

# ~ Please Baby ~

by Shea K.

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General warning: This story mentions casual drug use and child neglect. It also involves a romantic relationship between two women (surprise, surprise).

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## Chapter 1: Sick and tired

Jayne felt like she was going to put her fist through the heavy door as she pounded on it, knowing that she had to knock loudly if she wanted to be heard. Usually, there was all kinds of chaos and commotion going on in the apartment, enough for it to be heard outside quite easily. For once there was no loud music or shouting coming from the apartment, but she still knew she needed to knock as loud as possible. She hoped that none of the neighbors heard, though, as they were not above getting nosy, suspicious, and sometimes even calling the police. Her tailored suits and polished appearance did not make anyone think that she was above being at the house for the same reason most people came there for-drugs.

A chilled wind from the autumn air blew by her, causing her black hair with a dark red tint to whip around her face. She liked to think that cool breeze was what caused a shiver to run down her spine; it had nothing to do with the fact that no one was answering the door and the apartment seemed to be as silent as a grave. Once a throbbing developed in her tan-colored hand and impatience settled in her near-onyx eyes, she decided on a different course of action, figuring that five minutes without an answer was an excellent excuse to let herself in. There was a big chance something was wrong.

Pulling out her keys from her small brown handbag that was settled on her shoulder, she found the pair for the door. Working the two locks on the door quickly, she pushed the door open only to have a foul smell push back, causing her above-average frame to fall back just a little. Grimacing as the odor assaulted her worse than any street thug, she made her way into the apartment as her obsidian eyes watered. She held her breath for as long as she could, but eventually she did have to breathe, taking in the foul miasma and hoping that it did not melt her lungs. Her heart sped up several beats, even though she was accustomed to all sorts of terrible smells and the horrid state of the expensive apartment. She was sure the place would be cleaner if someone used it to house livestock.

"Q, you home?" she called out, dark eyes stinging from the aroma of urine, but searching for some sign of life and also on the lookout for anything wrong...which she would consider everything.

Flies buzzed around the garbage, which was knocked over by the dog-she figured anyway. She did not see any sign of the dog, other than the garbage and large amounts evidence that he had been eating. Well, she hoped those things were left by the dog, but she would not put it past someone that Quentin knew to have done their business in the wrong room. *It'll be hell cleaning that up...not that Quentin cleans anything.*

It was blatantly obvious that Quentin never cleaned his apartment from the mix of potent stench, unidentifiable stains, and piles of garbage almost everywhere with all kinds of insect activity around the place. There were disregarded cigars and cigarettes littering the hardwood floor, which was scratched up and covered in sticky substances that she never wanted to guess what they were. Rolling papers and bits of weed covered the coffee table, kitchen counter, and what was left of the torn, shredded, burned sofa. Razor blades and needles were all about the place and Jayce was very careful about where she stepped whenever she came into the apartment.

Creeping about the hardwood floor, as if she was a ninja-and making as much noise as one, which was an amazing feat considering her slightly heeled shoes-she called for Quentin again. The howl of the wind through a broken window was the only answer that she got. Frowning, she moved deeper into the apartment, disregarding any broken furniture. The cracked walls looked just as bad as the floor, mysterious substances clinging to them, holes kicked or punched in them, and filth smeared as if it was an art form. Stained and torn clothing littered the hall.

"So help me God if he's passed out on the bathroom floor again," she muttered to herself, cutting in the hallway for the direct route to the bathroom. "Q! I brought the baby-" She halted that statement immediately, interrupted by a sound that made her blood boil and freeze at the same time. A high-pitch, helpless, exhausted cry that only lasted a second echoed through the frigid, noxious apartment.

A snarl tore savagely through Jayce's oval, caramel face as she stormed to the back of the apartment. The door to the single bedroom was open, mostly because it was broken and could not be closed, revealing a room that was a smaller version of the apartment as far as dirt and grim went. The smell almost made her vomit in her mouth. Deep, dark brown eyes frantically scanned around the horribly cluttered room while small, elfish ears tried to pick any delicate sound. Her head turned sharply to the left by the unkempt bed with stained sheets as she heard another cry.

"Damn it, Princess, please be okay, please be okay," Jayce prayed aloud as she cut over to the end of the bed.

She almost cried herself as she spotted what she really did not want to see. On the sticky floor, by an unfinished slice of pizza and a pile of porn magazines, was her young, tiny niece. The baby was wearing only a diaper, lying in her own filth, being used as a home for roaches and flies, and weeping like the world was going to come to an end. The bawling was not very loud, sounding

more exhausted and hopeless than upset. Tears gathered in Jayce's eyes as she bent down and picked the poor child up.

"I'll kill that bastard! I'll kill him and I'll fucking salt the ground where he's buried! I'll kill him if there's anything wrong with you, Princess!" Jayce vowed aloud in a heated tone as she pressed the baby girl to her, offering what little comfort she could at the moment.

Princess cuddled up into the familiar warmth and her crying dwindled down to a distressed coo, knowing that she was in safe, capable hands. Jayce did not care that as she held the baby, the child's waste was oozing out of her diaper, soiling Jayce's suit jacket. All that ran through her mind was giving Princess some comfort and ridding the child of anything that might harm her. She dusted off any visible critters crawling on the baby, sniffing as she did so. She winced seeing little bumps and bites on the child's chilled, brown skin.

Princess whimpered into the soft material of Jayce's tan jacket, clutching onto a lapel with a tiny, chestnut-colored fist. Jayce felt the child's cold breath against her neck and noted the rapid rise and fall of Princess's chest. She could hear the congestion inside of the child and feel what a struggle it was for her to breath.

"It's okay, pretty baby. Auntie is here now and she's going to take care of you. Let's get you into something clean and warm first. Then Auntie is going to get you some food and take you to see good old Doctor Laramie to make sure you're all right," Jayce promised, speaking in soothing tone as she bounced her niece gently in her arms.

The ebony-haired adult rushed to where she knew her brother kept the baby's diapers, only to find the bag empty. Sucking her teeth and cursing in her head, she decided to just get out of the pigsty of an apartment as fast she could and settle things once she was outside. Wrapping Princess in her jacket for some form of protection, she rushed out into the crisp, autumn air, getting to her car in a flash; she was parked all the way at the other end of the street.

There was a car seat in the back of the small, clean, midnight blue coupe and Jayce quickly strapped Princess, having done the routine almost daily. She covered the baby in a blanket that was waiting and then jumped into the front seat. As she tugged on her seat belt, she glanced in the rear-view mirror to find that Princess was sound asleep. A small, smile curled onto Jayce's full lips.

"Sleep tight, Princess. You're safe with Auntie," Jayce vowed, speaking out loud for Princess to hear, as if the baby understood.

While Princess slept, Jayce pulled out her cell phone to start making calls. The first was to Doctor Laramie, demanding an appointment immediately because of an emergency. She had to speak with the doctor personally for it to be understood that she would be there in twenty minutes and they would see Princess, no arguments. With that out of the way, she felt just a little better, but she still had other calls to make.

Next on Jayce's hit list was her brother. She angrily punched the call button to get him on the line. She was not surprised when his voicemail picked up, but she was ready to leave a message so heated on his phone that she hoped he burst into flames when he heard it.

"Q, this is your sister, in case you're too fucking high to realize that. Now, listen carefully, you worthless, irresponsible, heartless bastard! I just found Princess on the floor in your filthy, fucking, rat-infested, covered-in-roaches apartment! You better hope to high heaven that shit isn't wrong with her or I'm beating your fucking ass the next time I see you, you miserable son of a bitch! What the hell type of man leaves a one-year-old alone in a fucking nasty, cold apartment?! You're a new type of asshole, you know that? You fucking deadbeat junkie! I swear to you that if anything's wrong with her it's your fucking head!"

Snorting in disgust, she ended the call with a violent press of the "end" button. For a few seconds, she drove in silence, her niece's ragged breathing assaulting her ears. Her grip tightened on the steering wheel, whitening her caramel knuckles as she scowled so deeply the lines were probably permanently etched smooth features. She snatched up the phone again to make another call, avoiding crushing the wheel in her death-grip.

"Hello?" a female voice answered.

"Mom," Jayce said through gritted teeth.

"Who is this?" the voice asked quite seriously.

"I don't have time for this crap, Mom. Have you seen Quentin at all today?" Jayce inquired, wondering why the hell she had to be born into such a stupid fucking family. The only thing that made her fine with them was Princess and right now she was thinking the worst for the baby. So, at the moment, her bullshit tolerance was at a serious low.

"Why?" the voice was clipped and annoyed.

"Just answer the damn question!" Jayce roared, catching herself just enough to not wake the baby, but not enough to avoid having her mother hang up on her. "Shit," she hissed as she dialed the number again. "Mom, I'm sorry. This is serious, though. Have you seen Quentin?"

"Are you going to tell me why?" her mother replied, sounding smug, happy to be holding something against the young woman.

"Okay, look, I went by his place a while ago and the apartment was messed up. More so than usual. I think his dog ran away...if that was his dog. No one was there and the place was freezing. Anyway, Princess was just lying on the floor, covered in her own shit with bugs and shit on her. I just want to know how long she might have been there like that," Jayce explained, wiping away tears crawling down her cheeks. *Stupid, fucking, idiot brother! How do you do that to helpless baby?!*

"I'm sure he just stepped out for a while," her mother answered, as if the information that she just got was inconsequential.

"Mom, didn't you hear me?! The baby was covered in roaches and not the kind your idiot son smokes!" Jayce snarled. Her face was flushed from fury and a vein bulged out of her neck from the tension coursing through her.

That set her mother off. "Don't you talk about your brother like that! He has a disease and he is getting better!"

Jayce bit back a comment so hard that she could taste blood in her mouth. *He's getting better?!* She often wondered what fantasy world her mother lived in where Quentin was even trying to get better. As far as she was concerned he was a junkie and he was quite content with continuing to be a junkie. But, for the sake of her sanity, she kept that thought to herself.

"Mom, have you seen him at all today?" Jayce asked with a long sigh. The sooner she got off the phone with her mother, the better.

"I haven't, but I'm sure he'll be home soon. He probably just went out to get Princess something. He would never leave her alone for too long. He loves her so much, after all, Not like that good-for-nothing mother of hers."

"Her mother's dead, Mom," Jayce felt the need to point out, even though she knew that it would not matter to her mother.

"So what? That girl wasn't worth anything when she was alive. Always stealing Quentin's money and getting him hooked on those awful drugs."

Jayce rolled her eyes. Sometimes, she thought her mother was just plain crazy to spin the facts so far in favor of Quentin. Now, as Jayce recalled, the substance abuse was not the only thing that Quentin and Princess' mother had in common, but they were both worthless, sorry excuses for human beings. When they were not busy getting high together, they were both stealing from friends and family. Quentin did not have any money for Princess' mother to steal. But, that was neither here nor there since Princess' mother was gone and Quentin was missing in action.

"Mom, I've got to go," Jayce said as she pulled into the parking lot of the medical center. She disconnected before her mother said anything and glanced back at the sleeping baby. "Princess, your grandma is a bitch," she reported with a sneer.

The toddler did not stir, even as Jayce lifted her out of the car seat and took her into the cold once again. Princess borrowed deeper into her aunt's warmth while remaining asleep. Jayce hustled into the medical center, not wanting to expose the child to the elements for too long. She was taken to Doctor Laramie immediately.

The giant, blond pediatrician winced when he got a good look at Princess as Jayce settled the baby on the small examination table, which was designed to look like a fire truck. Questioning

aqua eyes met a desperate near-onyx gaze. He ran his hand through his short, curly hair and shook his head.

"I'm going to need to make a call on this one, aren't I?" the good doctor asked, sorrow clouding his eyes. There was no way around it, not with him being able to tell the baby was in such poor condition from sight alone. Really, he had been dying to make the call months ago, but he was not sure how Jayce would react and the baby seemed to be doing all right. Right now, he could see in the aunt's eyes that she knew what needed to be done and she was ready to do it.

"I think so. I'm going to keep her with me. I don't know where her no-good, bastard of a father is and I don't know how long she was in his nasty apartment alone. I just know that when I found her bugs were on her and she was lying in her own shit," Jayce explained with disgust in her tone and a snarl on her lip. At the moment, she was pissed off just being related to her asshole brother.

"I'm glad you came here immediately. Is that her breathing?" he asked as short, raspy inhales and exhales reached his ears.

"Yup."

"Okay, let's get to the little lady first and then we'll talk."

Jayce nodded and then stepped out of the way. Doctor Laramie peeled Princess out of Jayce's suit jacket and then had to peel her out of the diaper that she was in. He shook his head through the examination, but Jayce could tell it was more from moral outrage than anything else. When he was done, he allowed Jayce to bathe Princess in the sink, get her into a fresh diaper, and he had some clothes for her to wear.

"This was a lousy day to forget my baby bag," Jayce muttered, eyes looking away in disappointment.

"How could you have foreseen this?" Doctor Laramie pointed out.

"Because I know my brother's a worthless bastard. Every day I go over there, I think about what kind of shit Princess is living in and I always have her baby bag, just in case. I took it out of the trunk last night to replace some things in it and just forgot to put it back in the car. So stupid," she berated herself with more disgust tugging at her top lip.

"It's all right, Jayce. You're the best thing going in Princess' life right now. I'm sure if you weren't around, she'd be dead by now," he told her, dead serious in every way possible.

Jayce nodded a little, the fact staring her right in the face at the moment. "I don't like to think about that. I'm here now and I'm going to do my best with her."

"I know you are. I'm going to make that call as soon as you get out of here. I don't want you to give Princess back to your brother."

"I wasn't planning on it," Jayce replied. She would not let that good-for-nothing prick anywhere near this child ever again, not after this incident.

"Good. Keep her with you while I make some calls, beyond reporting this. Jayce, I think it would be best if you were Princess' fulltime guardian."

"I agree."

Doctor Laramie did not think it was odd for her to agree so quickly. He had come to know Jayce very well over the past year; that was how long Princess had been alive and Jayce had come to him to be her pediatrician. Jayce brought the child in regularly thanks to Princess' half-ass, absentee dad. He was sure Jayce was the reason Princess was still alive and relatively healthy.

"Jayce, do you understand what I'm saying? When I start making calls and pulling strings, I'm going to let everyone know that I think it would be in Princess' best interest to stay with you permanently," the blond stated clearly.

"I totally get what you're saying and I agree."

"Good. Don't let Princess out of your sight until this is all straightened out. I don't want there to be a chance for someone to send her back to your brother or for her to get lost in the system when she has a loving family member to look out for her."

Jayce nodded. "We might meet a roadblock in this, doc. My mother isn't going to like this idea one little bit."

"Why? Does your mother hate Princess or something?" Doctor Laramie asked, even though he could not fathom such a thing. Despite her circumstances, Princess was a cheerful little child, who would smile and laugh at the drop of a hat and loved nothing more than to cuddle with people.

"My mother hates me. And I do mean hate. This woman has called me a cunt-licker to my face and slapped me in front of coworkers and friends," Jayce informed him.

A noise and nod came before anything else. "One of those, huh? Jayce, you're just going to have to be strong and fight against your mom if it comes to that. Unless, of course, you just want your mother to end up with Princess because I won't stand for her going back to your brother."

"If my mother got Princess, she'd give her right back to her fuck-up of a favorite child. She doesn't think there's anything seriously wrong with Quentin."

Doctor Laramie grimaced. "Is she blind as well as homophobic?" The question was serious because he had never met Quentin and knew the man was "fucked up." In fact, he was sure that description did not even scratch the surface when it came to Quentin.

"No, that's just her precious first son. The brilliant stock broker."

"The deadbeat dad," Doctor Laramie added with bite in his tone.

"Can't call you a liar on that. So, how does this work? Am I going to get a call from someone or anything?" she asked curiously. She wanted to be totally prepared for anything to make sure nothing went wrong with this procedure.

"More than likely you'll get it today. Go home and relax. I'll make sure you get a little time. Besides, the woman I'm going to call is more than likely going to want to see the mess you pulled Princess out of before calling you. And I'll make sure she knows you have to go get medicine for this little cutie," Doctor Laramie replied, gently caressing Princess' tender head, injured from insect bites and poor hygiene. A sorrowful sigh escaped his throat when he saw the baby wince from a soft touch.

"Thanks, doc."

"Thank you, Jayce. I'm glad you got to Princess in time. Stuck on her back with all of that phlegm building could've been bad, really bad. If it was as cold as you said it was, that would have only made things worse. She probably would not have been able to stand that exposure for much longer."

Jayce nodded, understanding the unsaid words there. Dark eyes glanced down at Princess as Jayce held the child close to her, feeling Princess' congested chest against her own. She could not believe what happened in between the few days since she last saw the baby. Her brother was seriously a jerk, she thought. She kissed the baby's cheek, silently vowing to take the best care of Princess. There was no way in hell she was going to let her brother destroy the only good thing he had ever done in life.

Jayce and Doctor Laramie bid each other farewell and Jayce went to go get Princess' medicine to clear her chest. After a quick trip to the pharmacy that was right across the street, Jayce moved to get some food into Princess' stomach. She got some pudding and a couple of bananas for the girl. Princess devoured her bananas on her own, holding onto the food for dear life and getting it to her mouth efficiently through out the car ride. The pudding waited until they got home to Jayce's two-story condo.

"Come on, pretty baby, we're gonna feed you some pudding and then watch some funny cartoons before all pretty babies have to go beddy-bye," Jayce cooed as she unstrapped Princess from her car seat.

Princess smiled and cooed back, as if she understood. The child cheered once she was in her aunt's arms and cheered even more when they entered the two-floor condo. The usual smell of vanilla greeted them, causing Jayce to wrinkle her nose a little; she was not a fan of the scent. Leaning down, Jayce put Princess down on the lilac-colored carpet while she remained on the purple tile to remove her shoes.

With her feet free of the dreaded heels, which were barely two inches high, Jayce picked the baby up again. She went to change out of her work clothes, which was a tan-colored skirt and



black shirt. After putting on pajama pants and a tee-shirt, they returned downstairs. Princess was fed and Jayce put on cartoons as promised in the living room. They were bouncing around on the cream-colored sofa singing along with a show; well, Jayce was singing while Princess was making noise. The sound of front door opening caught Jayce's attention. Jayce glanced up after a few seconds and smiled as her girlfriend entered the house.

"Hey, Jannie, we've got a guest!" Jayce announced, holding out the smiling baby.

"Hey, there Princess. You staying the night?" the newcomer asked, kissing the child's cheek before giving Jayce a kiss on the lips. The child giggled from the affection.

"She is," Jayce confirmed with a smile.

"Hmm, I guess that's going to make it hard for you to take me out to dinner tonight, but there's always tomorrow," Jannie commented with a bright smile. Her hazel eyes shined, thinking about the night that they would spend together. Sure, she would have preferred it tonight, but waiting would enhance it, she believed. Besides, Jayce would probably make up for making her wait, which would be even better.

Dark eyes glanced away and Jannie did not miss the move. She stood back up to her proper height, which was an inch shorter than Jayce's own height, while Jayce put Princess on the floor. The taller woman was about to say something, but Jannie shook her head, her thin, long braids moving with her head. That movement alone warned Jayce not to say anything if she did not want a huge blow up right now. Jannie strolled away, going to upstairs to change out of her street clothes, which were chic and stylish, like she was.

Jayce did not think anything of it, even though deep down she was aware a storm was brewing; that was clear from the heated look in Jannie's light brown eyes. She turned her attention back to the baby and picked Princess up. Bouncing and singing resumed, joined with some loud giggling by a very happy Princess.

Jannie came back dressed in sweats and a tight tank-top, as if showing Jayce just what she was not having that night. There was an intense look on Jannie's deep cocoa face, tension pulling down the youthful visage into a twisted scowl. There was suspicion and indignation in her hazel eyes, which got a small gulp out of Jayce.

"Why didn't you tell me you were getting Princess?" Jannie inquired, her voice tight, letting Jayce know she was in big trouble already. Leave it to Jayce to do something that involved the two of them, but not let her know about it, she mentally huffed. *It's inconsiderate bullshit like this that keeps Jayce in trouble.*

"I didn't know I was. I just went to check on her, but my dickhead brother wasn't home. Bugs were eating her and she's sick. God only knows the last time she ate before I got her. I had to bring her home," Jayce answered honestly, trying her best to ignore the slight glare that she was getting. Her tone was strong, despite being in trouble, because she knew that she did the right thing.

Jannie nodded. "Okay, so, when she going home?" she asked bluntly.

"She's going to stay here from now on, Jannie. I can't send her back to Q! He'll leave her to die!" Jayce hissed, wanting to keep her voice down to not bother the baby. She had a feeling this might be a long discussion, so she put Princess down on the couch. Princess sat up and merrily watched her cartoons.

"Then send her to your mother," Jannie ordered with a scoff, waving off the taller woman's words with a flick of her wrist. *Goddamn it, Jayce, stop being such a drama queen!*

"Who will send her right back to Q, which is what I don't fucking want because he's obviously not taking care of her and doesn't seem to care if she lives or dies," Jayce pointed out, moving her hands back and forth with each word. *What the hell don't you get about this Jannie? We need to help Princess.*

An angry snarl tugged at Jannie's full lips. "So we just have to keep her? I don't mind her being here a day, but I'm not keeping a baby that's not mine indefinitely," she declared, pointing to her chest with her index and middle finger.

Jayce snorted. "Oh, so I'm supposed to just leave my one-year-old niece to fucking die? To hell with that!"

"Stop being so goddamn dramatic. You can give her to your mother. I know your mother would take her."

Jayce growled like a mad dog. "And give her back to Q. What the fuck part of that don't you get?" she demanded, hands chopping heavily through the air to emphasis every word that she spoke.

"How can you make that goddamn decision without even asking me?" Jannie snapped. Her eyes were on fire with rage burning bright and a bite in her tone as she motioned sharply to Jayce with two fingers.

"Because someone has to be the responsible one!"

"Then you be the goddamn responsible one sleeping in the playpen with Princess tonight!" Jannie declared as she stormed off, going back upstairs. Jayce winced when she heard the door slam.

"Princess, that didn't go as well as I thought it would," Jayce sighed. "I thought Auntie Jannie would be happy to have you over and stay with us, but I guess not."

Jayce was fine with things, even though she knew that she was going to be in the doghouse with Jannie for days to come, and that was if she was lucky. Sometimes, Jannie could be upset with her for weeks. In fact, she was pretty sure that it was going to take some fine jewelry, expensive wine, and maybe even a little vacation to get her out of trouble. She was supposed to be taking

Jannie out to dinner and a show that night, but had instead brought her niece over unannounced to stay forever and pushed pretty much all of Jannie's buttons. The date was blown since Jannie would never go out with a baby, considering it low-class and distasteful behavior. Jayce had no idea where Jannie got such a notion.

"I guess it would be in pretty bad taste to take you to a play that late at night, but you'd probably sleep through it all anyway, wouldn't you, pretty baby?" Jayce cooed, earning a giggle from the toddler.

Jayce took Princess down the hall on the ground floor to the guestroom. The walls were a soothing, powder blue and light hardwood floors. It had the basics—a full bed with clean linens, a dresser, and television. Some of her clothing was already in there, as this was her bedroom whenever she was in hot water and banished from Jannie's bedroom. There were a few of Princess' things in there too since this was her room when she spent the night.

She settled in for her night in the room, which would be spent with Princess. She tucked the child into her makeshift bed; it was a playpen located opposite the bed. She had never been able to talk Jannie into buying a proper crib and was really never in the mood to hear the argument that would happen if she bought one without Jannie's permission. She imagined the volume alone during that argument would break her.

Princess rested her head on the tiny pillow in the playpen and curled up with a fluffy bunny that was almost the same size as she was. The baby put her thumb in her mouth and was out for the night seconds later. The caring aunt made sure to cover the baby with a blanket and stared at her for a moment. The sound of short, ragged breaths hurt Jayce's heart and after a few seconds, she could not listen anymore. Jayce was ready to drop off herself, but the phone rang.

Knowing it was bad omen to get a phone call a little before her usual bad time did not stop Jayce from grabbing the phone. She checked the caller ID to see that it was her mother, which she knew could not be good. Yet, she answered anyway. After all, it was better to know if her mother was planning something now rather than have it sprung on her in the future.

"Yes, Mom?" Jayce asked, barely hiding her annoyance with forced politeness.

"Who the hell do you think you are, taking Princess? Don't think you're keeping her!" her mother screamed. Jayce imagined that her mother's face was bright red from her fury, which was pretty much right.

"Mom...how do you know I have Princess?" Jayce inquired, even though she had a sinking suspicion as to who ratted her out. *Fuck, Jannie, how could you do this to me?! I know you're upset, but to tell my mother? Damn it!*

"That whore you eat out called me! She told me you're trying to steal Princess from Quentin! Like hell I'll let a degenerate bitch like you take my baby's daughter!" her mother hollered like a madwoman. A thud echoed through the phone, making Jayce think that her mother hit either a table or the wall.

"I'm a bitch? That fuck-head you call a son abandoned your granddaughter! Left her to fucking die! You goddamn right I'm keeping her!"

"You bring Princess here right now! I'll hold her until Quentin comes around for her," her mother stated, as if that was the most logical and righteous thing to do.

Jayce scoffed. "To hell with that plan. Princess is staying with me. I might even change her name while I've got her." She hated the fact that her niece was named "Princess."

The child was actually lucky that she was not named "baby" since it would have been the easiest for her parents to remember in their drugged-up realities. Thankfully, the hospital staff argued a little on naming a child "baby," but her parents still wanted something that would be hard for them to forget and eventually went with "Princess." God, they had named her like they were naming a puppy; actually, that was the name of the couple's dog. It had disgusted Jayce to no end and she did not take it as a good omen that the dog died a little while after Princess was born. Of course, her mother had taken the naming issue another way and thought it was absolutely adorable for Quentin to name his daughter "Princess" to show that she was like royalty. Quentin never bothered to correct his mother on her assumption because he really did not care.

Her mother snarled. "I'll ruin you before I let that happen," she proclaimed in a deadly serious tone.

Jayce snorted and disconnected the call, dropping the phone on the floor. She went to take a shower and do her nightly routine before going to sleep. Before crawling into bed herself, she put Princess in the bed too. She thought it would be nice for Princess to sleep on a mattress for once; even at Quentin's home, Princess slept in a hard-bottom playpen. It eased her mind to have the baby close too.

"Princess, I've got you now. I'm not going to let anybody hurt you anymore, no matter what," Jayce pledged aloud. A small yawn and tiny lips smacking was the response, but that was more than enough for the happy aunt.

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2: Do tell

The morning after Princess' arrival in the house was tense. Jayce and Jannie took turns glaring at each other while Jayce made breakfast. That only paused when Jayce went to the bedroom to get ready for work. Princess got ready as well; well, her aunt got her ready, but she ended up dressed. When the aunt and baby were prepared to leave, Jayce sighed and went to sit down next to Jannie on the sofa. Jannie was sitting comfortably, still dressed in her pajamas. She flipped through the paper while sipping her morning coffee, which rested on the cluttered coffee table.

"Baby, can we please talk about this?" Jayce begged, expression pleading with her lover to just open up and listen for a moment.

She hated to leave the house when they were upset with each other. One never knew how the day could go, after all. She always thought that this was something Jannie would understand, but it was not. Jannie had no problem holding into her anger for a long time, whether she saw Jayce or not. Jannie hated when people disagreed with her because she just knew that she was right and that was why she could hold a grudge the way that she did.

"You know how I feel about this. Your mom is perfectly fine with taking the baby, so you should give Princess to her," Jannie replied in a clipped tone, not even taking her eyes off of her paper.

Jayce's face tensed to the point where she could not speak for a moment. "So she can give Princess back to Quentin? God, the man didn't even want to name her and you want me to just let him have her back?!" she huffed incredulously. *What the hell is wrong with you, Jannie?!*

"She's his responsibility, not yours," Jannie stated soundly, making it seem like that was the most logical answer. For her, it was. She did not see why they needed to look after someone that was not their responsibility. Princess was not their child. She belonged to Quentin and he should have to bear that responsibility.

Jayce snarled in frustration, hitting herself in her chest with her palm. "She's my responsibility now. She needs me. She needs us," her voice softened her, as did her eyes, imploring her lover to understand.

"She can have your mother," Jannie countered calmly before taking another sip of her coffee.

Jayce frowned deeply and ran her hand over her mouth, as if trying to smooth out the tightness in her jaw. Her near-black eyes went to the ceiling and the floor as she tries to calm herself down. A few deep breaths followed, not really helping at first, but after a few seconds, she felt a little better.

"Baby, my mother will give her back to my brother. What about that don't you understand?" the taller woman begged to know. She could not figure out what was so hard about this. Giving Princess to her mother would be like giving Princess back to her brother, who did not care about the child in the first place.

"Why do you think it's your responsibility to take care of a child that isn't yours? Princess is your brother's and he's been taking care of her-" Jannie was cut off with a menacing glare from ebony pools.

"The hell he has!" Jayce snarled, feeling deeply insulted that her own girlfriend would say such a thing. "I've been with her since day one and I'm the one that's taking care of her now!" the older woman shouted with conviction, pointing to herself.

Jannie growled and tore herself off of the couch, wanting to stand toe-to-toe with her lover now. "Well, what about me?! I don't want a baby and I'm in this too! You didn't ask me. You just showed up with Princess and expected me to take to her like you, but to hell with that! I don't

want a baby, especially one that neither of us gave birth to!" She punctuated that by poking Jayce hard in the center of her chest.

"This isn't just any baby. This is my niece we're talking about and I just can't do what you're suggesting. It's not possible. My mother hates for me to see Princess as it is. If I give her to my mom, not only will she give Princess back to Quentin, but she might convince him to never let me near the baby again, saying I tried to steal her or something. Can't you understand that?" Jayce inquired, eyes imploring her lover to just let up on this one thing. Jannie was not backing down, though.

"Can't you understand that I like our lives the way they are? I like being able to go out every night and stay out past midnight. I like being able to make love all night long, screaming like you're killing me. I like being able to watch something that's not animated or doesn't have puppets. I like how things are and I don't think things will be as bad as you think. You're just being paranoid," Jannie proclaimed as if it was completely obvious.

Jayce almost bite her tongue off to keep her from saying something awful. She swallowed down hateful words and decided that this was something they would have to discuss when she got back home. So, she leaned over and lightly kissed Jannie's cheek, trying her best not to leave while being upset with her girlfriend.

"That's not going to make me change my mind," Jannie commented dryly, obviously not helping.

"I know. We'll talk more when me and Princess get back. You know I hate for us to leave each other angry," Jayce replied.

Jannie nodded, taking in the words, but that did not cure her face of the scowl that she was sporting. Tilting her head, she presented Jayce her cheek again, but nothing more. Jayce took what she was getting, kissing her lover's cheek a second time. *No, still doesn't make me feel any better.*

"Princess, kiss Auntie Jannie goodbye," Jayce said, leaning down to put the child up. She then leaned Princess over to Jannie's cheek.

Princess wasted no time kissing the rich mocha cheek, making a smacking sound with her lips as she did so. The noise earned a chuckle from her aunt, but Jannie did not look moved. Jayce left the house after that, making sure to tell Jannie that she loved her on the way out. It did not go by Jayce that the words were not said back to her.

"Auntie Jannie was just a little upset, Princess. There's no way she'd really send you back to your idiot Daddy," Jayce said...well, she hoped so anyway. If Jannie tried anything really funny, they were going to have problems and for once Jannie would be on the bad end of things. She tried to put that out of her mind for now, though.

Jayce strapped the baby into the car and was off. She went to work, knowing that she was going to get an ear-full there too, showing up with a baby and everything. She did not care about that

because she was not going to let Princess out of her sight. She was not going to give her mother the chance to grab the child when she was not looking. Her mother was the type that would scheme and plot, taking Princess the moment Jayce let her guard down.

Entering the small accounting firm, eyes did turn to see Jayce, immediately going to the bundle in her arms. There were whispers too as soon as they noticed the baby, who was marveling over her new environment. Odd looks came from most people, who watched Jayce march through the floor like nothing was out of the ordinary. A few people actually poked their heads out of their office to see what was going on. They all watched her until she was at her office door, wondering just what she was up to.

"Okay, Princess, this is where we're going to be spending the next few hours," Jayce informed the baby in a happy tone, stepping across the threshold into her office.

Putting down the baby bag, Jayce then gently placed her niece on the floor. Princess glanced around the modest-sized office with awe in her big, dark eyes while her aunt set up a play area for her off to the side of the room. She could figure it would be the best place for her to see the baby from her extremely orderly desk and Princess was out of the way if anyone came in. Jayce put Princess on a large blanket with a few toys, dolls, and her favorite tiny pillow; it had butterfly designs on all over it.

"Now, you be good, Princess, while Auntie crushes numbers for the next eight hours, okay?" Jayce said. Princess cheered in response before turning her attention to a couple of teddy bears.

While the baby played with her toys, Jayce got to work, turning on her computer and pulling out the files that she needed. She barely had time to exhale, let alone do any real work because the door to her office burst open as if the police were raiding her. Rolling her eyes, she glanced up in time to see her boss storm in like he was a one-man SWAT team. Frosty blue eyes glared at her as he pointed a manicured finger at Princess as if she was an object that was beneath him.

"Newton, what the hell is a baby doing in this office? This is an accounting firm, not a daycare!" he hollered, making sure the whole office knew that he was reprimanding her. His voice was shrill and often made her flinch when she heard it. Princess joined her in that.

Jayce frowned and her near-onyx eyes darkened to look like something beyond black as she glared up at her boss. She looked at the man as if he was short, which he was, but for her it was that he was short of character more than physical height. It was to the point that his tailor-made suit seemed to twist to accommodate deformed soul.

"Mister Huntington, I know this is an accounting firm, which explains why I'm trying to work on my accounts. Princess isn't bothering anyone, just sitting in my office with the door shut, so I don't see why it would be a problem for her to be in my office away from everyone," she explained with cold patience.

He stormed over to her desk, leaning his already hunched over, lanky body down to glare at her as if he was going to melt her with his stare. She had to bite back a comment about his grey

hairpiece sliding a little as she waited for him to tear into her. The day was never complete without him personally chewing her out, after all.

"The point is..." He paused for dramatic effect, his nostrils flaring as he did so. This drew attention to his long, hooked nose. "...this is a place of business. Babies aren't allowed!"

Jayce arched an eyebrow and then scratched it with her long pinky nail. This was a habit that she picked up from Jannie, who did it way more often than necessary. The ebony-haired woman leaned forward a little, the light shining showed off her rust-colored highlights. She then answered him quite calmly, knowing it was the best way to deal with this little man with a big ego.

"Nowhere in the employee conduct code does it say that I cannot bring a baby to work with me. Now, as I was saying, she's not bothering anyone and I am working, so I don't see what the problem is," she stated coolly with an even look in her eyes. He glanced away for a moment and she felt a small victory as she watched him bristle slightly.

"The problem is that she doesn't belong here. Having a baby around takes away from the professional environment that we should show all of our clients at all time. Now, why don't you just take the kid to a daycare or babysitter or just drop her off at your mother's house?" he suggested, attempting to sound cordial. She was not buying it.

Jayce's frown cut deeper into her face and her glare was harder than diamond. "I've got her." Her tone left no room for argument.

Mister Huntington tried to match her glare, but found it impossible. "Just make sure she doesn't interfere with your work."

"She won't. Thank you." The clipped tone was so dismissive that Mister Huntington had no choice but to leave.

He leveled a heavy, heated stare at the baby before marching out of the office. Jayce sighed and turned her attention to her niece. Princess was happily gnawing on the arm of a teddy bear, oblivious to the action that just happened. Jayce chuckled a bit, seeing that the child was quite fine.

"Hey, Princess, I think that your grandma called her attack dog on us. Mister Huntington, or Ethan to your mean grandma, was probably on the phone with grandma this whole morning, trying to figure out how to get you out of my evil clutches. Ethan will do anything for Miss Marion Newton, you know? Even try to steal a baby from me, so she can give you back to your crack-head father," Jayce snorted, rolling her eyes in disgust.

She decided to stop talking, knowing that she would just end up bad-mouthing her mother and brother to Princess, which she knew was not good. There was a chance that all of that might stick with the baby, she considered, and she did not want Princess latching onto her dislike of her mother and brother. Princess should be able to grow up and make her own judgments on them.



The adult woman turned her attention back to her computer and got to work, making sure not to give her boss another excuse to come into her office. Of course, he never needed an excuse. She was spared another visit for a few hours, though. Princess did not make much noise and even though she did check on the baby every minute or so, Jayce was able to get through an average amount of work by lunchtime.

"Come on, Princess, let's go out and get something to eat," Jayce announced when she noticed that it was noon. She leaned down and picked up her niece. "You are such a good little baby, you know? You sat here for four hours and didn't make a fuss at all. Sure, you got cookie crumbs the blanket, but that's okay because I can wash that."

Princess giggled and cuddled into her aunt's warm shoulder. The baby rubbed her cheek into the soft material of Jayce's beige suit jacket, causing Jayce to laugh from the cute sight. As she left, Jayce noticed Mister Huntington's blue eyes clocking her. She bet that he was going to make a call to her mother as soon as she was out of sight, but she did not care. She was not going to give her mother the chance to take Princess from her.

Jayce went to the same café every day for lunch and got the same seat every day. It was a ten-minute drive from her job, but she loved the place. It had wonderful food, excellent service, and was always in top condition. It was not a large place, but had a very friendly atmosphere. She set Princess up on the table by the wall, keeping her in her car seat for the moment. A youthful waitress bounced over to the table moments later.

"Hey, Jayce, you brought Princess with you!" the waitress grinned broadly, tickling the baby underneath her chin. Princess giggled like mad, more from the attention than from the actual tickling.

"Yes, she was telling me about how she really wanted to see Zoe and wanted some apple sauce from *Marco's*," Jayce replied with a smile. Despite the happy expression, there were lines under her eyes and her forehead was slightly wrinkled from pent up tension.

"Well, Zoe is here!" the waitress announced, tickling Princess more. The baby wiggled now, trying to escape, but she was still strapped into the seat. "Should I bring out a high-chair?" she asked, even though she knew the answer to that.

"I'm sure Princess would appreciate it, Zoe. She's not very good at eating in the car seat," Jayce answered with a small smile.

"No problem. You don't even bother to order. I know what you need today. Once I bring it to you, you tell me why you look so down, okay?" she requested with concern shining in her deep, brown eyes.

Jayce forced out a chuckle. "All right, Zoe."

Zoe smiled brightly, lighting up her creamy rounded face before prancing away. She quickly returned with a high chair for Princess, happily transferring the child from the car seat to the high

chair while Jayce looked on. After tickling Princess some more, Zoe darted off to get their food. Jayce made a couple of faces at Princess until her phone rang and interrupted their play.

"Mom, what do you want?" Jayce answered the phone. Usually, she would have just let it ring, but she was curious as to what would make her mother actually talk to her. She would hate to find out her mother had found some way to get Princess and now wanted to taunt her about it, but she feared that was the case. If so, she would rather know now than have someone show up and surprisingly rip Princess out of her arms.

