

The Pearl

She wanted to kill him. Okay, maybe kill was too strong of a verb, but she had a really strong urge to physically injure him in some way. Maybe starting with that smart mouth of his.

“Tess, look at me.”

She refrained from rolling her eyes at his plea. Instead, she focused on her objective -- the plastic bag in his right hand -- the reason she was still here in this god-forsaken place. By “here” she meant Earth, not this rat-infested, urine-smelling back alleyway. She hated being in Longwood, the absolute most ghetto neighborhood in the Bronx; it reminded her of a past she wanted to forget, so she traveled to this area strictly for business. God, what she would do for a shot of pearl right now.

Her focus zeroed in on the obstacle to her euphoria. Jas. His golden eyes brimmed with concern, but she ignored it, shoving it into her mental box labeled “things I’m not dealing with.”

“Look,” she bit out, “we both know you’re going to give it to me, so stop wasting your breath.” Jas flinched as though she had slapped him. Then his face hardened and his jaw flexed.

“I don’t think so.” His gaze tracked her every move. Scratch that, instead of killing him, she would kill Boss for sending her to him. He had failed to mention her ex-best-friend, whom she had been avoiding at all costs, was the middle-man. She would deal with Boss later.

Distracted by the nails digging into her head, a sign of an impending headache, she closed her eyes. She needed the pearl, and she needed it now. Taking a deep breath to collect herself, she quietly asked, “Do you really want to go there?”

“If it means you’re pearl-free,” his tilted his chin up, “then yes.”

She sprung, closing the distance between them in milliseconds. Crouching, she used her left leg and kicked his back knee, causing him to stumble but not fall. She cursed. Spinning

around to his other side, she lunged for his right hand still clutching the pearl. He side-stepped her, and she nearly fell forward onto the dirt road.

“We could do this all day,” his voice was soft, and she hated it, “but you know you can’t beat me.” She also hated how he was right. When it came to hand-to-hand combat, Jas always won. He was the one who taught her and the other kids when they still lived in the Eastern sector. That was years ago, when she naively thought they would always be together -- Jas, her, and Evie. Shaking her head, she shoved the past aside and refocused on her obstacle.

With his jaw no longer clenched and his thick brows no longer furrowed, Jas almost looked--she stopped the thought in its tracks. What had she been about to think? *Handsome?* A slight breeze danced around them, and she watched how Jas’s brunet curls kissed his cheeks, slightly flushed from the cold. *Don’t get distracted*, she reminded herself. Pulling her gaze from his, she stared at the bag fluttering in his right hand. The nails were digging deeper into her head, and she felt the beginnings of a tremor in her hands, a warning of worse to come if she didn’t get that plastic bag. Desperate times called for desperate measures.

“Okay,” she said, “you win.”

Jas’s eyebrows shot up, then furrowed. “I don’t believe you.” He crossed his arms. “What are you playing at, Tess?” She expected this. Jas knew her too well.

“You said it yourself.” She shrugged. “I can’t beat you.” *In hand-to-hand combat that is*, she thought and bit the inside of her cheek to keep from smirking.

“Yes, that’s true,” he said slowly, his gaze never leaving hers as his steps hit the ground, deafened by the roar in her ears, “but when has that ever stopped you from trying?”

She swallowed thickly at his approach and willed herself to remain still. Even after avoiding him all these years, she couldn’t believe how affected she was by his presence.

“Look, I understand why you’re trying to get me to stop using,” her next words burned like acid in her mouth, “and I feel bad for putting you in this position.” Even though she was lying, she hated sharing anything about her feelings, especially with *him*.

“Look at me, Tess.” He was right in front of her now, so close she could feel the heat emanating from him, but she didn’t look up. She couldn’t. He sighed. “I’m choosing to put myself in this position, so don’t place all the blame on yourself, okay?”

She nodded just to appease him but wanted nothing more than to shove him far, far away, where nothing, not even light could touch her, but that was impossible.

“You’re like a sister,” he paused and his eyes found hers, “maybe even more important to me than a sister,” her heart fluttered against her will, “and I would do anything to protect you.”

She shoved aside her feelings and latched onto the word *sister*, twisting where the knife hurt. “Do brothers seduce their sisters’ best friend, treat them like crap, and dump them?” This time she felt satisfaction when he flinched.

“Is that what she said?”

Now she looked up at him and felt burning irritation. He had the nerve to look like a kicked puppy. “Yes,” she spat, “that’s what *Evie* said.”

