

“What I wouldn’t give, Lo...if things were diff...”

“Don’t,” she rashly interposed, removing herself from the table as she dropped her napkin on a plate. It took everything to keep her voice from splintering.

She stormed through the restaurant – she could hear footsteps behind her.

This time, he didn’t have to chase her; startingly him, she quickly turned around, grabbed at his beautiful brown face, cupped it in her shaking hands, and pressed her lips into his.

“There,” she retorted submissively. *“Is that what you wanted? Are you satisfied?”*

He wistfully gawped at her, panting.

“This is why I cannot be near you, Nicky,” she stammered. *“This is why...”*

His expression took a melancholic turn.

“I love you, goddammit! And I can’t breathe when I’m near you...I can’t fucking breathe, Nicky...can’t you feel it? This whole thing is bigger than me...and I can’t...I can’t...”

He lunged out at her, enveloping her in his swiftly, kissing her again.

He pulled his lips away from hers, his eyes shut tightly, forehead evanesced with hers, seizing her body with vexing hands.

“It’s cruel,” she whispered against his lips. *“You and I...it’s cruel...”*

. . .

A couple of nights later, she let him into her bedroom and he started removing her clothes.

She reached out to him, tugging at his belt.

Driven to madness at his touch, she quickly fell victim to her own internal, salacious heaving.

This is cruel, she thought to herself, as his lips moved to the nape of her neck, *and we’ll be punished for this.*

And while the rest of the Vaughn mansion slept in peace, they were writhing naked together in the pale blue overlay of a crescent moon.

She forebodingly deluged herself in the delight of her own absurd love.

And in the early morning, she sluggishly removed herself from the bed, huddled in a corner where the blinding sunlight could not illuminate her infamy, and she cried

derisible tears, watching him sleep, in a pool of their own sordid plight.

. . .

The following week, Oliver called to tell her that he was taking Gianna to the doctor for the third time in a few days. She hadn't been feeling well.

"No need to worry," he assured her. "The doctor seems to think it's nothing more than mono..."

"Mono, Ollie? At her age?"

"That's what I said," he replied. "But it's more common than you think..."

"Learn something new everyday," she sighed. "Call me when you hear something more concrete?"

"Will do...I love you, Lo..."

"I love you too..."

Loren thought nothing more of his mother's illness than an abnormality that could be cleared up within a week with antibiotics.

When Oliver didn't worry – she didn't worry.

A couple of weeks later, she snuck away from a dinner with Vaughn on his veranda to take Oliver's phone call.

"Loren Aida, what the hell are you doing right now?"

He'd been drinking – she paused to collect her thoughts before she responded.

"Oliver..."

"What? I asked you a question...now *you* answer it..."

"Have you been drinking?"

He belched into the receiver. "What was your first guess, baby?"

He then chuckled loudly – she was far from amused.

"Can I call you later?"

"Are you too busy for me, baby? Is that why? Don't have time for me?"

He hiccupped, and then started laughing again.

She grumbled. "Ollie...where are you?"

"Driving..."

“Oliver! Oliver, pull over the car!”

“Why? I’m five minutes from my place...my baby crossed my mind and took the time to call her...could you put Loren Soto on the phone, please?”

“That’s not funny, Oliver...pull the car over and *call someone...*”

“Is everything alright, Lo...?”

Nicholas appeared from behind – she shuddered, hearing Oliver make a noise of strong disapproval in the background.

“Where the hell are *you*, Loren Soto? Tell me now!”

“I was having dinner with Vaughn and some associates, Oliver, nothing more...”

He chuckled emptily. “You’re a fucking liar...speaking of *fucking...*”

“Oliver...don’t...”

“Tell *him* I said ‘hello’,” he mocked. “Don’t want to keep you two from spending time together...”

“It’s not...It’s not...”

“I thought I’d call and tell you that my mother is going to die...”

“What?”

“My mother,” he repeated. “She’s going to die. Her doctor found a massive lump in her breast a few days ago...the biopsy came back and it’s malignant...”

“Oh, my God...Ollie...”

He hung up the phone.

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