"Jayce, I'm giving you one last chance to bring me Princess, so she can go back to Quentin or I'm going to take you to court. You know no judge in the world would let a degenerate bitch like you have a child! You'd probably just molest her!" her mother proclaimed in a dead serious, thoroughly heated tone.

The ebony-haired woman rolled her eyes and snorted. "Mom, I'm a lesbian, not a pedophile. There's a big difference. I'm not giving you Princess, so I guess I'll just see you in court."

"I'm going to get my granddaughter! Don't think you'll win this!" her mother shrieked as loud as she could.

Jayce sighed and slammed her phone shut, even though she was sure that her mother was not done ranting yet. She put the phone away and turned her attention back to her niece. After a few more funny faces, Zoe returned with just what Jayce needed—one of the café's famous tuna-melt sandwiches with fries on the side. Jayce bit into her sandwich while Zoe sat down to feed the baby her applesauce.

"So, tell me what's going on to make you look like you've got one foot in the grave already?" Zoe asked, sliding into the empty seat across from the accountant.

Against her better judgment, Jayce went into the story of finding Princess abandoned in Quentin's apartment and deciding to take custody of the girl only for her girlfriend to hate the idea and betray her to her mother in less than an hour of finding out that she planned to keep Princess. Making matters worse, her mother wanted the baby to take her back to Quentin and had Mister Huntington playing spy for her while threatening to take Jayce to court. Zoe did not look surprised through out the story, which did not go by the older woman.

"Okay, Zoe, I know there's a reason you look like you expected to hear all of that, so what is it?" Jayce inquired. She also knew that the entire café staff was going to know what happened to her about a minute after she left the restaurant.

"I didn't expect it, but it all makes sense to me. I'm sorry you had to find Princess like that, but this might be a blessing in disguise. I mean, you love Princess and I know you want to do the best you can for her. I'm glad you're trying to get custody of her. You're the best thing for her more than likely. I mean, I know I only met your brother once, but he beg you for money and then he did try to rob us right after, so I figure it's safe to assume he's a jackass. Jannie's a bitch

from what I can tell from the way she's always yelling at you on the phone," the waitress explained calmly.

"Hey!" Jayce shouted in outrage.

Zoe held up her hands in surrender. "Look, I know you love her and everything, but she's always whining to you about something or another on the phone. Sometimes you just look miserable while talking to her. You even do a pathetic 'yes, dear' kind of voice when you talk to her most of the time. I'm glad I never met her." Never saying it out loud, Zoe always knew it was a bad thing when she never saw Jayce's girlfriends because it meant that Jayce did not want to share one of her favorite places with someone sharing her life. Jayce had only brought a couple of very special women to the bistro that was a few years ago.

"Jannie isn't that bad. I wouldn't have stayed with her for a year if she was," Jayce pointed out, hoping that would get the waitress to drop the topic. Of course, no such luck there.

Zoe nodded. "I guess you're right about that. I've seen you go through real bitches in a couple of weeks, so I guess Jannie can't be that bad. Still, it doesn't look good on her to just call Marion on you like that, knowing how fucked up your relationship is with your mother."

Jayce sighed, but stopped herself from agreeing. "She's just used to getting her way. She didn't know what to do when I didn't give into her. I thought she'd love the idea of helping Princess, knowing about Princess' situation and everything, but now that I think about it, she's never really been much of a fan of Princess."

"No?" Zoe looked at the baby. "Who couldn't be a fan of such a cutie?!" she asked incredulously. She then had to tickle the child's chin and made cooing noises at her. Princess, as expected, erupted into joyous giggles. Zoe silently decided that only someone made of stone could not like that smiling face.

"I think Jannie gets jealous of Princess whenever I have her. If I have Princess, I never pay Jannie as much attention as I usually do."

"Oh, right, she's an attention whore."

"Zoe!" Jayce snapped, glaring at the shorter woman.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry. I sometimes forget this is the love of your life. She just doesn't seem very loving when she's yelling at you so loudly, I can hear her over by the cash register. That just doesn't make any sense. So, do you think Marion has a shot at getting Princess? I hope she doesn't. I want Princess to live and have a happy childhood."

Jayce nodded in agreement. "I do too, but my mom does have more connections than I do. If we get a homophobic judge, I'm screwed. If we get a judge that knew my father and thus knows my mother, I'm really screwed. I guess I need to start looking up lawyers. At least Doctor Laramie is with me on this. Having her doctor on my side should look good."

Zoe nodded again before turning back to Princess to feed her more applesauce. Jayce dug into her sandwich and fries. Thankfully, the conversation dropped as Zoe kept her attention trained on the baby. By the time Jayce was done with her meal, Princess was eating cookies and enjoying some juice.

"Okay, Princess, say bye to Zoe and tell her we'll see her tomorrow, but we really need to get back to work," Jayce announced with a smile as she lifted the baby out of the high chair.

The waitress laughed and turned her attention to the baby. "You working hard, Princess? Crunching those numbers while your aunt plays around," she joked. Then she turned her brown eyes to Jayce. "Good luck with everything, Jayce. Keep me updated," Zoe said.

"You'll just bug me about it every day if I don't," Jayce pointed out, pulling out money for the bill and for Zoe's tip. It was the high gratuity that started their friendship and Jayce did not see why that should change after they had become friends. Zoe always provided her with excellent service, so she always provided an excellent tip.

"You're damn right about that!" the waitress replied with a grin as Jayce handed her the money, which she did not even bother to count.

They laughed and hugged before Jayce and Princess took their leave. The afternoon at work was the same as the morning. Jayce was not really looking forward to going home, knowing that an argument with Jannie awaited her, but she had to go home sometime. She figured it was best to get the argument out of the way and then start looking for a lawyer to keep her mother at bay.

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"Jayce, are you sure you can handle meetings today with Princess in your office?" a coworker asked Jayce as she came into the office with her now-usual cargo. After a week, everyone expected to see the child.

"It shouldn't be a problem. You know Princess is well behaved. It'll be like she's not even there," Jayce answered. Princess always seemed to be fine with being left alone on her blanket with her toys, hardly ever making a noise unless she was hungry or wet.

"Okay, but you know Huntington's going to be on your ass for this."

"Isn't he always? Everything should be all right," Jayce assured her coworker.

"You know, I could hold her in my office for you."

"You don't have to. I've got her," Jayce answered. She had not let Princess out of her sight for a week and she was not going to start now. If Jannie yelling at her did not get her to yield, then nothing from Ethan Huntington was going to get her leave Princess anywhere.

Jayce went to her office and set Princess up in her play area like she had done everyday that week. Then, she got her files together for the series of meeting that she had to conduct that day. Everything was in order by the time her first client came in. Almost immediately, he noticed the baby on the floor and he made a strange face because of it. Jayce proceeded on like everything was normal, so he got over the fact that Princess was in the office.

Things progressed like that for the day. The shock of having the baby there did make the meetings go a little longer than she planned on. Things got even worse when one client tried to play with Princess. Something about the guy must have rubbed her the wrong way because she started crying. He hurried out of the room while Jayce tried to soothe the child by gently rocking her in her arms.

"Shh, pretty baby. I bet you're hungry, aren't you? I know we're running late, but I promise after this last client, we'll go to *Marco's* and you can see Zoe and have your favorite applesauce," Jayce vowed in a gentle tone.

She got the crying down to a light whimper when her office door opened for her last appointment. Dark eyes glanced over to the door to see a posed, tall woman step through, surveying the area with a light hazel gaze. The visitor's presence seemed to take up the whole room before she was even all the way in. The aura that she brought in with her was not a positive one. Her lip curled up as if she was scandalized when she caught sight of Jayce comforting the baby.

"Miss Tucker?" Jayce asked the sharply dressed newcomer. She was answered with a curt nod. "I'll be with you in a second. Please, have a seat," she said in a polite, professional manner.

"I don't have time for you to play babysitter. I'm a busy woman," Miss Tucker replied in a clipped tone, barely moving her mouth as she spoke. Stony hazel eyes locked onto Jayce, insulting her without saying anything. The tension in the rounded chocolate face seemed to come from being offended by Jayce's niece.

A frown almost cut onto Jayce's tanned face, but she caught herself. "Of course," she said, forcing out a small smile.

Miss Tucker took a seat, folding her left leg across her right, showing the tight crease in her black slacks. Jayce kissed Princess' face with the hope that it would be enough. She put the baby down and then went back to her desk. She faced Miss Tucker, thinking that the woman looked a bit familiar. *She looks a little like Jannie, just taller and...scarier.* There was a thought considering the fact that Jayce always thought that a furious Jannie was the most frightening sight ever.

"Now, Miss Tucker, I've been going through your files-" Jayce started, but she was quickly cut off by her client.

"Then you can tell me what the fuck happened to my goddamn money you stole," Miss Tucker stated evenly and bluntly, folding her arms across her chest, wrinkling her black suit jacket just a little.

Jayce blinked hard, caught very much off-guard by that accusation. "Excuse me? Stealing from you? You've got to be fucking kidding me!"

"I call it how I see it. You're in charge of keeping track of the money from my businesses, so when money starts to disappear and you don't do anything about it, I have to assume you're the one stealing it," Miss Tucker commented coolly, as if it all made perfect sense.

"You've got some nerve!" Jayce shouted and she was about to really cut into her client, but Princess started wailing. Jayce was at her niece's side in an instant and trying to quiet her down. "Shh, pretty baby. It's okay. Nothing's wrong..." she cooed to the distressed child, rocking Princess gently in her arms and stroking her hair.

"The hell it isn't! How the hell are we supposed to have a meeting and talk when you've got a damned crying baby in your office? Is the whole firm full of shit or is it just you?" Miss Tucker hollered, shooting out of her chair. She stood almost six inches taller than Jayce, but something about her made her seem like a hundred feet high. It did not make Jayce back down, though.

"Gee, I dunno. Is your business full of bastards or is it just you?" Jayce countered, sneering at the amazon before her.

Miss Tucker glared daggers at Jayce in a manner that she was very familiar with. She stuck her index finger in Jayce's face, like she was about to verbally tear Jayce a new asshole, but decided against it. Turning on her heel, amazingly enough not snapping her high-heel while she was at it. She stormed out of the office, yanking the door so hard on her way out that it looked like she was about to pull it out of the wall. The knob slammed into the wall and sounded like a thunderclap when it impacted the wall, taking some paint off with it. A grimace shot through Jayce from the noise and also what she suspected she had just done.

"Princess, Auntie might just have lost her job," Jayce muttered as her client fled the scene. She shook her head a little, disappointed in herself.

Princess did not seem to care about that, still fussing from the noise and hunger. Jayce figured she might as well go have lunch and she could find out what happened when she got back. Packing up the baby's things, the pair left for *Marco's* bistro for their lunch. When they came back, Jayce was not surprised that she was summoned to Mister Huntington's office.

"Yeah, Princess, Auntie is definitely out of a job," Jayce whispered to the child as she marched down the hall, feeling like she was taking the long walk to her own execution. She halted at the double-doors and turned her attention to the secretary's desk to her left. "So, Mister Huntington wanted to see me," she said.

"Oh, yes, Miss Newton, go right in. He's waiting for you," the young woman answered.  
"Um...would you like me to hold the baby for you?"

Jayce shook her head. "No, that's quite all right," she answered politely.

The tan female stepped into the office, spotting her boss at his desk on the opposite end. The office was almost triple the size of her own, decorated with much darker colors. She did not see how he even conducted business in there because the atmosphere seemed almost gloomy, not helped by the giant, full body portrait of Ethan Huntington hanging on his right wall. The painting made it seem like he was glaring down on whoever was in the office, employees and clients alike.

"You wanted to see me, sir?" Jayce inquired.

"Come here, Newton. Why the hell do you still have this baby with you?" he huffed, growling at her a little. All week he had been bugging her and questioning her about Princess, but never getting a straight answer from her.

"I'm not letting her out of my sight-ever. Simple as that. Now, you wanted to see me?" she asked again, standing in front of his desk now. She cuddled Princess close to her to make sure the baby did not start crying; little did she know, but Princess was napping at the moment.

"I had a client in here earlier, screaming bloody murder on you. And not the first one. First she said that money was missing from her accounts and you never said anything about it. Did you actually embezzle money from a client, Newton? Are you really that much of a fucking idiot?" he inquired, looking like he wanted to laugh at her.

"I didn't embezzle anything, sir," she replied in a tight tone. "I hadn't seen the figures for that account yet."

"In other words, you didn't do your job. You're not competent enough to do this job or something, Newton? That's what it looks like from here."

She growled. "I am a good accountant," she stated in a firm tone.

"Clients from today would definitely disagree. Plenty of people wanted to know what the hell was wrong with you, conducting meetings with a crying baby in your office, paying more attention to the baby than their money and businesses, and all of this other bullshit," Mister Huntington stated, knocking his hand on his desk with each point that he made. His blue eyes showed a demonic delight in being able to dress her down for once without her having some smart remark.

"That's not what happened, sir. Princess was perfectly fine through all of those meetings and no one complained to me about her," she argued.

"They don't need to complain to you. If they are dissatisfied with your performance, they go to the boss to explain whatever issues they have with you. Now, all you had to do was put the brat in daycare, but you want to be difficult."

"I'm not letting her out of my sight," Jayce said for what felt like the millionth time that week.

"Then you're going to lose your job."

"Oh, so the choice here is leave Princess at a daycare or become unemployed?" she asked. It seemed like a strange choice and she knew it was because he was trying to help her mother. He had her between a rock and a hard place because her job was important to her, but he miscalculated.

"That's the choice. I'll even talk to one client who says you've been stealing from her." A smirk pulled at his lips that made him look like the devil to her.

"I didn't steal anything, but I will clean out my office right now. You know where to send my last paycheck. Thank you for the opportunity to work here," Jayce said in a surprisingly civil tone. She had been sure that when she was finally fired, she would finally call him a "dick-head" or something, but she did not even feel like it. She just wanted to get out of there.

Mister Huntington's face dropped in disbelief as Jayce took her leave. He did not think that she would actually leave. It would have been so much easier for them both if she just put Princess in daycare, he thought. She was sure that he was going to be on the phone with her mother as soon as she was gone, but she did not care about that. She went to clean out her office and left as soon as possible, not daring to go home yet because Jannie would be there. She did not feel up to dealing with how Jannie would handle her being fired.

"*Marco's* it is then," Jayce decided, leaving the firm for the last time.

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### 3: Breakfast at *Marco's*

Zoe sighed as she leaned against the front counter, almond-shaped eyes focused on what was quickly becoming a normal occurrence. Concern laced her deep brown eyes, which did not go unnoticed by her coworker. The cashier, who Zoe was standing near, turned to see what Zoe was looking at.

"Geez, Jayce is here again," the cashier commented, green eyes watching Jayce now too. He shook his head, somewhat disappointed at the sight. Like all the other employees at the café, he loved having Jayce there, but having her there as she was now just screamed that something was wrong. It was written all over her demeanor, obvious in her eyes, even though she tried to hide it behind a cheerful smile.



"Every day at nine exactly. She got fired," Zoe replied, sounding quite dejected. From the sound of her voice, it seemed like she was the one who was fired.

The cashier, a short teenage boy with a cream-colored baby face, blond ponytail that went to the middle of his back, and two piercings in his eyebrow, looked skeptical that such a thing could happen. He knew that Jayce was a hard worker and he knew that she was beyond competent. After all, she had given most of the employees and the restaurant owner money advice at some point. Very good money advice that had saved an ass or two...or more. It did not make any sense for her to get fired.

"How do you know that?" he asked curiously, turning his mouth up a little.

"She told me, jackass. I talk to her everyday since I'm not stuck behind the counter and there are lulls in my section every now and then. She basically comes here because she knows she'll get the peace and quiet to look for a new job and get advice on what to do about her mother, who's trying to take Princess from her and giving her all kinds of hell every minute about it too," Zoe reported with a sigh. It was as if she hurt for Jayce, which she really did. It pained her that someone as sweet as Jayce was going through such horrible things.

His mouth dropped open, ready to hit the ground, but he started talking first. "Get the hell out! Why would she take Princess? Jayce loves that kid like she gave birth to her! From what I've seen with her father, I'm shocked he didn't try to give her to Jayce days after she was born anyway," he proclaimed, moving his hands wildly as he spoke, like that would somehow make sense of everything that he was hearing.

"You're preaching to the converted, Sam. Hell, I'm the one that told you all of this," she pointed out, making a hand motion between the two of them.

He nodded. "Do you think her mother will do it?" he inquired, some fear shaking his voice as he glanced over to Jayce and the baby again. He hated to think what would happen to Jayce if someone took Princess from her. It was so clear that Jayce loved Princess with all of her heart and he thought only a monster would want to break that bond. Only a monster would take Princess away from such a caring, loving, kind individual too, he silently concluded.

The waitress shrugged. "From what I can tell just from looking in her eyes when she talks about it, she's really scared that her mother will succeed. She's not getting much help, even though she's looking really hard. Her mother's got a lot of clout apparently and doesn't mind trying to move Heaven and Earth to show she's got power. I think it comes from her father. He used to be a banker or something and had a lot of powerful clients. Sad thing is, as great as her father was and as big as he was around here, when she graduated school, she couldn't get an accounting job anywhere. It was like she was blacklisted before she even started. I hope that changes now," Zoe said with another sigh. Although it did not seem to be changing because, from what she could see, Jayce was no closer to being employed than ever before.

"Not if her mother is the bitch you make her sound like. Her life sucks," Sam stated the obvious, sucking his teeth as he did so. A frown settled on his smooth, youthful face, hating that Jayce's

own mother could be such an asshole toward her. "Why doesn't she just do this at home, though?" he asked. He figured that it would be better for Princess at the least if Jayce stayed home to do whatever it was that she did while she was at the bistro all day.

Zoe scoffed dramatically and made a show of rolling her eyes. "Extra-bitchy girlfriend," she answered in a biting tone.

Sam shook his head and snorted. "Damn. Her life really does suck."

"That's putting it mildly," the waitress muttered, folding her arms tightly across her chest, slightly wrinkling her pristine lilac-colored uniform shirt.

"You wanna treat her to a muffin?" Sam proposed out of the blue. It was the only thing that he could think of to show his support and try to get their regular to feel better. He figured it would at least remind Jayce that there were people that cared about her. Sure, most of them were just high-schoolers or college students, but they were people, who all agreed that she was several kinds of pure awesome.

"She's unemployed in a custody battle with her bitchy mother and getting no support from her girlfriend and you want to buy a muffin for her?" Zoe inquired in disbelief with an arched eyebrow. She cut her eyes to him, almost as if she was calling him an idiot in her mind.

"Blueberry muffin?" he added, almost as if to correct his mistake of daring to suggest just a regular muffin.

"Better make sure it's warm."

Sam nodded and went to work on that. Zoe delivered the muffin, which earned her a tired smile and small thanks from Jayce. Zoe stayed a while to give Princess some attention and get her out of the high chair. The baby clapped and cheered, beyond happy to be freed from the confines of the chair. This got another smile from Jayce.

The happy expression did not disguise the exhaust carved into Jayce's face. There were dark circles around her eyes. Jagged, worry lines marred her tanned face, cutting the corners of her mouth and just underneath her eyes. Her hair was fuzzy, as if her weariness had caused a static build up on the top of her head. Even her clothing seemed to be fitting her funny thanks to all of the stress in her life.

"If I have spend another week here, Princess'll probably run to my mother to never have to see another high chair again," Jayce commented, forcing out a laugh. Her eyes belied her true fear, though, which was that her mother was going to get Princess no matter what she did. She swallowed down some nervousness and it settled in her stomach, causing a burning sensation there.

"Princess knows you're doing your best for her, so she'll be here for you, like you are for her, even if it takes a year of you sitting in here," Zoe remarked while swinging Princess, earning lively giggles from the baby.

"I hope it doesn't take that long. My butt wouldn't be able to take it," Jayce joked, chuckling for the first time in two weeks. It was a forced chuckle, but it was better than nothing. At least she had tried to crack a joke, which Zoe took as a sign that there was still some fight in Jayce.

"Me and Sam won't be able to afford muffins for that long either," the waitress chimed in with a grin. She hoped that it lifted Jayce's spirits a little more, but it seemed to have the opposite effect as the unemployed woman's shoulders slumped.

Jayce's head dropped and her dark eyes fell to the floor. "I'm sorry if I'm in your way. I could just go home..." she murmured, sounding as defeated as she felt. *Could I be any more of a loser?!*

Zoe scoffed. "Jayce, don't be an idiot! We love having you here and you're not in the way. This is your damned table and everything. We just wished you weren't hanging around because you can't go home without Jannie screaming her head off at you about getting fired. Not like it was your fault anyway."

"Well, Jannie's not going to believe that. I think the bitch that got me fired was her sister," Jayce sighed, shaking her head. The attitude certainly had a strong family resemblance as well as the appearance. There sure was a hatred of babies that they had in common too, or at least a hatred for Princess.

"Her sister?" Zoe gasped, eyes going wide from surprise. *A family of assholes apparently. Poor Jayce, having the displeasure and poor luck of meeting both of them.*

"She looked an awful lot like Jannie and they had the same last name. I remember a while ago, Jannie said she was going to try to help get me more clients and she'd start with her sister, who owns a couple of businesses. She never told me if worked out or not. I couldn't figure it out since I didn't know her sister's first name or what businesses she ran. Whenever Jannie talks about her, she always just says 'my big sister' and goes on from there. I just assumed nothing came of it, especially since Jannie never said anything. But, now that I think about it, I guess something did come of it. The only reason I don't think it was Jannie's sister is because Jannie hasn't been acting differently this week." Since Jannie had not thrown the greatest tantrum of all time and called her every name in the book, Jayce assumed her girlfriend was unaware of the fact that she lost her job. This was one thing that kept Jayce from believing that was Jannie's sister that got her fired because surely Jannie's sister would have said something to Jannie.

"Maybe it was just coincidence. Tucker isn't a crazy surname or anything like that. I'm sure plenty of people have that as a last name," the waitress said in a hopeful tone. It would be nice for something to work out for the former accountant, she thought. No matter how small.

Jayce nodded. "You're probably right. I mean, if that was Jannie's sister, I'm sure she would've said something to Jannie about having a fucked up accountant that was stealing money from her."

"I still can't believe she accused you of stealing from her. What an asshole!" Zoe huffed, a tight frown cutting across her face. Jayce was about the most honest and nicest person that she ever met and it really pissed her off for someone to even imply otherwise. Obviously that woman did not know Jayce at all.

"Watch the language in front of the Princess," Jayce requested, nodding toward the baby, who was now watching the adults intensely. This was mostly because Zoe stopped swinging her more than anything else.

Zoe laughed a little. "You should take your own advice. I think you swear more with her around than without. Do you mind if Princess helps me with my rounds? I'm not going to take her anywhere that you can't see." She knew that Jayce never let Princess out of her sight and even though she was sure that she could talk Jayce into letting her take Princess out of view, she did not want to cause Jayce that type of stress.

Jayce nodded and waved the waitress off. "It's fine, Zoe. It'll give me a chance to make a few phone calls and try to get a new job quickly."

Zoe nodded and took the baby to give Jayce a few minutes alone. Everyday since she had been fired a week ago, she came to the café and tried to find a new job. Thankfully, her favorite hangout spot had free wireless, so she could get a lot of work done. She had her laptop with her, working on her resume and sending out emails. She also contacted lawyers, trying to find someone to help her fight off her mother to keep Princess in her custody. So, far for both legal help and employment, she was just getting the run around.

She had anticipated that was going to happen, but that did not make the blow hurt any less. Her mother's talons reached far out and Marion Newton seemed to love nothing more than to use those talons to claw at her daughter. And of course if she could tear Jayce down while "helping out" her beloved son, it was all the better for Marion Newton.

The former accountant was not going to give up, though. Princess' life hung in the balance as far as she was concerned and she would be damned if she was going to let something happen to an innocent baby. So, she searched on, day in and day out. The progress was the same everyday - none. She tried her best not to let it discourage her, to put on a strong front, and to convince herself that she would make it through this crisis for Princess' sake.

The café was like Jayce's unofficial office. She easily admitted that she liked it much better than her old office. The people were much friendlier and more likeable at the café and she never had to bother worrying about Mister Huntington breathing down her neck anymore. The one problem was that she was not being paid to sit at that corner table by the window everyday. In fact, she was losing money by sitting there because she ordered food every hour out of guilt for taking up space.

The little bell on the door rang as a customer walked in. Jayce had learned to ignore the noise quickly, so she did not even bother to look up from her computer. Princess, who was sitting in a high chair next to her aunt, turned her attention away from her oatmeal cookies and cheered, but that did not get her aunt's attention either. Every now and then, Princess made some sort of sound when a patron entered the establishment. Jayce thought it was just a part of Princess' upbeat, happy personality; the baby just liked to see people. Other regulars, who knew the baby's habit, would wave and cheer back, which just drove Princess mad with delight.

"Uh...excuse me..." A familiar voice said, causing Jayce to turn her attention away from her laptop screen to her unwanted visitor.

At first, Jayce expected to see someone that might ask her if someone was sitting across from her. It was not unknown for the café to get very crowded at certain times and for strangers to sit together, but now should not be one of those times. In fact, she was certain that it was not one of those times when she saw who was addressing her. It was the unforgettable Miss Tucker.

"Hi, I'm Gus Tucker. I'm not too sure if you remember me-" Miss Tucker started, sounding very cordial and mellow. Her hazel eyes shined with a gentleness that was lacking when they first met. Somehow, she gave off an aura that still seemed to take up the whole room, but it was not the same as before; it was not menacing or malicious.

"Oh, believe me, a couple of weeks doesn't make me forget a woman who accused me of stealing," Jayce snapped, her eyes hardening like chipped obsidian. No, she definitely would not forget a woman that soiled her good name, did not seem to like Princess, and helped her lose her job.

Gus winced a little from the bite in Jayce's tone. She scratched her eyebrow with her pinky for a moment, which got Jayce's attention. *It could be a coincidence that she does that just like Jannie does*, Jayce thought.

"Look, sorry about that. I had just had the day from Hell. Actually, it was more like the week from Hell. Maybe even month. Anyway, finding out all of that money was missing and my accountant hadn't caught it was pretty much the final straw, so I figured I'd take it out on her. Well, you know that since I took it out on you. I really shouldn't have done that. I should've looked into things much more carefully than just assuming you were stealing from me. So, please, forgive me," Miss Tucker implored the smaller woman. Her light brown eyes begged for forgiveness.

Jayce could not help rolling her eyes and turned her attention back to her laptop. "Fine, whatever. Goodbye," she said, waving the businesswoman away. *I don't have time for this shit.*

A scowl cut through Gus' cocoa face and all of the earlier tenderness was wiped out of her gaze because she felt like she was being dismissed. "That's all you have to say? I'm trying to apologize here," she growled. The air around her seemed to crackle as her mood turned to anger.

"Accepted. Goodbye." The politeness that dripped out of her mouth upset Gus even more.

"Look, listen to me-" Gus pointed at the former accountant, who did not even bother to glance at her.

"I have. Goodbye," Jayce repeated, her voice final. The conversation was over.

Gus opened her mouth to say something, but Princess beat her to it. The baby shouted something that sounded suspiciously like "go!" but could have easily just been "ga." Either way, the noise cut into the conversation and ended it all.

Gus did an about-face, the scowl not leaving her tense, chocolate features as she headed for the front counter. Inside, she seethed, not used to being dismissed and deciding that she did not like it very much. Not to mention, she still felt like an ass from before and Jayce did not really seem to accept her apology. Now, she pretty much felt like pure shit and she blamed the unemployed accountant for that.

"Bitch," she said in a perfectly clear voice before turning her attention to the person working the register, who happened to be Zoe. "Hi, let me get-"

Zoe cut her off. "No," she stated in a hard voice while leveling a heated glare at the wannabe-but-not-gonna-be customer.

Gus blinked in surprise and some bemusement. "No? What do you mean 'no'?" It seemed to be a day of firsts. First she was dismissed and now she was being refused service. Nothing like that had ever happened to her before.

"I'm not going to serve you and when the regular cashier gets back from his phone call, I'm going to tell him not to serve you too. In fact, if our second cashier miraculously makes it here for the first time in days after getting knocked on her ass by the flu, I'll tell her not to serve you too," Zoe informed the older woman as if it was the most logical thing in the world. A smug look overtook her face, but venomous fury settled in her almond-shaped eyes.

"Who the hell are you to refuse to serve me? I'm a customer here just like anyone else," Gus huffed, rage hardening her eyes. Her jaw tensed as soon as she finished talking. *God, I feel like I'm going to have to hit someone today or something! Hadn't I filled my quota for bullshit this month?!*

"I have the right to refuse any customer I want and I refuse to serve you. I'm also going to make Sam refuse when he comes back, so you might as well just go somewhere else," Zoe said, calmly and decisively. It sounded simple enough to her, so she could not figure out why the tall woman before her was still standing there.

"I'm not going anywhere else. I'm here now and I want to order from here," Gus stated with the force of a woman not used to being told "no."

"Hell, no," Zoe replied and dismissed the woman with a flick of her wrist. Before Gus could retort, Sam returned to his post and immediately noticed that he stepped into a cold-war zone.

"Uh...what's going on?" the young man inquired curiously, silently hoping that the pressure from the thick tension did not kill him. He also hoped that he did not get drawn into the problem just from asking a simple question.

"This lady was just leaving," Zoe answered in a clipped tone, looking at Gus as if she was short and as if she loathed the taller woman.

"Excuse me..." Gus paused to look at the cashier's nametag. "Sam, do you think you could get your manager for me?" she requested in a collected, polite manner.

"Uh..." Sam glanced at Zoe.

"Go ahead and get him," Zoe told her coworker. She then cut her eyes at Gus. "Not gonna help you get service around here," she promised in a haughty tone.

Sam was happy to have an excuse to leave, even if it was only for a moment. He decided to hang back when he returned with the manager. The manager, a lanky man in his late twenties with a crooked tie, folded his arms across his chest as he turned his attention to the two women.

"All right, what's going on over here?" the manager inquired with patience in his tone despite the defensive nature of his stance.

"This...woman...refused to serve me," Gus replied, sneering in Zoe's direction as if the young woman disgusted her.

"Zoe, why are you making trouble so early in the morning? Why don't you go play with Princess and leave the adults to work?" the manager teased the Asian woman. He was hoping to defuse the situation and save face for both ladies. The way neither female moved, though, told him that things were not going to be that easy.

The young waitress rolled her eyes. "I'm not making any damn trouble. It's this..." Pausing, she turned to look Gus in the eye and said the next word with deep hatred, "...bitch that's make trouble. She called Jayce a bitch for no reason after bothering the shit out of Jayce for no reason. You know Jayce doesn't need this shit, trying to find work and get her mother off of her back. Things have been hard for her since she got fired after that bastard boss of her accused her of stealing from a client."

"Fired...?" Gus muttered, glancing over at her former accountant, who was buried in her laptop. Jayce looked up for a second, but her attention was on her niece, not that scene at the counter.

The manager put his hands up. "Whoa, calm down, Zoe. Okay, I can see why you're all bent out of shape, but you don't have to serve her," he pointed out. He was sure that easy solution had not escaped her, so he could only wonder what why she was still standing at the register.

Zoe frowned. "I don't think *we* should serve her at all. She's an asshole."

"Zoe, look, I like Jayce as much as the next person. I'm glad she's always in here, but we're not going to turn away business just because you're outraged and someone hasn't taken to Jayce like we have. Everyone is entitled to their opinion. Maybe there's a reason this woman doesn't like Jayce," the manager reasoned in a calm tone.

"How can you not like Jayce unless you're some sort of asshole?" Zoe countered quite seriously. From all the time that Jayce had been coming into the café, they all knew that it was a rare day indeed for someone to dislike her. The only person that seemed to constantly and consistently detest Jayce was her mother. Often ex-girlfriends even turned into friends for Jayce. Hell, people that tried to pick Jayce up and got turned down often walk away from her with a smile. So, Zoe could not figure out how a person could not like Jayce unless there was something seriously wrong with that person.

Gus did not even hear being called an asshole again. Her attention remained on Jayce and the guilt that she felt from before seemed to intensify with every passing second. She suddenly walked away from the counter, away from the discussion, leaving a confused manager and a triumphant Zoe in her wake. Gus wandered back toward Jayce, eyes locked on Jayce and shoulders heavy with the consequences of her actions. She loomed over the accountant, who did not turn away from her computer.

"Hey, can I talk to you for just a moment?" Gus requested in a soft, remorseful voice.

"Why don't you just leave her the hell alone?" Zoe huffed, speaking loud enough for Gus to hear her. She was ready to charge over to the hazel-eyed woman and yank Gus away from her good friend. Sam and the manager held her back, telling her that she needed to mind her business.

Gus glanced over her shoulder to look at Zoe, but then dismissed the Asian woman by turning back to Jayce. "Okay, look, I deserve the cold shoulder. I didn't realize my bad day and my actions would actually go so far as to get you fired," she explained, voice still humble and apologetic. But, as she spoke, she realized how idiotic she must have sounded.

Jayce scoffed, near-onyx eyes turning to Gus laced with disbelief. "You complained to my boss about me stealing from you and you didn't think it would get me fired?" she inquired incredulously.

"I never said specifically that you stole from me. I just told your boss that money was missing and you didn't catch it," Gus replied. *So stupid! Of course my complaints got her fired! Underneath it all, I knew that too. I just didn't care at the time. Okay, maybe I was an asshole then, but I'm not being one now.*

Jayce rolled her eyes. "It doesn't matter anyway. It wasn't your fault," she replied with a deep sigh, waving the whole matter off with a flick of her wrist.

Gus arched a thick, dark brown eyebrow. It was her turn to sound incredulous. "What the hell? How the hell wasn't it my fault? I, the client, went to complain to your boss about your actions and on that same day you lost your job. So, how the hell is not my fault you got fired?"



The ebony-haired woman sighed, sounding annoyed and frustrated. She finally turned to look at Gus. "Look, my boss was a jerk-off. He's got the hots for my mother and gave me the job in the hopes that it would get him closer to her. Little did he know, my mother hates me and was not pleased with him for helping me, not that she ever plainly said that. But, eventually he figured that much out and he's been itching for an excuse to fire me ever since. If you didn't provide him with the excuse, someone else would have, especially considering the fact that I had Princess in all of those meetings that day. That would have been more than enough for him."

"Still, it wasn't my intention to get you fired. I suppose looking back on my complaints, I can see how it would progress to that, but I didn't mean to do it. It was such a pissy day, though," Gus huffed, shaking her head a little. *Such a pissy life really! Damn it, Amanda, you've still got me acting like an asshole.*

"We all have them." *I've been having one for the past two weeks.*

Gus nodded in agreement. "Still, most don't involve getting someone fired. I've had my head up my ass since I got here and this is just what I needed to get it out. Look, I know I probably can't get you that job back, but if there's anything I can do to help, I would like to," she offered with a pleading look in her eyes. She was begging to help.

Jayne smiled a bit, a sincere expression that made it to her eyes. Very lovely eyes, Gus silently noted. Jayne waved the offer off. "Thanks, but I'm fine on my own."

A skeptical look took over Gus' face. "Fine on your own? Is that why you were taking a baby into work with you before?" she asked, not meaning to sound as condescending as she did.

"I don't think that's any of your business," Jayne said in a clipped tone.

"I've gone and put my foot in it again, haven't I?" Gus asked, even though she knew the answer to that. She scratched her eyebrow with her pinky again, trying to figure out a way to stop being a jerk to the shorter woman.

"Indeed. How about you leave while you're ahead? I've got a lot of work to do and I'm sure you'd like to figure out who did steal that money from you," Jayne replied, sounding calm and polite again.

"Oh, that's already been found out. This is why I was a little shocked that you were fired. I went to your boss the day after I accused you to explain that I did find out what happened to the money. The manager at my spa was skimming from me," Gus explained. "Are you sure I couldn't talk to your boss and straighten everything out?" she sincerely offered.

"Trust me, nothing you can say or do will get me that job back. Now, if you don't mind, I need to finish this up," Jayne said, motioning to her computer.

"Don't you think it would be easier to work if you left the baby with a babysitter? Or even worked at home?" Gus asked curiously.

"I don't believe I asked for your opinion on the matter."

Gus yelped slightly, realizing that she had once again put her foot in her mouth. Deciding to go before she gnawed off her whole leg and made a complete jackass out of herself, Gus retreated from the café, not even bothering with breakfast as she had planned on. When she got into her car, she sat silently in there for a few minutes.

"Shit, she doesn't seem that bad and I've gotten her fired. Jannie didn't say anything about it, but then again, I've only talked to her once since I got here. Hell, I didn't even tell her I moved here yet. I'll get to her in a second and I guess we'll have a lot to talk about it," Gus muttered to herself. She then finally started her car and drove off.

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#### 4: Catching up

Gus flopped down on her cushy, burnt orange sofa, leaning all the way back and throwing her smooth brown arm over her eyes. Inhaling deeply, she took in the soothing lavender scent that coated her house. A soft, contented sigh escaped her lips as she listened to the comforting sound of old time jazz music floating from her sound system. Kicking her high heels off, her feet ended up on the wooden coffee table. Her toes wiggled, happy to be free from the prisons that were her black pumps.

"I've got to stop wearing those things," she muttered to the empty house. She only wore the shoes because they made her taller. Standing at 5'9" she really did not need to be much taller, especially since she carried an intimidating aura with her like an aluminum bat. But, she found that standing at six feet really made people move and added just that much more bite to her bark. There was something about literally looking down on someone while she was chewing the person out or just speaking in general that made people listen harder and follow through that much faster.

Mustering some strength, she moved her arm from her face and glanced around her new home. Everything was decorated in the oranges and creams that she loved, but there were not little knick-knacks out yet, so the house had a barren feel to it. Boxes of her things were piled high in the garage and the dining room. She knew that she was going to have unpack some time, but with the way everything was going, she doubted that she would get to it anytime soon. She did not mind the empty look anyway, but she did want to make the place seem like the home it was. She was certain that once she did that, she would feel much better at where her life was at the moment.

"Before anything I need to call up Jannie and tell her I'm moving out here. I'll never hear the end of it if she finds out from a friend or something," Gus grumbled, blindly reaching at her side for her cell phone. Figuring that the phone was somehow moving after she failed to grab it on three attempts, she tilted her head a little to see where the phone was on her hip before she finally caught it. After hitting a button, she placed the device to her ear and waited.

"Gus, what's up?" Jannie answered in a delighted tone. The smile that she was wearing could be heard clearly in her voice.

"Nothing. It's just that I'm in town and I was wondering if you wanted to have an early, light dinner with me. Since it's such short notice, I don't want to mess up anything that might be going on between you and your girlfriend," Gus replied.

"That's be great!" she practically cheered. "Me and Jayce don't have any plans anyway," the addition was said with a bitter, biting sneer.

"No? From the stories you used to tell me, I thought you guys did things almost every night." She was always happy to know that Jannie was in such good hands from the way the younger woman went on and on about how great Jayce was and how Jayce would pretty much bend over backwards to please Jannie. It meant that she did not have to worry about Jannie and could spend her time worrying about other things.