“What if I said that’s not true?” His lips parted when he met her gaze, and she felt her chest lurch. “Would you believe me?”

“I don’t need to believe you. All I need is this.” She held up the plastic bag in her left hand, and his stunned face was almost worth the pain. Then she took off, sprinting towards Claremont Village, the relatively safer Bronx neighborhood where she worked.

She felt so much better now that she had some pearl in her system. The tremors receded and the headache was all but gone. Her thoughts flashed back to Jas's stunned face when she danced the bag in his face. Anytime she brought up Evie, he became distracted, so it was child's play to snatch the bag from him. That said, it was a double-edged sword. Old, unpleasant memories she'd rather never remember resurfaced, and she tried burying them but to no avail.

Hands full of charred bread, stale pastries, and even a packet of coffee cream, Tess returned to their makeshift home in the slums of Longwood. Cigarette butts, glass shards, and torn garments littered the streets. She wrinkled her nose at the usual smell of urine. Despite the less-than-ideal conditions, there was a skip in her step. She knew Evie and Jas would go ballistic over the food she managed to salvage, and she couldn't wait to see their faces. Maybe Jas would even give her his whimsical smile, a rarity these days, ever since his mom fell ill. She squeezed her spoils tighter; perhaps she could give him some of her portions for his mom. Hunger was an old friend of hers, so she didn't mind.

As she neared their home marked by a "yellow flag," a long branch tied with a yellow scrap of cloth burrowed in the dirt, she slowed down. The flag was Evie's idea, saying they needed to mark their territory or at least distinguish themselves from the other street kids. The entrance cloth was slightly parted, so she could see a larger figure on the floor with a smaller figure underneath them. She stopped, heart pounding out of her chest. It was Jas and Evie.

Tears pricked the corner of her eyes, and she twisted her hands together. She took a few deep breaths, reminding herself it was all in the past. Back to her "normal" self, she remembered she had *someone* to take care of. Shoving the plastic bag into her inside coat pocket, she traveled

to the main street where small businesses had their storefronts set up. While Claremont Village had fewer crimes and shootings, it was still a den of black market activity, so she kept her head down and moved quickly. Spotting her destination, a petite store with a cracked and unlit Signature Tea & Bakery sign hanging above the frame, she unlatched the metal door and announced to the empty clutter of chairs, “Your best “barista” is back with the pearl!”

A middle-aged man popped out from the kitchen in the back and smiled warmly at her.

“Tess, you’re back!” She rolled her eyes at his fake enthusiasm and closed the distance between them in one stride, her iron grip landing on his shoulders.

“Care to guess who showed up at the meeting point?” She glared at Boss, knowing his answer and furious he sent her to meet Jas after she explicitly told him she was avoiding Jas.

He gently placed his hand over hers. “Tess, I know you’re upset I lied to you, but Jasper offered a fair amount of cash.” He winced when she dug her nails deeper into his shoulder.

While his nickname was Boss, and he was technically her boss, he didn’t have complete control over her. They both knew he needed her expertise in the Bronx. She knew which short-cuts to take, which gang members to avoid, and which suppliers to choose. “I-I couldn’t turn it down, not with the Black Spades demanding more and more for protection.” *Against the Alley Cats*, their rival gang was left unspoken but understood. With a murderous glare, she released him with a tsk. She knew the situation was out of his control. “Fine,” she noted his sigh of relief, “but I’m taking half the pearl this time.”

He opened his mouth in protest, but he withered under her glare. She poured out all the white powder onto the kitchen scale. Re-storing exactly half into the plastic bag, she put the remaining in a circular glass dispenser. The customers always liked a little something extra in their drinks, and they were more than willing to leave extra cash for it.

“Well, my job here is done.” She turned to leave the same way she came. “I’ll be back tomorrow morning for my shift.”

She found herself wandering around Longwood, passing the same Spirits Bar & Lounge again and again. It didn’t help that there were no street signs and all the storefronts were the same corroded aluminum color, windowless, and barricaded with iron railings. Only those who knew slums well enough could navigate them, like her on a pearl-less day. The drug made her feel serene and floaty like her spirit could drift out of her body and fly anywhere it wanted, but it also impaired her ability to focus. Her feet moved on their own accord towards the makeshift apartment she used to call home, her eyes unconsciously searching for the “yellow flag,” but, of course, it was long gone.

