

Prologue

Flash back

It was Melanie's first day of kindergarten. Her mother had always made her a lunch of fresh fruits and a sandwich made from homemade apple jelly. Melanie had spent hours making apple jelly with her mother over this past summer. Her mother passed away in August, a few weeks before school started. Today, her father had used the last of her mother's homemade apple jelly on Melanie's sandwich. It almost made Melanie feel like her mother was back with her.

Selene, her older sister, had helped get her ready today as best she could and dropped her off before going to her own second grade class.

Little Melanie put her things in her cubby like her teacher instructed her to do and sat down at the front of the class. It was as she was methodically going over the items in her pencil box that a sharp tug from behind her made her look back. A boy with dark messy hair and bright blue eyes looked back at her mischievously.

"Your hair is really black," the boy commented off-handedly. "I was trying to check and see if it was your real hair."

"Of course it's my real hair," Melanie scoffed, eyes narrowing at the boy.

It was rude of him to ask if she had fake hair.

"My name's Brad," the boy said cheerfully. He dug into his pockets and produced a chocolate wrapped up in gold foil. "Want one? My Dad buys them from a friend's shop in town"

Melanie tentatively reached for the chocolate, grabbing it and excited to try this special sweet.

"Melanie!" scolded their teacher when she spotted Melanie chomping down on her newly gifted chocolate. "You know the class rules! No eating during class! I expected better from you."

Melanie looked at her teacher forlornly, swallowing the chocolate quickly. Melanie was supposed to be the perfect student. Her teacher was supposed to love her and here she was making a bad impression. What's worse, the entire class was now laughing at her. Melanie turned around and glared at Brad who seemed to be chuckling as well. This was his fault for giving her the chocolate! He'd had three pieces by now judging from the wrappers under his desk but hadn't gotten caught. It wasn't fair.

Sneakily, Melanie waited until she heard Brad unwrapping a chocolate. Her hand shot up in the air as she promptly announced to their teacher that someone was eating chocolate in class. Needless to say, Brad was reprimanded hastily and made to empty his pockets.

Brad glared at Melanie angrily.

"Tattle-tale," he murmured under his breath as Melanie smirked at him when he walked by her.

Melanie simply ignored him for the rest of class.

At lunch-time, they were allowed to go sit outside on the picnic tables. Melanie happily opened her lunch box, laying out her food in front of her.

"Your sandwich smells so good," said a girl named Amy who was sitting next to her.

Melanie nodded at Amy.

"It's got homemade apple jelly in it," Melanie stated proudly, looking at Amy and then towards her teacher who sat at the head of the picnic table. "I helped my mother make it," Melanie stated proudly.

"That's wonderful," Melanie's teacher praised her.

Melanie glowed, feeling like she'd just been awarded a medal of honor.

"Help! I dropped my lunch money in the grass!" Josiah, another student from their class wailed.

Their teacher immediately got up to go help calm Josiah down. Before Melanie could realize what had happened, someone swooped by and grabbed her sandwich, running away with it.

"Hey!" Melanie yelled at Brad's retreating gure.

She got up and began to run after him across the school yard.

"Give it back!" Melanie screeched.

"Oh but it's homemade apple jelly!" Brad said in a high-pitch voice, trying to mimic Melanie's enthusiasm.

"It's mine!" Melanie yelled as her legs spurred her on.

Brad was fast, but Melanie was a few inches taller and managed to grab the back of his cardigan. Scrambling for escape, Brad expertly shrugged himself out of it, leaving an empty dark blue cardigan in Melanie's hands.

"You stole my sandwich!" Melanie screeched, a lisp from her missing front tooth making it sound like she said 'sammich'.

Brad simply laughed, making his way towards the play ground where he could hide from her. But before he made it far, he was stopped by their gym teacher.

"Mr. Sinclair," a deep male voice boomed. "Why do I get the feeling you're up to no good?"