"We used to..." Jannie paused, unable to keep the disappointment out of her voice. "Things are a little different suddenly. I'll tell you about it later on. When do you want to have dinner? Where are you staying?" her voice picked up as she changed the subject, happiness returning.

"Hmm..." Gus thought about how she wanted to spring her new living arrangements on the younger woman. "I'll give you the address. I guess you can come around seven, okay?"

"Sounds perfect."

The phone call disconnected and Gus found the motivation that she needed to get off of her ass. First things first, she went to take a shower and get into something a little more comfortable than the business suit that she was wearing. After a long, hot shower, she put on some buggy, beige sweatpants and a black sleeveless tee-shirt, showing off well-developed biceps.

"Now to figure out what to order for dinner. It's been a while since I've had Jamaican food..." she mused aloud, rubbing her hands together as she spoke.

There was a restaurant not too far that would deliver and had food that made her mouth water just thinking about it. She used to practically live off of the restaurant a few years back because everything was so delicious. It took her a few minutes to find the number and after she placed her order, she went about getting the task of getting the house to look somewhat decent-a difficult feat considering all of the boxes that she had lying around. Still, she managed to get the place into some order before the food arrived.

As she was taking the food out of the containers that they were in, she heard Jannie's car pull into the driveway. She finished fixing one plate before going to the door to let the younger woman in. As the door opened, Gus was engulfed in a full hug and being squeezed in a way that she was sure was akin to how pythons killed their prey. The only difference was this was done out of love...or so was the claim.

"Jannie..." Gus groaned in pain, trying to pull away.

"What? My big sister can't take a little tough love?" Jannie asked with a teasing grin, squeezing just a little harder. She could give bears lessons on how to bear hug.

"I can't take that you're a goof when no one's around!" Gus chuckled, but her voice did sound strained. Turning red in the face from the pressure, she tried once again to escape the death grip that she was in.

"Why Augusta Paulette did you just call me a goof?" Jannie inquired with mock outrage, frowning her brow, but smiling at the same time.

Gus turned her nose up in disgust. "Did you really just call me Augusta Paulette?" she demanded through gritted teeth.

The smile grew wider. "That's your name isn't?"

"Sure, just like yours is-" Gus' words were cut off as a warm, petite hand covered her mouth. Jannie shook a disapproving, well-manicured finger at the taller woman-it was a bit hard to tell that Gus was taller because Jannie was wearing boots.

"Don't you dare say that whole name if you want to stay my big sister!" Jannie commanded with false indignation dancing in her eyes.

A lopsided grin broke out on Gus' face, lighting up her vibrant hazel eyes. "You'd never disown me, Jannie. How would you make it through school? Or is that girlfriend of yours paying for everything now?" Gus held in a wince, hoping that was not the case because it would cause a little screw-up to expand exponentially.

"She pays for enough," Jannie answered with a cocky smirk and a wink.

"She still worshipping the ground you walk on?" Gus asked curiously as Jannie stepped away from her. Jannie always made it seem like her girlfriend thought the sun and moon rose with her, which Gus was happy for because Jannie always seemed so euphoric about it.

"But of course!" came the confident response as Jannie started looking around the house. She noticed the boxes and the colors decorating the place. An eyebrow gracefully arched. "Gus, whose place is this?" she asked, walking from the small foyer into the large, sunken living room. She already had an idea of whose place it might be, but she did not want to get her hopes up.

"Nice isn't it?" A half-smirk and twinkle in her eyes told the story that Gus' words did not, but her little sister was not looking at her to see the tale.

"Hell, yeah. I like the neighborhood too. This place always seemed like something out of a TV show. Remember we always wanted to live here as kids?" Jannie's voice was distant, showing that she had gone beyond the living room and was walking toward the bedrooms.

"I do remember that, which might explain why I made the dream a reality!" Gus called to the retreating form.

"What? I couldn't hear that!"

Gus repeated her. "I said I made the dream a reality!"

Silence was her answer that time. She was making her way back to the dining room when Jannie stormed back to her, looking bewildered and elated at the same time. Her grin was awkward with her top lip sort tucked underneath her teeth. Honey-colored eyes shimmered with joyous tears.

"Did you just say you live here?" Jannie demanded to know, spinning Gus around, so that they were face to face. Similar eyes stared into each other. The younger woman's body shook a little, trembling with glee.

"This is my house, Jannie," Gus answered with a smile on her face.

"OH MY GOD!" The squeal and crushing hug were expected, but Gus winced anyway when they arrived. "When did you decide this? Why didn't you tell me?!" Jannie jumped up and down, taking her sister along for the ride.

"Well, I wanted it to be a surprise for one," Gus answered with another small smile, pulling out of the tight embrace. Thankfully, Jannie let her go without much of a problem.

The younger woman jumped up and down for a moment. "Well, damn right it's a surprise! A very pleasant surprise!" she declared, clapping her hands together. She was not sure what to do with herself because she was so happy.

"It was supposed to be," the older woman boasted, nodding to emphasis her point.

"But, what made you move back here? I thought you liked your posh little suburban life with your white picket fence and wife that can't stand you," Jannie teased, wagging her index finger at her older sister.

"Oh, if we're going to talk about that, we might as well sit down and start eating. There are stories to tell in that and I'd rather had some food in my stomach when I tell them!" Gus declared, throwing in a scoff to show that they were not going to be happy stories.

Jannie only grinned and rushed to the dining room, having to go through the kitchen to get there. The dining room was set high and looked over into the living room. There were stairs to get there from the living room, but the younger woman wanted a peek at the kitchen-not that she would ever use the area. She knew her sister never would either, but she liked seeing her sister's decorating skills. The kitchen was done with chestnut cabinets and a cream countertop. The refrigerator was an off-white and in the corner opposite the plain, beige-colored stove. The walls were done in a light pumpkin sort of color, giving the room a livelier feel to it than a regular dull orange could have provided.

When she got into the dining room, Jannie could not help walking to the railing that was there in place of a wall. She peered down into the living room, feeling like she was taking in a real view as she admired in the plush leather furniture and impressive entertainment center. The house was a dream, but it did not seem big enough for two people in the way that she knew her sister liked space and she knew that her sister had plans on having a family one day, so the home really did not seem like the type of place that Gus would purchase on her own.

"I'm guessing business is good with you," Jannie commented with a light laugh.

"It's been better, but I'll get to that as I tell you the story about the wife-or should I say ex-wife," Gus replied as she eased into a chair at her small, rectangular table. She still had to put her food on the plate, but she was more interested in drinking some of her soda.

"Ex-wife? What the hell? You left Amanda? How could you leave Amanda?! You were together forever!" Jannie pointed out, rushing over to the table to speak with her sister face to face.

"Four years is hardly forever," Gus remarked drolly, rolling her eyes a little.

"Yes, it is. She's the person I think of when I think of you with someone because she's been there so long. Hell, I've been together with Jayce for a year and that's the longest I've been with someone! I'm practically married to her! And let me tell you, it makes my friends so freaking jealous!" Jannie proclaimed with a proud grin.

"I'm so sure. You're not mature at all, little sister," Gus chuckled, dramatically rolling her eyes. She knew that Jannie was boasting, but she was not doing it to be mean-spirited, so it did not bother the elder sister.

Jannie grinned again and pointed to herself with her thumb. "I'm way mature. You just don't know it because you've been missing in action for so long. Now, what happened between you and Amanda? You never even said you guys were having problems, so what happened?" she asked curiously, concern floating her eyes and her voice.

Gus scoffed and massaged her forehead with two fingers on her left hand. She knew that she was going to have to tell her sister, but really, she did not want to think about it. She was not interested in her little sister knowing about her marital problems or what a fool she was, especially since she knew that Jannie thought her relationship was perfect. She did not want to disillusion Jannie in thinking that no relationship ever worked out. She wanted to be a model for her little sister in everything to give Jannie hope and to give Jannie something to strive for.

The taller woman took a deep breath before she started to explain. "What didn't happen? One, she does nothing but talk about me behind my back to anyone who'll listen. Two, she spends my money worse than you ever did. Three, she was only affectionate with me when she wanted something or she thought that she did something that pissed me off. Four, she was never supportive in anything I wanted to do or even comforting if I ever needed it. Five, I'm pretty sure she was actually some kind of snake that managed to take the form of a human female. Lastly, she was having numerous affairs, including one with my spa manager. So, when I found out

about two of her affairs with quite a bit of proof to back it up, this sorry bitch lies to me first, which is something she's really good at doing, and then starts begging with me to forgive her after I prove that she had been sleeping around. I told her I'll consider it, but she still has to get out of the house. She then starts all of this shit, not just at home, but with our friends and starting rumors about me and just all kinds of crazy crap to defame my good name and make me look like a goddamn asshole. I couldn't deal with it anymore. I put in for a divorce so fast the document had scorch marks on it."

Jannie gave her sister an understanding nod and a sympathetic expression. "I'm sorry you had to go through all of that. I always thought Amanda was an asshole. She hated when I was around you."

Gus waved that off. "You don't have to worry about that anymore because she's not going to be around much longer. Once the divorce is final, I'm never seeing her again. She's going to be upset when she finds out that she's getting out of this with only what she brought into too. I wonder how many women she'll score when she doesn't have my money to flash in their faces," she sneered in the end.

Jannie wrinkled her nose a little. "I'm glad I don't have to put up with any of that with Jayce. She begs for forgiveness if I even catch her looking at another woman. I've never even had a thought that Jayce might be messing around."

"Lucky you. It's a horrible feeling. For a while, I wondered if maybe something was wrong with me," the elder sister admitted, shaking her head a little in despair.

Jannie's mouth dropped open and her eyes opened wide with shock. "Of course there's nothing wrong with you! Amanda's just an idiot! You're the best! She just doesn't know how to appreciate a good woman. Don't worry yourself over her. There's a great woman out there for you," the younger sibling declared and then she looked down at her food. She smiled at the sight. "There has to be a great woman out there for you considering how fantastic you are! I mean, how many big sisters would even think to put ketchup on my stew beef, even though they think it's gross? The only other person that does or ever did that for me is Jayce!"

Gus smiled softly, but there was some sorrow hidden in her eyes. "Sounds like she takes great care of you." This fact only made her feel guiltier about what she did.

"She's really great most of the time."

"Most of the time?" Gus echoed, leaning forward, not wanting to miss a word if her baby sister was being mistreated in any manner. There would be hell to pay if that was the case.

"Well, when she gets her niece around, sometimes she forgets I'm alive and shit. But, let's not talk about that right now. Other than that, Jayce is great. Now, aside for Amanda being a bitch, what made you move out here?" Jannie inquired, making sure to dig into her food. A few delighted moans escaped her lips as she savored her delicious meal.

"Goes back to Amanda. Most roads in my life right now led back to her. One of the affairs that she was having happened to be with my spa manager."

Jannie gasped. "Get the hell out! That's just awful. God, I didn't know she was such a jerk. I didn't think she was *so* bad when I met her. I mean, yeah, she didn't seem to like me much and I didn't like her much either, but she totally seemed into you. Why did she do it? Do you know? I thought she loved you."

"I thought she loved me too, but I'm guessing she loved the money a lot more and that was enough for her to stay with me, even though it's pretty clear now that she didn't give a damn about me. As far as why she did it, she claimed I couldn't please her in bed if I had an instruction manual on how to do it. She said I didn't pay attention to her anymore. I was more concerned with my software than anything else, she told me. She said I was the world's worst lover," Gus forced out a laugh.

Jannie snickered a bit. "Well, I don't want any insight on that if she means that in the way I think she means."

"Well, I'm sure the way it was meant went beyond sex, but sex was a big part of it. I don't recall her complaining at the time." That thought still stung. Maybe she could not please her woman in bed, she considered, especially since her ex-wife seemed so sure of it. Hell, a person with Amanda's experience would know a good lover when she had one, she thought.

"Ah!" Jannie put her hands over her ears. "I don't want to know! As far as I'm concerned Gus doesn't have sex!"

The taller woman laughed. "You keep telling yourself that. If anything, I should be the one convincing myself that my sister doesn't have sex."

Jannie snorted and rolled her eyes. "Let's be serious. Okay, back to Amanda being a bitch deluxe."

"How about we hold that until after dinner? It's making me lose my appetite. Tell me about your life," Gus requested, picking up her fork to dig into her meal. First, she finished putting it on a plate before starting to eat. She and her sister always ate delivery or fast food on plates because it gave them the illusion that they were having home-cooked meals.

"Life is going okay. I'm doing good in school, which I'm sure you know anyway since you have access to my school account. I hate that all my professors remember you. A few of them actually call me 'Gus' little sister' instead of remembering my name," Jannie pretended to huff. She then sneered at her sister, earning a laugh. Really, she did not care at all when being referred to as "Gus' little sister." Hell, some of her friends called her that and she just smiled and answered.

"Good to know I made such an impression at that place. So, you think you'll be ready to take over the spa or the software company sometime soon?" Gus inquired. She knew which one her baby sister wanted and she was going to be happy to pass it along.



Jannie stuck out her tongue. "You know I'm going to take the spa. Good thing the position is open and everything," she joked.

"Well, you knew that was waiting for you anyway. All you have to do is graduate and it's yours," Gus promised for about the hundredth time. A year ago, after she started her second business, she promised her little sister that she could manage one of them once she graduated business school. It was no surprise to her that Jannie wanted the spa, especially since it was her idea to open one in the first place.

"Really, everything is normal for me. Kind of anyway..." Jannie glanced away and sighed dramatically.

"Kind of? What's wrong? You're not in any trouble, are you?" Gus demanded, body tensing, ready to move if her sister confirmed that she was in trouble.

"No, nothing like that. It's just...Jayce..." Sorrow swept across Jannie's youthful, smooth face. From the look on her face, a person could get the idea that the world was coming to an end and she had to deliver the message.

Gus growled and her eyes flashed with a deep fury. "Did she hurt you?"

"What? No! Jayce would never do something like that! Geez, are you kidding me? All my friends are jealous that I caught Jayce in the first place and you think she'd hurt me or something? Jayce isn't like that!" Jannie huffed, offended that her sister would even think such a thing.

Gus' forehead wrinkled and she scratched her eyebrow with her pinky. "If not that, then what's wrong? You make it sound like Jayce is so great and then you say that there's something wrong with her. Now, I know she's not perfect because no one is and the look on your face a moment ago was pretty bad, so what's the problem?" the elder sister inquired, speaking in a gentle but firm tone.

"Jayce is great most of the time, but she just does some inconsiderate shit every now and then. It'll work out, though, so don't worry about it," Jannie replied as she dismissed the issue with a wave of her hand.

Gus decided not to press the topic, thinking that she might have a clue as to what was going on with Jannie and Jayce. She figured that they would probably work through things too since Jannie seemed to think that Jayce was the greatest thing since sliced bread. And from stories that Gus heard, Jayce seemed like the type to make sure she would make sure that she could provide for her girlfriend. Gus smiled a little out of the blue.

"What're you smiling at?" Jannie asked curiously.

"Huh?" Gus blinked and shook her head a little, clearing her thoughts.

"You were just smiling. What were you smiling about?" the younger sister asked again.

"Oh! I was just thinking that it's great you found someone you obviously care a lot about. Jayce must take really good care of you."

Jannie nodded. "Much better, especially compared to what Amanda did with you."

A half-smile formed on Gus' small mouth and her head nodded once. "The crazy thing about it all with Amanda was that she was screwing my spa manager and staying with me for the money. So, the spa manager gets the brilliant idea of trying to impress a woman that she knows is a fucking whore by getting more money."

"Don't tell me this silly bitch asked for a raise or something?"

"No, she did something far stupider than that!" Gus proclaimed.

Jannie scratched her right eyebrow with two fingers from her right hand. "What's stupider than that?"

"The goddamn spa manager starts skimming profits from the spa."

"The bitch was stealing from you!" Jannie shouted incredulously, hopping up from her seat while she was at it. It was a good thing she finished her food or it would have fallen out of her mouth.

"Hell yeah, she was," the elder sister confirmed.

"Shit, that's crazy, but that way stupid too. I bet my baby caught that the second she looked at the figures!" Jannie declared with a proud smile.

Gus almost winced, but she caught that. Still, there was a flicker in her hazel eyes that caught her sister's attention. Beyond that, guilt ate away at Gus' mind again as she realized that Jannie did not seem to know what happened between her and Jayce a couple of weeks ago. Gus was not sure how she felt about that, but she ran through a few emotions that she could easily identify.

First off, the businesswoman was relieved that her baby sister did not know that she made an ass out of herself with Jayce. That had to be the worst "first impression" ever on both sides, she thought. Then she was pissed off that Jayce would keep such a big secret from Jannie. They were supposed to be a couple and share big news with each other, whether it was good or bad news. Then she was upset because it seemed like Jayce lied by omission and was hiding the fact that she got fired. But, that brought her back to being happy that Jannie did not know that she was the reason her lover was let go in the first place. Crawling through all of those emotions was her big-sister-overprotective-ness.

"She caught it, didn't she? Jayce is way smart!" Jannie proclaimed with clear pride and unshakable faith in her partner.

"Uh..." Gus glanced away. She did not want to lie to Jannie, but she did not want to steal that beautiful confidence from her little sister either.

Jannie tilted her head slightly. "You're serious? Jayce missed that? How could she miss that? I've heard stories about her catching the tiniest mistakes in figures. She's like a machine!"

"She missed that one..." Gus muttered.

A flush spread through out the younger sister's face, as if she was embarrassed for her lover's obvious mistake. "Uh...Well, she might have been a little preoccupied. She's been taking care of her niece...not that she needs to. She's just stubborn," she muttered, trying to defend her girlfriend's seeming incompetence.

"I suppose that's one way to put it. I'm shocked she didn't tell you about this considering the way I was when I met her a little while ago," Gus said.

"What do you mean? You never said you had a meeting with Jayce," Jannie commented.

"I know I never said anything. I didn't want to upset you. I'm surprised Jayce never said anything to you since I'm sure she didn't enjoy the encounter," Gus remarked with a light scoff.

"What the hell happened?" Jannie demanded to know, a frown setting in on her flawless face.

"Uh..." Hazel eyes glanced away and the first two fingers on Gus' left hand scratched at her eyebrow. "...Maybe you should have Jayce tell you..."

The younger woman growled a little. "No, I want you to tell me since you were there. You started it."

Gus snorted. "Boy did I start it. Really, the whole thing was my fault. I went into her office with a chip on my shoulder already thanks to that goddamn Amanda, but I didn't know about what the spa manager was doing yet...aside for Amanda anyway."

Jannie's face was scrunched up, but she nodded anyway. "What does this have to do with Jayce?"

"Well, I was sorta...a little bit of a bitch when I went to see her. I blamed her for missing money-" Gus' confession was cut off right there.

"You didn't!" Jannie gasped.

"I did. I was pissed and her baby crying wasn't helping-"

"Goddamn! Princess is not Jayce's baby! I told her not to take her to work, but Jayce can be such a stubborn jackass sometimes!" Jannie roared, pushing herself up from the table. A snarl escaped her throat as she paced the dining room, thinking of ways to punish her apparently idiotic, lying lover.

"She should've listened to you! I mean, what the hell was she doing bringing a baby to place of business? That would've gotten her fired without me going to her boss and saying anything to him!" Gus added in, throwing her hands up in frustration.

Jannie stopped mid-pace. "Did you just say *fired*? Are you telling me that Jayce was fired?" she demanded, eyes blazing with endless rage.

"Uh..." The older woman tried to think of some way out of the mess that she had just created.

"Gus, when did you meet with Jayce? How long has she been unemployed?" Jannie inquired, marching over to her sister, glaring down on the businesswoman.

"Jannie, this is really something you should discuss with her. I don't want to come between you two," Gus replied, holding her hands up as if to keep her sister back.

"Goddamn it!" Jannie hollered and stared at the ceiling for a few seconds, searching for answers. She took a deep breath before she spoke again. "How did you even know she got fired?" she asked curiously. Her anger evaporated...or so it seemed for the moment anyway. She just figured that her sister had a point and she would rather talk to Jayce about things than to hear them from Gus.

"I ran into her at that café she's at all the time. *Marco's*."

"*Marco's*?" Jannie echoed as if she never heard of the little bistro. She shook her head because the name was not ringing any bells.

"Yeah. I was under the impression that she spent a lot of time there. Everyone knew her by name and such. When I ran into her there, she was there in the morning." She figured that Jayce spent a lot of time there from the way the staff got so upset with her after she insulted the former accountant.

Jannie nodded, starting to piece together a few things of her own. "Okay. I guess I'll have to talk to her about that. Thanks for telling me."

"No problem. Everything still all right with you and Jayce?" Gus asked, not really hiding her hope. She did not want to be the one that broke her sister's longest relationship to date. Not to mention, Jayce did not seem to be that bad, despite the lie by omission.

"We'll have to see. This is a pretty big thing to keep from me, you know?"

Gus nodded. "It was. From the way you talk about her, I figured that she would always be honest with you. I'm sorry that you had to hear it from me."

"It's all right, Gus. It's not like it's your fault that she got fired and then lied to me about it," Jannie replied, going back to her seat to regroup. She let loose a long sigh once she was sitting.

"Well, it was kinda my fault. I'm the one that complained about her," Gus admitted.

Jannie waved the statement off. "If not you, someone else would've. She brought a baby into a professional accounting firm, after all, and apparently had the baby there while she was supposed to be in meetings with clients. I'm sure you're not the only one that complained. Jayce is a good accountant, but she's making stupid decisions because she doesn't listen. She didn't need to take that baby to work. She doesn't need to have the baby around all the time. This is her fault and now she's too cowardly to even tell me she was fired." An angry snort escaped Jannie's throat and she rolled her eyes.

"Well, that is a pretty big thing. Don't take it too hard on her." She could understand why Jayce would keep it a secret. She knew that if her business started to go under, she would try to move Heaven and Earth to keep things together before telling her partner. It was that pride of being the primary earner of a couple and enjoying the fact that she could take care of her family. She figured that Jayce might have a similar pride.

"Gus, I love you and respect you more than any other person on the planet, but don't tell me how to go about my relationship with Jayce," Jannie replied in a tight tone.

"I'm not telling you how to go about it. I'm just saying that you shouldn't be too hard on her. You don't know what it's like to be the breadwinner in a relationship-" Gus tried to argue, but her baby sister was not hearing any of it.

"Oh, so I don't know how she feels because I don't have a job is what you're saying?" Jannie snapped.

"I didn't say that, Jannie, and you know it. I won't have you putting words in my mouth. You're right, though. It is your relationship. You go about it as you see fit. You've been with Jayce for a year, so you know how to deal with her best and you seem very happy with her, so I doubt you're going to just throw the relationship away," the elder female replied.

Jannie nodded. "I know I'm right and thank you for treating me like an adult."

Gus waved her sister off, not wanting to say that she really was just giving up because she knew that Jannie could throw quite a tantrum. She was not in the mood to put up with that, just wanting to enjoy her baby sister's company right now. Silently, she conceded that was her fault Jannie threw fits, but that was neither here nor there. Her sister was grown and had to live her life on her own, even if Gus did want to stand up a little for Jayce because she did feel partially responsible for what was happening between the couple.

Once the sisters put that subject behind them, they had a very good visit. Gus gave Jannie a brief tour of her home, awing the younger woman with ranch-style house. Even though there were only two bedrooms, they were huge. There was a ground-level pool in the backyard and a large space that Gus planned to turn into a garden if she ever got the time. The garage held two cars that Jannie was not surprised to see.

"You know, if you were a guy, I would think you're trying to compensate for something here," Jannie remarked with a laugh as she ran her hand along the small, sleek, two-seat sports' car. "You don't even drive this during business hours, do you?"

"I don't use it to pick up chicks," Gus insisted, knowing that was where her sister was going with all of the teasing.

"No? The slick little SUV does that, doesn't it?" Jannie teased, turning her attention to the other vehicle in the garage. It was a stylish, cream-colored CUV.

"Unlike you, I get my women using my irresistible personality and charm. I don't need bait," Gus shot back, a half-smirk gracing her face.

"Yeah, your personality got you stuck with Amanda," Jannie reminded her sister.

The frown that cut across Gus' face could have sliced a diamond in half. "That goddamn bitch..." she growled.

"Hey, sis, you're better off without her. You deserve way better than a nasty ass girl like that. You need someone that'll treat you right and will appreciate everything that you do for her," Jannie assured her elder sister, putting a gentle hand on her shoulder to calm her down.

"I know I do. It just feels like so much of my life was wasted with her. Hell, I'm ready to settle down and now I have to start all over. I planned my life around Amanda and she goes and does this twisted shit," Gus huffed, shaking her head in defeat.

"I'm glad you have to start over. Imagine having done what you wanted to do with goddamn Amanda the huge bitch! Hell, there's no guarantee that she would've given into what you want anyway!" Jannie pointed out.

Gus nodded in agreement with that. *A selfish bitch like Amanda probably wouldn't want kids; be it through adoption or one of us having a baby. I wouldn't want kids through us getting a divorce or anything either, which would've been inevitable since she spreads her fucking legs for anything that'll put its tongue there.*

"You'll meet the right girl, sis. You're too good a person not to," Jannie insisted. "Speaking of girls, I need to get home to mine. We need to talk, after all."

"That's right. Well, it was great having you over, Jannie. Come over anytime," Gus said sincerely.

"You know I will! I'm so happy you live back here again!" Jannie jumped into Gus' arms for one last hug.

Gus chuckled as Jannie rocked her in the embrace. With that, Jannie went to her car-a cherry red coupe-and drove off. Gus sighed and shook her head, knowing she just put a big wrinkle in Jannie's relationship with Jayce.

"Still, Jayce should've been a big enough person to tell Jannie what happened," Gus informed the air before turning to go into her house. She might even work up the strength to unpack a box or two. It would at least distract her from the guilt gnawing at her gut and the pain stabbing at her heart.

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[Next time: Jannie and Jayce have "the talk."](#)

[Shea K's Scrolls](#)  
[Index Page](#)

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## ~ Please Baby ~

by Shea K.

Disclaimer: Welcome to another original story by this lunatic. The story and the characters are mine. Do not use them without my permission. Also, any and all characters, events, and situations found in these stories are fictional. If there are any similarities between these things and real people, events, and situations, it is purely a coincidence.

General warning: This story mentions casual drug use and child neglect. It also involves a romantic relationship between two women (surprise, surprise).

Contact the lunatic at: [starving.lunatic@gmail.com](mailto:starving.lunatic@gmail.com) and lemme know what you think of the story. Thanks and enjoy.

5: Heavy

Jannie arrived home and slammed the door upon entering the house. The noise echoed through out the place, alerting everyone that Hurricane Jannie was home. As she pulled her shoes off, Princess greeted her, totally oblivious to what just blew in. The baby walked with a very awkward and gaping stance, like she had just gotten off of a horse. Princess grinned and giggled as she approached her other aunt.

"Jannie, you see her walking?!" Jayce called with excitement in her voice.

Jannie curled her lip in anger and maybe a hint of disgust and jealousy. "Yeah, I see her," she replied, not bothering to hide her sneer. It could easily be heard in her voice.

Jayce sighed, knowing without seeing her lover that there was some kind of problem. "Baby, what's wrong? You were out pretty late," she pointed out, stepping out of the living room to face her girlfriend. She thought that maybe seeing Jannie's face might help her to understand how severe the problem was.

"I know I was," Jannie replied in a clipped tone.

"Are you okay? Is there anything I can help with?" Jayce offered politely. She could tell that she was in trouble, but she was not sure why. Her question really was, "Whatever I did, I am sorry and how should I begin making it up to you?" She just did not want to assume that she was the problem so quickly and gave the shorter woman the benefit of the doubt.

"You've done quite enough. I'm going to bed," Jannie informed her lover with a vexed expression twisting her lovely face. She marched off without another word, body so tense it seemed ready cave in on itself.

Jayce sighed again and went to pick up Princess. "You know, pretty baby, I don't think Auntie Jannie is going to get used to you being around. I don't know why. You're such a pretty baby!" She nuzzled the child, earning lighthearted giggles.

The relatives went to the living room where Princess continued taking little steps around the area. Cartoons played in the background, every now and then Princess stopped to watch the show. Jayce stayed out there until Princess fell asleep. After putting the baby to bed, Jayce went to talk with her girlfriend.

Jannie was in the bed by then too, reading one of her schoolbooks with pillows propping up her back. She ignored Jayce as the older woman sat down on the foot of their king-sized bed. Jayce was silent for a moment, fingering the soft cotton of their black comforter.

"Jannie, do you want dinner? I made your favorite," Jayce said, figuring it would be a good way to start a peace offering. One of the things that she had quickly learned about Jannie and how to get out of trouble was preparing good food. Jannie could not cook-could barely boil an egg-so, she was always pleased to have a well-prepared, home-cooked meal.

"I ate already," Jannie replied in a clipped tone, eyes never leaving her book.

Tan hands came up to rub Jayce's face, as if she was trying to wipe away her frustration. "Sweetheart, we have to talk about this. I know you're not happy about Princess being here, but I really think you would love her like I do if you tried. I mean, you don't feel any empathy at all toward her? You know what it's like to need a relative to take care of you..."

Jannie growled and looked offended that her girlfriend would even say that. The glare that she gave Jayce was enough to stop her heart for a brief moment. She wished that she had kept her mouth shut now.



"That's a totally different thing, Jayce, so don't even try to compare the two. Gus was the only goddamn thing between me and an orphanage. Princess has a father and grandmother, but you just have to save the fucking world without even needing to and without asking me. So, I don't want to hear your bullshit right now and don't try to make it seem like I'm the inconsiderate one. Now, I have to study, so you can go now," the graduate student ordered.

Jayce-used to being dismissed by all sorts of people-got up and left, head hanging low in defeat. She would rather quietly leave than have a big fight, especially if they were going to argue over the same things. She hated fighting point blank. She did not understand why it always seemed so hard to talk things out with people and for people to be respectful of each other's feelings.

She retreated to what had easily turned into her bedroom since she had been sleeping there since Princess arrived-the guestroom. Already dressed in her pajamas, she crawled into bed. The spread was already pulled back because the baby was sleeping on the bed. Checking on Princess, she saw the child was sprawled out on her back in the middle of the bed, head thrown to the side and arms up by her head. Jayce smiled at the sight.

"I don't know why Jannie isn't taking to you, Princess. You're adorable and loving. Hell, you'll hug just about anybody and smile at whoever smiles at you! I figured she'd understand too since she was raised by her sister for half her life. She lost her parents when she was twelve and her sister raised her. So, she should understand when you need a little help from relatives, but I guess she's not going to see that or agree with it or whatever. It might just mean more fighting about this too since it's something that she doesn't like. I don't want to fight, but I know we will.

"And I still didn't tell her I got fired. I'm guessing she doesn't know yet since she hasn't started screaming or anything yet, but that's going to be a whole other firestorm. I'm sorry you got all this drama around you right now, Princess. I mean, not just Jannie, but your grandmother is so serious about taking you. I can't find a half-competent lawyer to help me. We've to got to court in a little over a week, pretty baby. I'm scared your grandmother is going to win. What the hell then..." Frustrated tears gathered and silently slid down Jayce's eyes. She quickly wiped them away and forced the tears to cease. "Crying isn't going to solve anything."

She kept the tears from returning by reminding herself that she never cried, no matter what. She had not cried when her mother threw her out of the house at seventeen with nothing to her name except the clothes on her back for being a lesbian. She had not cried when her father offered to pay for an apartment for her, just to make sure she never tried to come back home. She had not cried when both of parents stopped acknowledging her existence. She had not cried when she first saw what the ugly things that drugs had done to her brother. She had not even cried when her father died. So, she was not going to start crying now, she told herself. She had to take action because action was what was needed, not tears.

"I'm not going to fail Princess and I'll make this all up to Jannie. I know I can make her happy, I just need to try harder. Everything'll be fine. As soon as I get a new job, I'll buy Jannie a bunch of gifts and get a really good lawyer and everything'll be fine," Jayce tried to assure herself. Not surprising, it took chanting that to herself for over an hour to put her into an uncomfortable sleep.

Jayce woke up feeling exhausted; it was something that she was getting used to. It felt like living was draining her and sleep was tiring her out. Checking on Princess, seeing the baby was still sleeping soundly, she dragged herself out of the bed and took a quick shower. This action barely lifted the lethargy weighing down her narrow shoulders. After the warm shower, she dressed in her usual, bland grey business suit, keeping up the illusion that she was leaving for work.

"Okay, Princess, time to get up," Jayce said, picking the child up. Princess made a noise as complaint, but she remained asleep.

Jayce dressed her niece warmly in jeans and a sweatshirt with her favorite cartoon character on it; it was dragon that loved counting. Keeping Princess in her arms, she grabbed Princess' baby bag and went downstairs. She was not surprised to find Jannie in the kitchen, sipping coffee and reading the paper.

Recent mornings had become tense and pressing for the couple. Jannie rarely said a word to Jayce now, barely looked at Jayce now-unless it was to glare at the older woman anyway. The animosity radiating from Jannie cut into Jayce, troubling her heart, twisting her stomach, and burning her soul. Jayce tried her best to ignore it, telling herself that everything would be all right as soon as she made things up to Jannie. *I can fix this; I know I can.* She would do everything in her power to keep Jannie, to continue having her love.

Heated hazel eyes followed Jayce around the kitchen as she made herself a simple egg sandwich. She made enough for Jannie to make a sandwich too because she knew that Jannie liked them as much as she did. When Jannie did not move from her spot, Jayce went so far as to making the sandwich for her lover and putting it in front of her upset girlfriend. The only reaction that she got was an incensed glower from Jannie.

"Uh...well, bye, sweetheart..." Jayce said, too nervous to do anything else. She wanted to lean down and kiss Jannie, as if that would somehow make everything better, but the aura of Jannie kept her at bay.

"Have fun at work," Jannie said in acidic tone, like she was trying to slay Jayce with that simple statement.

Jayce blinked hard from the shock of her lover speaking to her. "Um...I will... Thank you..."

A snarl curled onto Jannie's full lips that did not get by Jayce, but she was not in the mood for a fight. Jayce quickly left the house, trying to put Jannie's cold shoulder out of her head. She strapped Princess, who was still dead to the world, into her car seat and smiled softly at the sleeping baby.

"God, Princess, I don't understand how she can't just love you and want to protect you like I do," Jayce whispered, giving her niece a little kiss before shutting the back door.

The ride to *Marco's* was made in silence. Princess stirred when the car was parked, grinning as if she was just happy to be awake. Jayce unbuckled her from the seat and Princess cheered like she

had been freed from the worst of bonds. The baby threw her hands around her aunt and giggled, hugging Jayce for no real reason. More happy cries came from the child as they entered *Marco's*.

"Princess!" Zoe shouted, smiling broadly as she rapidly approached the pair with open hands.

"Wait, Zoe! Watch this!" Jayce put the child down while Zoe stopped dead in her tracks.

Princess wobbled for a moment before gaining her balance. She glanced up at her aunt, who encouraged her to go to Zoe. Princess turned her dark eyes to Zoe, staring at the young woman with deep concentration. And then, like a cowboy wandering into a saloon, she took a wide-legged step toward the waitress. Zoe cooed in delight so loudly that every patron in the shop turned to see what was going on. Princess continued on, oblivious to the audience, but grinning widely because of how gleeful Zoe looked. The café patrons smiled and many of them had to resist the urge to clap while they watched the child stagger toward the waitress.

"Oh, god, c'mon Princess," Zoe urged the baby, holding her hands out of the smiling baby.

Princess took a few more steps before tipping over a little. She caught herself on her hands and picked herself back up; she did not even notice her aunt was behind her in an instant, ready to help her up. Princess' forehead wrinkled in concentration as she steadied herself again and began her shaky journey to Zoe. After a couple of steps, Zoe could not stand it anymore and scooped the child up, pressing her into a tight hug.

"You are such brilliant baby!" Zoe declared as if Princess was the first child to ever walk in the history of mankind.

"This kid is gonna have an ego the size of the planet if Zoe has anything to say about it," Sam commented, speaking more to himself than anyone in front him, but they heard anyway.

"It's sweet," one of the regulars replied.

"So sweet that you're going to buy Jayce her muffin today?" Sam inquired with hope in his eyes, leaning on the register a little bit.

"I'll go half on it."

"What the hell? Everyone around here thinks Jayce and Princess are so sweet, but I always end up splitting the cost of a muffin! Do you know how much I make? I can't keep going half on muffins around here!" Sam sighed dramatically, lowering his head in defeat and looking absolutely pathetic.

"You done being a drama queen? Because if you are, Kurt here is going to pay for the other half of the muffin," the regular said, motioning to the man behind her.

"Okay!" Sam perked up instantly. He grinned and rubbed his hands together.

Jayce went to her usual seat and set herself up, opening her laptop and putting her cell phone on the table. There were no contacts about jobs waiting for her at her email inbox, so she started sending out more resumes. Her plan was to look for legal help after that, but she did not make it that far.

"Oh, so this is what the fuck you do now?" Jannie demanded as she stormed into the café in a way that would have made any hurricane green with envy.

Jayce's eyes went wide as the plate her muffin was resting on. She was sure that there was some kind of dimensional distortion or a bend in the fabric of space and time because somehow the temperature in the bistro rose to the heights of Hell and also dropped to the level of the arctic. It was like all of the air was sucked out of the place as everyone turned to see the demon in high-heels that came in.

"Jannie..." Jayce gasped in disbelief. *How did she know I was here? I never told her about this place!* She doubted that Jannie followed her because she would have noticed the car, so she could not figure out how in the world her girlfriend knew where to find her.

"All this time, lying about going to work when you're actually coming here?! You spending your whole goddamn day here, content to be fucking unemployed?! What the fuck is that all about? How long have you been doing this? A week, two, more?!" Jannie demanded to know as she marched over to her cowering lover.

"Baby, it was just...temporary..." Jayce tried to explain, finding herself squirming underneath the younger woman's intense gaze.

Jannie scoffed and glared harshly at her girlfriend, knowing exactly the type of affect she was having on Jayce with her actions. She knew by striking swift and hard, Jayce would be thrown off balance and would not react properly. She figured this would be the best way to get the truth out of her lover and would also make sure that Jayce did not cross her again. She did not care that she was exploiting a weakness Jayce had shared with her in confidence. No, this was all about getting Jayce to finally tell her the truth, no matter what because she felt she was owed that much and more.

"Temporary? What was temporary? That you were going to lie your ass off to me?! That you were going to be unemployed? Or that you were going to stop acting like the world revolves around Princess?!" Jannie roared.

"Sweetheart..." Jayce stammered, not sure what to say. Her mind was frozen as fear gripped her insides. A little voice inside of her was trying to tell her this was not her mother screaming at her and she was not fifteen anymore, but the rest of her brain was not listening to that. It just heard to loud hollering matched with an almost hateful stare and reacted as it always did thanks to years of conditioning. Her brain just shut down and she sat there looking like a deer caught in headlights.