Evie stomped through the opening entrance of their cardboard wall, tears streaming down her face, hands pulling at her hair. She screamed and hurled her tin cup to the ground. Tess didn’t know if she should comfort her or stay away and let her calm down, so she chose to do nothing. After a few moments of heavy panting, Evie turned towards her, grabbing her shoulders.

“Stay away from Jas,” her eyes looked wild. “He will hurt you, just like he hurt me.” Evie shoved her wrist into her face, and Tess saw red streaks still fresh and oozing. The Jas she knew wouldn’t hurt anyone unless in self-defense, but at the same time, she didn’t want to negate Evie’s feelings.

“What happened?”

Evie’s arm halted mid-throw, her breathing heavy and coming out in short bursts. She closed her eyes for a few seconds before turning towards Tess, markedly calmer. “We were

arguing over who made the best team--me and you or you and him." Her arm fell to her side. "He was adamant it was you and him." Her gaze was unfocused, seemingly deep in thought. "The option of me and him didn't even come up." She sighed and placed the tin cup back on the upside-down crate that served as their kitchen table.

Tess's mouth went dry. The same conflicted feelings she always felt inside resurfaced against her will. On the one hand, her heart danced giddily at the knowledge that Jas thought he and her made the best team. On the other hand, she was terrified by what that might mean and quickly broke that train of thinking. Instead, she refocused her thoughts on Evie and her wound.

"How'd you get injured?"

"Oh," Evie's gaze returned to her hand where blood was still dripping, "this." She shrugged. "We were playing tag with a knife, and he played dirty." Her voice ended on a note of finality, so Tess didn't press any further.

She rummaged through the plastic bins they had spotted and taken outside one of the houses in Mott Haven. It never ceased to amaze her what rich people threw away, but it benefited her, so she didn't care. Her hands landed on their "first aid kit," and she found what she was looking for -- gauze and antiseptic.

"Give me your hand." She reached out to grab Evie's hand.

"Don't bother," she snatched her hand away, "it'll heal, and I don't want to waste what little supplies we do have."

Tess didn't press because when Evie made a decision, she stubbornly held onto it no matter what anyone said.

"But tell me," Evie pulled Tess towards her so that their faces were mere inches apart, "what's going on between you and Jas?"

Tess averted her gaze, “What do you mean? Nothing’s going on.”

“I know you like him,” Evie’s gaze bore into her, and she opened her mouth to protest, but Evie cut her off, “don’t bother denying it.”

A rock settled deep in her stomach as she turned back in the direction of Claremont Village, towards her studio apartment. She shook her head, attempting to clear the cobwebs. Her focus wasn’t as bad as before, but it still wasn’t great. Maybe that was why she didn’t notice the black cats milling along the road until it was too late.

“Well, well, well,” a loud voice boomed from behind her, “what do we have here?” A chorus of chuckles accompanied the goosebumps that broke across her skin.

She silently cursed at her stupidity. Fingers clenched, she turned around slowly. There were four men, three lounging on the footsteps that led up to the Spirits Bar & Lounge, and one approaching her. If there had only been one man, she could have easily brought him to his knees, but four was out of the question. The bright red with splotches of black on the mens’ t-shirts reminded her of aposematic coloring in animals, especially since it was a sign they were part of the Alley Cats, notorious for their drug dealings and human trafficking. Even worse, they also controlled this area she had haphazardly waltzed into.

“Pretty face,” he smirked, “am I right, boys?” He was met with jeering and whistling. Her face warmed, and despite everything that had happened between them, she thought of Jas in this moment. They often explored Longwood with Evie, landing them in trouble more often than not.

She scrambled down a wooden crate and looked behind her. “Jas, hurry up!”

He smiled sheepishly from the rooftop. "Sorry, my shoelace is untied. Gimme a minute." She rolled her eyes and crossed her arms, their loot, a loaf of bread, snug against her chest. A green bob appeared behind Jas. "Evie," Jas jolted, "you scared me."

A laugh, the sound of bells twinkling, reached her ears, and she watched as Evie, with her lithe figure, crouch beside Jas still struggling to tie his shoelaces.

"Let me help you," she said, her voice singsong. While Evie reached for the laces, their hands brushed against each other, and Tess swore Jas's face turned the color of ripe peaches. She felt a twinge in her chest that she ignored. These small exchanges *always* happened.