In the time it took Brad to realize he wasn't going to get far and wasn't going to be able to eat the delicious smelling sandwich in peace, their Kindergarten teacher as was angry too. Melanie had reached his side.

"I was just borrowing her lunch!" Brad protested.

"He was not! He stole it! It's mine!" Melanie exclaimed, stomping her foot for emphasis.

She was livid. That sandwich was the one thing she'd been looking forward too all day!

He was put in time-out for stealing a class fellows lunch. After that day, little Brad labeled Melanie a tattle-tale. She was a snitch and stuck up. Anything that pissed her off made him happy. And apparently someone getting better grades than her was a pet-peeve of Melanie's. So even though Brad became a trouble-maker who enjoyed cutting class, he made it a point to always try and get better grades than Melanie.

Melanie decided early on that Brad was a good-for-nothing boy who would never amount to anything. He was awful and mean and all-around bad news. He tried to steal her special sandwich! He began smoking in tenth grade and it was just more proof that Brad was the embodiment of everything a young man should not be.

End of ashback

For as long as Brad could remember, he loved food. He loved good food and he loved when his dad would take him out to eat because his mom sucked at cooking. Going out with his father and eating quality food, especially satay with a perfect blend of spices and a hint of the underlying smoky charcoal flavor, was always amongst his most cherished memories. And when his father would buy him and his siblings chocolate from his favorite bakery at the end of the meal, well it was just the icing on the cake to time well spent together.

But everything changed when his dad died. Alpha Edward had always been a strong pack leader and when Xavier, Brad's older brother, took over, he couldn't replace his dad no matter how hard Xavier might try.

Another constant in his life, unlike his father who left him, was Melanie. He hated her with a passion. He hated her when they were kids and she would tattle on him to the teacher when he snuck food into classes. He hated the way she won first place at the science fair because she grew some stupid plants. Big deal everyone grew plants. So what if she tested how different types of music affected the growth of plants which was actually kind of cool but his science project had been way better. He made a volcano explode, spewing chocolate everywhere. Smart and tasty. Instead, he won second place.

But right now, today, he hated the fact that she was sitting there, little-miss-know-it-all, and twirling a strand of black hair around her finger. It was f****g annoying. Everything she did was annoying. Especially the way she was raising her hand and trying to get Mr. Blackworth's attention.

Teacher's pet. She was such a suck up.

Mr. Blackworth ignored her, trying to call on someone else for once but Melanie kept waving her hand about like it was going to fall off.

Brad couldn't help but think that she probably angered herself to the thought of getting all the answers right in class. He snorted at the thought and Melanie glared at him before looking back at Mr. Blackworth eagerly.

Just to piss her off more, Brad raised his hand. Their tenth-grade history teacher called on him. He got the answer right and Melanie crossed her arms, glaring at him as if she'd like nothing better than to pulverize him. Brad simply busied himself looking down at his book as Melanie started asking a bunch of stupid questions

She was so annoying and Brad internally thought of himself shoving his dick in her mouth just to shut her up. Thoughts of her enjoying it as he told her she was the best and deserved an A+ swirled around his brain. Melanie obsessed over getting A's. He couldn't help but guffaw at the thought. The noise earned him a glare from his teacher and Melanie.

Coughing discreetly, he looked away. He'd been having those types of thoughts a lot more than usual lately and couldn't help but wonder why. School was almost out for the summer and he'd be turning 16 soon. He couldn't wait to find his mate and hopefully let out some of this pent-up s****l frustration. That was the only reason he was probably getting these thoughts into his head. The bell rang signaling the end of class and Brad picked up his bookbag, slinging it over his shoulder, and walked out of class.

He met up with his friends at the lockers, discreetly pocketing the packet of cigarettes handed over to him.

"Let's get out of here," Brad said, depositing his books in his locker.

Josiah, his packmate and friend, led the way. Brad barely glanced around as he exited the school building. If he had, he would have noticed Melanie watching him.