"Don't you 'sweetheart' me! You lost your fucking job and didn't even bother to tell me! You've been playing like you were going to work for who-knows-how-long only to run to this stupid, little goddamn café! And to top things off, Princess is the reason you got fired and you're too fucking stupid and goddamn stubborn to send her back to her father so you can get on with your fucking life!" Jannie put a threatening finger in her girlfriend's face and snarled at the frozen Jayce. "You need to get your goddamn priorities straight. You're gonna sit here and try to play mommy and everything's going to blow up in your goddamn face. You already lost your job, it's a guarantee you're going to lose Princess in this custody shit, and you're on the verge of losing me. You can't do anything right at the moment because you're blind to what matters. All you fucking see is Princess, a kid that doesn't even need a screw-up like you right now. Get your goddamn act together, Jayce, before you find yourself alone, completely and totally!" the livid college student declared, loud enough for everyone inside and just outside of the restaurant to hear.

Before Jayce could quite fathom what just happened Hurricane Jannie was gone. Jayce blinked twice before it sank in as to what did happen. Burying her head in her hands, Jayce tried her best to disappear or at least stop the headache that was building right between her eyes. Tense tears welled up in her eyes, but she willed them to stay right where they were. She hated that she knew everyone was looking at her too, judging her and her circumstances. She hated even more that Jannie might have a point.

"Damn it, Jannie..." Jayce muttered, shaking her head a little while making sure to continue covering her face with her hands. Her body trembled ever so slightly from tension and sorrow, knowing that things were probably just going to get worse for her.

"Jayce, it's okay..." Zoe said in a soothing voice, coming up behind the older woman to rub her shoulder.

"No, it's not all right. Damn it, she's right. She's totally right," Jayce murmured in disgust.

"She's not right. She basically called you a loser in front of a café full of people. That was totally uncalled for. I'm sure the reason you didn't tell her that you lost your job is because you knew that she would react like this," Zoe reasoned in a quiet, gentle tone. There was a right way to handle things and a wrong way to handle them. She was beyond certain that Jannie picked the wrong way, even if Jayce was wrong for not mentioning that she lost her job.

"It doesn't matter. I should've told her about it, but that's not all she's right about," Jayce sighed, throwing her hands up in defeat. "What the hell am I doing? I'm never going to get a job without my mom's help! I'm never going to find a real lawyer that'll help me on this case and even if I do, I wouldn't be able to afford him! I'm going to lose Princess! Q is gonna get her back and she's going to end up dead before she's in kindergarten!" she screamed to the ceiling. Hot tears stung her eyes, but they dared not fall, not in front of everyone, not when she needed to do something. Shaking her head, she managed to get rid of those tears, but her frustration remained.

"Hey, hey, hey! Now, no talk like that!" Zoe ordered, putting a hand on her friend's shoulder and shaking Jayce to get her under control.

"Why not? She's right!" the unemployed female hollered. Zoe held her tighter, even though her presence did not seem to be comforting Jayce at all.

"She's not right! And this is how I know!" Zoe moved so that Jayce was staring right at Princess, who was in the waitress' other arm. "This is exactly how I know she's not right!"

Jayce stared into the eyes of her smiling niece, eyes the same color as her own. Tan hands-just like Jayce's, but tiny-reached out for unemployed accountant and Zoe leaned over more, letting Princess touch Jayce's cheeks. Jayce could not help smiling, especially when the baby leaned down more to kiss her nose.

"Thank you for that, Zoe, but it hurts even more now, knowing I'm going to lose her," Jayce whispered, sounding near tears even though there were none in her eyes.

"You're not going to lose her and you know why I know that? I know that because you'd do anything for this girl, including defy the odds and kick your mother's ass for custody!" the waitress proclaimed.

Jayce was about to respond, but she paused to think about things. The promise that she made several times came to mind. She knew that she was Princess' only hope. If she let her mother win, Princess would be stuck with Quentin and she knew how that would end up. Staring in nearly black eyes, so similar to her own, but so innocent and joyful, Jayce sighed.

"You're right, Zoe. You are absolutely right. I can't just give up. Princess needs me to fight for her. I'm sure somewhere out there is a lawyer with a good track record that my mother hasn't gotten to somehow and I can manage to afford him or her," Jayce stated in a firm tone.

Zoe nodded while pulling Princess back. "Does your mother really have that much pull?" she asked curiously. She could not believe how all-powerful Jayce made her mother sound, but there had to be some reason for Jayce not being able to find a good lawyer to help her win custody of Princess.

"I guess so. I've been trying my best to find a lawyer, but it's not really working and I assume it's because of my mother. She stonewalls most things in my life," Jayce explained, shaking her head.

Jayce did not understand why her mother had such an intense hatred of her. Sometimes, she doubted it was even because she was a lesbian, but that was a convenient excuse for her mother. A woman who outted her to her high school and even suggested that she not be allowed into the locker room because she would most likely ogle some of the other girls. A woman who had tried to get her kicked out of college numerous times by suggesting that she cheated on papers, that she was involved in homosexual prostitution (Jayce had never even heard of such a thing at the time), and going so far as to imply that Jayce slept with her professors for her outstanding grades. Jayce did not even like to think about the rumors her mother spread about when she was trying to find work. And worse than that was her father's silence, his quiet approval of her mother's nasty behavior. Sometimes, she was certain they just never wanted her. She was some

unhappy, undesired accident in their lives that they were unable to take back and these actions were how they let her know that.

Zoe was silent for a moment. Sometimes, she just could not believe how horrible Jayce's life seemed, especially when it was on a downward turn. The odd thing, she noticed that Jayce's life never hit a really nice patch. There were just times when things were not as terrible as other times. And really, she could not figure out why people did these things to Jayce. She had never met a sweeter person in her short life. Anyone who knew Jayce should feel privileged to have known such a charming, sweetheart of a person. So, she wondered why people just kept hurting her friend, all the time.

"Thanks for the talk, Zoe," Jayce said, forcing out a small smile.

The waitress grinned brightly, enough to get a smile out of the baby. "No problem, Jayce. You just keep doing what you're doing. You can deal with little-miss-cause-a-scene after you've gathered yourself, done what you need to do, and have a little breather," the younger woman insisted.

Jayce nodded because that made a lot of sense to her. So, instead of chasing after Jannie-as she was going to do-she turned her attention back to her computer. Zoe smiled, seeing that she got through to the out-of-work female and she went back to work herself, keeping Princess with her while Jayce focused on her computer. The only interruptions she got were people that offered to help if she was in trouble. She waved them off, believing that the only way things would ever get done would be if she did them herself, especially since no one was offering a job or a lawyer to help. No, those were in short supply around *Marco's*.

At the end of the day, she packed up like always, ready to head home. She strapped Princess into her car seat and then got into the driver's seat, but did not start the car. Dark eyes focused ahead while tan hands tightly clutched the steering wheel until her knuckles were white.

"I can't give up now. I have to keep fighting. This isn't just for me, but for Princess. I have to be strong for Princess. Mom hasn't broken me yet and I'm not going to let her start now, even if she has unknown help from damned Jannie," Jayce declared and she turned the key in the ignition, starting the car. She drove off holding her head up high.

Jayce took a deep breath as she pulled up to the condo. Glancing out of the window, she thought of how it was a quaint little community. She had hoped they did not mind the firestorm that was about to hit the complex when she went inside. She was not going to back down like in the café. There was too much at stake now, so she was going to fight until her last breath if necessary. She did not care what Jannie said or did; she was going to give just as much Hell as she got.

"No, Princess, I am not going to back down ever again," Jayce declared, getting out of the car to retrieve her charge. Princess was dead asleep; apparently, being put in the car was an instant knockout pill for the child. On the reverse side, as soon as she was pulled out of the car, she was up and smiling.

Jayce cooed to the awake child in her arms while grabbing her bags from the automobile. Once she was at the door, she put Princess down, getting a cheer from the baby. Jayce smiled down at the girl before opening the door to the condo. Princess walked in, calling out in her nonsense language, basically alerting Jannie that it was time for round two. Jayce steeled herself before following her adventurous ward into the hot zone.

Silence greeted Princess' joyous outbursts and for a moment Jayce considered that Jannie might not be home, despite the fact that her car was parked outside. There was always the chance that her party-girl lover had gone out to blow off some steam. Sometimes, Jannie seemed to think it was a punishment for Jayce to come home to an empty house and not know where her lover was. Honestly, most of the time that was a good assumption, but right now, Jayce did not care where her girlfriend was.

The search for Jannie was on after Jayce pulled off her shoes, as well as Princess' shoes. The first stop was the living room, which was empty of all life. Jayce nodded, knowing just where her girlfriend was if she was home.

"Upstairs it is then. Sorry, Princess, but it's the playpen for you. But, I will set you up comfortably before going to deal with that mess," Jayce decided, speaking aloud in case Princess understood her meaning.

The baby only grinned. Jayce went to get the playpen from the guestroom and put it in the living room. She put Princess inside the pen and then turned on the television, using the DVR feature to play one of the child's favorite movies. After setting the baby up with her favorite toys and movie, Jayce marched off upstairs, going to the bedroom that she once shared with Jannie. Trying the handle and discovering the door was locked, she knocked loudly.

"Jannie, open the door. Let's talk," Jayce suggested.

"There's nothing to talk about," Jannie retorted sharply.

"There's plenty to talk about and I'm not going to do that through this fucking door!" Jayce proclaimed heatedly. She was done being treated like some whipped puppy.

"Then fuck off! There's nothing to talk about, you lying, inconsiderate bitch!"

"Is that so? You think you can just come into my comfort zone and embarrass the shit out of me and after that there's nothing to talk about! There's plenty! How about the fact that you're not supporting me while I'm trying to get Princess out of that fucking hellhole my brother calls a home? How about that?!" Jayce hollered, through the door despite the fact that she did not want to do that.

"Your mother is going to have her!"

"Motherfucker, you know what my mother is going to do!" Jayce replied, very conscious of her word-choice.



"What the hell did you just call me?" Jannie hollered, voice closer to the door now.

"I do believe the term I used was 'motherfucker.' Is motherfucker too light a term considering all of the twisted shit you've done so far? How about son of a bitch? Or just bastard? You fucking bastard!" Jayce ran off the names she was pretty sure were horrible to call her own girlfriend.

Suddenly, the door swung open and Jayce was looking into two blazing hazel eyes before noticing the finger in her face. "You watch your goddamn mouth unless you want to get thrown the hell out of here!" Jannie snarled, features twisting terribly because of her fury.

Obsidian eyes rolled. "Oh, your feelings are hurt now? Well, you're not the only fucking one with feelings around here. What about my feelings? This is my niece we're talking about and you're just ready to throw her to the wolves! And, to top matters off, you come out and you scream at me in public, airing all of our business out there like that and acting like it was nothing!" Jayce countered.

"You pushed me to that! You're sneaking around, hiding the fact that you lost your goddamn job, and playing like you're still going to work!" Jannie huffed, face starting to turn red from all of the yelling.

"Okay, you've made that point. Now, can we go in the room and talk like civilized adults? I don't want Princess to hear us screaming at each other," Jayce said, suddenly calm. Really, all she wanted was to speak with her girlfriend face-to-face, which was why she called Jannie all of those names in the first place.

"Fuck Princess!" Jannie roared, eyes ablaze with uncontrollable, fierce ire. "I don't give a shit about her! I didn't want her to live here! You never asked if I did! I don't want kids right now, but you never asked about either! You just do shit and think I'm supposed to flow with it because you suggested it! Well, to hell with that!" Jannie hollered.

Jayce was silent for a moment. Her face was tense and she ground her teeth together for a moment, nodding, taking it all in. Her tan hand came up and rubbed Jayce's chin as she carefully deliberate on her next words.

"So, what you're saying is I should have left my one-year-old niece to die or become a ward of the state because you're a fucking selfish bitch with no fucking compassion, heart, or soul at all?" Jayce reasoned, sounding like this was the most logical deduction she had ever had in her life. Part of it was a revelation. She never realized just how selfish Jannie really was.

The scowl that cut across Jannie's face could have sliced a diamond in half. "Stop being so goddamn dramatic! You know your mother wouldn't let her only grandchild die! You just want to make it seem like you're the goddamn hero in all of this! Isn't that how you always want to look, Jayce? Like you would save the fucking world if you could! If you had the time you would just save every fucking body, right? But, we both what that's really about. It's just a pathetic attempt at trying to buy love without spending money!" she pointed out smugly.

"God forbid someone was genuinely nice and cared about people, right? Not everyone is as self-serving as you are, Jannie!" Jayce snapped.

"Don't try to pin your inconsiderate bullshit on me! You're the one that's wrong here, simple as that. You didn't tell me you lost your goddamn job and you didn't ask me about keeping Princess. You're a fuck-up, pure and simple!"

"I shouldn't have to ask you to help me! As my girlfriend, your fucking support should be there automatically! I need to help my niece and you should've just been there! Any decent fucking human being would be there to help a baby! Not to mention, you should fully understand considering you lost your parents and you needed your sister to step in to take you or you've been sent to an orphanage! Why the fuck can't you help Princess like your sister helped you? You know why you can't? Because you're a selfish fucking asshole who can't stand it when my attention isn't squarely on you," Jayce stated in a rather satisfied tone.

"You know what, you think you've read me so well, but you know what this is really about? I'm sick of watching you trying to raise someone who'll love you since you know no one in the world really ever will. Your goddamn prick of a father hated you. Your mother hates your fucking guts. She probably wishes you were never born and I'm sure your father felt the same way. And do you know why? Because you're a worthless bitch, who always fucks up. That's why you got fired and that's why Princess is going to hate you eventually too!"

Instinct winning over thought, Jayce was all action after those words. With a wild look in her eyes, she grabbed Jannie by the shoulders and shoved the smaller woman against the wall. Hazel eyes opened wide in pure shock as both bodies shook—one in terror and the other in fury. A couple of tense seconds ticked by before Jayce realized what she did.

"Jannie, I am so sorry..." Jayce muttered as she quickly released the shorter female. Her focus went down to her hands, not believing what she had just done.

Apparently, Jannie did not accept the apology, did not say anything at all. As soon as she was free, she slapped Jayce in the face as hard as she could. Jayce's face snapped to the side as the sting spread through her entire head, down into her heart and soul. The belief that she deserved the smack only made it burn more.

"Get the hell out of my house, Jayce, before I call the cops. I never want to see you again! It's over between us! Have fun being a fuck-up on your own, especially since your mother's going to get custody of Princess and she will grow up to hate you," Jannie declared.

Jayce did not argue; she did not even look Jannie in the eye. She marched down to the guestroom while Jannie retreated into the bedroom. Jannie could hear the sound of Jayce moving things around, even though Jayce was not being particularly forceful with anything. Less than ten minutes after the confrontation, the sound of the door opening and closing let Jannie know that Jayce was out of her life. Straining her ears, she could hear the sound of Jayce's car pulling away.

Tears slid down Jannie's cheeks as she sat on the bed, knowing that she was alone now. She felt safe to cry since no one was around. Hugging a pillow to her chest, she reached for the phone and automatically dialed the first number that came to mind. More tears came when Gus finally answered the phone.

"Gus, I need you!" Jannie cried into the receiver.

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## 6: Picking up the pieces

"Jayce and I just had a really big fight! She scared me a little," Jannie admitted, sniffing while wiping away a cascade of tears. She was on the phone with her big sister after having a huge fight with Jayce that ended with Jayce leaving the house. She was pretty sure that was the end of their relationship and that was fine with her. If she never saw Jayce again, it would be too soon!

"Scared you? What? How?" Gus asked with concern oozing through her voice. In the background, Jannie could hear things being shuffled around, letting her know that her sister was moving about wherever she was.

"For a second, I thought she was going to hit me!" Jannie bawled. "I really thought she was going to hit me!" She could not believe it, but in that split second, she honestly thought that Jayce was going to beat the living shit out of her. Just remembering the fierce look in those dark eyes made her heart race for a few seconds.

"Hit you?" Gus snarled. "Where the hell is she?! Is she there now?!" the big sister demanded to know with murder in her voice.

"No, she left..." the shorter woman answered, sniffing again and trying to dry her tears. Instead, more tears fell after she uttered those words. She could not believe that Jayce had actually left. The realization of it hit her right between the eyes, causing even more tears. Jayce was gone, probably for good. She let out a loud, guttural, wounded sob at that thought.

"Okay, make sure you lock the doors. I'll be there in fifteen minutes!" Gus promised. Forget the fact that she lived over twenty minutes away.

"Okay..." Jannie sniffled again. "See you soon..." She disconnected the call and before she could even put the phone down, she started wailing as if Jayce had truly hit her. She had never been so afraid of her now ex-girlfriend before, but there was something much more causing all of the pain and sorrow to pour out of her.

She honestly could not believe that Jayce had scared her so much. Sweet, kind Jayce had glared at her with hate in those beautiful, deep, almost onyx eyes. Jayce had put her hands on her in a malicious way; it just did not seem possible. Those hands had always been so gentle and adoring until today. Today, though, that had turned against her, slamming her hard against the wall. She never felt such fear before; it made her entire chest hurt just thinking about it.

"Oh, Jayce!" Jannie wept, wanting to believe it was only because she was so frightened, but underneath that she knew that there were a few other reasons why she was bawling her eyes out.

Unaware of how much time passed, Jannie eventually heard the loud, heavy pounding on her door. Once the sound reached her ears, she dashed downstairs, knowing it was going to be her sister. She threw herself into Gus' arms as soon as the door was open.

"Are you okay?! What happened?! Goddamn it, did she hurt you?!" Gus roared, holding her little sister tightly. She planned on making Jayce pay for touching her sister in a less than respectful manner!

"No, no, no! Well, not physically anyway," Jannie answered, pulling away a little just to wipe her eyes.

"She made you cry," Gus hissed, frowning deeply.

"She was mean-spirited and self-serving, like always. Damn it, why didn't I see that?! Jayce seems perfect, but it's all just an act! It's cry for help! 'Oh, please, love me like my family never did!' How the hell couldn't I see that!" Jannie hollered, pulling away completely now, so she could pace. She had to move to the living room to get enough space for it.

Gus followed her younger sibling and watched as the shorter female tried to pace, but the playpen was in the way. Jannie scowled at the playpen and kicked it with all of her might. Powerful legs sent the playpen slammed against the wall; the businesswoman followed the object with her eyes, but did not move. She was not surprised by the strength of her little sister's legs and she was also not surprised by the hot, smoldering anger rolling off of Jannie.

"Jannie, what the hell happened? She didn't hit you, did she?" Gus demanded to know, making a fist.

"No," Jannie replied again, sounding utterly pathetic. "She didn't hit me. She just grabbed me and it really scared me."

"The hell?! That's just as bad! She's damn near my size, so she could've hurt you!" Gus declared.

"She is not near your size..." Jannie argued weakly, not sure what else to say. Yes, Jayce was probably only a couple of inches shorter than Gus, but she was nowhere near the same weight class since Gus worked out faithfully and Jayce was on the skinny side. Jannie thought Jayce might actually weigh less than she did, but she could not remember at the moment.

"But, what the hell happened?! Do you have bruises where she grabbed you?!" Gus asked, clearly going out of her mind with the idea that her little sister was somehow assaulted and injured.

"No..." Jannie replied, glancing down at her arms. She was wearing a sleeveless shirt, so it was clear that she did not have any bruises around her arms. There were no signs whatsoever that she

had even been touched. "It's just that we were arguing and she kept saying these horrible things to me. So, I said some things back and then she just flipped out and grabbed me, pushing me into the wall," she explained with pout and watery eyes.

"What brought all of this on?" Gus asked curiously, looking around. There were no signs of a rumble, which she felt was a good thing. Still, she did not feel good about Jayce putting her hands on Jannie at all.

"I confronted her about losing her job and lying about it. She had the nerve to get pissy about it! Can you believe it?! She was so in the goddamn wrong and she gets all-uppity about it! This is the shit she does! She did this shit with Princess too! I didn't want Princess staying here, but Jayce just thinks it's okay because she thinks it's a good idea and then she got all upset with me when I said I didn't want Princess here!" Jannie started to ramble as she continued to pace the living room. "She didn't even ask me when this is my house! I understand her brother's an ass, but her mother wants the kid and would probably take care of her. She's just too stubborn to let her go, even though she knows she's going to lose Princess anyway! Then, she does this bullshit with her job and tries to make it seem like it's my fault that this shit happened! None of this shit would have happened if she just let her mother have Princess in the first place, but she's too fucking stupid to see that! She's just a fuck-up!"

"Okay, wait, calm down," Gus said, putting her hands out as if that would slow her sister down. She was taking in the explanation, getting the gist of it, but not totally understanding what was going on.

"Jayce is a fuck-up is what I'm saying! A fucking asshole and I just ignored it! I'm glad I kicked her the hell out!" Jannie declared, throwing her hands up in victory.

"You kicked her out?" Gus asked to be sure.

"Of course I did! She was calling me all sorts of horrible things just because I told her the truth! She grabbed me and pushed me because I told her the goddamn truth! She's going to lose Princess and she needs to face that! She also needs to face that she's a fuck-up and she can't go around trying to buy love! Her mother is going to get Princess and Princess is going to grow up not being able to stand Jayce because of that, so she needs to face that shit too," Jannie proclaimed.

"Princess? That's the baby that she keeps with her?" Gus inquired curiously.

"Yes! Annoying little brat really. I mean, I don't mind her in small doses, but I didn't want to keep her and Jayce just assumed I did, didn't even bother asking me! Just brought her over here and thinks that Princess can live here because her brother keeps his home a pigsty and doesn't know much about taking care of a baby. But, she's acting like she's Princess' salvation when her mother offered to take her, but Jayce is too stupid and stubborn to give it. The idiot doesn't even have a job, so how the hell does she think she's going to care of a baby? That shit is expensive and she didn't even think of that! Fucking idiot!" Jannie snorted, continuing to pace. Her face was tense with aggravation from the situation and Jayce stupidity, in her opinion.

Gus scratched her eyebrow with her left hand. "Okay, Jannie, slow down, take a deep breath, and tell me this story from the beginning," she requested, suspecting that there was something more to what happened. It would not bother her much if only her little sister was not going on and on about this baby so much. The argument seemed to be more about the child than about the lies involving the job, which disturbed her a little. She hated to think that Jannie had some kind of animosity toward a tiny, harmless baby.

Jannie nodded and inhaled before starting the story from the beginning—the beginning being when she followed Jayce to the café that morning. She told the story as expected—Jayce sounded like an insensitive bitch. Gus had learned long ago to read between the lines with her baby sister, though. It was easy to do this time since Jannie was so upset that she rambled through much of the explanation, probably not even realizing most of what she was confessing.

Gus nodded at the end of the story. "Okay, so, let me see if I've got this just right. You confronted Jayce about losing her job in front of a room full of strangers and hit her hard and fast, knowing this would keep her off balance and give you the upper-hand in the impending argument?" she asked, silently noting that her little sister seemed to be proud of the fact that she exploited her now-former girlfriend's weakness considering the fact that she made it a point to explain why it was Jayce's weakness. That was damn near evil, in Gus' opinion. *You don't do that to someone you claim to love. You don't use their weaknesses against them just to win a goddamn argument!*

"Of course! I didn't want her to think that she hadn't done anything wrong! She needed to feel bad about what she did because she was wrong for lying and she needed to be scared of me to know I wasn't playing around with her. She needed to know the truth about everything too. She's so goddamn useless sometimes," Jannie declared.

Gus nodded again. She took a moment to rub her eyebrow with her left pinky. "Okay. So, after thoroughly ripping her to shreds in front of a busy restaurant and then retreating back to home base, you waited for the fight to come to you. Now, I understand you jumping on her about the job. She was totally wrong there, but why did you keep telling her that's going to lose the baby?" she inquired curiously. There was something so very vicious about the way her sister attacked Jayce through the baby and she disliked that immensely. From what she could tell, even if Jannie had been right about things, the way she handled everything was so fucked up that she was easily wrong too.

"Because she is! She can't find a competent lawyer to help her and her mother's going to do anything possible to make sure Jayce can't keep that little girl! She's nuts to think that she can and that's why she went nuts on me and pushed me against the wall. If she just accepted that her mother's going to get Princess things wouldn't have come to that. We wouldn't even be arguing because she wouldn't have been so inconsiderate and she wouldn't have lost her job from being stupid enough to bring Princess with her to work," Jannie proclaimed, as if it all made perfect sense to her.

"Why does she take the baby with her everywhere anyway? Why'd she bring the baby to work? Why not leave her with you?" Gus inquired, finding herself intrigued by this odd soap-opera that

was her sisters life. There was something just so peculiar about this whole situation that she was now in the middle of.

Jannie scoffed and rolled her eyes. "I didn't want to watch Princess. I refused to watch Princess. I've got better things to do with my life and if I did watch her, Jayce would think I approve of what she's done, which I don't. Jayce didn't ask me if I wanted her around and I wasn't about to be a part of something I wasn't asked about. Jayce is paranoid, thinking that her mother is going to kidnap Princess the second she's out of Jayce's sight. She's nuts. Why would her mother kidnap Princess when she's just going to win in court anyway? Jayce is such an idiot."

"Well, whose baby is this?" the older sister asked. She wondered why Jayce was so attached to the baby, not that that really mattered to her.

"Her crack-head brother's."

"And how did Jayce get her?" Gus inquired, hoping her sister was still too deep into her anger to realize that Gus was going down another road entirely now than to listen to Jannie rant about how everything was Jayce's fault.

"Jayce goes over to her brother's house every couple of days to check on Princess because she's paranoid. Yes, her brother is a druggie, but Princess was always fine, so obviously he must know a little about taking care of her. But, Jayce claims when she went over there a couple of weeks ago that Princess was by herself, on the floor, and covered in crap-literally. She made it sound like Princess damn near died, but she looked fine to me on that first day. Sure, she had to take medication, but that baby takes medication damn near every day for something or another. Jayce is just trying to get over. But, whatever. She's such a fucking liar, she was probably lying about that too." Jannie rolled her eyes.

Gus nodded slowly, unable to hide the disturbed feelings running through her. Water built up in her hazel eyes while her mouth dropped into something between a pout and a scowl. Thankfully, Jannie was still pacing or she would have known her beloved big sister's attitude toward her right now.

"Um...Jannie, I need to go..." Gus muttered, shaking her head and backing out of the living room. Right now, she just needed to get away from her little sister, away from the feelings of disgust and disappointment.

The younger woman spun around. "Go?" she repeated with sorrow and disappointment oozing from her being.

"Yeah. Do you happen to know where Jayce went?"

"No, nor do I care!" Jannie declared, putting her chin in the air. "That idiot picks a baby over me! I can't believe her! A baby she's not even going to have by this time next month! She'll come crawling back to me then, but I'll have a new girlfriend and I won't care about Jayce at all!"

"She doesn't have any friends or family to stay with?" Gus asked. God, she hoped that Jayce had someone to be there for her right now since it was clear the one person that should have been was utterly and hopelessly against her.

"Nope! She doesn't have anyone. I was all she had and then she threw that away. Idiot!" Jannie declared. Gus nodded and this caught the little sister's attention. "Gus, what are you thinking?" she asked curiously, not understanding the look on her big sister's face entirely.

"I need to go," Gus repeated, turning around to leave.

"Gus, you don't have to go out and look for her. Jayce didn't hit me or anything, so you don't have to go beat her up. I'm not hurt and she's going to be the one sorry that she left," Jannie proclaimed, honestly believing that and hoping it would get her sibling to stay with her.

"I still...I need to go..." Gus mumbled, making her way to the door. Jannie rushed over to grab her big sister by the arm.

"But, why, Gus?" Jannie begged to know.

"It's just...lock the door when I leave...I'll have a locksmith come by later," Gus replied distantly.

"You don't need to. Jayce left her keys and she's not the type of person that would come back to start trouble."

"You didn't think she was the type of person to slam you into a wall either!" Gus pointed out with a growl.

Jannie was silenced with that for a moment. "But...she was upset..."

"She might still be upset," Gus said. She thought it spoke a lot of Jayce's character for Jannie to be so angry with her, but to still defend her, even though Jannie did not realize she was doing it. This made Gus even more determined to find Jayce. She turned to her little sister. "Look, just do me this one favor, Jannie. Lock the doors when I'm gone, okay?"

Jannie nodded to show that she understood. As soon as Gus was gone, Jannie locked both locks on the door. She turned to look around the condo, surprised by the deafening silence.

"It's actually nice to hear nothing for once," Jannie declared with a nod. A smile worked its way onto her face.

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Gus huffed as she got into her CUV, ready to drive off, but realized that she did not have a plan of any kind for what she had on her mind. She did not know where Jayce might have gone, what kind of car Jayce drove, or anything like that. She did not know anything about Jayce, except for



the fact that she helped ruin Jayce's life by getting her fired and now she might have helped in Jayce losing a baby that she obviously loved.

"Shit, way to thoroughly fuck things up, Gus," the businesswoman grumbled aloud.

Gus figured that most of what was going on was her fault and she had it all reasoned out why. She was the one that got Jayce fired, first and foremost. She was already sorry for that, but then she had to go make matters worse by telling her sister about Jayce being fired. She thought of it as just looking out for her baby sister, but hearing how Jannie handled it let her know that she should have just left things alone. Jayce did not seem like the type that deserved to be embarrassed in a place that was obviously her sanctuary and Jannie was so proud of using Jayce's weakness against her. A weakness that Gus was sure Jayce told Jannie in confidence, just trying to get support from her girlfriend. Instead of support, Jannie used it to cause Jayce crippling emotion pain and was proud of it.

Worse than the thing with Jayce's job, for Gus anyway, was the notion that she might have helped Jayce lose Princess. It was obvious that Jannie did not care about Princess, but the girl seemed to mean the world to Jayce since she did not let the baby go, even though keeping her was clearly getting her in trouble with her girlfriend. Even though she did not know all of the details, Gus remembered for the brief times that she saw them how attentive Jayce had with the baby, how loving she had been with the child, and she did not want to be the reason that Jayce lost Princess. She hated to think how hurt Jayce would be if she did lose Princess. Gus knew the fear there, which made her sympathize with Jayce. Gus could not even figure out how or why her little sister seemed to think it was poetic justice that Jayce could possibly lose a child that she clearly loved.

"Okay, I have to fix this shit somehow. First step would be to find Jayce, so how do I do that?" Gus asked herself aloud.

Without thinking, her hand went to her cell phone and it occurred to her that she could call around. Surely someone else knew Jayce Newton! After all, she was a very competent accountant and Jannie had recommended her services to others. Not to mention, she was Jannie's girlfriend-or former girlfriend-so, some of the acquaintances that Gus and Jannie shared might have met her or might know something about her.

As she made her phone calls, Gus pulled off. She drove around as information came in through her phone and she continued to call people. She found out that Jannie was exaggerating a little about Jayce not having friends. Yes, Jayce knew people, but she was not close enough to anyone-as far as Gus' contacts knew-for someone to offer her a place to stay, especially when she had a baby with her.

While getting information on Jayce, Gus also found out little things about her sister that she did not like. Apparently, through out their relationship, Jannie made Jayce pay for everything whenever they went out, which seemed to be very often. And when they went out, it was always expensive and extravagant. Jannie was never a cheap date, but Jayce did not seem to mind.

Some people said that it seemed that Jannie would purposely start fights with Jayce because she knew that Jayce would buy her an expensive gift to make up. Sometimes, she would even make it seem like the first gift was not good enough to get another one, which worked very well. More than a few people made it clear that Jannie took advantage of Jayce's love and good nature. A few people dared to express that they thought Jannie was using Jayce, but Gus refused to believe her sister was that low. She could believe the spoiled brat behavior, though.

"Damn, now I'm going to have to talk that girl. Figured she would mature a little bit at the age of twenty-three," Gus grumbled, referring to her sister.

Other than dirt on Jannie and Jayce's relationship, Gus learned what type of car Jayce drove, but nothing more than that. No one really knew where Jayce would go now that she was homeless. Everyone agreed that there was no way that she would go to her mother or her brother, for different reasons. Her mother hated her guts for reasons no one really understood. Her brother was a different matter, though. Apparently, Jayce's brother Quentin was worthless and she would not suffer his presence unless she was trying to see Princess. Well, she had Princess, so Gus figured that Jayce would avoid her brother at all costs, especially since she was trying to gain custody of his daughter.

Gus learned a little more about the custody battle too; it was surprising how much gossip moved around the town, especially on someone that everyone claimed kept a low profile. But, it would seem that Jayce was trying to gain custody of her niece and was fighting her mother on the issue; Gus knew this thanks to her sister's earlier rant. She found out, though, that Jayce's mother hated her and that hatred ran deep. There were plenty theories as to why that was too. Most people assumed it was because Jayce was a lesbian, but they also figured that it had to be more than that because of how horrible they knew Marion Newton treated her only daughter. Some people thought it went well beyond Jayce's sexuality because they knew that Marion Newton treated Jayce like something she found on the bottom of her shoe long before Jayce ever came out. Besides, the loathing was so intense and they knew that because they heard the horror stories of how Marion tried her best to ruin Jayce's life. The speculation was that if Marion gained custody of Princess then Jayce would never see her niece again.

Most people also seemed to think that Jayce was the best thing in the baby's life, especially since they were all sure that Quentin did not give one damn about his daughter. They were all sorry to hear about her losing her job since they figured that would blow any chance she had at getting custody of the baby. This, of course, just added to Gus' guilt.

"Damn it, if I've helped fuck up this baby's life too..." Gus shook her head.

A bright spot in her day was when a friend called her back to say that she thought she might have seen Jayce's car while she was driving home from work. The car was parked in the lot of some dive motel. Gus needed two sets of directions and a load of landmarks to find the place. An instant frown appeared on her face as she pulled into the parking lot; she looked just as gloomy as the nighttime, cloud-covered sky.

"This isn't any place for a baby," Gus grumbled as she exited her car.

She hoped that Jayce was staying in the room that her car was parked in front of, even though she doubted it would be hard to find Jayce in such a seedy place. A couple of bucks would probably buy her a key to Jayce's room without any explanation; she would make a bet on that. A soft knock to the door yielded no answer, but she could hear the television on, so Gus tried again only louder.

"Who is it?" Jayce called through the door, which lacked a peep-hole, so she could not see who was on the other side of the door.

Gus paused for a moment. Surely Jayce would not open the door if she knew who was at the door. The businesswoman had to think fast.

"It's management," Gus lied. She hoped it would work.

"What do you want? There's nothing wrong," Jayce replied, also lying. Everything was wrong, especially with the room, but it was all she could afford at the moment.

Gus cursed under her breath. "There've been complaints," she continued on.

"About what?" Jayce demanded.

"The baby." Gus figured this should insult Jayce just enough to get to open the door. She was right.

Jayce ripped the door open, shaking the wall that it was connected to. As soon as those near-black eyes set on Gus, the glare was almost lethal. Jayce tried to shut the door just as harshly as she opened it, but Gus put her foot in the way and did not seem to care if she lost it because she stuck it in the doorway. A whimper escaped the businesswoman's mouth as her foot was crushed.

"Get the hell out of my face," Jayce ordered with a growl, still trying to close the door.

"Not until you listen to me and talk to me," Gus replied in a strong tone, pushing back on the door because she needed her foot.

"I've got nothing to say to you. I'm not your accountant anymore, so we have nothing to discuss," Jayce stated.

"Look, I'm Jannie's older sister-" Gus did not get further than that as the shorter woman cut her off.

"I'm not with Jannie anymore."

"I know. That's part of why I wanted to talk."

"Look, I'm sorry I shoved her. I was out of line. If you want to chew me out because of that, just go ahead," Jayce sighed, eyes drifting to the floor. Her shoulders slumped as if she was carrying

an elephant on her back and she let go of the door, no longer having the strength to try shutting it.

"I don't want to do that," Gus' voice dropped to a gentle hum.

Shiny obsidian eyes looked up again, wide from shock. Gus' held her gaze, not wavering at all. Honesty and tenderness came through in a simple look. Jayce stepped out of the way and Gus entered the room.

The businesswoman had to use a lot of self-control to keep from sneering at the accommodations. She had seen cubicles that were larger and she had seen dumpsters with better décor. The walls had a nasty brown paint covering them and that paint was peeling and chipped in large quantities around the room. There was one lamp in the room and did not seem to have even a sixty-watt bulb in it. The television was a throwback to the 1980s and did not seem to work if all of noisy snow on the screen meant anything.

"Nice digs," Gus muttered sarcastically.

"It's all I can afford right now," Jayce replied in a tired tone, moving toward the bed to check on Princess.

Jayce found that in the time it took her to answer the door, her niece went from jumping on the bed to passed out on the bed. Moving quickly, she picked the small child up and went into her baby bag. She pulled out a towel first, laid that on the bed, and then laid Princess on top of it. Then she pulled out a tiny pillow and small down blanket. The pillow went under the baby's head and the blanket fit perfectly over her little body.

"So, you wanted to talk?" Jayce said, turning her attention to Gus and found the businesswoman staring at her and Princess.

Gus did not seem to hear the question directed toward her either. She was too focused on the gentle care that Jayce was showing the baby. Jayce cleared her throat loud enough for hazel eyes to snap to attention.

"You wanted to talk?" the unemployed accountant repeated.

Gus nodded. "Talk, right. I did want to talk. I'm sorry for this whole mess."

"So you've said before, but none of it is your fault," Jayce replied.

"No, it is my fault. First, I got you fired. I don't care what you say, but it was my direct actions that caused you to lose your job and I know that's one of the things Jannie got on you for. Making matters worse for you, I was the one that told Jannie you were fired. I looked at it as looking out for my sister, but really I was meddling!" Gus admitted, pointing to herself.

"Hell, yeah, you were!" Jayce hissed, frowning cutting across her face. The only thing keeping her from screaming was that Princess was right there and trying to sleep.

"I know I was, which is why I'm sorry. I shouldn't have gotten into your business. I was just trying to look out for my little sister," Gus explained.

"Yet you're not here to chew me out for shoving her," Jayce scoffed, turning her head sharply.

"I'm not. Listening to Jannie go on about things today, I get the feeling that she earned it. What I wanted to know was what happened. What's your side of the story?" Gus asked calmly.

"Why do you care?" Jayce huffed.

"I'm a little troubled by the fact that my sister can bring a woman who she had always described in glowing terms to the point where that woman grabs her and shoves her into a wall. I also want to know where I went wrong and my sister thinks it's all right to throw a woman and a baby out of her home, knowing that they don't have anywhere to go," Gus answered, still keeping her cool.

"Jannie didn't do anything, but tell me what was on her mind. We just happened to have opposing viewpoints," Jayce said in a tense tone. Her body matched her voice and the hard look in her eyes screamed defiance. She did not want to talk about this right now.

"I understand that, but I was curious as to what they were. Speaking with my sister, it disturbed me a little. I'm not looking to take her side, Miss Newton," Gus informed the younger woman.

"It's Jayce. And it's fine for you to take her side."

