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Sweet Nothings

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Sweet Nothings

Danielle Dattolo

“Oh, a little cat eye never hurt anyone,” Amelia said. I considered her opinion on the matter authoritative and shut my eyes. Each of her eyelashes were individually coated in dark mascara even though she wasn’t going anywhere. After a minute or so, she stepped back and tilted her head before diving in and brushing a mascara wand along my eyebrows.

“What are you doing?” I asked with a laugh. My eyebrows were too blonde—I didn’t think it would look natural.

“It’s just a last little touch. I mean, come on, you’re giving me day-two curls to work with,” she said, tugging at my hair. “I’ve got to do everything I can.”

I looked up at Amelia, who had gone out with twice as many guys as me—but none of them half as hot as the one I was going to see. “Okay,” I conceded with a laugh. I knew I could trust her. She’d done it so many times. “You can do whatever you want.”

“Correct answer,” she said, jetting off to the rest of her makeup stash. “Want some lipstick? Are you planning on smudging it?”

“Whatever it takes, right?”

She turned around and winked at me. “Baby’s first kill. I can’t wait to hear how it goes.”

Don’t use a knife; it leaves a mess. Guns are cleaner, making the mess easier to hide on the killer, but the victim’s wound isn’t. And they’re loud. Poison is tasteless, undetectable, and untraceable: the perfect weapon. The syndicate’s specialty was a substance that mimicked the effects of drinking large quantities of alcohol too quickly.

That was precisely how I planned to kill Tristan Cortone: under the guise of a drunken night at Ray Kennedy’s house. His file had been slipped under my door earlier that week before my mom came home from work. Intel told me Tristan was eighteen; a senior at Razorback High; and had applications submitted to the University of Richmond, Georgetown, and American. He was the son of local politician Arthur Cortone, and the syndicate had to send a message that would ensure the elder Cortone didn’t

run for Congress. Politicians are familiar with our work, though not our faces, and the syndicate's message comes across pretty clear. That was usually how these things went—when you live in the DC/metro area, everything is political.

I also happened to know the bottom of Tristan's jeans were always tucked behind the tongues of his sneakers, and even though that made him look like a tool, he managed to get away with it. He was the goalie on our school's hockey team, with two championship medals to his name. On an important but unrelated note, his eyes were a beautiful, bright blue. His hair was kind of a muddy brown, but other than that he was pretty flawless—broad in the shoulders, and one of the tallest guys at Razorback. And he was the first boy I ever liked. We had Mrs. Fisher together in the second grade, and I liked him until the end of April. Any other time, I would have been flattered to be going out with him. I usually looked too young to attract much attention from boys, but the workouts in training had been kind to me.

He picked me up at ten, though he didn't come to the front door.

"So this is the Tristan, huh?" Mom stuck her nose out the door, spying his beat-up Corolla parked alongside the curb. "Quite the gentleman, huh?"

"Bye, Mom..." I kissed her cheek as I pushed past her. "I won't be back till late."

"Well, let me know if you need me to come get you," she said, holding the door open, one hand on her hip. "If anything makes you feel uncomfortable—if you feel unsafe at all—just call me, okay? Will Jax be there? Do you know anyone at the party?"

"No," I said. "He won't be there. And I have a bunch of classes with people who are going—I'll be fine."

"Okay. Well, you know to call Jax or me if there's any trouble."

As Mom closed the door, I popped the vial in my mouth. At the start of her career, Amelia created a pouch for the poison—a small vial, not much larger than a mustard seed—that can be transferred through saliva without the victim's knowledge. They swallow it and gastric acids break it. It wasn't a popular method within the syndicate—men and women alike had tried it, but most found it too personal. Jax was one of those not in favor of it. Amelia used it as her default. I only wished it was more comfortable; as we drove to Ray's party, the vial felt as big as a marble laying there, though it could only have been a centimeter in diameter. I didn't like it. I tossed it around my mouth. As I knocked the vial around, it landed at the back of my tongue, tilting toward my throat. I sat forward, tucked the poison back by my frenulum, and hoped Tristan couldn't hear my heart pounding. A panic attack would have been far from stealthy.

When we got there, Tristan leaned in and I closed the gap, pressing my lips to his. He tried that sooner than I had planned for, but I just had to get a few beers in him faster to disguise the kill. His breath smelled like the burger he probably had for dinner, and there might have even been some pieces left in there. I pushed him off before his tongue roamed any further.