"Okay, done!" Evie clapped in glee and hopped down the rooftop via the wooden crates stacked against the brick wall. Jas opted for jumping and landed on his feet in a low crouch, dust billowing around him. He noticed her watching him and cracked a grin, "Like what you see?"

She quickly looked away. Now it was her turn to look like ripe peaches. "In your dreams," she muttered under her breath. Before Jas had time to respond, a loud clang startled all three of them. A stout man emerged from the back door that led into the alleyway where they were. "Kids these days," he swore, "stealing left and right. I'll have their heads if I catch them."

It was almost comical when he noticed them and froze. She was the first to react and bolt down the street. A shout rang from behind, and she turned back to see if Evie and Jas were following and wished she hadn't. They were smiling at each other for god knows what and her gaze dropped down to their interlocked fingers. She had her inklings but this all but proved them, and she swallowed down the burning sensation at the back of her throat.

She fixed her eyes on the man in front of her. A smirk pulled at his lips. Cold sweat pricked her skin. She was outnumbered, but perhaps she could outwit them. She schooled her

expression. “I would be more than happy to serve you all.” The words were like acid on her tongue, but she swallowed down her nausea. She would make a break for it once they let down their guard. The man in front of her smiled, one that didn’t reach his eyes.

“How generous of you,” he said while the other men in the back hooted, “how about I have a taste first?” His tongue darted over his upper lip like a snake as he closed his hand over her wrist. His skin, calloused and dry, felt like sandpaper against hers.

The metal door to the store opened and a lean figure wearing all black emerged. His golden eyes found hers, and time stretched like an elastic band around them.

His lips parted. “Tess? What are you doing here?” Her heart pounded rapidly against her chest. She knew Jas was somehow affiliated with the Alley Cats but seeing him here in their territory felt like being dunked in cold water. Jas followed her gaze, landing on the man’s hand around her wrist. She’d never seen his face change so fast from neutrality to barely contained fury, and a shudder ripped through her.

“Mark,” he said quietly, “release her.” Silence blanketed everyone at the veiled threat.

Mark unhanded her, and she rubbed her wrist, trying to forget the feeling of calloused skin against hers. Jas strode towards her and pulled her in the direction she came from. Her heart did little summersaults against her will at the feeling of his hand in hers.

He was silent as he walked, heading towards the Claremont Village. When was the last time they had walked together? Three years ago, maybe? She’d lost count of the days, only holding onto her resentment of him and avoiding any paths on which they might cross.

“You know I’ve always liked you, right?”

She blinked. What had he said? Perhaps she hadn’t heard him correctly.

“I’ve always liked you,” he repeated, “not Evie.” He searched her face as he said all this. “I thought Evie told you, but I guess she kept it to herself.” He shook his head. “I’m not surprised, but I should have known better.”

It was like the ground underneath her shifted, and she was falling. She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Jas liked her? Was this a dream, a nightmare, or both?

“You know how Evie always liked skinship.” She nodded, not trusting herself to speak. “I thought she was just being friendly, so I went along with it. But I guess for her it meant something different, and I was blind to it.” He sighed and ran his slender fingers through his curls. “Sorry, this was out of nowhere, but what you said about me seducing Evie and everything stuck with me, and I wanted to let you know my side of the story.”

Her head tilted down, halfway through a nod when a ripple of heat flashed through her.

“What about that time I caught you on top of Evie?” The accusations came out before she realized what she was saying. “What about that time you used a knife to play tag with Evie? She said you played dirty.” The things she usually kept bottled up inside were spilling out, but in her anger, she didn’t care.

“I,” he grimaced, “I will admit I did play dirty.”

She felt an imaginary wall wedge between them at his admission. “How?”

“Well,” he swallowed, “I might’ve used some of my charms on her.”

She felt a sharp, burning irritation rip through her. “Just tell me. Stop with the euphemisms.”

“Fine, fine.” His jaw flexed. “I used my hand to trace the skin of her arm leading up to her jawline and pressed my thumb against her lip and-”

“I get it,” her face flushed, “stop talking.”

“You asked for it.”

She sighed. He was right. Why did she care so much what he did or didn't do? It was all in the past anyway. Why couldn't she let it go? Why couldn't she let the past stay in the past?

His hold on her loosened as he rubbed his face. “And I was on top of Evie because,” he blushed and turned away, “she seduced *me*.”

Her eyes widened, but then the more she thought about it, the more it made sense. Evie always liked skinship, so it wasn't hard to imagine something more than simple touches, and it made her feel gross like she was covered in a coat of grime, just thinking about it. She wanted to push past the walls she had built up between them over the years, but a chain around her heart weighed her down.