"But, I don't really want to right now. I'm upset that Jannie was so insecure that she felt threatened by a baby. I could hear the resentment in her voice when she spoke of Princess. I'm upset that she bragged about catching you with tricks that you told her in confidence made you imbalanced. These things bother me because you shouldn't do that to someone you love or who loves you. So, right now, I'm just a little more inclined to be on your side. Now, if you could just tell me what Jannie said to you that made you *grab* her and *shove* her," Gus said. She stressed those two words because she thought they might make it through Jayce's armor since it was clear to her it bothered Jayce to have acted in such a manner.

Jayne flinched at the sound of the words, like she had been hit by them. Turning away, as if trying to escape what she did, her eyes happened to fall on Princess. The baby looked so cute when asleep, she thought, and this had the strangest effect on her. Tears gathered in her eyes and she burst out, sobbing as if the world was going to come to an end. Gus' movement was just as sudden and incredibly swift, stepping over to the smaller female and embracing her in an instant.

"I'm going to lose Princess! I don't have any money or friends! My mother has everything! I didn't even have support from Jannie! She just told me to give it up and let my mom have Princess, but Mom would just give Princess back to my brother and he doesn't care! She was so

sick and thin when I got to her! I was so scared Mom would take her if I let her out of my sight and just give her back to my asshole brother! I'm so scared!" Jayce wailed. Her voice was muffled because she buried her face in Gus' chest.

Gus only held the shorter woman as her body shook violently with harsh wailing. Soon, Gus could feel her shirt being soaked with tears, but she still held onto Jayce, not daring to let go. Jayce wrapped her arms around Gus, pressed herself to the businesswoman, and cried harder. Stronger fingers kneaded tense shoulder blades until the smaller body started sniffing, obviously calming down.

"Sorry...I didn't mean to go all to pieces..." Jayce muttered, making no move to pull away from the warm embrace.

"It's fine. Sounds like you needed it," Gus replied in a near whisper, keeping a tight hold on the woman in her arms.

"I haven't cried in almost ten years. Didn't even cry when my dad died," Jayce admitted in a mumble.

"Then you obviously were overdue. Jayce, I want you to think about this for a second, you need a helping hand. Please, let me be the one to help," Gus offered, squeezing the smaller woman's shoulder slightly.

"I don't..."

"You do," Gus gently insisted, pulling the ebony-haired woman impossibly closer to her.

"I don't want to lose Princess. She's so small and she can't count on her idiot father. God, he left her in the apartment one time and I came in to see the dog peeing on her! Who could leave a baby like that? Who?!"

The sobs started again and Jayce's grip on Gus tightened. Gus held onto the weeping woman, starting to rock her slowly to help soothe her strained nerves. The taller woman felt her stomach drop into her feet and her eyes drifted to the sleeping child. She could only wonder how someone could be so careless with such a darling little person.

Gus leaned down to speak into Jayce's ear. "It'll be okay," she vowed in a breath.

"No, it won't," Jayce whimpered. "Jannie's right. My mom's going to win. She knows everyone and I don't even have the money to hire a lawyer anymore. And even if I did, I don't have a home or the means to provide for Princess. I'm so fucked!"

"No, no, no," Gus whispered, rubbing Jayce's back again. "It'll be fine. You have to believe it'll be fine and make it fine, if not for you, then you have to do it for Princess."

Jayce sniffled loudly and nodded. Her hair brushed against Gus' chin, giving the taller woman a hint of how soft it was. A subtle hint of strawberry invaded Gus' nose and this caused her body to relax. This unconscious action actually calmed Jayce down.

"She's such a great kid..." Jayce whispered, pride sneaking into her voice. "I promised to take care of her."

"And you will. Just let me help, please," Gus begged.

"Are you serious?" Jayce inquired, daring to look up to find out if Miss Augusta Tucker was being sincere. The expression in the hazel eyes was something that Jayce was unused to seeing and did not know what to make of it.

"What?" Gus asked. "Do I have something on my face or something?" The question was posed because of the confused look on the distressed woman's face.

"No, it's just your eyes remind of Jannie's, but there's something more to it than that."

"Maturity," Gus remarked with a lopsided smile.

"I think there's more to it than that. I know that Jannie's not a bad person and she does have a lot of growing up to do, but there is something more to you that is just way beyond her."

Gus smiled a little more. "I think I'll take that as a compliment, even though I wish I raised Jannie to be better than me. Little January has a lot of growing to do and I hope she makes it."

This got a tiny smile out of Jayce. "She'd hate to hear you call her January."

"I'm the big sister. I get to do things that she'd hate. She gets over it. Just like she's going to get over the fact that I came over here to talk to you and help you out, even though she thinks that she did the right thing by kicking you and the baby out. Now, let's get you out of here," Gus said.

"And where am I going to go?" Jayce inquired with an arched eyebrow.

"You and the little Princess there are going to stay with me until I can talk some sense into Jannie. You're letting me help, remember?" Gus pointed out with a charming smile.

Jayce paused for a moment, knowing that she never agreed to that plan. Her eyes wandered to Princess and stayed on the tiny form for a moment. Then her eyes shifted to her own position, stuck in an embrace with Gus, feeling more reassured than she had in days and feeling relief from having gotten some of her grief out.

"I am letting you help," Jayce replied.

Gus let loose another lopsided smile. "Good. Let's get out of here then."

Jayce did not argue; she was happy to leave the cramped, hot, odious room. Carefully, she gathered up her niece while Gus grabbed the baby bag. They quickly left the room and set out to bring some order to Jayce's universe.

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## 7: Running hot and cold

A chilling breeze whipped through the night air, daring Gus to get out of her car, so that it could slice through her. But, it was not the cutting wind that kept Gus stuck to the driver's seat. Her thoughts kept her pinned there and her eyes locked on her sister's condo...the condo that she actually bought for her sister. She was mentally preparing herself for war, knowing that the fighting would be intense. Making it worse, the war was not on her turf and she did not have a good battlefield either.

"Jannie's in control here and she's damned stubborn," Gus grumbled with a deep frown on her face. Stubborn was a nice way of putting things and she was too aware of that. *This is going to be worse than an uphill fight on home territory, but I have to try, no matter how stubborn Jannie is.*

She knew good and well that Jannie was in control and not open to listening to her too thanks to calling before coming over. She thought that they could do business over the phone, but soon found out that what she wanted would require a face-to-face meeting after Jannie simply hung up on her a few minutes into the conversation. The rumbling in her gut told her that things were not going to be much better, but she had to try.

"Come on, Gus. You're the big sister, you're the one that raised her, and you're the person that can conduct a million dollar deal without breaking a sweat. This shouldn't be such a problem. You've handled Jannie for years without much of a problem, so why should this be any different? It is no different. This won't be a problem," she stated in a strong voice.

Now, if she was so convinced that it would not be a problem, she wondered why she was not leaving her car. Inhaling deeply and releasing a long breath, Gus squared her shoulders before finally opening her door. She marched to the front door with confidence in her step and knocked hard on the front door. There was no answer.

"Jannie, open this goddamn door. You know I'll make a scene out here for your neighbors to see," Gus huffed, speaking aloud enough to get the aforementioned neighbors attention. No, she definitely was not below embarrassing her sister in front of large groups of people.

A loud scoff could clearly be heard through the door. "Yeah, right." Deep down, she knew that calling her big sister's bluff was not the smartest move, but she decided to give it a try.

"January Marie Tucker!"



"Goddamn it!" Jannie yanked the door open. "Don't blow me up on my own front porch!" She loathed her full name and appeared to be completely enraged and scandalized that her sister would dare to use it in public.

"If you don't let me in, the whole neighborhood is going to know what age you were when you got your period and the *delightful* story afterward," Gus hissed, eyes daring her sister to challenge her.

Jannie zipped out of the way and Gus was in the house in a flash, slamming the door shut with a fury that made the walls shake. Jannie backed away, putting plenty of space between her and her older-and much larger-sister. Hazel eyes glared at each other as they faced off.

"Jannie, let's be serious about this," Gus stated, getting right to business. Her sister already knew why she was there to talk, so she did not need to explain what "this" was.

"I am being serious. Why should I accept Jayce back into my home? It's my home. We aren't together anymore and I don't want to look at her or her niece," Jannie replied, rolling her eyes and folding her arms across her chest. Her face settled into a disgusted scowl, repulsed by the very idea that she would let Jayce back into *her* home after what the ebony-haired accountant did.

"She needs some place to stay, especially to take care of her niece, and you have some place that she's stayed for the past six months," Gus argued. She could remember the day that Jannie called her, so happy and proud that Jayce agreed to move in with her. Barely six months later, that same pride came out when Jannie refused to take her ex-lover in, if only to help out a woman that Jannie herself swore was the nicest woman she ever dated. *Spoiled brat doesn't even begin cover this bullshit!*

"So? It's my house, not hers!" Jannie stomped her foot and made her hands into tight fists.

Gus literally bit her tongue to prevent herself from declaring that it was her house! She had paid for the condo, getting it for a ridiculously low price from a friend and then she had given it to her baby sister for Jannie to have a place to stay while she attended school. Unfortunately, she knew that if she got into that argument, they would be there all night and her little sister would just throw a tantrum in order to win the match, which would not work. Then it would be one big mess that she was not in the mood to deal with. Right now, she needed to focus on the matter at hand because Jayce and Princess needed a home.

"She lived here for six months, Jannie," Gus pointed out in a calm tone. Her face was tense because she honestly wanted to scream and maybe yank Jannie around a little to knock some sense into her. But, again, that would lead to a mess that she was in no mood to deal with.

"And she doesn't live here now," the younger sister riposted in a smug manner, having the nerve to fold her hands over her chest again, as if her logic was superior to her older sister's reasoning.

"And you honestly don't care that this woman you've said was the nicest woman in the world has no place to go?" Gus inquired, face twisting from confusion and disbelief. *How the hell can Jannie be so heartless and cruel?! Damn she knows how to hold a grudge!*

Jannie glanced away, but squared her shoulders. "No, I don't care. She scared me yesterday," she whimpered bit, trying to sell the act. Her big sister was not buying it, though.

Gus rolled her eyes. "She scared you so much that you didn't want me to go find her and kick her ass," she pointed out.

Jannie snarled and frowned at her older sister. "Okay, look, I just don't want her here! I don't care where she goes or what she does and I don't see why you do give a damn!" she proclaimed, throwing her hands up in bewilderment.

"Because she's got a small child with her, Jannie. I know you think she's going to lose the baby soon, but for the moment, she has a baby with her. It bothers me to know a baby is homeless, partially because of me," Gus admitted in a controlled manner, making sure to maintain eye contact with her little sister. She was trying her best to pierce this thick armor the smaller sibling had around her, but it did not seem to be working.

Jannie put her nose in the air. "Not my problem. Why should I have to worry about her when she didn't worry about me when she jumped into this mess? She didn't worry about me when she was lying about losing her job. She didn't worry about me when I told her to leave!"

Gus scratched her eyebrow and took a deep breath. "Uh...you threw her out..." she pointed out, sounding slightly perplexed.

"I know, but she didn't even put up a fight! How could she say she loves me and then she doesn't even put up a fight to stay?! She just left! She didn't even make a goddamned attempt to stay with me, like she didn't care that I told her to leave!" Jannie huffed, arms going back across her chest.

"So...let me get this straight, you're pissed at her for doing what you wanted without making it hard on you?" Gus asked to be sure. *Women will never make sense to me apparently, even if I'm related to the woman in question.*

"Yes!" Jannie replied as if her reasoning made total sense.

Gus scratched her eyebrow again and considered that she might scratch it bald before this conversation was done. Her baby sister needed to do some serious growing up, she realized. This was beyond being a spoiled brat; Jannie was an attention whore, wanting to seriously be the center of the universe. She wanted everything to be about her. Obviously, she thought that she was a diva and everyone else was there for her amusement and entertainment.

"Jannie, do you listen to yourself when you talk or think out things before you say them?" Gus asked curiously, even though she felt like she knew the answer to that. *Goddamn it if this isn't my fault too!*

"What's that supposed to mean?" Jannie huffed, eyes narrowing and body tensing. She leaned forward a little, as if she was going to do something.

"Because I'm hearing a lot of whining about yourself and no concern whatsoever over the woman you loved a week ago or the baby that she has to care for," Gus pointed out, putting her hand to her chin in concentration. She noticed that her little sister almost made her attitude an art form.

"Why should I give a shit?" Jannie demanded, eyes seething with fury that her own sister would try to make it seem like she was the wrong one here. *Jayne was wrong for picking the baby over me!* Jayce was wrong for bringing Princess to stay with them forever in the first place! *Jayne is the one that never asked me about it and then she didn't even stay to fight for us!*

A long finger went back to the slender eyebrow before Gus just wiped her whole face with both of her hands. She even took a moment to slowly count to ten in her head, wanting to remain as even-tempered as she could. She did not remember it ever being so difficult dealing with Jannie, but then again, the last time she had to deal with Jannie and a girlfriend, it was when Jannie met her former wife Amanda. She never really had to jump into a situation with Jannie and her own girlfriend, though. She definitely was not enjoying the current state of affairs, so she was going to try to make this the first and last time that she had to deal with Jannie and her own girlfriend.

The elder sister started speaking very coolly, making sure to keep that tone, even though she really just wanted to grit her teeth and snarl. "Jannie, sweetie, there's a little thing called compassion and another called support. I know Jayce offered you these things because you've ranted about it on end to me, but you're supposed to give her those things in return. That's what a relationship is about," the taller woman stated, pointing to the ground to emphasize her words.

"Oh, yes, and you're obviously knowledgeable on relationships," Jannie snapped, rolling her eyes.

Gus nodded, using the movement to hide a flinch rather well. "I have a feeling you'll be the same way if you keep this attitude up, dear sister," she replied in a clipped tone.

A wince and a deep frown came before any words. "I don't care about Jayce and you can't make me take her back in here. I don't care about Princess either. She's not my kid, thus not my problem. I'm happy here by myself with all of the quiet! I'm going to go out tomorrow and get drunk with my friends for the first time in months!" she declared, tilting her head upward and eyeing her sister with defiance in her gaze.

Gus was quiet for a moment, just taking everything in. She let the words, emotions, and body language travel around her mind a few times. After a couple of seconds, she nodded, more to herself than in agreement with her younger sister's words. Odd, emotional hazel eyes then looked

completely at Jannie. The expression buried within those light brown depths were a mixture of so many different emotions ranging from sorrow to disgust to pity and so many others.

"Sounds about right. Enjoy yourself, Jannie. I hope you grow up sometime soon, though, because what you like to do might be fine for your twenties, but you're not going to be twenty-three forever," Gus said in a defeated tone as she turned to leave.

Jannie moved forward, ready to chase after her big sister. She had never seen Gus look at her in such a way and she did not like it. But, before she even took a full step, she recalled her anger and stopped herself. Jannie decided to count this as her victory. Smug hazel eyes watched Gus leave the house and tried not to think anything about what just happened.

"I am grown up and Jayce was the one that was wrong. I'm not helping her out if she couldn't even ask my opinion on things. To hell with her! She's going to come back eventually, but I'll have another, hotter girlfriend by then and I still won't give a shit what Jayce has to say," Jannie informed the empty house in a heated tone.

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Gus sat behind the wheel of her car and just stared off into the night for a long moment, not believing the selfish creature that she left in the house was her sister. Going through her memory, she tried to think of what she did to raise Jannie into someone so self-absorbed and narcissistic. And, she hated how easy it was to figure out after she thought about it. She had always acted like the world revolved around Jannie, even before they lost their parents. It got even worse after they lost their parents. Jannie was her world for so many years. The sun rose and set with her little sister as far as she was concerned, and obviously Jannie thought so too.

She used to give Jannie anything she wanted. Cost was no object and all Jannie needed to do was ask. And that was before she started her company and was making enough money to do such things! If Jannie wanted it, Gus always would figure out somehow or make some sacrifice to do it because she wanted her little sister to be happy, especially after the tragic loss of their parents.

Hell, she used to break up with women-women that she really liked-if Jannie did not get along with them or Jannie did not like them for whatever reason. Nothing was too big or too small for her sister to merely imply she wanted. And now, apparently, Jannie expected the world to treat her the same way.

"I can't do anything about that now. She's got to learn that the world doesn't revolve her. That'll be an interesting little wake up call, I suppose," Gus muttered.

She did not so much regret how she raised her sister. She was glad to be able to provide for Jannie and Jannie never did anything too outrageous. Rather normal teenage years with little rebellion or trouble and very good grades as well as victories in track competitions made it easy to reward Jannie with anything that she desired. The grades and victories carried on to her undergraduate studies in college; hell, she graduated with honors from undergrad. So, those

things continued to make it easy to give her things, even big things like the condo and her car. Gus never saw the selfish side effect until now, though.

"And I don't like it one bit. How the hell can she be okay with putting a baby out on the street?" Gus asked, speaking to the air.

When the howling wind or the evening chill gave no answer to her from the night, Gus decided it was time to go. She drove off, heading home and trying to put her sister out of her mind. Making an effort not to think about Jannie, Gus went over business issues that she would have to deal with tomorrow and some adjustments that she was going to have to make to her life...at least for a little while. Those matters actually made her feel better after dealing with her sister.

As soon as she came through the door, her ears were assaulted by an unfamiliar noise. High-pitched cries ricocheted off the walls and clung to her ears. Her face twisted a little from confusion, but interest caused her to walk toward the sounds. She ended up in the kitchen where Jayce was bouncing Princess in her arms while scouring through the baby bag with her free hand. For a moment, the sight hypnotized Gus, but she managed to shake herself out of it.

"Hey, do you need any help?" Gus offered in a soft tone, hoping to lessen any shock that Jayce might feel to find that she was not alone.

Ebony hair swayed as Jayce turned her head sharply and near-black eyes locked onto Gus. There was a pleading look under the minute shock, which answered Gus' question. The taller woman walked over, peered down at the crying baby, and then at the baby bag.

"So, what's wrong?" Gus asked.

"Nothing much. She's just hungry and I'm trying to find her snack. Hopefully it'll hold her over until I can make dinner," Jayce answered.

"Okay. I'll find the snack and you can focus on comforting her," Gus offered with a small smile.

"I'm sorry about all of the crying-" the unemployed woman tried to apologize, but Gus held up a hand and shook her head, stopping the words before Jayce could finish speaking them.

"Don't apologize. She's a baby. I know there's going to be a little crying every now and then," Gus stated as she opened the bag and started going through it. Jayce withdrew her hand to let Gus work.

"Usually she's very happy and cheerful. She gives hugs out with no problem and even shares messy kisses with people," Jayce said, bouncing the bawling child in her arms even more. Princess continued on weeping; no amount of bouncing was going to fill her empty stomach.

Gus nodded. "I hope I get to see more of that. I could use a little affection after the month I've been having. I'm sure you could too," she replied as she fished out a baggy full of dry cereal. She held it up for inspection. "Is this what she wants?"

"Yes, thank you." Jayce took the baggy, fingers brushing against Gus' for the lightest of contact. They glanced at each other-almost as if checking that the most innocent of touches was okay-and neither said anything. Jayce turned her attention to the baby. "Hey, there, pretty baby, look at what Miss Gus got for you?" she cooed, shaking the baggy in front of Princess' face.

Princess sniffled as she noticed the bag as her aunt opened it for her. Princess turned around and quickly took the little plastic container with both hands. Shoving her hand in and yanking out a fistful of cereal, the child cheered as if her aunt just saved the world. Jayce and Gus both laughed a little.

"I see what you mean about happy. That sounded like this was about way more than cereal," Gus remarked.

"She's not used to eating this late. With the craziness of today, her schedule has been thrown off. I didn't get a chance to feed her at Jannie's house and there was no way to cook at the motel," Jayce explained.

Gus nodded and her face took on a somber quality. "Again, sorry about all of this," she humbly apologized.

"Don't be sorry. You didn't know all of this was going to happen and you're helping me in such a huge way just by getting me out of that motel. I don't know what I would've done if you hadn't come along because that motel was the only place I could afford."

"Well, if it wasn't for me, you wouldn't have had to stay there in the first place. I tried talking to Jannie, but she isn't letting you move back in," Gus explained and quickly continued when she saw Jayce's expression drop. "But, I would be honored if you stayed with me," she declared, placing her hand on her heart.

Jayce's eyes opened wide and her mouth practically hit the floor. "You want me to stay with you?" she asked to make sure she heard right. She was halfway certain that she was hearing things.

"Didn't we agree that you would let me help you? You need some place to stay and I have a house that you can stay in, for as long as you need to. This way, you don't have to worry about house-hunting or anything. You can focus on keeping this little cutie pie," Gus commented, gently caressing Princess' head. The child cooed and that made it seem like she agreed.

"Are you...are you sure about this?" Jayce asked in a shaky tone. *What if she acts just like Jannie? What if she doesn't like Princess and gets annoyed like Jannie did?* Despite those thoughts, she could tell that something was vastly different between Gus and Jannie. There was just something in the eyes...and the personality.

"I'm positive. Jayce, this is the right thing to do. It gives you time to get on your feet and do right by this little bit. I'm going to call my lawyer tomorrow and have him find you a great lawyer too.

One not scared of your mother and her connections and willing to kick her butt to get Princess for you," Gus promised.

Jayce sniffled and nodded. "Thank you so much..." she whispered, not sure what else to say. She felt overwhelmed, but kept it in check to avoid crying in front of Gus again. She did not want to freak the businesswoman out or give off the impression that she was prone to random emotional fits.

"No need to thank me," the brown-haired woman stated, a small smile gracing her chocolate features. She was hoping to set Jayce at ease with the expression.

The unemployed accountant shook her head. "No, there is every need to thank you. You don't know how much this means to me! God, I've got nothing, but I need to save Princess and you're offering me the chance to do it. You don't know how much this means to me and how much it'll mean to Princess later on!"

"Why don't you tell me about it?" Gus requested.

"How about over dinner? I can cook fairly well," Jayce offered. *I know it won't compare to what she's giving me, but cooking for her is the least I can do!*

Gus grinned. "Sounds great since I can't cook for shit."

"I guess that's where Jannie got her skills from," the shorter of the two teased.

"Inherited them from both parents. My dad almost burned the house down boiling water once and my mother couldn't make toast without burning the first four slices," Gus quipped with a smile.

This very short story got a small smile out of the guest. "Well, I promise nothing like that. I was looking around at the few things you have around the kitchen and I think I can whip us up a decent dinner. Princess should be good on some mash potatoes and some food I have in her bag," Jayce explained.

"Sounds excellent. How about I take Princess into the living room and we watch TV and get out of your hair for now?" Gus offered.

For a moment, Jayce hesitated. She had not let Princess out of her sight since she rescued the child from that garbage dump her brother—who was still MIA—called a home. Hell, the only person to hold Princess aside for herself was Zoe, and even she did so within ten feet of Jayce most of the time. But, her mind quickly pointed out that Gus was not going far with Princess and it was very unlikely that a woman that did not even know her mother would steal the baby and run off to deliver the child to Marion Newton.

"She likes cartoons and music videos," Jayce said, sliding Princess off of her shoulder and placing her in Gus' arms.

"Oh, she's at the age where babies like to dance?" Gus asked, another bright smile lighting up her face.

"Well, she doesn't really dance. She stands up and rocks mostly. She also does this thing with her right hand, which is weird since I'm pretty sure she's a lefty," Jayce answered while making note that her hostess seemed to like Princess despite her attitude toward the child in their first meeting. She silently prayed that attitude stayed wherever it was because she truly needed a place to stay and she doubted that she could stay some place that Princess was not wanted.

"Okay." Gus nodded and then turned her attention to Princess. "Let's see if we can find you some cartoons or videos while your mother makes dinner!"

Jayce opened her mouth to object to the title Gus bestowed on her, but the businesswoman and baby were out of the room before words flowed from her shocked lips. The shorter woman started on dinner, which did not take too long to prepare. After putting the meatloaf that she made in the oven, she went to peek into the living room, ready to take Princess from Gus if the hazel-eyed female seemed even slightly annoyed. She was surprised by what she found.

Gus, through a lot of channel surfing, managed to come across a channel that showed nothing but shows for babies and toddlers. She was down on her knees and holding Princess' hands, doing the twist as the characters on the show sang a song about apples. The wide, gleeful grin that Princess was sporting was not a shock, but the excited smile reaching Gus' eyes was stunning. Jayce did not expect Jannie's sister to take to Princess at all, but for her to do it so quickly and easily was nothing short of miraculous to the unemployed woman.

"Hey," Gus said with a smile as she noticed Jayce. "Princess was just teaching me a brand new dance!"

"I can see that. You guys look like you're having good time. Dinner should be done a few minutes. I used that ground beef you had to make meatloaf. I hope that's all right," Jayce explained, walking deeper into the room.

"It's fine. I usually buy it to try to make hamburgers. I figure since I went out and bought a Foreman grill, then I should figure out how to use it. I haven't figured it out yet, though," Gus replied with a sheepish smile, scratching her eyebrow a little with her pinkie finger. "The meat would've gone to waste after my experiments," she admitted, no shame in her tone.

Jayce could not help laughing, throwing her head back a little. Gus smiled again, enchanted by the pleasant sound coming from her guest. It seemed like a genuine laugh, which warmed Gus' heart because it led her to believe that she was doing the right thing. Jayce needed help and she needed some relief from the stress that she was obviously under; Gus was happy to help. She hoped that Jayce would laugh more often now that things were looking up for her.

"Maybe I can show you how to do that at some point. Part of the huge 'thank you' I owe you," Jayce offered.



"You don't have to think of like that, but damn, I would love to learn how to make something simple like hamburgers. I can boil a mean hotdog!" Gus quipped, grinning up a storm.

The ebony-haired woman chuckled again, which kept the smile on her host's face a little longer. A beat of silence passed between the adults and then Gus turned her attention back to the baby, who was still doing the twist. Jayce watched the two play together until dinner was done. Jayce set the table, making their plates, before calling Gus to eat. The tall woman came into the dining room with Princess in her arms. She handed Princess over to Jayce before sitting down. Jayce followed suit.

"I hope you don't mind meatloaf," the unemployed guest stated.

"Jayce, I just told you I can't cook for beans. If you threw a raw cow on my plate, I would be grateful because I would be way better than I can do," Gus stated sincerely. She looked down at her plate to see meatloaf, potatoes, and string beans. Her eyes went wide for a moment. "I didn't even know I had vegetables in my house," she mumbled in a shock.

"They were buried deep in the back of the cabinet, next to some cream corn," Jayce reported. They were canned string beans, but that was better than nothing.

Gus made a face. "I might have been sleepwalking when I brought this stuff then. I don't even like cream corn. Wouldn't begin to know what to do with it either," she remarked.

Jayce chuckled a bit, enjoying Gus' humor and conversation. They were all silent for a little while, starting in on their meals. Jayce fed Princess some potatoes and the baby managed some of the string beans, but she did make a bit of a mess with them because she kept pulling out of her mouth and then slurping them back in. Gus tried not to laugh at the antics, thinking that just might encourage the baby.

"So, how about you tell me the story here with your mother and this little cutie?" Gus requested halfway through her dinner. "If it's not too difficult anyway."

Jayce shook her head. "I don't mind. You should know what you're getting yourself into anyway. This way, you can figure out if you still want to help or if you want to throw me out as soon as I'm done."

A half-smile tugged on Gus' lips. "I'm not throwing you out. You and Princess can leave whenever you're ready."

Jayce smiled a little too and proceeded to tell Gus everything. How she found Princess in Quentin's apartment for the last time, how Princess came to be in the first place, and why her mother hated her enough to take Princess from her only to give her back to Quentin... "If she can ever find him anyway," the unemployed accountant muttered.

Gus shook her head. "I can't imagine going through that. My parents didn't mind me being a lesbian. Hell, they knew before I knew according to my father. I don't know how, but they knew

and they were fine with it. They always encouraged me to talk about any girls in my life, making sure I knew it was something that was okay and I had nothing to be ashamed of. My mother would even help me plan dates sometimes if I couldn't figure out what to do. They encouraged me to bring girls home for them to meet. I can't imagine being thrown out, still in high school, and disowned for the most part. How did your dad take it?" the businesswoman asked curiously.

"A little better, but not by much. He didn't really want anything to do with me either, but he was at least civil the few times we met up after I was thrown out. He gave me some money to get a place to live, but nothing more than that. I'm sure the money was to make sure that I don't try to come back to the house, which worked well. I had to work my way through college, but I did have some scholarships, so it wasn't that hard. I didn't have loans to pay back or anything. But, I was alone for a long time. My mother hates me to this very day. My dad wouldn't talk to me once I was out of the house. Q was still the golden child, but he was already sliding. He had been sliding for a while. The only time he talked to me was when he wanted money and I was so lonely I'd give him whatever the hell he wanted as long as he stayed with me for a little while. I was just so happy to have my big brother back. Fucking asshole never knew how much I admired him, same with my stupid dad. I excelled in math because I wanted to be like them, but by college I realized they were both jerks. That's why I didn't go into stocks or banking, but still, I just wanted..." Jayce sniffled, choking up thanks to the trip down memory lane. Water gathered in her eyes, causing her to wipe away any tears that attempted to fall. "I'm sorry. I don't usually get this worked up..."

Gus leaned across the table and lightly touched Jayce's forearm. For a moment, the former accountant tensed, but Gus did not move. Quickly, Jayce relaxed, realizing how warm and comforting the hand was on her limb. She gave Gus a small smile to let her know that it was all right to continue touching her.

"It's fine. You've earned it. I won't give you another reason to cry, though. You need Princess just as much as she needs you and I won't let your mother take her away, especially if she's going to give her back to a man that obviously doesn't want her," the businesswoman promised, squeezing Jayce's arm gently as if that would make her words the complete and utter truth.

"My mother doesn't want to believe that. She thinks butter wouldn't melt in Q's mouth, despite the fact that he's robbed her before-more than once actually-and left Princess countless places in the year he's had her," Jayce informed her hostess, shaking her head in dismay.

"Love sometimes blinds us. She can't see that her son needs help, just like I couldn't see that Jannie is a spoiled brat," Gus commented.

"Jannie's not that bad. You raised her well," Jayce argued with sincerity in her eyes and voice.

"Thank you for saying so, but I could've done better obviously. Anyway, how about we figure out where you're going to sleep?" Gus proposed.

"I'm fine with the floor. I'll let Princess sleep on my chest. I wish I had taken her playpen, but it was too big to carry in a hurry." Jayce sighed.

The brown-haired woman caressed Jayce's arm for a moment, hoping to keep her calm. "Don't worry about it, Jayce. You don't have to apologize to me anymore or worry about anything. Just focus on raising Princess and getting custody of her. She needs all of your attention. Now, for the moment, I'd rather you take my bed since you have the baby."

The smaller woman gasped in shock. "I couldn't!"

"You will. You're the lady with a baby. Jayce, before we go any further, I need you to understand, I'm not Jannie and I'm the one that offered to help. Instead of arguing or handling me with kid gloves or worrying about if I'm going to flip out, just let me help and take what I offer. Please," Gus begged, hazel eyes glistening.

Jayce was touched by the earnestness that she could see shining in those beautiful eyes and the comforting presence that Gus offered. These emotions were so rarely directed toward her, but so freely given by Gus. They stirred up something inside of her, but she was too exhausted to pay it much mind.

"...Okay, but you have to let me pay you back for all of this at some point," Jayce replied sternly. She was unaccustomed to all of this attention, so she was not too sure how to react to it.

Gus smiled. "Fine. Sometime in the distant future, though." She was glad when Jayce did not argue and they both went back to eating in a comfortable silence.

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8: Balm for the soul

"You made breakfast..." Gus muttered as she stumbled into the kitchen, rubbing sleep from her eyes. Her dark brown hair was going off in every direction since she failed to wear her scarf last night to bed. Hoping to make a good impression, she had worn proper pajamas, even though it had taken her a while to find them; the pajamas were plain cream flannels and quite comfortable, but they had been buried in one of her unpacked boxes. She sort of regretted never wearing them until now, but her usual pajamas consisted of a long, torn tank-top and her underwear.

"I figured you'd like breakfast before going to work, but I wasn't sure what time you left..." Jayce explained, glancing away, looking shy. "Um...thanks for the pajamas again," she added, just to make sure it was out there...for the fourth time since Gus gave her the clothing last night. She did not want to come across as ungrateful for anything that the brown-haired woman was doing for her.

"No problem on the pajamas," Gus replied, taking in how her pajamas fell on her guest. The clothes almost fit, which was something new to Gus because she was usually by taller by several inches than woman around her, not to mention heavier thanks to her muscles.

Gus found that she liked the fact that the clothing nearly fit Jayce. The sight teased her imagination, causing all sorts of wonders to pass through her mind. She quickly shook that away, thinking that it was just the loneliness inside of her acting up.

The businesswoman then turned her attention to breakfast. "Oh, pancakes! I haven't had homemade pancakes," she declared with almost childish glee in her voice with a smile to match. It was rather charming in her guest's opinion.

Nonetheless, Jayce thought that was an odd thing to say. "You mean you haven't had them in a while or never?" she asked. She had made pancakes, scrambled eggs, and toast. There really was not much else to make, so she made a mental note to go shopping in order to make her host some real meals while she was there.

"Never. Usually, for breakfast I might have a bagel or a muffin or just a cup of coffee. I've never had pancakes at home before, except for the frozen ones in a box," Gus explained, making a face at the end. She was not very fond of those frozen pancakes, but she ate them with the hope that one day they would taste like the ones at IHOP.

The unemployed woman blinked in surprise a couple of times. "Oh, you are missing out. You've never heard someone cook for you?" she inquired in disbelief.

"None of my girlfriends were really good at cooking. I've had a few that could make dinner, but nothing really elaborate. None of them ever really wanted to make breakfast and they didn't seem to know how either. Hell, in fact, most of them wouldn't even be up when I had to get up for work," Gus replied.

Jayce tilted her head a little, looking a little perplexed as well as curious. She could not understand how a girlfriend would just let Gus leave the house for work without a proper breakfast. She always made sure her girlfriends were well fed, be it breakfast, lunch, or dinner. If she was there, then she would cook.

"How about you go to the table and sit down. If you want, you can tell me more about this weird habit over a nice homemade breakfast," Jayce commented warmly.

Gus nodded and smiled, walking off to the dining room with a strange pep in her step that she attributed to a good night's sleep. Princess had been sitting on the kitchen floor and playing with a plush toy, but she abandoned her toy to follow behind her new friend. The baby walked half of the way before falling and crawling the rest of the way. Gus noticed the grinning child as soon as she sat down, so she picked Princess up. The baby giggled, which Gus took as a greeting.

"Good morning to you too, smiley," Gus remarked, tapping the corner of Princess' mouth with her left index finger. Princess giggled again, as if approving of the nickname. "So, we're going to have pancakes thanks to your mother," she reported with an enchanting smile of her own.

Jayce tensed up a little and Gus knew it was from being referred to as the child's mother. The businesswoman did not say anything about it at that moment, instead focusing on the baby. Jayce

hurried in with the food, placing the plates down in a rush too, in order to take Princess away from Gus.

"I wasn't sure how many pancakes you wanted. Here, I can handle her, so she's not bothering you," Jayce said, very close to sounding panicked. A sorrowful, but frightened look colored her onyx eyes.

"She's not bothering me," Gus replied in a gentle tone, hoping to soothe her guest's obviously raw nerves. "Look, Jayce, I'm not my sister. I'm quite content to hold Princess and play with her. I like children and she's really cool. Also, you shouldn't look so embarrassed when I call you her mother. This is what you're going to be when you win custody of her, so get used to it, Mom," she remarked with a brilliant grin.

"You sound so...sure," Jayce muttered as she took a seat across from the taller woman. She could not even meet Gus' eyes because she was not so certain that she would win custody. She was also a little embarrassed about wanting to take Princess from Gus when the taller woman was admittedly happy to hold the baby.

Gus smiled again. Jayce could not help wondering how many different smiles her host possessed. This one was such a soft, sweet expression. It seemed like it was made just to ease Jayce's worry...and much to her surprise, it worked. No one had ever looked at her with such assurance and kindness before, not even Jannie.

"I am. You love this kid and she's a great kid. I've already called and gotten you a great lawyer. I'll leave you the number before I go to work," the businesswoman stated.

For a moment, the shorter woman was speechless. Even when she recovered the ability to speak, she did not know what to say. In the end, she said the simplest thing that she could think of.

"Thank you so much."

"Jayce, you're going to have to stop thanking me every time we speak and you're going to have to stop tiptoeing around me. I'm not that bad, honest," Gus commented with another dazzling smile, reaching over to touch Jayce's arm. It was the expression, the twinkle in her eyes that made Jayce believe it, but the warm sensation caused by the gentle touch drove the belief home.

"So, where do you go to work anyway? I know you have the spa and then you have your software company," Jayce said, looking to make conversation and she was genuinely curious. She wanted to find out more about this strange woman, who she could not quite figure out yet. The one thing that she was certain of so far was that Gus was kinder than she thought.

"The software company is my baby really. I go there almost everyday to make sure things are running smoothly, brainstorm with my crew, and just work on different projects that I started. I love going in there. My crew is great and just being there relaxes me a lot of the time. Even if there's a crisis going on, I don't mind being there. I guess I should've taken more time down at the spa, though. That's where all that money was missing from," Gus replied, shaking her head a

little. She moved her hand from Jayce's arm to scratch her eyebrow a bit; the other hand was too busy holding onto Princess to do anything else.

"Oh." Jayce nodded in understanding. "Did you ever...I mean, you said you caught..."

The taller woman nodded. "I did catch the person who was stealing. Oddly enough, she was stealing from me to be with my gold-digging ex-wife."

Jayce could not hide the surprise on her face from that one. Her mouth dropped open and her eyes went wide. "Oh, wow."

"Yeah, talk about dyke drama. Amanda was worth more than her fair share of it, actually. She's the reason I moved here. Lying, cheating..." Gus growled as thoughts of her former spouse went through her mind and how that bitch made such a fool out of her.

Without a thought, Jayce reached across the table and took hold of her host's hand. A light squeeze brought a smile to Gus and a squeeze back. There was that warmth again, Jayce noticed. It was different from any other sensation and she wondered if Gus could feel it too. She did not see any sign that Gus might have felt something beyond grateful for having some comfort in her life. They stayed like that for what seemed like ever, looking at each other and the world felt right for the first time in a long time for both of them. The moment was broken when Princess broke into a fit of giggles.

"This by far the happiest kid I've met," Gus commented, pulling her hand back from Jayce to get a better grip on the child. She pulled Princess back just as the baby seemed like she was ready to jump off of Gus' lap and take a belly flop onto the floor.

"She's always been like that. You want me to take her so you can eat?" Jayce asked, more being helpful now than trying to keep Princess from getting on her host's nerves.

Gus emphatically shook her head. "No, no, no. I want to hold her. Do you think you could tell me the whole story behind her?" she inquired curiously. She glanced down at her food and over at the baby, who was now watching the food. She was about to give Princess a bit, but she realized that it might not be good for the child. "Oh, is it all right if I share my breakfast with her?" she asked, just to be sure.