"Are we heading in or what?" I asked Tristan, selling it with a smile.

Lay low after the kill. Then, report to your squadron. You must not contact anyone until your group has been debriefed.

"And then my cat ran away." Amelia's voice carried down the hallway of her two-story colonial, four blocks from the party. "I think he was eaten by coyotes."

I opened the door to her bedroom, which was always too pink and frilly for whatever mood I was in, and she pulled me against her before I could even cross the threshold, my arms hanging limp at my sides. "Lea, you're here! You did it!" she said, her words muffled against my shoulder. Something told me that Jax—I could see him sprawled out on her bed, eyes shut, hands clasped on his stomach—would have been even more grateful for my appearance.

"There you are, killer," he said, a smile ticking up at the corner of his lips.

"So, what'd you think?" Amelia asked. "Oh my God, you did smudge your lipstick. I should've given you some so you could reapply. Were you there when the cops came?"

"I transferred the poison in the car before we even walked into the party," I said, recalling my lesson earlier that month on how to relay information according to protocol. "I watched from the window but left before any commotion." Before he collapsed on Ray's kitchen counter, his eighth beer crashing on the marbled floor. Before Tara Gilroy could get him over to the sink while her sister Lisa called 911; he kept vomiting, and his eyes rolled back. I felt like I was going to vomit, too.

"Smart. Nice. Way to go." Amelia hugged me again, but it just felt like she was squeezing my stomach too hard. "This is huge. I'm so excited for you. Well, Jax, you got anything to add?"

"Congrats. You managed to not get yourself extracted," he muttered. "You'll live to get assigned another victim. Good for you."

"Ignore him. He's already over it," Amelia interjected, narrowing her eyes. "He's just jealous. God, Lea, you *seriously* smudged your lipstick." She dabbed at my lips. "Let me go get some more."

The hint of a smile playing on Jax's lips had disappeared. His eyes were trained on the ceiling, and he ran a hand through his dirty blond hair. Now that the wrestling season was almost finished, his hair was getting shaggy. I liked it better that way.

"So...how'd regionals go yesterday?" I asked him, sitting down on the bed at his feet. It was like all my organs sank with me. I picked at the edge of the lace comforter and ran my finger around some holes in the pattern.

"We went 2-2. We beat Lincoln 35-12 and Packard 37-18. But we lost to Washington and Rice... Lea, you look like you're going white. Are you okay?" He sat up, but I drew back as Amelia approached the bed.

"Be a little considerate if you're going to make out—I am in the room, you know. *My* room. Should I not give you the lipstick then?" she teased.

I shook my head before standing up, hoping Amelia couldn't see me blush. She didn't need more fodder for her tired third-wheel jokes. "I think I'm just going to head out," I said. Training warned you of emotional side effects. They mentioned guilt, shame, even exhilaration. I just felt sick.

When I went to sleep, I saw him. Tristan. I woke up at two in the morning, beads of sweat on my forehead, my whole body damp, my sheets cold. I was shaking. He was there in my dream. His eyes were black, his cheeks hollow. He was standing in my doorway. Just standing there. He looked gray. I couldn't go back to sleep.

"I got a call from the school," my mom told me when we sat down to dinner at our kitchen island the following evening. "They said you missed homeroom and first period."

I cut a chunk of chicken off and stuffed it in my mouth, proceeding to drag my fork around the plate, tracing the red swirl that led to the center, anything that prolonged my excuses. "I just had a rough night. I'm sorry. I fell asleep really late."

"I hope you won't be missing work, too," she said.

"I'm not working at Gino's until Saturday, Mom."

"Still, I can't let you go to any more parties," she said, tipping back her wine glass. On nights that she worked late shifts at the hospital, she only poured herself a small amount—"just enough," she used to say. "I don't want this to become a pattern. And I definitely don't want you going to any more parties where there's going to be drinking. I know what happened at the party! I know that's why you missed school! When were you going to tell me? Hm?"

I wondered if it was a rookie move, letting my mom know that I went to the party with Tristan. Amelia probably wouldn't approve. It would have been just as easy to tell her I was there with someone else. I just hoped it wouldn't get traced back to me. No one at the party knew I was his date, but my mom did. Was that enough?

"Mom, I wasn't there when it happened... I left early," I muttered. "I just had a bad night. I don't know what to tell you." I wouldn't make eye contact with her. "No need to worry about me."