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Melanie was a sweet fifteen-year-old girl who seemed to get along with grown-ups rather than her own peers. Some of her fondest memories of her childhood had been digging around in the dirt and keeping up her mother's garden. Melanie couldn't remember her mom but her older sister Selene, older than Melanie by two years, said she was the kindest soul to have ever walked this land. Melanie's 19-year-old older brother, Ricky, said their mother loved two things the most in the entire world: her family and gardening. Ricky was almost nished with his training to be beta of the Silver Creek Pack and their alpha was Dylan Sinclair, Selene's boyfriend. Dylan was also Brad's older brother.

Melanie's mother had died when Melanie was a little girl, barely the age of five, but Melanie could faintly remember toddling around the garden as her mother hummed and worked away in it. She'd hand Melanie different colored owders to smell, teaching her their names all the while. But as time passed and her mother's smell and voice became lost in an abyss of foggy memories, Melanie held on tighter to the picture of her beautiful mother that was on her nightstand. She was smiling, her expressive grey eyes looking at the photographer with love, a lacy pink dress on her slim form as two hands rested on her protruding belly. It was a picture of when she'd been pregnant with Ricky but sometimes, Melanie would pretend it was a picture with her. Because as every youngest child knows, the house is always full of pictures of the first child, but as life gets busier for new parents, picture of the proceeding children are often scarce. There were no pictures of Melanie and her mother together. There was one picture of Ricky and Selene on Selene's first birthday and more pictures than Melanie cared to count of Ricky. There was even a book documenting his birth weight, height and even the loss of his first baby tooth. But at some point between Selene turning one, Melanie being born a year later, and the death of the female-beta, pictures of Carey Young and her children seemed to have disappeared within their house. The picture in their entrance foyer was one for Christmas, they were all dressed up and her father had a santa hat on his head. Melanie had been three and was sitting on the floor with crossed legs, her siblings beside her while her parents sat on a couch behind them. Her mother didn't seem as happy in it as she'd always seemed in other pictures. Maybe it was because she'd found out she was sick. The sickness that killed her was still a mystery to Melanie but she knew that everyone had known she was sick for awhile. No one talked about what exactly her caused her mother's death. Especially not her father who everyone said had changed drastically after the death of his mate. He wasn't happy anymore but did his best to be present for his three children. But sometimes, Melanie sorely wished she had one picture, only one of just her and her mother. Because as she grew older, she was forgetting the feel of her mother's arms around her...

Melanie was suddenly jolted from her melancholy thoughts as someone she absolutely loathed walked by her with his friends, pocketing a packet of cigarettes while trying to be sly about it. Melanie hissed in annoyance. Just once she wished he'd get caught. Ever since Melanie could remember, Brad had been a thorn in her side. The teachers seemed to like him despite his trouble-making ways. He was the son of the previous alpha of the Crimson Phoenix Pack and the current alpha's youngest brother. Rumor's had it that he was in-line to be his pack gamma.

Dylan, another of one of many of Brad's older brothers, was alpha of Melanie's pack. He was also her older sisters boyfriend and it was rumored that he planned to take Selene as a chosen mate when the time came. Dylan was right. He was always nice to Selene whenever he came over to see Selene. Even Tony, the second-oldest brother and Crimson Phoenix Pack beta was nice to Melanie. One time, Brad called Melanie ugly and weird when Dylan invited her for a Halloween party last year. But Tony had made Brad apologize to her. Not that Brad had meant it but Melanie still took a perverse satisfaction in the knowledge that Beta Tony had given Brad an earful over his rude behavior.

Melanie watched Brad exit the high school building, fury rising in her. He was skipping fifth period. That much was obvious. How was it possible for a guy so careless when it came to his classes still get one of the best grades? In some classes, he'd scored more than Melanie. Which was so unfair. Melanie never skipped. Melanie always studied and rarely partied. She worked hard and still Brad managed to beat her. Slamming her locker shut in disgust, Melanie stalked off to class, determined to study as hard as she could and beat him. She'd be damned if she let Brad become Valedictorian of their class.