"Yes, she'll take a little bit, but she's got her own breakfast right here." Jayce pushed a bowl of hot cereal to Gus, so that the businesswoman could feed the baby. She was lucky that she traveled with little packets of oatmeal for Princess or the child would have been trying to stomach pancakes for breakfast because Gus did not have anything around suitable for the baby to eat. "What do you mean story behind her?"

"Well, how she came to be and everything. I mean, I know you said that your brother and his girlfriend just suddenly had her shortly after you met the girlfriend, but I know there's more to it than that. How'd you end up pretty much responsible for her?"

Jayce nodded. She had not really gone into any detail when explaining matters to Gus last night. She supposed that she owed it to the brown-haired woman. Besides, she had no problem explaining things as best she could.

"Well, I usually check in on my brother, just to keep up with him. I have this fear one day I'm going to find out he OD'ed or something and I would hate to think that I missed out on sometime with him. Oh, I suppose I should tell you that he's an addict, which is one I'm scared to find that he'll have OD'ed one day. He's getting really bad...well, he was from what I recall. It's been a while since I've seen him and I hope my worst fear hasn't come true for him.

"So, anyway, one day a little over a year ago while checking up on him, I find out that he has a girlfriend. I don't remember her so well. I only met her a couple of times. I think her name was Allison. She was as much of a junkie as he is. She actually looked like a junkie from what I could tell. My brother's not too much better, mind you. He can put on a business suit all he wants, but you look at him and you can tell that there's something wrong with the guy. I guess it doesn't help that he's missing two of his front teeth.

"Anyway, not too long after I meet Allison do I find out she's pregnant. Now, that was something you never would've known looking at her. Princess was born two months premature and addicted to just about everything under the sun while being the most sickly little thing you ever could see. The doctors didn't even think she'd live through the night, but she's a scrapper. Her mom died before Princess got released from the hospital-drug overdose. She was named Princess because her parents wanted something easy to remember and apparently the hospital staff refused to put 'baby' or 'little girl' on the birth certificate under 'name.' Honestly, they named her after one of their dogs to help them remember her name, not that her mother needed to remember since she didn't even get to know this precious gift that she should have had the pleasure of carrying.

"My brother was nice enough to call me when she was born, but now I think he just called me because he knew I'd be around to keep an eye on her. Once I showed up at the hospital, he disappeared for a while. I watched over her while she was in the hospital and after she was released. I had her for almost a month at the time..."

Jayce paused and snorted for a moment. She had forgotten when Princess was released from the hospital, she was the one that took care of the baby. And now that she thought about, she recalled that Jannie had not been very supportive that time either. In fact, Jannie had practically tossed Princess at Quentin when they met him at his apartment to take her. Thinking about that saddened Jayce a bit because she realized two things-one, it was clear that Jannie was never really a big fan of her niece and two, her brother was so far gone back then that she did not even want him to meet her at her apartment or Jannie's condo because she did not trust him with the addresses.

Gus noticed the sorrow clouding Jayce's eyes, so she reached over the table again. That time, she took Jayce's hand and held it firmly in her own. Jayce offered her a small smile as thanks before continuing her story.

"I really think underneath it all, Quentin would really like me to have her, but he knows that if he gave her to me, Mom would flip. He's Mom's favorite, always has been and always will be. In fact, she considers him her only child at this point. I doubt he wants to mess up anything with her, especially since she still thinks he's the golden child despite his addiction and criminal behavior that it causes. Sometimes, she even still gives him money, as if she doesn't know what he's going to do with it. She just accepts whatever excuse or lie he tells her when he needs the money.

"Added to that, I think he's not too sure that I'd accept her if he did just try to give Princess to me. He might think that I'm the type that likes taking her, but I also like having some place to take her back when I want to get back to my life. Little does he know, but she is my life now. He probably doesn't want me to look down on him for not being able to take care of her too. I mean, no matter how fucked up he is, a lot of the time he is still aware that he's the big brother and he's supposed to be setting an example."

"If only he knew..." Gus muttered, glancing down at Princess. "If only he knew what a treasure he was letting go of..." Her voice was a strange mix of sorrow, pity, and awe. It tugged at Jayce's heart because she could see that Gus might love Princess more than Quentin and Gus only just made the child's acquaintance.

Sadness clouded Jayce's dark eyes again for a moment. "Yeah, but he's so into his drugs. I mean, he does any and everything, smokes, shoots, snorts, and whatever the hell else you can do with a drug. Some drugs are to get him through work, which I'm surprised he's still capable of doing. Others are to relax him, others to make him forget, others to get him around, and whatever else you can think of. He's just on about everything. It's a shame to see, especially since they're all illegal drugs. Well, not that it would be any better if they were legal, but there's the added element that he could do to jail one day. It was really hard to deal with when Princess was in the hospital because of her addiction thanks to her parents. Some days, I didn't think she would make it either, but she always pulled through. She still has some health issues, but I'm keeping on top of it. Her doctor is the one that started this whole custody thing."

A surprise look showed in Gus' light brown eyes. "Oh, really?"

"Yeah, too many visits with her having too many problems that didn't come along with her usual illnesses. Q doesn't take care of her at all and god-forbid I miss a day or two with seeing her. She wouldn't be changed or fed and shit like that. Just a fucking mess." Jayce shook her head and sighed, putting her hands over her face for a moment to keep herself calm.

"Hey," Gus cooed soothingly, speaking to Jayce. "It'll be okay from now on. The lawyer I got you is fantastic. I promise you that."

"Thank you so much."

Breakfast was quiet after that. Gus assumed that just talking about her brother and Princess had taken a lot out of her guest, but that was not the reason why the unemployed woman could not speak anymore. Jayce was silently overwhelmed by all that Gus was doing for her. If not for the



resemblance, she would not be able to figure out how Gus and Jannie were related at all. They were complete opposites from what she could tell, which she was thankful for. She was getting the support and help that she thoroughly needed and Jannie refused to provide. Jayce mentally admitted that Gus was amazing; possibly the most amazing person that Jayce had ever met in her life.

For a moment, the ebony-haired woman strayed, thinking about Gus saying that her wife had cheated on her. For a few seconds, Jayce could not understand why someone would cheat on someone like Gus, but then she thought about how people often took advantage of others. She was willing to bet that Gus' ex did not know how lucky she was to have Gus. *Idiot.*

Gus kept Princess with her through out the meal and shared some of her breakfast with the baby before switching Princess to the cereal that she was supposed to be eating. For a moment, she played around with the baby while she was trying to eat. A semi-stern look from the child's guardian ceased the playing and Gus gave Jayce an adorably sheepish look, clearly asking for forgiveness. Jayce smiled, which caused her host to do the same. Gus stayed at the table until she absolutely had to leave for work, handing Princess over to Jayce.

"I think she likes you, pretty baby," Jayce whispered before placing a kiss to a chubby cheek. Princess let out a loud cheer.

"Okay, I'll see you two ladies later," Gus said, rushing back into the dining room now completely dressed for work. Putting down a card on the table, her eyes met curious onyx eyes. "This is for the lawyer. I was going to ask him to call you, but I wasn't sure if you'd be comfortable answering my phone. All you have to do is bring him up to speed. I promise you everything will be fine. This guy is hella good."

Jayce chuckled a bit. "Did you just hella?" she asked with an amused smile.

Gus dropped her head and palmed her face, an embarrassed flush staining her cheeks. "I say it sometimes."

"It's cute." *And you're downright adorable right now!* Jayce shook that away, knowing that now was not the time to even consider such a thing. She needed to worry about getting in touch with lawyer and keeping her niece.

Gus mumbled a goodbye and tried to get out of the house now that she had thoroughly embarrassed herself. Jayce halted her before she could escape, though. As soon as Gus turned around, she felt little arms go around her neck. A smile conquered her face and her insides went warm. She would not have been surprised if she turned into a puddle thanks to Princess' embrace.

"Thank you," Gus said to the baby.

"If you tilt your head, she'll also kiss your cheek," Jayce informed her hostess.

Gus could not resist and had to see for herself, tilting her cheek. Princess went in and planted a warm, wet kiss to Gus' cheek. A faint blush colored Gus' cheeks, getting a giggle from Jayce.

"You're very cute this morning," Jayce commented. A key difference between the sisters she now noticed was that Gus did cute things. Cute was not something she associated with Jannie. Jannie would also be offended if Jayce called her "cute." With Jannie, she knew she had to use words like "hot," "sexy," and "beautiful" or not compliment her looks at all.

Gus was not sure what to say to that, so bid her guests farewell again and left the house in even more of a rush now. Jayce chuckled a bit, thinking that staying with Gus might not be such a bad thing. The adorable factor alone was worth it so far. The help and support put it way over the top.

Jayce went to the living room now that her host was gone. Putting Princess down on the floor and turning the television on for the baby, Jayce turned her attention to contacting the attorney that Gus set her up with. When the conversation was done, she actually felt better, lighter, like the weight of the world was lifted off of her shoulders. The only person more reassuring than the attorney was Gus.

"Hey, pretty baby, I think that things are actually going to be okay," Jayce commented with a big smile, taking a seat down by the dancing child. "I think we should treat Gus to a big dinner because of all of the help she's given up and all of the kindness she's shown us. What do you think?"

"Us!" Princess cheered, throwing her hands up and grinning at her aunt, showing off her four teeth.

"Yes, pretty baby, Gus," Jayce replied, tickling her niece a little. She definitely wanted to do something nice and special for Gus, not just that day, but everyday that she was there.

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Gus was a little taken aback when she walked through her front door after work. Sounds of life greeted her and surprised her. But, the sounds wrapped themselves up inside of her and warmed every piece of her, comforting her while still surprising her. A smile tugged at her lips as she took in the noise as she tried to figure out where the sounds were coming from. A guess in mind, she slipped her shoes off and went to find out if she was right.

Hazel eyes glanced into the living room, just to make sure no one was in there. The television was off and the room was still, so she figured that it was empty. She continued on her path, coming to the arched doorway of the kitchen. The smile returned when she saw what was happening in her usually barren kitchen.

Jayce was moving around, holding Princess in one hand and trying to fix dinner with another. A soft hum from the unemployed accountant kept Princess settled while her aunt worked. Gus could not help staring, watching Jayce's movements as if mesmerized by the innocent motions. A happiness as well as a longing filled her and for a moment she felt both fathomless joy and

infinitely sorrowful. Once she realized what she was doing, she shook off all of those emotions. She thought that it might be a good idea to make her presence known to avoid frightening Jayce.

"You didn't have to make dinner," Gus commented. At the sound of her voice, Jayce spun around as if she was doing a dance move.

A wide smile took over Jayce's face when she laid eyes on Gus. The businesswoman had to exhale as she took in that wonderfully light expression. Part of her immediately recognized that she would like to see those types of smiles more often, from Jayce, especially if they were directed at her. That definitely made coming home worth it.

"Oh, hey, Gus. I know I didn't have to, but I really wanted to. You helped me so much, especially with that lawyer. God, Mister Davis really made me feel like I've got this in the bag," Jayce stated, still smiling widely.

"That's Andrew for you. He's not blowing smoke up your ass either. He's never lost a case and I've seen him pull off miracles," Gus explained with a smile of her own. She could almost feel the elation radiating from her guest and she liked it. It felt wonderful to share in someone's joy for the first time in a very long time.

"He seemed really confident that I'd win this case, especially since I have witnesses that know I'm basically Princess' primary caregiver. He doesn't think my mother has much, even if she does have a bunch of connections."

Gus nodded. "That's good. It gives you one less thing to worry about."

"It does. Since I didn't have to worry about that, I worried about filling your kitchen and making dinner. I hope chicken cutlets is fine for you."

The businesswoman nodded enthusiastically. "Much better than the frozen pizza I planned to eat!" she proclaimed with a grin, even though it was clear that she seriously considered eating frozen pizza before she knew that she had a home cooked meal waiting.

Jayce chuckled a little. "Okay, well, go ahead and do what you do after work. I'll call you when dinner's done."

Gus did not argue, scurrying off to get out of her work clothes and totally unable to keep the smile off of her face. Jayce turned her attention back to her cooking-and entertaining Princess. When Gus returned, she found Jayce and Princess lounging on the couch, singing along with some song on television. The businesswoman eased down onto the sofa and as soon as she was seated, Princess turned to her. The baby reached out for Gus, laughing and grinning.

"Is it all right?" Gus asked, putting her hands out for the child. Princess jumped at her and she luckily caught the eager baby.

Jayce laughed. "I guess it is fine. As long as you don't mind."

"I honestly don't. Jayce, do you think I would have a company that makes children's education software if I didn't like children?" Gus inquired curiously.

"You make a point. I just don't want her to bother you," Jayce explained, a slightly sheepish expression coloring her cheeks. She could see that Gus really did not have a problem with the baby, but she just wanted to be sure. She figured that it was better to err on the side of caution with Gus, mostly because she was Jannie's sister. No telling when the other shoe might drop with her.

"I don't mind. She's a great kid. I would actually pay money to come home to that smiling face every day," Gus remarked, tapping Princess' chubby cheek.

Princess giggled again and then tried to tap on Gus' cheek in return. Gus laughed now and then pretended to bite Princess' hand. The child squealed, grinning widely, and she tried to escape by pulling her hand back. Gus pressed the child close, continuing to pretend biting her. Princess was nothing more than a lump of mad giggles after ten seconds.

Jayce smiled at the sight, not bothering to break things up. After a few minutes, she eased away to check on dinner. Making the plates, she called Gus to the table after she had everything set up. The taller woman trotted into the dining room, holding the baby close. Gus noted a bowl of mashed potatoes by her plate, which was loaded with steaming food, and she realized that Jayce was going to allow her to feed the baby. This brought a smile to the taller woman's face.

Gus almost whistled as she stared down at the meal prepared for her. There were juicy chicken cutlets with yellow rice and mixed vegetables. A baked potato was off to the side, dripping with butter. There were dinner rolls in a bowl on the table and even a salad.

"This looks great," Gus declared. "Should I leave you a tip at the end?"

"I tried, but the tip is very unnecessary. I wasn't too sure what you liked, so I went with a little bit of everything," the ebony-haired woman explained. She wished that she had known Gus' favorite foods because she would have made those as part of her thanks.

"I'm not picky at all. I like just about everything and I'm sure I'm going to love this," the taller woman proclaimed confidently as she dug in. Loud, pleased moans escaped her mouth before she even finished chewing. "It fantastic! You're a great cook!"

"Thanks. So, how was work?" Jayce asked curiously as she sat down to eat.

Gus blinked hard from shock and was speechless for a few seconds. Her silence earned her a strange look from her shorter guest. She cleared her throat and thought that it was best to explain why she was so quiet.

"Wow, I hadn't realized until you just said it that it's been a long time since I've heard that question, especially at home. Amanda probably stopped asking me that about a year into our relationship," the businesswoman answered.

"That's sad. Jannie used to ask me every night," Jayce replied. It was one of the nice things about Jannie. She seemed genuinely interested in how Jayce's day was, much like Jayce was with her. She supposed that she would miss that sort of underrated piece of affection.

A soft smile came to Gus' lips, even though some sadness came to her eyes. "Good to know she can be considerate."

"Jannie wasn't all bad, I promise you that. You did a good job with her. Yes, she hurt me recently, but before that I did enjoy being with her. She knows how to have a good time and everything. Most of the time, she made me feel cared about. Yes, we argued a lot and she could hold a grudge, but there was affection there. I wish that she got along with Princess. Princess really does adore her, but then again, Princess adores just about everybody," Jayce commented with a smile.

"She seems great. I don't know how Jannie couldn't fall for her charms. I mean, she's got me and I've only known her for a day. By the end of the week, I'll probably be wrapped around her little finger and I'm sure she'll know it. Jannie's probably known her for her whole life and didn't seem fazed by the fact that she kicked you two out. I just don't see how she couldn't fall for such a cutie, especially one with beautiful eyes like this, kinda like two black diamonds staring at you, and a smile that could melt an iceberg!" Gus declared with a proud grin.

"I bet you want kids," Jayce pointed out.

"Hell, yeah, I do! That's one of the reasons I'm happy I ended things with Amanda. I'm pissed it came down to what it did and it took me so long, but I am happy for the most part to not be with her anymore. Not only did she not want kids, but she would've been a horrible mother if we did have them. She was way too self-absorbed and can't be trusted to take care of anything. Hell, she killed all of our plants when I was off on a business conference once. I was only gone a week! I didn't even dare get a dog or something with her," Gus remarked, even though she was quite serious. She had been scared to get fish because she was certain that they would be dead if she had to go somewhere for a weekend.

"Sounds like you two wanted different things out of life, so I guess it was good that you broke up," the unemployed woman stated. Silently, she considered her words, thinking that they probably applied to her too. She and Jannie had to want different things in life if Jannie could not accept Princess. Considering that took away some of the sting that came with being thrown out of Jannie's life, not that there was that much sting. Jayce did not even focus on the small pain because she had so much other stuff to worry about.

Gus nodded. "I finally agree. At first, I was hurt. She said such hurtful things to me after I found out she was cheating and we broke up. For a while, I took those things to heart, thinking that they might be true since someone I loved said them to me. But, just holding Princess let's me know it was the right thing for us to split up, no matter how much it hurt at first. I do want kids and I wouldn't have been able to have that with Amanda. I want a stable, domestic life, which I know she wasn't interested in. She was the jet-set type. She always needed the latest fashions, to eat at the best restaurants, and go on month-long cruises and crap like that. I'm a little more low-key

than that. I don't mind staying in every now and then or just going out to a movie. Hell, I don't even mind being at a restaurant where there are kids running around."

"So, it sounds like she did you a favor."

Another nod and the subject of Amanda was dropped. Gus was going to say something along the same lines for Jayce since it was clear that Jannie was not ready to take on any responsibility while Jayce seemed to be all for it, but she felt like Jayce was taking her breakup fairly well. She did not want to do anything that might make Jayce upset about the breakup. Besides, she had done enough melding when it came to Jayce and Jannie. She figured that it was best to stay out of it at this point.

They had a quiet dinner with Gus taking time out to feed Princess. She went so far as to share her dinner too, cutting the chicken up enough for Princess to have some. She discovered with a huge grin that Princess loved broccoli and tried to eat pieces in one bite.

"Does she like all vegetables this much or just broccoli?" Gus asked curiously.

"She's not very picky about food, people, or even TV shows. I often get the feeling that Princess is just happy to be alive," Jayce answered with a smile.

"Not a bad way to live life. I like this kid," Gus remarked, smiling in return. She hugged Princess a little, which prompted the child to hug her in return.

Jayce chuckled a bit and watched for a while as Gus fed Princess another stem of broccoli. After dinner, Gus volunteered for the dishes since Jayce had taken the time to make dinner. They had a mild argument over it because Jayce was going to do it and wanted to do it since Gus had opened her home up to her, but Gus would not allow it. She just would feel like a very poor hostess if she allowed Jayce to act like the maid.

Jayce went to bathe Princess while she had the time. Gus went to observe after she was finished with her chore. At first, she lingered in the doorway...until Princess noticed her anyway. A cheer came from the baby that surprised Jayce, causing her to get splashed and Gus had to laugh.

"Oh, you wouldn't think it was so funny if you were the one getting a shower before you planned on having one," Jayce snorted, speaking to Gus now that she knew the taller woman was there.

"Well, considering the fact that I already had one and I'm dressed for the night, I would mind as much as you, if not more," Gus replied, still chuckling.

The bath did not take much longer because Princess would not sit still after seeing Gus. Gus was not helping either, making silly faces at the child. Whenever Jayce turned around, Gus would go back to normal. Princess laughed at that change every time it happened and wiggled around more than before. Jayce cleaned her very quickly to avoid anymore splashing.

After the bath, the trio went back to the living room. Princess did not stay up too much longer after that. When Jayce noticed her charge was fading, she pulled out a small book and read a few pages to the child. Princess was out before the middle of the story.

"You two can take my bed again tonight," Gus said in a manner that made it clear it was final, but it was the gentle undertone to it that kept Jayce from arguing.

As both women drifted off to sleep that night, they thought that everything would work out fine. They were certain that not only could they live together, but that they could enjoy each other's company. That thought comforted both women.

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[Next time: things get more domestic.](#)

[Shea K's Scrolls](#)  
[Index Page](#)

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~ Please Baby ~  
by Shea K.

Disclaimer: Welcome to another original story by this lunatic. The story and the characters are mine. Do not use them without my permission. Also, any and all characters, events, and situations found in these stories are fictional. If there are any similarities between these things and real people, events, and situations, it is purely a coincidence.

General warning: This story mentions casual drug use and child neglect. It also involves a romantic relationship between two women (surprise, surprise).

Contact the lunatic at: [starving.lunatic@gmail.com](mailto:starving.lunatic@gmail.com) and lemme know what you think of the story. Thanks and enjoy.

9: Trust

Gus was not surprised when the scent of fresh bacon took her from her sleep. Morning meal smells were better than any alarm clock she had ever owned when it came to waking her up and getting her moving. She never thought that she would be eager to get to food before, but Jayce had certainly trained her in a very short time. She knew that she was trained too, but she did not care.

Having someone cook for her everyday and to have meals waiting for her made Gus feel many emotions. Most of those, she did not put names to. She did not even think about them, just

experiencing the sublime feeling that seemed to always course through her now that she had guests in her house. Magnificent guests if anyone ever bothered to ask her, even if they had taken her bed...yes, she knew that she had given them the bed.

Since she had taken to sleeping in the living room, she found that she did her morning routines backwards. Breakfast used to be the last thing she did in the morning at home, but now it was the first. She rushed into the dining and was greeted by a sight that she could not help staring at- Jayce bent over slightly to pour coffee. Gus let a long breath, but that did not get her eyes off of a very alluring ass. It was only when the sound of Princess cheering drew her attention did hazel eyes move on. Jayce turned around as soon as Gus shifted her gaze to the baby.

"Thank goodness you're up. I don't know how much longer I would've been able to keep Princess from charging into the living room to wake you up," Jayce commented with a smile.

"What? Princess wouldn't do that, would you?" Gus asked as she picked up the child. Princess gave her a big wet kiss on the cheek and she returned it with one of her...hers not so wet.

"She really wanted you to wake up. She knows that when you're up that's when we can start eating," Jayce remarked.

"Oh, hungry baby, huh?" Gus sat down at her plate. They were having grits, scrambled cheese eggs, toast, and bacon. She figured it was safe to share the grits and eggs with the baby. She noticed that she had a large portion of food too, so maybe it was assumed that she was going to share. "So, what do you have planned for today?" she asked curiously, picking up a spoon to use for Princess. Scooping up a little bit of grits, she blew on them to make sure they were not too hot before feeding the food to the child.

"Court date," Jayce answered, taking her seat at the table. Her eyes lingered on how comfortable Princess was with Gus feeding her and she thought about how comfortable her hostess was with the baby. The pair made quite a sight.

Gus nodded. "I thought so. Are you going to take Princess with you?"

"I have to. If I let her out of my sight, I know my mother's going to try something. I just can't leave her."

Gus nodded again. "I could take her for you. If you want," she proposed, trying to hold off smiling to avoid looking desperate. She would love nothing more than to spend the day with Princess. *This kid is hella awesome!* Added to that, she figured that would take some of the stress off of her guest.

Jayce was silent for a moment, staring at Gus as if she was an alien life-form. The businesswoman tried to gather what was going through Jayce's head from her expression, but even that was an amalgamation of bewildering emotions. She could see regret, sorrow, and some hesitation. All that added up to an answer Gus did not favor nor did she want to hear.



"That would be nice Gus, but I think that maybe I should just keep her with me," Jayce replied in a quiet voice, unable to look the brown-haired woman in the eyes as she spoke those words. She did look up to gauge Gus' reaction to her confession.

"So, you don't trust me?" Gus asked, eyes betraying her agony instantly. She wished that she could take the words back as soon as they left her mouth. It was obvious that Jayce did not trust her and she was only going to cause herself more pain when Jayce confirmed it or tried to lie to cover it up.

"Oh, Gus!" Jayce reached over to caress her hostess' forearm in the hope to bring her comfort and get that crushed look out of those beautiful light brown eyes. "Gus, I'm sorry, but I haven't known you that long and...Princess is all I have right now. She is my most precious item in the world. So, it's nothing against you, Gus, but it's just that if I lost Princess..." Jayce trailed off and glanced away, her chin trembling at the thought of having her niece taken from her.

Gus shifted her hold on the baby, so that she could take Jayce's hand. She held onto it tightly, causing near onyx eyes to turn back to her. She offered the distressed woman a small smile, silently saying that there were no hard feelings. The contact and expression softened the look in Jayce's eyes.

"You know what, Jayce, I totally understand what you're saying. I actually felt that way about Jannie when our parents died. I wasn't sure if she'd be able to stay with me and I was scared everyday that someone would come and take her from me, so I totally understand. It's okay." It was okay because the businesswoman did understand the reasoning. Underneath it all, she did wish that Jayce trusted her more, but she supposed that she would build that up with a little more time.

Jayce looked up and saw no animosity in Gus' light brown gaze. This brought a smile to her face, which got another, wider smile out of Gus. They let the subject drop and went back to their breakfasts.

"I think I'm going to go by Jannie's house later on and try to get some of my stuff. She's been calling me a lot about it. My cell is just full of messages from her. Plus, this way I can start sleeping on the floor since Princess'll have her playpen and she can sleep in that," Jayce explained, thinking that might be some good news for her hostess. If nothing else, Gus could have her bed back and she could get a proper sleep before going to work now.

"Hey, no hurry. I don't mind sleeping on the floor," Gus replied with a lighthearted shrug. It really did not make a difference to her, especially since she slept like a rock once she was out.

"Still, I want to get it before she throws it out." Jayce knew that things would come to that if she tried Jannie's limited patience, especially considering the messages that her former girlfriend was leaving on her phone. Really, she did desired to get Jannie out of her life as soon as possible and getting her stuff as soon as possible would best do that. She was aware that she and Jannie would never be together again, so she did not dwell on it. There were too many other things going on in her life.

Gus nodded; she could see her little sister doing something like throwing out all of Jayce's belongings just to be spiteful. "That might be the best idea."

"What about you? What do you have planned for today?" Jayce asked curiously, also looking to get the spotlight off of her.

"Nothing much. I'm going to try to go to both jobs today. I feel like I have to babysit the spa now. I can't wait for Jannie to graduate. I opened the stupid spa for her anyway," Gus answered, sighing a bit. Never did she think that the spa would cause such a headache. It was a great business, but thanks to this thing with her ex-wife, she disliked the aura of the place for the moment.

"Did you? So you just like the software company?"

"I really like my software company and I'm sure I always will. It was my dream since I was in high school. The spa was just something that was spur of the moment. It was a good decision and everything because it gets very good business, but I don't feel the same for it as I do for my software company. It is good to be able to get a free massage, though," Gus remarked with a light laugh.

Jayce chuckled a bit too. "I imagine it would be. I get the feeling you need it every now and then too."

The taller woman nodded. "For a while, yes, but I'm over it now for the most part. I feel a lot better about things," she stated and then she bounced Princess a bit on her knee. Truthfully, she felt better now than she had in years. She was not sure why that was, but she was not going to question it. Feeling so good made her believe that life was going to be all right, despite all of the crap that she had gone through and despite all of the crap that she helped Jayce go through.

All too soon, breakfast was over and the ladies had business to conduct. They were about to part ways at the door, but Gus followed Jayce to her automobile and helped her get Princess strapped down in her car seat. Earlier, such actions would have surprised Jayce, but she was starting to get used to Gus and her rather helpful nature.

"Thanks," Jayce said with a small, but very grateful smile.

"No problem. I wish you the best of luck today," Gus said and on impulse she leaned down to place a quick peck to Jayce's cheek. A blush invaded the shorter woman's face while they both thought that brief exchange was pleasant. "I hope that brings you enough luck to keep this most precious person of yours," the businesswoman commented as she pulled away.

Jayce smiled, but she could not respond. Her brain could not form any coherent thoughts and her mouth would not have been able to deliver them anyway as it was shut tight. Gus was gone before Jayce got a hold on herself, but the delightful, mellow feeling inspired by Gus remained for the rest of the day. It was wonderful; hard to ignore, but she managed it in order to keep her wits about her. She was not alone in that struggle, though.

The subtle, sweet taste of Jayce's cheek settled on Gus' lips and took up residency there for the day. The feeling of the simple kiss and smile that went with it had Gus floating for the day. It just seemed like a good way to start the morning and that stayed with her, making it easy to get through the day. She made a mental note to try that move again sometime in the near future.

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Jayce was on cloud nine as she pulled up to Jannie's house. The smile on her face could not be torn off with a crane, so she figured that going to see Jannie would not bother her much right now. She got out of the car and unstrapped her niece from her car seat. Kissing Princess' cheek for no reason and getting a happy giggle for her troubles, she started toward the door. The bell sounded in its usual monotonous manner and Jayce waited for an answer.

"Who?" Jannie called, clearly standing right at the door from the sound of her voice.

"It's me," Jayce replied.

"Oh." The disappointment and anger was clear, even with a door between them. "Hold on, I'll get your stuff for you."

"You're not even going to open the door? I've got Princess," Jayce informed her ex-girlfriend.

"I really don't give a goddamn, Jayce, and since we're no longer in a relationship, I don't need to give a goddamn."

Jayce scowled. "We can't be cordial to each other? You can't open the door, so Princess-who is only a year old-can be inside while I get things settled in the car?"

"No."

The tension that raced through Jayce's face made her look as if she was possessed, but it did not last long. *After this, I don't have to deal with Jannie and her bullshit again. I can just go home and tell Gus what happened. I'm sure she'll be happy along with me, which I know Jannie would never be, even if we were still together. I just need to get through this and then I can go home.*

Getting "through it" was not that difficult because there was not much to do. The door opened after a few minutes and Jannie kicked a large box of things out of the door. Before Jayce could gather what was happening, the door slammed. Dark eyes glanced down at the box while a sigh escaped her lips.

"Hello, Jannie, nice to see you too. How are things in your life? Mine? Not bad. Still unemployed, but I did receive the best news today," Jayce muttered to herself as she went back to the car to put Princess down. "...But, it's obvious that you don't care about that."

She could not help wondering if Jannie ever did care about her or just the fact that she had no problem with lavishing Jannie with attention whenever Princess was not around. She gathered it

was the latter. Jannie more than likely relished in the fact that she had a little lapdog, who was always begging to be loved and would do just about anything for that affection.

"Well, not anymore," Jayce vowed as she packed away her things into the trunk of the car. Never again would she beg some woman to love her, she promised herself. She was just going to do her best to love and provide for her niece. That would be enough in life and that was all that mattered.

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Gus practically ran into the house after parking her car in the driveway. "Jayce, what happened? Sorry, I couldn't return your call, but I was in a meeting when you called me," she explained, shouting through the house. She was anxious and eager to know why her housemate called her during the day. She hoped like hell that it was good news, if only to get her stomach to stop flipping.

"I get to keep Princess!" Jayce cried, running out to Gus and throwing herself onto the taller woman. Her embrace was so tight that she was cutting off Gus' air supply, but the businesswoman did not care.

Gus returned the loving embrace. "That's great!" she proclaimed with deep sincerity.

Tears suddenly gathered in Jayce's eyes. "You really mean that, don't you?" she asked in a cracked voice. Someone actually was happy for her for once in her life.

"Of course I do. Hey, may I please take you both out to dinner to celebrate?" Gus asked curiously, sounding almost shy. This was partially brought on by the fact that she wanted to lean down and kiss Jayce's cheek again, but she doubted that would be proper. Even though she was sure she could use the excuse of being overly excited and celebrating in an over-the-top manner, but she did not want to abuse the privilege of being close to the smaller woman.

Jayce noticed that Gus' voice sounded odd. It was not as confident as usual and she was being excessively polite. She figured that it had to do with how she handled the situation that morning with Gus offering to hold onto Princess for her. Gus was not sure how to approach about some things now.

"We would love you to," Jayce replied with a bright smile that instantly set her hostess at ease.

Gus grinned, clapped her hands, and then rubbed her hands together. "Great. I know the perfect place! You can tell me all about today there!"

Jayce smiled and nodded. They broke apart and Jayce went to get Princess ready for their day out. Gus went off to call and make sure they could get a table. Under an hour, they were gone, heading to the restaurant in Gus' CUV.

"This place looks a little...extravagant," Jayce commented as they pulled up to the front of the restaurant for the valet parking. The outside was designed to look like a Roman building with a pair of fountains in front that had colored lights shining around them to make the water look like a host of different, beautiful colors. The baby noticed and cooed as if she was impressed by the water show. She wished that she had time to change her clothing now. She wondered if it was a good idea to bring Princess, not that she would have been able to leave the baby anywhere.

"It's not as expensive as it looks, I promise. It's also nothing for you to worry about anyway. This is my treat to celebrate your victory, remember?" Gus pointed out with a warm smile.

Jayce opened her mouth to argue anyway, but Gus silenced her with a weird puppy-dog look that Jayce did not expect from the businesswoman. Her mind screamed adorable while also making a mental note to watch out for that look in the future. *What future? I shouldn't be with Gus that long, so why am I think about a future?* Still, the thought of a future with the kind, friendly businesswoman made Jayce feel warm inside, so she could not let it go like she believed she should.

They let a valet take the car and they entered the restaurant. Gus was holding Princess now, who was still marveling over the lights. Inside, Jayce got to see the place was more like a family-oriented restaurant than the outside valet parking and façade implied. She smiled as they were shown to a table and a high-chair was brought out for Princess. They were set up in a corner by a window, looking out into a nearby pond. It was a nice view, but Jayce did not have much time to take it in because Gus wanted to know what happened with her and in court.

"So, tell me about today and how you got custody of Princess," Gus asked excitedly, squirming in her seat from her desire to hear all about what happened.

For a moment, Jayce just smiled, touched by the enthusiasm that Gus was feeling and showing. Her animated behavior made Jayce want to jump up and down with her, but she restrained herself enough not to do that. On the inside, she was turning back-flips, though. Taking a deep breath to keep herself calm, the unemployed woman went into the story of her day.

"It was a pretty sound decision. Andrew said the judge was a good guy and very fair and he was right. The judge saw that I've been taking care of Princess since day one while my mom's just a visitor in her life," Jayce explained, a small smile gracing her features.

Gus shared the smile with her, feeling so much joy that something finally went right in Jayce's life. Something huge too! And she had been able to help and now she was able to share in it.

"Did he ask about your brother?" Gus inquired curiously, wondering if Quentin Newton might be some kind of roadblock for Jayce.

Jayce nodded, eyes laced with momentary sorrow. "Indeed he did. I told him I haven't seen my brother since I picked up Princess that faithful day. Then my mother tried to lie about seeing him and she lied about his drug-use. Thankfully, Andrew had police reports to back up the fact that my brother is addicted to everything under the sun."

Gus nodded. "That's great that you got her." She bounced a little more, having so much trouble containing her happiness. She was not sure the last time she felt this happy, but she considered it was probably when her littler sister graduated.

Jayce reached across the table and held onto Gus' hand. That small gesture stopped the businesswoman from childishly jumping in her seat. They stared at each other for a long moment before Jayce continued the conversation.

"You're the reason I've got her for now," Jayce stated, appreciation brightly shining in her dark eyes.

"For now?" Gus echoed. That seemed like a might odd choice of words.

Jayce nodded and blinked, causing the happy glint in her eyes to disappear. Gus was upset at herself for asking that question. She wished that shine remained in Jayce's eyes forever.

"Well, really, it's more than likely just temporary that I have custody of her. My mother's going to fight it, no doubt about it. She's going to find people to talk about how I'm a lesbian and I don't have a job. Hell, she tried to bring that up today, but she didn't have anything really to present in court. I guess she thought just her word would carry things, but now that she knows that's not the case, she's loading up her ammo. I know it. I'm sure it'll be coming full force soon, though. She fights so dirty too and she's not below making things up about me," Jayce said, sniffing a little.

"What do you mean?" Gus asked, griping the hand holding hers just a little tighter to let Jayce know that she was there for her.

"My mother...she can be vicious. When I was in college, she actually tried to get me kicked out a bunch of times. I don't know why. Maybe it's just because she's a malicious old goat, but she would say things like I copied my papers and I was sleeping with my professors. Hell, once she said I was a prostitute who only serviced women!"

Gus' eyes went wide, unable to imagine a mother doing something so horrible to her own child. "Oh, god. Your mother is unbelievable to do shit like that!" she commented, unsure of what else to say.

"That she is, but I don't care. She can throw whatever she wants at me. I don't know what I'm going to do about the job because the only reason I got the job I had was because my boss liked my mother. So, I don't know what I'm going to do about that, but I'm not giving up. It's going to be a hell of a fight."

Gus reached across the table with her free hand and took Jayce's other hand into hers, linking them by both hands now. Warmth passed between them and Jayce felt happiness that she could share this moment with someone that genuinely cared. Having someone to share this with made everything seem so much more important, significant, and precious. Little did she know, but it felt that way for Gus too because she felt special at being able to share something like this with Jayce.

Jayne also felt guilty because of how she treated Gus that morning. Gus had done so much for her and she had paid her back with gross mistrust. She figured that she was going to have to make that up to her host and definite new best friend.

"You'll make it through this fight. You're strong, tough, and you care about Princess more than anybody else," Gus pointed out.

Jayne looked skeptical. "Love will be enough?" The look in her eyes let her companion know that she *needed* a positive answer.

"It will be in this case," Gus promised her guest.

Jayne was not sure why, but she believed Gus with every fiber of her being. After that, the shorter woman shifted the conversation because she did not need to discuss the court battle anymore. She asked Gus about her day. They did not release their hands, but neither of them noticed that.

"My day was pretty good. I had a meeting today about developing some new educational games and I got some really good ideas. I'm pretty sure the next thing we create will be about math and teaching kids everything from the basics to building until they make it to algebra. This got us to kicking around other ideas. Maybe even developing software for older kids," Gus explained with a smile.

Jayne nodded, but did not add to the discussion because the waiter came over to take their orders. The waiter glanced at their hands, which made them realize what they were doing. They finally let go and gave the waiter their orders. Once that was out of the way, the pair went back to talking with each other. They also took the time to pay attention to Princess, making sure she did not feel neglected. From the size of the baby's smile, they knew they were going a good job.

"So, what made you want to start a software company making education things for children?" Jayne asked curiously.

Gus shrugged. "I guess it's sort of like being a teacher without the headache that I know goes with it. And just in case you're wondering how I know, my mom was a teacher. God bless her for that because I know I wouldn't have been able to take it. My dad is the one that got me into computers. I guess I just combined the two. I love it, though. I love brainstorming new ideas. I love going to pitch meetings. I love playing around with the games in development before they go to market. I even like watching the interactive videos. I use the things like a kid sometimes. I just love it all."

Jayne nodded again. "That's good."

The conversation was paused again as they turned to Princess. The baby was "feeding" herself. Food was going just about everywhere, but some of it was making it into her mouth. To make sure she left the restaurant full, both adults shared some of their meal with her. By the end of the night, Jayne took Princess to the bathroom to clean her off while Gus handled the bill.

"That's a beautiful family you have there," the waiter commented with a happy smile, speaking to Gus.

