sni of the food. It smelt delicious and she was beyond hungry, so that helped.

Unconscious of Ben's eyes on her, Imani dug in, unable to control herself.

They finished their meal and Ben glared at Imani when she went to pay. "My treat," he forcefully pushed her towards the exit a er swiping his card. She realised really quickly that his had become a date of sorts.

Ben paused outside of the restaurant, he gripped Imani's elbow and turned her to face him. "Wait," he pulled her closer, "you've a little something," he spoke quietly.

Imani went to reach up and wipe whatever he'd seen, but Ben lowered his face and pressed his lips to hers. She wasn't going to lie, it felt nice. Safe Nothing like the punishing kiss Richard had le on her. She allowed him his fill, he didn't pry for more and she knew no other man would light up her insides the way Richard did.

A er a moment, Ben pulled back. "Too quick?" He questioned.

"No," she shook her head. Richard wouldn't question her, he wouldn't give her a choice and she hated to admit she missed his demanding ways. She decided then and there Ben would be her stepping stone away from Richard.

"Is it gone," she smiled.

Ben's cheekbones took a tinge of red, he nodded swi ly and placed his hand on her back. He took her back to the car and helped her inside before he keyed the ignition and began the short journey back to the dorms. A few minutes passed and Ben pulled up along the curb, in front of her apartment. Immediately, Imani's eyes focused on the black vehicle in front of them. She felt the heat in her panties and groaned out. Richard was here...

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