“How can I trust what you say is true?”

The corner of his eyes drooped, and she swore it looked like he was about to shed a tear. “I mean,” he raked his hand through his hair, “I can't force you to trust me, but I can try and explain what happened when Evie seduced me.”

She swallowed, not sure she was ready to hear the whole story, but the need to know outweighed her fear of the unknown. She nodded, once, eyes closed, bracing herself in the process.

She heard the whisper of breath escape through his teeth as he exhaled. “That day you were out scavenging for food, Evie and I were alone in the tent.” He grimaced, the memories most likely replaying in his head. “I was working on repairs when Evie crept up on me and did the, you know, usual skinship.”

She did know to some extent, but she wanted clarity. Keeping her eyes closed, she took a deep breath to hold onto what little patience she had. “What usual skinship?”

“Oh, um,” he looked sheepish, “she likes putting her arms around me and cuddling and the sort.”

It felt like her heart turned to stone and dropped to the bottom of her stomach. “Oh.”

“But I didn’t have any feelings for her,” he said quickly.

“Then why did you go along with it?”

He looked away from her, and she saw a red bloom across his cheeks.

“She told me to pretend she was you.”

“What?”

He groaned. “Basically, when she was trying to seduce me, she told me to pretend to see her as you, because she knew I liked you.”

“What the fuck? Why would she do that?” The more she learned, the more she didn’t understand.

“Because she liked me.”

She stopped walking, thoughts whirling like a tornado in her head. “Let me get this straight,” she always processed things better out loud, “you’re saying Evie liked you all this time, but you didn’t like her back, so she tried manipulating you by dragging me into the picture?”

A short laugh escaped him, “You could put it that way.”

Her thoughts went back to the time Evie stormed into their tent, blood dripping down her wrist. Now that she was no longer as emotionally affected by the past, she tried to see the past through a fresh lens. Having known Evie since they were basically children and taking into consideration what Jas had said, she reasoned that Evie’s warning to stay away from Jas might’ve been a ploy to separate them born out of jealousy, and she couldn’t help feeling betrayed, again. Did Evie seriously let a guy come in between the relationship they had?

After Evie had ranted to her about Jas, she had disappeared, and Tess spent months trying to track her but to no avail; she blamed Jas, challenging all her frustrations and hurt onto him. Evie's disappearance was part of the reason she had turned to the pearl, the only solace she had. The other part was numbing any feelings she had for Jas. She couldn't handle the possibility of a relationship, especially after Evie's disappearance, because what if Jas left her too? That would completely devastate her. But now, if what Jas said is true, he deserved better.

The walls she had desperately built up over the years came crumbling down, and she was glad for it. "I'm sorry," she said.

He gave a start. "What for?" Jas was like that, never seeing a person's faults.

She bit her lip. "For how I treated you these past years like you had leprosy. For jumping to conclusions about your relationship with Evie. I honestly thought you two were dating given how," she paused, searching for the right words to describe their physical intimacy.

"Touchy?" Jas offered, and she nodded and continued, "how touchy you two were."

His eyes had that distant look he got when he was deep in thought. "So where's my reply?" She furrowed her eyebrows. Jas could be so wildly random at times. "To what?"

"My confession." A cheeky grin pulled at his lips, one that only grew wider as she felt her face flush and heat snake up her spine. She looked at the ground, all of a sudden mesmerized by a line of ants. Deep down she knew how she felt about him, but it was a matter of being honest with herself. Her face burned, and the same fears of commitment, of intimacy that always gripped her heart like a vice, made themselves known again. What if Jas was lying to her? What if he left her just like Evie did? What would she do then?

She sighed. She was so tired of letting the same fears hold her back from living, from experiencing true freedom. Yes, the future was unknown, and she couldn't control what might

happen, but she could control her thoughts and actions. And she was done lying to herself about her feelings. She was done with the half-hearted way she had been living her entire life.

“I-I’ve,” she paused, her tongue heavy with the thought of the unknown, “I’ve always liked you too,” she murmured. It was true, from their first meeting, she was captivated by his whimsical smile, not that she would ever tell him that.

“I know,” he said, squeezing her hand, and she caught his smile.

Her own lips pulled up without her permission, and she squeezed back, her chest feeling lighter than before. For the first time in years, she felt like she could breathe easier.