Instead of correcting him, Gus just smiled and nodded. *It's easier than explaining the circumstances and it's not like he would care about that anyway.* She did leave him a generous tip and then left to get the car, so that Jayce and Princess would not have to wait outside for the valet to bring it around. The thoughtful gesture was greatly appreciated and expressed when Jayce came out to the vehicle.

"And they say chivalry is dead," the former accountant remarked as Gus helped her put Princess into the car seat. Gus only grinned at her, but there seemed to be a slight blush coloring her cheeks because of the compliment.

The night was not over once they got back to the house. Without a thought, they ended up on the sofa, watching a kiddie movie for Princess' amusement. The baby was thoroughly entertained, falling asleep a little before nine. The adults actually watched the whole movie before Jayce stood to put Princess to bed.

"Can you hold her while I set up her playpen?" Jayce asked, gently rocking Princess to make sure she remained asleep. Really, it was unnecessary, but Jayce enjoyed holding her and rocking her.

"Of course," Gus replied with a smile, happy to take the sleeping child.

The unemployed accountant went to get the playpen from the dining room, where she put the box with her things in it. She glanced over Gus and smiled, seeing just how much Gus did like the child. Affection shined through those light brown eyes, beaming like twin stars.

"I guess I can take the floor now that I have some place for Princess to sleep," Jayce announced as she returned with the folded-up playpen as well as some pillows and a baby blanket tucked under her arm.

"You don't have to. I'm fine with the floor," Gus replied. "Let me help you with that," she offered, starting to stand.

"You're helping by holding Princess," Jayce stated. "Gus, you don't have to do everything. You've done more than enough, okay?"

The businesswoman gave in, hearing the firmness in Jayce's tone. She sat back and held onto Princess while Jayce set things up to put the baby in the playpen. Princess was laid down on top of one blanket and covered with another. Once Princess was comfortable, Jayce turned to Gus and smiled.

"Join me for a grown-up movie?" Gus offered, hope coming through her voice and shimmering in her eyes.



"Yes, thank you," Jayce replied and flopped back down onto the couch. The channel was changed and they made themselves comfortable very close to each other. Before the night was over, Jayce was leaning against Gus, who put her arm around Jayce's shoulders. They did not notice, but it felt so comfortable and natural that even if they did notice, it would not have made a difference.

They did not realize it, but that night shifted something between them. They were infinitely more comfortable with each other, to the point where Jayce had no problem with leaving Princess with Gus for small amounts of time, like when she took trips to the store or such. Gus started calling Jayce often at home, checking on her and making sure everything was all right. Sometimes, she would bring home takeout for dinner, learning all of Jayce's favorite foods in the process. They cuddled more on the couch, whether they were watching movies or not. They took genuine comfort in each other's presence and shared in responsibilities when it came to Princess.

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"Gus, can you get Princess for me?" Jayce called, standing in front of the stove and working on scrambled eggs.

"No problem," Gus replied, walking into the living room while scratching her head. She noticed the child by the television, dancing and laughing. "Come on, little bit. Mommy made breakfast for us," the businesswoman commented, scooping the child up.

"Us!" Princess cheered, throwing her arms around the woman's neck and hugging her tightly.

Gus blushed, realizing that the baby was trying to say her name. Princess did not attempt speaking much, so it was touching that she would try to say Gus' name. They went into the dining room as Jayce started to serve the plates. Princess had a small bowl of hot oatmeal, but she would also share in Gus' breakfast of French toast with powdered sugar, scrambled eggs, and diced melon. Jayce then poured them some orange juice, putting some in a non-spill cup for Princess.

Gus watched Jayce move for a moment and thought about how much she appreciated all of the things that Jayce brought into her life. On top of that list would be Princess, but right underneath her and great company was home-cooked meals. Jayce was a wonderful chef and she loved cooking for Gus, which was flattering for the taller woman. She loved the way that Jayce served her for every meal too and heaven forbid she try to help. Even the manner in which Jayce glared at her made her list of appreciated things! Of course, it also scared the hell out of her enough to back off whenever Jayce glared at her and scolded her.

Ever since she took Jayce out to celebrate, she somehow felt like things got infinitely better too. She and Jayce were much more comfortable and familiar around each other. She supposed it was because of the level of trust that Jayce showed in her now. Like today, she was being given the honor and privilege of keeping Princess while Jayce had to go back to court to face new, wild allegations from her mother. So, Gus was going to have Princess for the whole day and she was very much looking forward to that.

"Hey, Jayce, would you mind if I go out and buy a high-chair today?" Gus asked, not wanting to overstep her boundaries...although there seemed to be less and less of those as time went on. It was just always better to ask Jayce then just do or she would have to deal with a mild argument or eternal verbal thanks. Neither of which she wanted to bother with.

"Tired of holding her on your lap every day?" Jayce teased as she eased down into her seat.

"She is getting a little heavy," Gus admitted, bouncing the baby just a little bit. Seriously, she could feel some weight on the baby that had not been there when the child first arrived at the house. She figured that it might just be the natural weight that came from being a growing child.

"That's good. She's always been underweight, so hopefully she is gaining weight. It'll help her stay healthy. But, back to your question. I don't suppose I would be able to stop you if you decided to get a high-chair," Jayce answered.

The taller woman smiled. "Now you're learning," she declared pointing at the shorter woman with a smile adorning her face. "I knew you were trainable," she added as a tease.

Dark eyes rolled dramatically. "Do you think you can do that while you have Princess with you, though? I mean, it's bad enough you're going to take her to work and to the doctor, but you want to go shopping too?" Jayce inquired seriously with a craned eyebrow. She thought that Gus was planning a little too much for her day, especially since she was spending the day with the baby.

Gus waved it off. "I'll be fine. Princess is great with me. You just worry about knocking down whatever your mother has to throw at you. Focus on what's going on in court. Princess'll be fine," she promised.

Jayce laughed and shook her head. "It's not Princess I'm worried about. I don't want you to try too much on your first outside babysitting venture."

"This isn't my first time at the rodeo. I did have to raise my sister," the taller woman reminded Jayce, holding her head up high with pride.

"Watching a teenager is a lot different than watching a baby," the ebony-haired woman gently countered.

"Hey, I'm fine with her when you go to the store and everything. Why should this be any different?" Gus inquired with a shrug. *I can handle this!* Princess was a gem and she had watched her on numerous different occasions already.

The baby's guardian could not help chuckling for a moment. "Maybe because this'll be outside and you'll have her for more than an hour by yourself. Not to mention, you've never taken her to work or to the doctor before. So, it will be different."

"Jayce, I'll be fine. Trust me, okay?" Gus flashed a brilliant smile. She knew it would be different and she was ready for that. She did not want Jayce to worry about it when she was confident everything would be fine.

"Sweetie, I do trust you. Trust has nothing to do with it. We both know that things don't always go as planned."

The businesswoman nodded and waved off the concern. "Right, right, right. Don't worry, though. If I don't know what to do, I'll call you right away. If you can't answer, I'll just come right back here," she promised with a smile.

Jayce shook her head. "I don't mean to make it sound like you're incapable-" She was quickly silenced by a hand coming over the table to hold hers and Gus speaking up.

"Hey, it's all right. You're a mom and I know how much moms worry. I'm flattered that you're going to let me take care of her while you're in court, fighting the good fight. I don't want you to worry about anything else, Jay. You don't deserve the stress you're being put through. Focus on winning this battle, okay, Jay?"

Jayce blushed, mostly from the use of a nickname. She had never been given one before. Gus did not seem to notice that she did it, but it caused a warm feeling to flow through Jayce. Once her mind returned to her, she nodded to show that she agreed.

"Now, let's eat breakfast, so we can both kick butt today," Gus declared and Princess chimed in right on time with a loud cheer. Jayce nodded again, feeling confident that Princess would be fine and she did just need to worry about the next round in court against her mother.

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10: Parting is just sorrow

"Okay, little bit, we've got your high-chair set up, but now we need to get things together for your mom. We're going to celebrate tonight, little bit," Gus said to Princess after she finished putting up her purchase of the day. The high chair was set up tall and proud right next to the table in the dining room, so the next meal that they had there, Princess would have her own seat.

Princess was busy with another purchase of the day-a large stuffed fox that was the same size as the child. She was rolling around on the floor with the toy, hugging it tightly and giggling while she did it. Gus bent down to get a closer look at the baby to make sure she was not in any danger of hurting herself. Princess paused to smile at the adult and then she cuddled up to the toy, much like she did with Jayce and Gus.

"I know your mom won in court today, even if she didn't call us to let us know. I mean, your doc was sure her mother didn't have a leg to stand on because she's been the only person keeping you alive since you were born and I know Andrew isn't going to lose. He just can't accept that. Plus, your mom loves you so much that I know she has to win. It's just that simple. So, I got some of

your mom's favorite movies and I'm going to call for some takeout. Now, what do you want?" Gus asked, genuinely curious if the baby would answer.

"Us!" Princess replied, putting her arms up.

"Okay, aside from being picked up, what else do you want?" Gus inquired with a smile, leaning down to pluck the child up from the floor.

Princess did not respond, simply hugging Gus and cuddling into her chest. Gus recently found out that this meant the baby was ready for a nap. Going into the living room, she sat down on the sofa and turned on the television. She watched a show while Princess drifted right off to sleep, curled into her chest, tiny ear close to her heart. Gus could not stop smiling as she held onto the baby and continued to watch her show.

Every now and then, she glanced down at Princess and thought about their day together. She had a good time watching the baby. Princess was a big hit at her office with everyone wanting to hold her and pass her around while smiling and talking to the child. Princess mostly just smiled back at first. Apparently, Princess never met a stranger.

Gus enjoyed explaining that Princess was her friend's baby and they were hanging out together. Princess seemed to get a huge kick out of it too, staring around at all of the new faces, pointing at everything, and going so far as to try to touch a bunch of items in Gus' office. The businesswoman had not minded one bit.

She had been more nervous about the doctor's visit. She was not sure if she wanted to hear what might be wrong with Princess. Jayce often spoke about the health problems that Princess had to endure from having drug-addicted parents and also from being born premature. But, according to the doctor, Princess was showing fine progress and was looking better every time he saw her. For such a good checkup, Gus treated the child to some sweets, which Princess appreciated if her content grin had meant anything.

After that, they had gone shopping for the high chair. At first, Gus was not sure where she would buy such a thing from, but easily found out from a phone call to a good friend who had kids of her own. With that help, it was easy for her to find what she was looking for and pick up the extra-large cuddle toy for the baby.

"It was a good day," the brown-haired woman decided, eyes going back the show.

The sound of the door opening took Gus' attention away from the television. She stood up and went to meet Jayce, knowing that it was her at the door. Gus kept Princess in her arms as she watched her housemate step in. The ebony-haired woman was grinning, which let Gus know that things had gone her way. She leaned in, giving Jayce a warm hug while they were both careful of the napping baby.

"Any more court dates?" Gus asked curiously, hoping that was not the case.

"Why? Having trouble watching her majesty today?" Jayce teased, delight dancing in her dark eyes.

"Of course not! We had a blast! The office loved her, begging to know when she was coming back. She was a great help in picking out a high-chair and an angel when we were at the doctor's office. Oh, she had a very positive checkup today. The doctor was very impressed with her and with the way you've been taking care of her. Princess, strong like bull," Gus explained with a laughing smile as she made a muscle with one arm while making sure to hold onto Princess with the other.

Jayce grinned and rubbed Princess' back. "I'm so glad to hear that. Hey, pretty baby, you're getting better."

"I think today was too much excitement for her. She's dead to the world," Gus reported with a light chuckle.

"She needs the sleep too, so that's fine. She might be wired tonight, though," Jayce replied.

"It's fine. Not like either of us mind being up with her. Now, I want you to tell me about today while we watch some of your favorite movies," Gus announced, taking Jayce by the hand. She led the smaller woman into the living room.

"You are too good to us, Gus. Most people wouldn't bother to remember my favorite movies. Actually, I think you're the only one," Jayce commented with a small, soft smile. She doubted that anyone had ever taken an interest in her or her life like Gus had.

Gus shook her head. "Then they're all missing out. You like a lot of great things from what I've noticed."

Jayce could not help blushing, not used to this attention. Jannie would pay her some mind and take an interest in some things with her, but definitely not to the extent of remembering her favorite movies or thinking to rent them for her in a moment of celebration. She knew that she was going to loathe leaving Gus, but it was going to be necessary. She was not a permanent resident and she was expected to leave at some point; she often had to remind herself of this. Gus was only doing this out of the goodness of her heart and surely she wanted to get on with her life, Jayce silently reasoned.

"So, what happened today?" Gus asked curiously, lying Princess across her chest again to make sure the baby was comfortable. Princess made a little noise, rubbed her nose in Gus' chest, and settled back down, remaining asleep through it all. She then settled in close to her houseguest, looking at Jayce as if the ebony-haired woman held the secrets of the universe.

"Well, my mom pulled out all of the stops today. We were in court all day because of her crap. I mean, she had people come in that talked about how I molested them, how I scammed them out of things, how I couldn't get employed, how I was homeless and leaving on the streets or under a bridge, how I was involved in conning older women out of money, how I was a call girl, and just

all kinds of outrageous nonsense. Someone actually came in and accused me of being on drugs and starting Q on drugs, and I sexually abuse Princess. It was just awful," Jayce reported, shaking her head. Some sorrow worked its way into her eyes. No matter how long it went on, she still found it hard to believe that her mother was willing to tell such lies about her.

"Wow, your mother is ruthless," Gus commented, putting an arm around Jayce to bring her some comfort. She caressed Jayce's shoulder, helping to relax the smaller woman.

Jayce leaned into the warm embrace and continued on. "For once, it came back and bit her in the ass, though. The judge wasn't impressed with her antics and said as much. In fact, he looked downright pissed after a while. She didn't have anything to back those claims up, after all. She did make points that I didn't have a job or a place to live, but Andrew had that covered."

"How so?" Gus inquired. She liked hearing about his tricks.

"He gave out my card to some of his associates and they hired me as their private accountant."

"Damn, why didn't I think of that?" Gus grumbled, glancing off to the side. It would have been a very good way to make up for getting the ebony-haired woman fired, after all.

Jayce patted her friend's hand. "It's okay. You've already done enough. I wouldn't have accepted that anyway. But, that handled the job problem. He pointed out that I live here, so the homelessness was not an issue either. I think her biggest mistake was actually admitting that she would give Princess back to Q when she saw him without checking up on him first. I don't think her lawyer wanted her to say that either, but she let's her mouth get away from her all the time. The judge ruled in my favor. Someone is going to come through here to make sure everything checks out and I'm taking care of Princess, but for the most part Princess is my responsibility now. I won. She gets to stay with me."

Gus grinned merrily. "That's great! You're a great mom and whoever the judge has come around to check on that will definitely see it. You are a great mom," she proclaimed, clutching Jayce just a little tighter to her.

A blush stained Jayce's cheeks. "Thanks."

Gus eyed Jayce, wanting to tell her that she was pretty when she blushed, but she held off. Instead, she moved to grab the remote and turned on the first movie, having to release Jayce from her hug to do it. Jayce squirmed in her seat a bit, missing the body against her, but not wanting to say anything about it or show that she missed being pressed against Gus. Before sitting back down, Gus made a call for some takeout.

"You certainly are pulling out all of the stops," Jayce remarked, laughing a bit as the taller woman settled back down next to her.

"No, pulling out all of the stops would be finding a babysitter for the night and taking you to *Scarlet's* for a real meal," Gus replied quite seriously.

"Oh, Gus, you don't have to do that," Jayce objected. She had gone to *Scarlet's* once in her life with Jannie. It was a top-class restaurant with prices to prove it. The elegance and atmosphere of the place was great, but Jayce doubted that she would ever really want to go back there. Not because of the prices, but because she preferred simpler things.

"I know I don't have to do it. I would like to do it one day, though. You deserve it," Gus stated. She would love nothing more than to treat Jayce to a real evening on the town, which would include a meal at *Scarlet's* as well as several other things that Gus was sure Jayce was never treated to. She hoped that she would get the opportunity to do so.

"You don't have to," the accountant repeated.

Gus gave her a charming half-smile that made the smaller woman swallow hard. "I know I don't have to, but I would like to. I also would like for you to accept that," the businesswoman gently stated.

Jayce was not sure how to respond to that, but found herself nodding. Gus grinned and they both turned their attention to the movie. Gus pondered for a moment if she should and could put her arm around Jayce again. She wondered if the embrace had been accepted before because it was an emotional moment or because Jayce enjoyed it. Before her brain could come up with a decision, her arm moved on its own, wrapping itself around Jayce's shoulder and pulling the shorter woman closer. Jayce did not resist and curled into Gus' side.

Before the food showed up, Princess woke up and practically jumped into Jayce's arms when she noticed the other woman. Jayce laughed and embraced the child, who planted a huge kiss on Jayce's cheek. Gus then leaned down and whispered something into the baby's ear. Princess giggled like mad.

"Mama!" Princess suddenly declared in a loud, elated voice.

And suddenly there were tears in Jayce's eyes again. She sniffled and wiped them away. For a moment, she glared at her hostess, but Gus could tell the glower was not from true anger.

"Damn it, Gus, do you realize I've cried more with you than I have in my whole life?" she demanded, hugging Princess close to her, hoping the baby would feel all of the love and joy that was inside of her. She tried not to think about her words to Gus, knowing that she had never been comfortable around someone enough to cry in front of them, but she could not stop the waterworks around the businesswoman. Something about Gus made her feel safe, secure, and let her know it was all right to show any and all emotions inside of her.

"It's all right. I don't hold it against you and I'm sure it feels hella good to let it out," Gus remarked with a charming smile, obviously trying to get a laugh out of her companion. She succeeded.

They had a quiet night at home, as they had been having for the past couple of months. They even stayed curled up close to each other, both taking great joy in feeling the other close to them.

It was almost pure bliss, they both thought. Everything seemed to be fine until Jayce said something that made Gus' heart pretty much stop.

"I looked at apartments today too. Just one spot, but I looked," Jayce commented casually. She wanted to throw that out there to show Gus that she was not going to take advantage of her kindness anymore than she had already. She also did it to remind herself that she was leaving soon and that she needed to keep that in mind. She needed to stop taking such solace from Gus' presence and get on with her life before things got so deep that she ended up drowning.

Gus choked on air. "Apartments?" her voice trembled as she echoed the word. Fear raced through her as it hit her that Jayce and Princess were not supposed to be staying with her. It was just supposed to be temporary. *But...I don't want...* She did not allow her brain to finish that thought.

"Yes, apartments. I felt free after the ruling and figured that it's about time we get out of your hair. Thank you so much for everything, Gus, but you need to get on with your life. You don't need us here, slowing you down," Jayce explained, trying to maintain eye contact, but finding it rather hard to do so. She did not want it confirmed that she and Princess were liabilities, even though she heavily doubted that Gus would ever do that.

"But...but...you're not slowing me down," Gus protested. *I love having you guys here! I love coming home to you! I love doing stuff for you and having you do stuff for me! I love taking care of Princess with you! I love just being around both of you! You make me feel alive and worthwhile! I want you to stay.* "But, I guess you should get on with your life. I mean, you have a job now and everything..." she sounded more sincere than she felt. *You don't need me anymore.*

Jayce swallowed a lump around her throat, seeing the despair in hazel eyes. "It's for the best, Gus." *You need to move on and so do we before we get any deeper in this thing. Whatever "this thing" is.*

Gus nodded slowly. "Yeah, I know. Can I come and visit when you leave? And maybe we talk...you know, every now and then?" she asked shyly. Maybe if she visited, they could build on that, she thought. She had a very good feeling what she wanted to build, but it felt like she had that already. *Why should build what we already have?* Well, because obviously, they did not have what she thought that did and she knew that. They had some weird pseudo-form of what she wanted.

"I would like that a lot, Gus. You're pretty much the best friend I've ever had in my whole life. I've grown used to talk to you every day about everything, so I would like to keep that up as best we can. But, let's not talk about that now. I mean, we're all still here."

"Right." Gus nodded. *Enjoy it while it lasts.*

They went back to cuddling, but now things seemed different. Gus was tense and did not focus on what they were watching. Instead, she was deep in thought and making wishes in her mind. She doubted that they would come true and she was not sure if it would be right of her to request



that Jayce stay. Besides, it would hurt a lot more if she asked and Jayce decided to leave anyway. It was indeed best to enjoy it while it lasted.

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Jayce smiled softly as she entered the living room and saw Gus knocked out with Princess sleeping on her chest. She loathed that soon this scene would not be common for her. She wondered how Princess was going to take being separated from "Us." Naptime would be hell that was certain because Princess was used to sleeping on Gus now.

"But, we all need this. Living together is just us building up a weird lie," Jayce muttered to herself. Still, that thought did not stop her stomach from twisting into a knot at the thought of not being in the house anymore, not having Gus' presence and support anymore. Then there was the fear that moving out would change everything between them and they would somehow lose everything. "We need to move on and I guess we'll be moving out sometime this week."

Jayce had just come back from an apartment that was all ready for her and Princess to move in to. She closed on the deal earlier, which was why she had been out. And now that she did not have to worry about someone coming to check on Princess' progress with her anymore, it was the best time to move on. She needed to get her own life and stop depending on Gus for everything, no matter how scary the thought was to not have Gus as she did right now.

She thought that maybe once she was away from Gus, she could also figure out if the feelings that she had for the taller woman meant anything. She knew the emotion was there, even when she tried to ignore it. She wondered if it came from her dependency on Gus or if it was something real. In order to explore that, she needed to get away from Gus for a while and see how she felt about that. Part of her hoped that the emotion was real, but a larger part of her hoped that the emotion only came from the comfort that came from living with Gus the past few months.

She did not really want to be attracted to Gus or have deeper feelings for the businesswoman because she doubted that the feelings would be returned. First off, she had dated Gus' little sister, so she knew that would be a huge obstacle. Sometimes, the irrational fear crept up on her that Gus would somehow turn into Jannie, even though Gus proved to be completely different from the sibling that she raised. The fear only lasted seconds whenever it did show up, but it was still there.

There was always the chance that Gus was just being nice to her out of guilt too since Gus believed that she was the reason that Jayce was fired and she also believed that she was the reason Jannie threw Jayce out. That really scared her. What if Gus was just being nice to her from guilt and nothing more?

Focusing on the sleeping duo to take her mind off of her worries, Jayce was sure of one thing- Gus really liked Princess and the feeling was mutual. Gus never had any problem with doing anything with or for the baby. Princess' face lit up in a special way whenever she laid eyes on Gus. They adored each other and Jayce was glad for that. She hoped that after everything, Gus

still wanted to be in contact with Princess at the least because she believed that Gus could and would be a great help in Princess' life.

Moving to wake the napping pair and break the news to Gus, Jayce was taken from that task when the doorbell rang. She turned around and went back to the door, happy for an excuse not to wake the duo yet anyway.

"Who is it?" Jayce called before opening the door. She noted that since she had been there Gus had not gotten many visitors. But, she did get a lot of phone calls and she spent a lot of time answering emails, so she doubted that her hostess was lacking in friends.

There was a long pause. "You sound familiar. Who are you?" the voice countered.

Jayce blinked; that voice did sound familiar. Hesitation held her for a second, but she opened the door. Standing in front of her was Jannie, who was frowning deeply and instantly glaring at her with hard hazel eyes. Jayce frowned too, not used to seeing light brown eyes filled with anger anymore.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Jannie demanded, snarling at her former girlfriend.

Not waiting for a response, Jannie pushed past her ex and stepped deeper into the house. Jayce shut the door, not too sure what to do. It was not like she could kick Jannie out; this was her sister's house, after all. She was just going to have to wait and see how Gus handled things.

Jannie stopped dead in her tracks when she came to the living room and took in the sight. It was not just Gus sleeping on the couch with the baby. It was also all of the baby things that were sprinkled through out the floor.

"What the hell is going on here?" the college student roared, turning to Jayce for answers. "Goddamn it, Jayce, are you fucking my sister?!" she demanded, pointing a sharp, accusing finger at her ex-girlfriend.

Before Jayce could respond, Princess let out a short cry, disliking her sleep being disturbed. This stirred Gus much more than the yelling did. Gus gently rubbed the child's back, calming her down. A yawn escaped the businesswoman before she opened one eye to see what all of the commotion was about.

"Jannie, what're you doing here?" Gus inquired in a curious, partially sleepy tone.

"What am I doing here?! What the hell is my ex-girlfriend doing here is a better question!" Jannie hollered, face turning red from her fury.

"I don't see how that's any of your business. You kicked her out, after all, and wouldn't take her back into the house at least, even though you knew she didn't have anywhere to go. You said she wasn't any of your concern," Gus pointed out.

"So, you bring her in here?!" the younger sister demanded, stomping her foot hard.

"Yes, and I need you to stop screaming. Princess is trying to sleep," Gus calmly replied, rubbing the baby's back a little more to help keep her asleep.

"I don't give a shit!" Jannie roared, eyes blazing and body language carrying any part of the message they might have missed.

Gus curled her lip in disgust and shook her head. Climbing off of the couch, she strolled off into the back with Princess in her arms, walking away as if she had not even heard her sister's screaming. Jannie watched her sister going, staring daggers at the older woman's back. When Gus was out of sight, she turned her glare on her ex-girlfriend.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Jannie barked again, snarling like an enraged animal. Her face was twisted and distorted, hiding any and all traces of the physical beauty that she held.

"She doesn't have to answer you," Gus replied sharply, returning to the living room.

"I can't believe you, Augusta! You can't keep a woman of your own, so you're picking up my scraps! You're really becoming a loser, Augusta!" Jannie declared. Each time she said her sister's full name, it was covered in venom and spite.

"Are you done yet? Because I'm not impressed with all of the yelling or your tone or your goddamn attitude in general," Gus commented dryly. "Let me know when you want to talk about this like an adult."

Jannie scoffed dramatically, throwing her head back. "Please, like there's anything to fucking talk about. My loser sister is screwing my loser ex-girlfriend, not caring that Jayce is only doing it because she's needs a place to stay to keep that brat! She's just prostituting herself to you! You're just being used again and you're too stupid to see it!"

"Jannie, I think it would be best if you left," Gus stated in a completely unruffled manner. Her decision was based more on the hurt look on Jayce's face rather than the hysterics that her little sister was in. Besides, it did not seem like she would be able to speak rationally with her younger sibling.

"You think it would be best if I left?! You should be kicking out Jayce, but you're too chicken-shit to do that! She fuck you that good, Gus?" Jannie sneered. "Not that you'd know since you're a cold fish in bed, right?"

Gus' eyes narrowed. "Jannie, I'm about a second away from tossing you out on your ass and you know I will, so you better go." With her build, it would be no problem for her to pick up her little sister and flung her out onto the lawn.

Jannie glared at both women again before turning and storming out of the house. She slammed the door so hard that whole place shook. Gus rolled her eyes at the display and then turned her

attention to Jayce, rushing over to the smaller woman. Gus wasted no time wrapping Jayce in a hug, which she returned.

"That went well," Jayce muttered sarcastically.

"As well as one can expect from Jannie nowadays. This is why I didn't tell her in the first place. I knew she'd be mean and resentful about it," Gus explained, rubbing the small of Jayce's back to help soothe away any hurt feeling. Part of her recognized just how well they fit together and how much she wanted to hold Jayce like this as much as possible, how much she wanted to soothe away all bad things from the shorter woman.

"You were right about that, but was kicking her out the right thing to do?" Jayce wondered aloud.

"What? It's not like I would've been able to explain what happened to her while she was in that state. When she's a bit more rational, I'll talk to her about."

"But, she still won't be happy about it."

"You're right about that, but she's going to have to deal with it."

Jayce sighed and pulled away a little to look the taller woman in the eye. "Gus, I don't want to come between you and your sister. You're the only family you each have and I really don't want to do anything to damage that. Jannie adores you and I don't want to break that apart. I need to move out."

Gus was silent for a moment, doing her best not to frown. She hated being reminded that one day Jayce and Princess were going to be leaving her. She had grown accustomed to having them around and did not see any reason to change that. But, she did not voice that thought because she doubted that Jayce felt the same way. Besides, realistically, she knew that Jayce could not stay with her forever.

"Well, you will, eventually. But, until then, Jannie is going to have to deal with it. Besides, it's not like we're in a relationship or anything." The businesswoman did her best not to sound upset while speaking that last sentence. She could not stop the flash of anger and pain that went through her eyes for a moment, though.

It was Jayce's turn to be quiet and fight back a scowl. "You're right, but still, I don't want to cause trouble between you and your sister. Thankfully, I found an apartment this afternoon. I can move in anytime."

Gus' embrace tightened and she looked down at Jayce with sorrowful eyes. "You're leaving, Jay?" she whimpered. *Oh, god, I don't want to be alone now! Not after having you and Princess with me for these past few months! These were the best four months of my life!*

Jayce swallowed a little, trying to fight off the sensation that she was drowning in those lovely hazel eyes. For a moment, she dared to consider that Gus wanted her and Princess to stay. She even entertained the thought that Gus might see her as more than a charity case, but maybe as a friend.

"I have to. We both need to get on with our lives, Gus. We've talked about this already," the accountant reminded her host.

"I know..." Gus sighed. "I just didn't think you'd be leaving so soon. I've gotten really used to having you here," she admitted. *Probably more than I should have, but I can't help it. You're so special, Jay. You and your little girl are so goddamn special and everyone else is blind if they can't see that.*

"I know. I've gotten used to being here, but this was never meant to be permanent. Thank you for taking great care of me and Princess, but now I have to stand on my own. I also need to get Princess somewhere stable. I don't want her to start thinking this is home or it'll be that much harder on her when we do leave." *I don't want to start thinking that either because I know you didn't mean for it to be that way. I don't want to be anymore confused than I already am too. I need to sort myself out before I can even begin to deal with you again, dear, sweet, and charming Augusta Tucker.*

"I'll help you get your things together. Is that okay?" Gus asked, her voice sounding small and frightened to her own ears.

"Of course."

"And I can come visit, right?" Hazel eyes sparkled with hope while her voice trembled.

"Of course," Jayce stated soundly. This got a beaming smile from the taller woman.

"And you can come visit me. And if you ever need a babysitter for the spud, you know you can call me."

"I know."

Though the conversation was over, they did not let go of each other. They felt something that was too deep and intense to sever yet. There was something very peaceful and healing going on between them, something that they wanted to hold onto for as long as possible.

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Moving was relatively painless because Jayce did not have much to move. Gus offered to go shopping with her for furniture, but Jayce turned her down, knowing that Gus would then offer to pay and all sorts of things. The whole point of moving was to strike out on her own than to have Gus provide for her.

After helping with the move, Gus went home and the silence that greeted her was booming. It only took about five minutes for her to decide that she could not take the deafening, choking quiet that engulfed her. She went out, hoping that would soothe the ache in her heart and fill the huge void in her soul, but when she came back home, the silence seemed even louder. She went to watch some television, but found it was not the same with Jayce not on the sofa with her and Princess was not curled up in between them. It just felt lonely and empty. So, she gave up and just went to bed.

The thundering wail of the alarm clock woke her up for the first time in months. In a daze, she reached for it, but could not recall how to turn it off. She ended up just yanking it out of the wall before falling out of bed. She expected to smell breakfast, but no such aroma greeted her. There were no songs in the air to indicate that Princess was up and watching television.

"This sucks..." Gus muttered, scratching her head on her way to the bathroom.

Once she was done in the bathroom, she put on a suit and had breakfast that consisted of coffee and a slice of burnt toast. She was out of the house in less than twenty minutes. On the way out, she glanced back into the house and noticed that everything was still and quiet. She felt as vacant as the house looked.

"The loneliness will go away, eventually. I felt like this when Jannie moved out for college. I felt like this when I moved in here. It'll go away. It has to go away," Gus told herself, tears gathering at the corners of her eyes.

The gaping hole did not get any smaller with time, though. After a week, Gus began having breakfast at *Marco's*, the small bistro that she knew Jayce enjoyed. She was hoping to run into Jayce, but it was not destined to be. Still, Gus went everyday, even though Zoe refused to serve her and she suspected Sam, the young man behind the counter, spit in her food when she was not looking. And it was often that she was not looking before she was trying to spot Jayce.

Gus sighed, exiting the café after another disheartening day and throwing out her muffin in a nearby garbage can. "This is pathetic. I'm pathetic. I should just go over there, but I don't want her to feel like I'm crowding her. Maybe I could call her tonight, just to check up on her. The sound of her voice and Princess might help me get more than three hours of sleep..." she muttered to herself.

In the end, she did not call. She did not want to smother Jayce, so she figured that she would try to make it to the end of the month before calling or begging if she could come visit. In the meantime, she moped around her empty house, remembering when there was life around the place.

The days ticked by slowly and she often wondered what Jayce and Princess were doing. In moments of weakness, she found herself reaching for the phone. She even called a couple of times, requesting to speak with the baby at times she knew Princess was already asleep. Just hearing Jayce answer the phone was balm to her agonized soul. They always exchanged a few pleasantries, but nothing more and got off of the phone quickly with each other.

"She's moving on without me...I should try to do the same..." Gus decided. It was the smartest thing to do, her brain insisted. Her heart just would not listen.

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11: In the right order

"Come on, pretty baby, hush now," Jayce cooed, gently rocking Princess with the hope that it would help put the baby to sleep.

Princess did not seem to know the rocking was supposed to make her sleepy because she continued crying. Her tears had dried up a while ago, but she was still making the noise to show that she was upset. Jayce tried singing to her, which usually worked on calming Princess down, but it had no effect on the distressed child that night. Turning on Princess' favorite show did not get her to quiet down and reading her favorite book did not have any effect either. Jayce was out of ideas for the moment, not totally sure why her usually happy child was so out of sorts lately.

"Princess, why are you so cranky?" Jayce wondered aloud, even though she had a theory for why that was. "I'm sorry, pretty baby, but Gus is gone now. I know you miss her and everything, but we have to learn to live without her. Yes, it's hard. I mean, there's no consistent support, warm hugs, thankful smiles, body to cuddle against, happy presence, and everything, but we have to learn to live without her. She has a life of her own and we have to build a life. She'll come visit soon and we'll go visit her," she promised in a whisper.

Princess seemed to understand the promise because she drifted off to sleep after that. It was always an adventure with Princess to go to bed ever since they moved into their new apartment. Jayce understood the child's frustrations. Gus was Princess' best friend and she missed the businesswoman, especially during naptime and bedtime. The baby had grown accustomed to falling asleep on Gus, listening to Gus' heartbeat like a lullaby. Sometimes Gus would hum to her too and she was used to Gus' voice for it, so it seemed that Jayce singing to her would not cut it.

"Maybe I should call her..." Jayce considered as she placed Princess down on the air mattress that was acting as her bed for now. She planned to go out and buy a crib as soon as she had the cash to do so, but right now, she was on a tight budget. Princess did not seem to mind the sleeping accommodations, just the lack of Gus' involved.

Sitting on the smooth, hardwood floor, Jayce reached for her cell phone, which was plugged into the wall against her back. She went through the received calls, just to see the three times that Gus had called her. A void that she felt deep in her chest widened with every second that ticked by and anxiety crept through her blood as she stared at the familiar number. A phantom voice told her to call Gus, end the pain. Instead, she flicked the phone away from her, not caring if it was damaged as it slammed into the wall.

"I need a reason to call her. I don't want her to think I'm helpless or something like that. There's nothing attractive about that. Do I want her to find me attractive?" A sigh escaped her lips. "Who

am I kidding? Yes, I want her to be attracted to me and find me attractive. I want her to want me. If I miss her this much, obviously those feelings I have are real.

"I need a reason to call her. It would be stupid to just call and say 'I miss you and I just wanted to hear your voice.' How needy would that be? She would probably think I'm pathetic. But, I do...I miss her so much..." she admitted aloud with another deep sigh. "I miss everything about Gus, but I have to move on. This way, she can patch things up with Jannie and I can worry about raising Princess. We both have way too much going on in life and neither of us is probably ready for a relationship anyway. I mean, she just ended a marriage and I just ended a year-long relationship. We need to focus on fixing our lives. Hopefully, I can get another job somewhere or at least more clients, get some furniture in here, and get Princess settled into our new home. Until then, life is going to be a struggle and I don't need Gus-on-the-brain distracting me from that."

Deciding against calling did not prevent her from staring at the phone and wishing that Gus would call. Sure, they had not had any deep conversations since she moved out, but just hearing Gus' voice lifted her spirits. Gus just had an aura that made her believe everything would be okay. A smile lit up Jayce's face when the phone did ring and she saw that it was Gus.

"Hello, Gus," Jayce said, doing her best to control her voice. She did not want to sound as joyous as she felt, even though she knew that Gus was not really calling for her. Still, it was such a delight to hear from the taller woman.

"Hey, Jay," Gus replied, voice smooth and smoky, like a warm mist. "Is the little bit still up by any chance?"

Jayce glanced at the "little bit" in question. "I just put her to bed."

"Really? She's going to bed later." She hoped that Jayce did not point out that she was calling at a time when she thought that Princess was in bed. She doubted that she would be able to explain why she was doing that without sounding like some kind of idiot.

"Yeah. She misses you..." Jayce admitted. She sniffled a little and rubbed her eye, biting her lip to avoid confessing who else missed Gus. Silently, she prayed that she would not burst into tears while Gus was on the phone with her.

"I miss her too. Why's she going to bed so late?" the businesswoman asked, concern dripping from her voice.

"I think she just needs to adjust to the new place. I know she misses her napping buddy," Jayce commented, smile heard in her voice.

Gus laughed, sorrow laced underneath the sound of glee. "I haven't had a nap since you two left. Well, I've got work in the morning, so I should get going," she said, not wanting to keep Jayce just in case the other woman did not really want to talk to her, but was being polite. She noticed that Jayce had not called her since leaving, so she considered that Jayce might not be inclined to speak her much.



"Oh, okay." Jayce could not hide her disappointment; she felt it too deeply. "Have you been eating well?" she asked out of the blue, not willing to get off of the phone yet. She just needed to hear Gus for a little while longer.

"Uh..." Gus paused for a moment. Part of her was happy for the excuse to continue speaking to her good friend, but she wished that she could report that she had been taking care of herself. She did not want Jayce to think that she was pitiful and needed someone to take care of her.

"You're not," Jayce answered her own question.

"I'm not. I've been eating a lot of fast food. I think I'm gaining weight from it," Gus replied. It was either the fast food or the intense emptiness devouring her that was putting a spare tire around her middle. She preferred to blame the junk food.

"You need to eat better than that," Jayce gently scolded the older woman. And then she thought better of it; she did not want to come across as a nag because she wanted to keep Gus on the line. "I'm sorry, Gus. I don't have any right to tell you that."

"What's the supposed to mean? You're only telling me that because you care about me. I don't want you to apologize for caring," Gus replied in a semi-hard tone. *I want you to care about me!*

"I do care, but I don't want to sound like I'm a nagging wife or anything like that."

The choice of words gave them both a bit of a pause. "Wife" echoed through both of their minds. Gus could not help realizing that she missed Jayce in ways that she never missed her now ex-wife, Amanda. She felt closer to Jayce than she ever did to Amanda. She trusted Jayce more than she ever trusted Amanda. She forced down those thoughts before anything further came out because she did not want to the lonely, empty feeling to balloon into something even deeper.

"I don't mind," Gus replied. "It's nice to have someone worrying about me for a change." She was the one that usually did the worrying. Everyone else either assumed that she had everything under control at all time or they just did not give enough of a damn about her to worry.

"I'm sure you have plenty of people that worry about you. I just can't see Amanda getting all of your friends in the divorce," Jayce remarked with a light laugh.

"Please, all she made in that divorce were a hive of busy-bee enemies. She didn't even get a good settlement. I'm sure next time she'll consider sleeping with a lawyer when cheating on someone," Gus joked. Being around Jayce and Princess had healed her enough to joke around about her ex-wife's betrayal. She knew that everything that she wanted out of life would not have been gained with Amanda and now knew that there was something wrong with Amanda and not her. She honestly felt better off. She credited all of that to Jayce and Princess.

"At least you got away from that intact. Speaking of getting away, I should let you go, so you can get ready for bed and you'll be fresh for work," Jayce conceded. She did not want to go too far or she thought that Gus might call less if she did sound like a nag or if she kept Gus from

doing important things. *I wish I was there with her and didn't have to worry about how long to stay on the phone with her.* She never felt this way about anyone before and she was not sure how to handle it.

Gus was silent for a while. "I guess you're right. I should get to bed." *And stay up staring at the ceiling, trying to hear you and Princess breathing from miles away.*

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

The call disconnected and Jayce stared at the phone, feeling tears gathering in her eyes. She wiped the tears away before they could fall...from her eyes anyway. Her heart pretty much erupted into tears, crying out for Gus.

"This doesn't make any sense. We're just friends, so why do I feel like this?" Jayce wondered, rubbing her face.

At first, she blamed her unease from being alone for the first time in over a year, but she knew that was not it. It was not that she missed Jannie-the person that had been with her for a year. No, she knew it was Gus' absence specifically that caused her discomfort and downright pain. She hurt from the loss of companionship, gentle understanding, and pure sincerity that came in everything Gus did. She missed the only person that seemed to care about Princess as much as she did. She missed the only person that seemed to care about her.

Deciding to sleep off the trauma of being separated from Gus, Jayce silently crawled into bed, lying close to Princess. Sleep only came for a few hours before Princess woke up, crying into the dark. Jayce shot up and gathered the child up. Cooing and whispering soothing words, Princess drifted back to sleep after a few minutes. Jayce sighed and placed the baby back down.

"She never did this when we were with Gus..." Jayce muttered. Every night since moving out, Princess woke up in the middle of the night, crying as if she was having a nightmare. A couple of times, she had actually called out for Gus, like she expected Gus to save her. That broke Jayce's heart each time she heard it. Not knowing what to do about it, she just hoped that eventually Princess got over it and moved on.

The next day, Jayce took Princess outside. She thought that going some place familiar and friendly would lift the baby's spirit, as well as her own. Princess was difficult and fussy while getting dressed, but when she saw that they were going outside, she cheered loudly. This put a smile on Jayce's face. It seemed like an eternity since she heard the child cheer over something.

They took the short ride to familiar territory, getting more cheers out of the baby, as they pulled up to *Marco's*. Princess twisted and turned, trying to get out of her car seat. A chuckle escaped Jayce as she freed the child and carried her into the café. A loud, jovial, high-pitch squeal echoed through the eatery, getting some disdainful looks from many of the patrons.

"You finally brought the baby back!" Zoe grinned, charging over to Jayce. "I wondered what happened to you! We've never gone a week without seeing you let alone something like four whole months!"

"I'll tell you all about it. You'll never believe it," Jayce commented with a small sigh. She could hardly believe it. Those few months that she was gone seemed like some great dream, made great by the presence of a certain hazel-eyed businesswoman who could have quite possibly been a guardian angel in disguise.

"I hope it involves you getting to keep Princess. She's such a cutie and she deserves a parent who loves her unconditionally, like you," Zoe replied.

Jayce smiled. "Thanks. I'm going to take a seat."

Zoe nodded. "I'll bring the usual for both of you and then you can tell me the story. Oh, you won't believe who had the nerve to show her face here! That bitch that kept bothering you from before came in again a bunch of times!"

Jayce paused. *Gus? Gus was here?* "She did? Did she say anything?"

Zoe shook her head. "Nah, we chased off pretty good. She might've been looking for you again. She came in here all distracted, scanning the crowd and everything. I bet she was looking to bug you. I mean, she even went over to your table and stared it one time, like you were just going to appear there!"

The accountant decided not to fill Zoe in on things while they were standing right there. *This is a tale that needs to be told sitting down.* She also figured that she needed to sort out what she wanted to share with Zoe and what she wanted to keep to herself. She sat down at a nearby table with Princess on her lap. Princess reached for the salt and peppershakers, but was unable to grab them.

"You hear that, pretty baby? Gus was in here looking for us. She really does miss us. Maybe we should go visit her," Jayce whispered to the busybody baby.

"Us?" Princess turned around at the sound of that name and stared at Jayce with wide, near-black eyes, begging to know where the tall businesswoman was.

"No, she's not here right now, pretty baby. But, we can go see her," Jayce replied, getting a loud laugh. Princess seemed to approve of the idea. It seemed safe to go see Gus if the taller woman was looking for them. It would not seem like they were butting in on her life then.

Before Jayce could go into further detail, Zoe came over with a high chair for the baby. Jayce sat Princess down and the child continued to reach for the items that were not within her grasp. Zoe walked off, only to return seconds later with Jayce's favorite muffin and a small coffee.

"So, tell me, what happened? Where have you been the past few months? Did you find a job? Did you get custody of Princess? Did that bitch girlfriend of yours ever stop being a bitch? And what about Princess? She's so big now! Did you get custody?" Zoe shot off each question rapidly, not giving Jayce a chance to respond. She finally stopped when a hand went up from Jayce. However, the hand did not stop her from bouncing in her seat, eager to hear what happened.

"Can I weigh in on this conversation or what?" Jayce asked with a teasing smile.

A sheepish blush colored Zoe's cheeks. "Oh, sorry. Go ahead and tell me what happened."

Jayce nodded and went into the story of what happened in her life since the last time that she was at the bistro. Zoe was glued to her seat and listening to every word, leaning in closer every now and then to make sure that she did not miss a single detail. It slipped her mind that she was supposed to be working. No one said anything to her, though. The story went on totally uninterrupted.

"Wow, I didn't expect Gus to be such a nice person," Zoe commented at the end. A thoughtful look appeared in her eyes. "I feel bad for giving her a Danish I dropped on the floor."

"You did what?!" Jayce demanded, glaring at the younger woman.

"Sorry! I thought she was the enemy! But, don't worry, I think she knew and she threw it out as soon as she left!" Zoe replied, throwing her hands out in her defense. She decided against saying all of the other things she and Sam did to the items that Gus ordered. She supposed that the next time she wanted to help a friend, she had better get the full story just to make sure she was doing the right thing.

"So? You still took her money and you treated her badly when she didn't do anything to deserve it. She's a sweetheart of a person and she needs to be treated as such. She's gone through a lot lately and it really tears me up to know that you were being so mean to her," Jayce scolded the young woman.

The waitress pouted and turned her eyes to her feet. Jayce sighed; Zoe looked downright pathetic, especially when she poked out her bottom lip and whimpered a little. The expression tugged at Jayce's heartstrings.

"It's all right, though, Zoe. You were trying to look out for me and I appreciate that," Jayce said, earning a smile from her tablemate.

"I'm sorry I was so mean to her. I just thought that she was trying to pester you again. I can't believe she helped you keep Princess."

Jayce nodded and reached out for the child, taking her hand. "She adores Princess just as much as I do, I think. She helped me get comfortable with the idea of being Princess' mom. I'm not her aunt. I'm her mom," the statement was said with unblemished and righteous pride.

Princess grinned. "Ma!" she declared.

The shout caused Jayce's eyes to water, even though the child was not looking at her and most certainly not addressing her. Still, Princess was not the most talkative child, even though she loved to laugh and make other noises; words just were not her thing for the most part. Jayce could only hope that one day Princess' random shout might be directed toward her.

Zoe smiled too. "You are her mom and you're a great mom. So, when was the last time you saw Gus? When she was in here, I guess she was looking for you."

"I haven't seen her in a couple of weeks, since I moved out of her house. I'm going to go see her when I leave here now that I know she was looking for me. I was trying to just ease out of her life, let her get on with things, but that might've been a mistake," she realized. If Gus was around looking for her and Gus was the one making it a point to call, then maybe Gus really did want her and Princess around. There was no need to make them all suffer if that was the case.

"Seems that way. When you told the story, it seemed like you two got along great, so I don't see why you would stop seeing her. She probably needs a friend. I know you do," Zoe pointed out, eyes saying more than her mouth. Beyond a friend, she believed Jayce deserved happiness and someone that would treat her with all the kindness that she needed and deserved. From what she heard in that tale, Gus was probably that person.

Jayce nodded in agreement, thinking that she might be getting the underlying message. She hoped that Zoe was right about it now that she had time to see what life was like without Gus around. After catching up on Zoe's life, Jayce grabbed Princess and went back to the car. Princess fussed a little, not wanting to go back to her restraining car seat.

"Calm down, pretty baby. We're going to go see Gus," Jayce informed the struggling child.

Onyx eyes lit up and a bright grin took over a chubby face. "'Us?'"

"Yes, baby, 'Us. We're going to go see her."

Princess clapped, clearly grasping what was going on. It was easy to put her in the car seat now. Jayce jumped in the driver's seat and they were off. So overjoyed was Jayce with the idea of seeing Gus, she did not remember to call and see if Gus was home. She was quite disappointed to find the house empty.

"'Us?'" Princess asked, eyes wide with hope, staring deeply at Jayce as they stood on the doorstep of the house.

"Sorry, pretty baby, but 'Us isn't home right now," Jayce replied with a sigh. Part of her wished that she had kept her key, but she knew that even if she had, she would not be comfortable with going into the home without Gus' permission to enter. Not ready admit defeat, she did knock again, just in case. There was no answer again. She turned to return to the car.

Tears gathered in the baby's eyes and her mouth fell into a deep pout. "Us?" Her mouth trembled, not liking one bit that they were not going in the house.

Jayce knew just how the baby felt because she wanted to cry too. She had been looking forward to seeing Gus. She *longed* to see Gus, knowing just a glimpse of the older woman would end the ache in her heart and soul. As soon as she was about to start the car, she watched as a familiar CUV pulled into the driveway of the house.

"Us!" Princess cheered, tugging at her car seat straps, trying to escape the contraption and reunite with her second favorite person on Earth.

Jayce got out of the car at the same time as Gus exited her vehicle. Their eyes met and the world seemed to stop around them. Jayce smiled while Gus' face did not know what to do. A grin spread across Gus' chestnut colored face while her eyes lit up with pure joy and she trotted over to the pair, not caring how silly she looked jogging in a business suit. It took every ounce of willpower that she had not sweep Jayce up into a tight embrace; the same thing could be said of Jayce.

"Us!" Princess was trying to go to the woman before Jayce finished unbuckling her from the seat.

"She's happy to see you. I hope you don't mind us just dropping by like this," Jayce said.

"No! No! I don't mind at all! I'm happy to see both of you. Please, come over anytime," Gus replied, unable to keep her enthusiasm down. She seemed ready to jump out of her shoes to celebrate their return. Jayce smiled because of the reaction, knowing that the businesswoman's words were sincere.

The trio went into the house; Gus carried Princess. The baby hugged Gus all the way in and barely wanted to let her go, so that she could get out of her work clothes. Jayce was able to pry Princess away and Gus bolted off to get out of her suit to change into something more appropriate and return to her guest. After changing clothes in record time, Gus went to play with Princess.

"Hey, little bit!" Gus grinned, feeling much more comfortable in a plain white tee-shirt and tan sweatpants. She figured that was much more appropriate for playing around with Princess. "Who's my little bit? Who's my little bit?" she inquired before blowing a raspberry into Princess' cheek.

"Us!" the child giggled as Gus blew another raspberry into her chubby cheek.

Jayce watched the laughing pair roll around on the living room floor. Gus tickled Princess, who tried her best to tickle Gus in return. Eventually, Gus tired out and grabbed a book.

"I miss reading to you," Gus said to Princess as she carried the child to the sofa. The baby clapped when she saw the book while Gus took a much-needed seat. "Hey, Jay, I'm going to read

to Princess. Are you going to come read too, so we can do the voices for her?" the businesswoman inquired.

Jayce sat down with the duo, moving close to Gus, but leaving her some space. Princess moved in between the women, which actually made them move closer together. They wanted to make sure they both had a hold on the baby. Gus put the book in Princess' lap once they were all settled. The baby held the book while the two women read, each doing different, individual character voices. This always got a laugh out of Princess and today was no different.

"Again!" Princess requested when the book was finished.

"My thoughts exactly!" Gus replied, happy to start the book again.

Jayce chuckled. "Okay, I guess we'll read it one more time, but then after that, I think we need to get some dinner in both of you."

"I can order out," Gus volunteered. She figured if she did not trouble Jayce with anything, it would keep the accountant and the baby at the house longer.

As tempting as it was, Jayce would rather the alternative. "I'd rather cook...I miss cooking for you," she admitted, silently hoping that did not seem creepy or anything like that.

Gus was sure her heart stopped at that admission. "...I miss your cooking..." she confessed.

A bright smile graced Jayce's face. "Then it's settled. You've got something that I can make a meal out of?"

"I think you'll have to decide on that."

Jayce laughed a little and made her way to the kitchen after they read Princess the book one more time. She found there was more than enough for her to make dinner, but she also found that she had to throw a lot of things out for Gus. It seemed that the businesswoman did not realize much of her food expired or was becoming its own ecosystem. She shook her head, smiling to herself.

"Gus, what am I going to do with you?" she asked the air in a lighthearted tone.

While Jayce was busy with dinner, Gus turned on the television and put it on Princess' favorite channel. Princess started dancing as soon as the show came on; anything with music always got the baby off of her feet. Gus danced with her, wearing herself out again before Jayce called them for dinner.

"Come on, little bit. Mommy's calling us for dinner," Gus informed the child, smiling because of how quaint and domestic that sounded.

"Mommy," Princess echoed, grinning as she spoke.

"Yes, mommy. Make sure you say that to her face when we see her, okay?" Gus asked and Princess nodded.

Gus picked the child up and went to the dining room. Jayce was still setting the places, but she looked up at the duo when they came in. She smiled at them while Gus whispered into the baby's ear.

"What're you doing?" Jayce asked curiously.

"Okay, Princess, who's that?" Gus inquired, pointing at the shorter woman.

"Mommy!" Princess cheered, throwing her hands up.

Jayce was taken aback, wide-eyed from surprise. She then turned her gaze to Gus. "You should stop putting her up to that. It's not going to keep shocking me, you know," she scolded the taller woman.

Gus held her hands up in surrender. "I didn't do it this time. It was all her." She pointed down to the "little bit" in her arms. Jayce glared at her a little harder. Gus continued looking innocent. "I swear, I just asked her if she's ready to eat, so we can go back to playing!"

Jayce blinked hard when she saw that Gus was sincere. She shook her head a little. "She just...she never...she..." she babbled.

"Mommy?" Princess' expression dropped because of Jayce's shock. The baby's lip quivered when Jayce started crying.

"Ah, Jay, it's okay," Gus said in a soothing tone as she put her arm around Jayce. She caressed Jayce's lower back while Princess hugged Jayce around the neck.

"This is the first time she's ever called me that, especially without being put up to it by you. Before, I barely ever got an 'auntie' out of her, but she says 'mommy' with such confidence," Jayce sniffled.

"Because she knows. She knows you're her mommy. You're the one that takes care of her, Jay. Even before her father physically abandoned her, she knew you were the one that was there for her," Gus said in a low tone. She kissed the side of the shorter woman's head, hoping to calm her down.

Jayce nodded to show that she understood and the kiss to her head did its job. Taking a deep breath, Jayce got herself under control. She noted that she thoroughly enjoyed the feel of Gus' lips, even if it was just a peck to her temple. Little did she know, but Gus liked giving the kiss as much as she liked receiving it. They would both love excuses for more physical contact, especially shows of affection.



The three of them stayed in the embrace for a while, savoring the moment. Silently, they agreed it was time to eat dinner. Gus held onto Princess as they had dinner. They all ate in a comfortable atmosphere with a gentle quiet between them. Jayce watched Gus with the baby while eating, noting that Gus could not stop smiling as she fed Princess. A smile settled on Jayce's face too. *Gus is so good with her and she seems to love Princess so much. I hope Princess isn't too upset when we leave, but at least I know I can bring her back any time and Gus will be willing to pay her so much attention.*

To prolong the night and their time together, Jayce helped Gus with the dishes. Gus held onto Princess for that too, letting her try to help. All the baby really did was play with the bubbles from the dishwashing liquid. But, even those antics got a pleased smile from the hazel-eyed businesswoman. From the delighted peace on Gus' face, Jayce smiled and felt at peace herself. For a moment, she dared to wish that things were always like this.

"You want to watch a movie?" Gus asked, hope coloring her voice and eyes. *Maybe snuggle on the couch.*

Jayce answered quickly, eagerly. "Sure!"

They curled up on the couch and Gus quickly found a movie for them to watch. Princess fell asleep ten minutes in, resting on top of Gus. Gus held the baby carefully, making sure she stayed put. Somehow, throughout the picture without any thought, Gus and Jayce inched closer to each other until they were leaning on each other. Halfway through the movie, Gus' arm wrapped itself around Jayce's shoulders and Jayce pressed herself into Gus' side. For the rest of the film, they were hugged up together where it was hard to tell where one ended and the other began. When the movie was over, Jayce reluctantly turned to Gus and the sleeping baby.

"I should get her home and in bed," Jayce said in a low tone, reaching out to rub the child's back.

"Oh...right..." Gus muttered, purposely forgetting that they did not live with her anymore. Hazel eyes glanced down at the baby resting on her and her mind reminded that this was not her baby, this was not her family.

"We'll be back soon and you still have to visit us," Jayce reminded Gus with a sorrowful smile. She could see the agony in Gus' eyes and she wanted so badly to rid the older woman of that.

"Right...I'll walk you to your car," Gus mumbled, doing her best not to frown. All she really did was cause her face look tense and tight.

The air turned somber as the pair began to leave. Princess did not stir, which Jayce was thankful for because she knew the baby would cry if she saw they were leaving Gus. Jayce struggled not to burst into tears as she drove away, staring at Gus in her rearview mirror. The tall woman stayed outside until the car was out of sight.

Gus rubbed her eyes when the backlights of Jayce's car faded from view. Shoulders slumped as she returned inside. Immediately, the emptiness assaulted her like some malicious marauder. The

silence was like hot and icy daggers twisting in her gut. Ghosts of Jayce's and Princess' presences haunted her, dancing in the shadows. Their voice whispered to her in the still air. Gus could not stop the tears that flowed down her cheeks.

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Jayce almost winced as she entered the apartment, consumed by the isolation she felt. Princess seemed to sense it too, crying out in her sleep. Jayce clutched the baby tightly to her chest and bounced her slightly in her arms, hoping to keep the child asleep. Princess turned and whined.

"Hush, pretty baby," Jayce whispered.

"Mommy, 'Us," Princess muttered, rubbing her nose in Jayce's chest.

Jayce's heart clenched tightly. "Oh, baby, we'll go see Gus again," she promised.

Princess moaned, disliking the idea. Jayce said a silent prayer that Princess would remain in a half-sleep state at the most. She just could not deal with a wailing Princess tonight, not when she was hurting just as much. A few whimpers escaped the child, but she did not wake up. At least, not until Jayce put her on the bed and started taking out of her clothes. Princess was up and sniffing before Jayce could even get her pants off. Jayce quickly brought the child back to her chest, bouncing her, rubbing her back, and cooing in Princess' ear.

"Hush, pretty baby," Jayce repeated, singing the words now.

Princess started crying. It was not a wail or bawling, nothing loud or obnoxious. It was a displeased noise, like she was annoyed with something. Jayce could guess what that something was. Princess cried herself back to sleep because Jayce could not do anything for her.

"Oh, god," Jayce muttered, covering her face with her hands after she putting Princess in her pajamas and settling the baby on the bed. She sat on the foot of the bed and rocked helplessly. Never before had she felt so alone and out of sorts.

A knock at the door drew her attention and was a welcomed distraction, even though she had no idea who might be visiting her at all. Picking herself up from the bed, she dragged her body to the door. Peering through the peephole, she drew back with wide eyes and rapidly opened the door.

"Gus, what're you-" Jayce's question was cut off as Gus rushed in, cupped her face with both hands, and planted a passionate kiss on parted lips. Jayce moaned, accepted, and returned the show of affection, but it was over almost as soon as it started.

"Come home," Gus begged. Hazel eyes watered, beseeching the smaller woman to give into that request. "I don't mean stay with me as a roommate. Live with me as my girlfriend. Be my family again."

"Gus..." Jayce was overwhelmed by the kiss and request.

"Please!" the businesswoman implored in a tone that Jayce had never heard before. It broke her heart to hear Gus sound so desperate, but it also made her feel so very wanted for the first time in her life.

"What about Jannie?" Jayce inquired, not sure what else to say.

"I'll take care of Jannie. I can deal with her, but I can't deal with being apart from you and Princess. Please, come back home. I need you and I need Princess in my life. I want us to be a family again. Please."

"...I really...really want that, Gus. I've missed you so much," Jayce confessed.

"Then come home, Jay. I want to be with you and I want to help raise Princess. Please."

Jayce bit her lip, tasting Gus and the answer to her request. "Yes! God, yes!" She threw herself into Gus' arms and they shared another passionate, but short kiss. "I've missed you so much, Gus."

"I know the feeling. Can we go tonight?"

"Yes. Princess will be so happy to wake up at home. She was crying for you so much. I felt like joining her most of the time."

Gus smiled a little. "I know the feeling. Most days, I just wanted to cry too. I haven't slept more than three hours a night since you guys have been gone. I just wanted you back so much."

Jayce nodded. "I'm glad you had the courage to come here and say what needed to be said. Give me a minute to pack some clothes."

Gus reluctantly released Jayce. The shorter woman quickly stuffed a few things in a duffel bag while Gus went over to Princess. A grimace was frozen on Princess' face, which Gus could not believe. She picked the baby up, along with her little blanket, and held the tiny body to her.

"Would it be all right to take her out like this? So we don't have to wake her to get her dressed?" Gus asked.

"Is it still warm outside?" Jayce countered.

"Yes."

"Just make sure you put her shoes on."

Gus nodded and did as she was told. They were off after that, returning to Gus' home in her car; they agreed to go get Jayce's car tomorrow along with other belongings from the apartment.

They also decided to discuss what to do about the apartment tomorrow. Right now, all they wanted to do was get a good night's sleep for the first time in too long time as far as they were concerned. They all ended up sleeping in Gus' bed, which was fine by the businesswoman.

Gus woke up in the middle of the night, smiling when she realized both Jayce and Princess were cuddled into her body; Princess had ended up on top of Jayce and partially on top of Gus. The hazel-eyed woman ran her fingers across Jayce's bare arm and fell back to sleep with a happy grin on her face.

When Gus stirred from sleep again, the wonderful smell of breakfast wafted through the air and wide, innocent obsidian eyes stared at her. Reaching up, Gus caressed Princess' cheek, getting a giggle out of the baby.

"Hi, 'Us!" Princess greeted with a merry smile.

"Hey, little bit, let's go see what Mommy made for breakfast!" Gus suggested, snatching up the child and exiting the room, stepping into her new life. The life that she was now happily going to share with Jayce and Princess. They were going to be a family, she was sure of that.

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Epilogue: Growing

Gus sniffled and wiped her face, wanting to keep herself from crying. It was hard because of all the emotion bubbling up inside of her, wanting to pour itself out in some manner. She took a deep breath and hoped that it would keep the tears at bay for a little while longer. She supposed if she did weep, she could blame it on allergies and the fact that they were outside in a grassy area.

A gentle hand on the businesswoman's shoulder got her attention and she turned to smile at the owner of the hand. Jayce smiled back and then they turned their focus back to the stage where graduates were walking to receive their diplomas. Gus found her emotions settling down somewhat thanks to the comfortable hand still on her shoulder.

"I can't believe my baby sister has an MBA now," Gus whispered, sniffing a little because she still felt like crying. Her pride just wanted to let it out because it was so amazing. She could not believe that her sister made it to this point in her life. Her eyes followed Jannie as she strolled across the stage as if the whole world belonged to her as she received her degree.

"With honors too," Jayce added in, which did not help Gus' watering eyes.

"She's such a good student! She works hard. She had a better GPA than I did," the taller woman admitted, pride and joy in her voice. She pounded her chest just a little, feeling good about herself because she knew that she helped get her sister to this point. "I wish my parents lived to see this day. I bet they wouldn't believe it! Jannie was not the best student when she was younger."

"You raised her well. I know your parents would be proud of both of you. Now, you have to get another one through this," Jayce remarked, bouncing Princess in her arms.

Gus laughed a bit. "I look forward to that, but I hope it doesn't happen as fast as it did with my sister. I want to savor my little bit being little for a while. I'm going to try to spoil this one a little less, though," she commented, rubbing Princess on the top of her hand, getting a grin out of the baby. She then smiled at her girlfriend. "I will spoil her mommy as much as I please, though," she added in, putting her arm around Jayce's shoulders and pressing the smaller woman to her.

"I don't know if her mommy is going to let you spoil her too much," Jayce said with a half-smile. She did not mind the occasionally romantic gesture, of course, but she did not want Gus to burn herself out, trying to take care of someone that did not need attention every minute of the day.

"You can argue all you want, but I'm going to continue to spoil you. I'm going to make sure you want for nothing. Jannie can try to spoil herself from now on. This graduation gift is going to be the last one I give her for a while," Gus proclaimed.

Jayce did not say anything to that, but she thought that her girlfriend's heart was way too big to just cut Jannie off and let her grow up. She loved that about Gus, though, and would not hold it against her. It was that big heart that let her and Princess in and gave them all a new life together.

"I'm going to go talk to her, okay?" Gus said once the graduation ceremony was over.

"Sure. I'll take Princess to the car. I'm sure she'll enjoy the AC," Jayce commented, her face glistening from the unusually hot May afternoon. Princess was sound asleep now, not thinking about the heat at all.

Gus smiled a bit. "Is it her or you that might enjoy the AC?" she teased, leaning down to kiss the baby.

Jayce's eyes twinkled in a way that showed that she had been caught. The tender expression earned her a light, but passionate kiss from Gus. After pulling away, they stared at each other for a moment.

"Good luck," Jayce whispered.

"I hope I don't need luck, but thanks for the support," Gus replied.

"No problem. I really hope Jannie is grown up enough to put everything behind her. I don't want to cost you your sister."

"You won't," Gus assured her, tenderly caressing her cheek as if that helped drive her point home. "Everything that happens is between me and Jannie. It has nothing to do with you."

Jayce did not bother to argue that because she had already argued against it many times. Right now, she just wanted to give Gus the space and opportunity to reach out to her younger sister.

They parted ways with Jayce going back to Gus' car while the businesswoman moved through the crowd to find Jannie. She was not surprised to find the little diva in the middle of taking pictures with her friends. Gus had no problem with waiting, especially since she did not have to wait long. As soon as Jannie noticed her sister, she moved over to Gus.

"You made it!" Jannie grinned, her excitement radiating off of her as she threw her arms around Gus and engulfed her in a huge, loving hug.

"Of course I made. I haven't missed a graduation yet," Gus replied, returning the embrace with as much zeal. She patted Jannie on the back a couple of times before pulling away. She had to wipe tears from her eyes that time; nothing was going to keep them from falling after such a warm greeting.

"I know you haven't, but..." Jannie trailed off, glancing down at the grass, moving a few blades with the toe of her high-heel shoe. Things had been pretty awful between them, she thought, and she figured that Gus would punish her for what happened by missing her big day. That thought had haunted her to the whole day and had her trembling up until the point where the diploma was presented to her.

"Walk with me, Jannie," Gus requested and gently pulled the younger woman away with her, so they could speak in private. "I wouldn't miss your graduation, a giant accomplishment for you, just because the last couple of times we saw each other didn't work out as well as I'd like," she informed the young graduate.

Jannie continued looking down. "I would have..." she admitted. She would have completely bailed if the situation were reversed. She would have looked at it as teaching Gus a lesson.

"Well, you're not me, Jannie. I'm not like that. Just because we're arguing doesn't mean I'm going to forsake everything going on in your life, especially a major step in your life. You're still my sister, no matter what," Gus explained in a calm, tender tone.

"I guess I didn't think of it that way..." Jannie replied. She did not think of it that way. All she thought was that she would want to punish Gus for being a jerk, possibly for Gus not recognizing her own worth for going after her little sister's ex-girlfriend, and lastly for going against her.

"You seemed to think Jayce was more important, though..." she pouted as she spoke.

"No, you jumped to conclusions and said some very hurtful words after doing that. Not just to Jayce, but also to me, which I didn't want to put up with. I didn't have to put up with it either, so I didn't. You needed some time to clear your head, whether you know it or not. No matter what, you're always going to be my sister. Yes, we might fight, but at the end of the day, you're still my family," Gus proclaimed, wrapping an arm around her younger sister's shoulder for a moment and rubbing her back. She did not want to prolong the contact, just in case the younger woman was still in a pissy mood.

Jannie nodded. "You really feel like that?" she asked, emotion shining in her eyes. Inside, she felt almost light to know that nothing would ever drive Gus away from her. They were always family, always sisters.

"Of course, which is why I got us reservations at your favorite restaurant to celebrate today. Everything is set up for a nice dinner at six tonight. Now, the question is, do you want to go or are you going to carry on with your usual behavior?" Gus asked.

The shorter woman frowned. "Is Jayce going to be there?"

"Yes, Jay will be there. And to answer your next question, yes, she and I are a couple."

"How can you date her, Gus? She went out with me for a year!" Jannie reminded her sister, as if Gus could ever forget.

"She's gone out with plenty of girls. Yes, I know none of them were you, but that's just life. She fits with me and I fit with her. She didn't do anything wrong to you, Jannie, and she didn't break your heart. You broke up with her," Gus countered. Underneath it all, she was a little thankful for all of the other madness that had been going on in Jayce's life when Jannie broke up with her. There were enough distractions to keep Jayce from dwelling on being dumped and she did not have to go through mourning period like Gus had. With everything clear now, Jayce seemed completely confident in their relationship, only talking about Jannie in terms of her being Gus' sister and rarely as being her ex.

"Still! It makes you seem so...desperate! And you're not that way! You're a great catch!" the younger woman argued, motioning to Gus with her hand as if presenting the businesswoman to the world.

"Jay would agree with you. She's a great catch too. Are you upset just because she's your ex-girlfriend? Is that really what's bothering you? Do you still have feelings for Jayce?" Gus inquired earnestly. She was not sure what she was going to do about that, but it was something that they would have to work on if it was confirmed.

Jannie was quiet for a long moment, eyes searching the ground and then the sky. "I don't...I don't think I ever really had feelings for Jayce beyond being my friend..." she confessed. Most people had suspected that about her after watching her with Jayce for a few months. "...But, she showered me with so much attention, I didn't notice..." Jayce was what she wanted in a girlfriend, so she always figured that she must have feelings for Jayce. Unfortunately, when Jayce left, she knew that she had felt nothing for the accountant because she never missed her. She had easily moved on with her life and wiped Jayce from her mind, until the day that she saw her ex-girlfriend at her sister's house anyway.

"Then what's the problem, Jannie? Do you think Jayce is beneath me?" Gus asked curiously. She thought it was weird that Jannie would judge Jayce fine for herself, fine enough to string along for a year, but consider Jayce a waste of Gus' time.

Jannie avoided that question with one of her own. "Does she still have that baby?"

"We're raising Princess together, yes."

"Raising? How long have you two even been together? Since she moved out with me?" the younger sister pressed.

"We've been officially going out for a month. The feelings between us have been growing since she moved in. Jannie, I understand if it creeps you out that I'm dating her, but I can't help it. We fit together. We want the same things and we compliment each other well. I think we have the potential to be together for a long time. I like having Princess around too. We all get along and enjoy each other. I'm going to stay with her," Gus declared soundly.

Jannie blinked in shock and frowned in anger for a moment. Never before had Gus stated that she was going to stay with someone that Jannie did not want around. She supposed that meant that Jayce really did mean something to Gus. For a moment, she dared to consider whining about why the relationship would never work and how Gus really needed to just cut her losses now before she ended up hurt like with Amanda, but glancing at Gus, she knew that would never work. Besides, Jayce was definitely no Amanda and it would not be fair for her to even let something like that leave her mouth.

"You like her a lot, huh?" Jannie inquired curiously. Something inside of her told her that she needed to get used to this relationship if she wanted to keep her sister close. Besides, Jayce was not that bad. Maybe they would make better friends than they had lovers, she considered. But, she did not want to give in that easily. She wanted things to go her way, like they always did.

"I'm sure that I can love her if I give these feelings enough time. I'm not going to let that go," the taller woman stated.

"Do you think she feels the same way? I mean, she could be-" Jannie was cut off.

"No, she's not after my money. She's got money and she's employed again. She's not after my house. She moved out of a pretty decent apartment at my request to stay with me again when she could have just used me that first time and never left. I trust her and she trusts me. We're going to build on that and gather things together in life now. Let me worry about my relationship with Jay."

Jannie was quiet again. "...Is she going to come to dinner with us?"

"Indeed she is."

"Bringing the baby with her?"

"No, we have a babysitter lined up for tonight," Gus said.



"A babysitter? You mean she's not super-paranoid anymore about her mother stealing Princess?" Jannie inquired, rolling her eyes and snorting a bit.

Gus frowned, but took a deep breath to keep herself calm. The last thing she needed was to get upset because Jannie would get upset and they would end up right back where they started. Neither of them wanted that.

"If you must know, Jayce is now Princess' legal guardian. If her mother touches Princess without her permission, it would be kidnapping. Besides, my friend is babysitting and I trust her with Princess. Is this going to be a problem, Jannie?" Gus inquired.

The younger woman thought on it for a moment. She knew what would happen if she decided it was a problem. She would end up pushing away the only family that she had left. That voice inside of her told her again that she needed to accept and get used to the idea of Gus being with Jayce.

"Are you really happy with Jayce?" Jannie asked seriously.

"Extremely," Gus answered with total honesty. Her emotions shined through her eyes so clearly that Jannie was sure that she would have recognized it even if she were a blind woman.

Jannie nodded, knowing what she had to say now. "That's good. You really deserve happiness, sis. I guess if it's with Jayce, I'll just have to get used to it. It's bit weird, though. I mean, you're dating my ex-girlfriend. You don't think it's weird?"

"Honestly? I don't think of her as your ex. I think of her as my now and my future. Do you have any problem with this?"

"I think I can get over it. I'll try to get over it anyway. Jayce isn't that bad, after all. I mean, if you really like her, I have to try to get over it anyway. If she's going to be in your life and I'm definitely going to be in your life, then I'll try my best to get through this," Jannie proclaimed confidently. She had been missing her sister in these past couple of months, so she knew that to avoid that feeling, she was going to have to try.

"Do you mean it?" Gus asked in shock. Considering the way Jannie had been acting for the past few months, especially toward Jayce, the businesswoman was stunned that her sister would agree so easily.

"Yes, I mean it, you big goof. You're my sister and I've missed you. It hurt when you kicked me out last time we saw each other too. I don't want to feel like that again. Um...it didn't mean you were picking Jayce over me, right?" Jannie asked, voice quiet and scared now.

"Never! Jannie, you're always going to be my sister. I told you that. I'm trying to build a life with Jay, but you're already in my life. I want to keep you there too. I'm not going anywhere, so if you're not going anywhere, then we're going to stay sisters," Gus assured her little sister, putting her arm around Jannie's robe-covered shoulders.

Jannie smiled and nodded. "That's good. Um...do you think there's something wrong with me since I couldn't make things work with Jayce?"

Gus laughed. "That doesn't mean anything! You both wanted different things. You were also in different places in life. You admitted that you never even had feelings for Jayce that would have made you want to really make it work. You'll meet someone that fits well with you and makes you feel better than you thought possible. You're going to put your all into staying with her, just like she'll put her all into staying with you and you'll both grow old together. I'm sure of it," she declared with confidence.

Jannie smiled again. She felt like if Gus said it, then it would be so. She knew also that Gus was right about her and Jayce wanting different things in life. They probably never would have worked, she mentally conceded.

"So, can I bring my girlfriend with us to dinner?" Jannie requested with a slight smile.

Gus chuckled a bit again. "Yeah, you can bring her. I did make the reservations for four, just in case. I'll be happy to meet whoever's in your life now," she answered. She thought that would make things easier for Jannie seeing her with Jayce too. Hopefully, it would lessen the blow and ease Jannie into the idea of Gus and Jayce being together.

She hoped that Jannie was trying to be as mature as she was finally acting because she did not care about whatever tantrums the younger woman was going to throw. She was going to stay with Jayce and try to make things work. Jayce and Princess were now her family, just as much as Jannie was. Time would tell how Jannie took it all and time would also tell how well she and Jayce worked out. She prayed that things would be as good as they seemed right now.

Jannie left Gus after that, looking to return to her friends, but the farewell was as warm as the greeting had been. They would meet up later for dinner. Gus walked to her car as if she was ten feet tall. Jayce smiled at her as she entered.

"It looks like things went well," Jayce commented because of the air surrounding Gus. She could practically feel the happiness coming off of her girlfriend.

Gus nodded. "She has grown up some. There's hope for that kid yet, which is great. I feel good about my focus shifting to the little bit and you," she replied, leaning over to kiss Jayce on the lightly on the lips.

"That sounds promising," Jayce smiled as they pulled away. Neither retreated very far.

"It is a promise. I want this to work, Jay. I want to be with you forever. I want to raise Princess with you and one day see her walk across that stage, just like Jannie. I want us to be lovers and a family," Gus stated.

"That's what I want too, so I don't see why we shouldn't be able to have that."

To show that she agreed, Gus leaned in for another kiss, much more passionate than the first. This kiss held the promise that they just made each other and the desire to work for forever together. The tender show of affection held the emotions that were forming between them and the single life that they could build together. The kiss held everything that they were and would be.

Interrupting the fervent embrace, Princess suddenly cheered. Gus and Jayce jumped apart from each other, surprised by the noise and they turned around to look in the back of the car. They started laughing as they saw Princess' smiling face. The hopeful family then drove off together to return to their home, still smiling at each other.

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The end.

Thanks for reading my story. I hoped you enjoyed it. I also hope you show up for my next story. Thanks for the support. Again to let me know what you think contact this Lunatic at: [starving.lunatic@gmail.com](mailto:starving.lunatic@gmail.com). Hasta...

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[Index Page](#)

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