"I don't want to have to worry about you, that's the thing," she continued, though I wished the conversation had ended there. "But some things are beyond my control... You know, when I talked to the school, they suggested counseling—"

"That's enough, Mom! I'm fine. Okay?"

"No, sweetheart, you'll hear me out," she said. "They offered counseling to everyone who knew this kid, and maybe you should look into it. You went on a date with him. In the attic, I still have the notes you kept from him in elementary school—you saved the valentine he gave you!"

It was a small, rectangular valentine's card, with a hole in the center for a cheap lollipop—I ate that and kept the card. I thought I was so special when he gave it to me, but everyone in the class got the same slip of paper, and maybe even the same flavored lollipop.

"Counseling might be something to think about," she sighed, breaking me from my memory. "Just talking to someone might help." She was right about that—but I wasn't going to talk to a counselor. Amelia never talked about her kills; that was one way to handle it. I thought Jax might be more open. "All right, honey, I'm leaving in five." She rose from her stool. "Think you can take care of all this?"

Jax drove to my house after his last wrestling practice of the season let out, not long after my mom left. When he got to the kitchen, he slid his racer jacket off, tossing it across the island. He scooped up the plates and glasses we'd used and walked over to the sink.

"I don't know what to do," I said. Jax turned the faucet on and washed the first plate. "I'm not sleeping," I muttered, pacing around the island. "And my mom thinks it's because I've been traumatized by a high school party where some kid died from drinking too much." When I reached the sink, Jax shoved a plate in my hands, throwing a towel at me as I paced away. "She's probably more scared about the drinking than the death, though, knowing her."

"Okay, relax," he interjected, churning out the other plate and one of the glasses. "Dry those. Obviously, your mom doesn't suspect anything, and you can't let her. You can't let her know."

I dropped off the dried dish and scooped up the remaining plate. “You *know* I’m well aware of that.” When I returned to the sink, the faucet was off, and he was glaring at me. I paused at the counter. He handed me the second glass.

“Just keep drying,” he said. “And don’t sound so bitter.”

“I’m not bitter,” I said, twisting the towel in my hands. “But, you know, I did just kill someone the other day, so excuse me if I’m not grateful for my job. I can’t *sleep*, Jax! I saw him last night! The last nightmare I had before that was about getting sick from someone else using my toothbrush! I can’t handle this!”

“I know, Lea!” he shouted. I quit pacing, my towel still inside the glass. “I know. I wish training better prepared us for it. They should tell you that you could be up as long as two, three nights in a row. That you’ll be missing school. That you’ll steal the liquor hidden away in your dad’s back room, and he hasn’t figured it out yet but, soon, enough of it will be missing that he’ll notice, because he’s drinking it too. Because you killed his only other son and it’s ruined him. What are you supposed to do when your dad finds out, huh? They keep assigning you people to kill so you have to keep drinking it all!”

“Oh my God, Jax...” I left the glass on the island and walked up to him. He was slouched in front of the counter. “I didn’t know that’s how you...dealt with it.” I shook my head. I wondered if it wouldn’t be long before I ended up that way too.

“I used to keep a black book,” he said. “I thought, if I ever needed to think about what I was doing, I just wanted to see names, not people. I started with Nia Rodriguez, an ambassador’s daughter; Amy Hartnett, the wife of Senator Billy Hartnett; but...I stopped after Jeff. He wasn’t a name. None of them were. Even still, I can’t sleep. I try not to think about them so I won’t have those dreams but...it doesn’t work. Training doesn’t teach you how to cope with it. Even if you follow protocol and you leave when you’re supposed to—even if you don’t watch your victim shake and convulse and die right in front of you—you’re still killing them. You know you’re killing them because that’s what you’ve been assigned to do. That’s what they’re forcing you to do. That’s how they roped me in—they picked me out of the crowd at a wrestling match. And I’m pretty sure Amelia helped them. I joined not long after.”

“Well, I never had a choice,” I said. I wanted to press my face into the towel. I wanted to scream into it. “You never let me choose!”

I wondered if he felt bad. After he killed Jeff, he came to me. He was crying, and for the first fifteen minutes, I couldn’t decipher a single thing he was saying. Still, he told me everything. He told me about them, about how they made him do it, and I didn’t understand at the time. After that, I

had to join, because no one outside the syndicate could know; Jax got me in. I told myself that maybe he thought he was helping me—that he was saving me from them and doing the right thing. Maybe he thought it was what he had to do, and maybe that's not so bad.

"God, this is sick," he groaned, running a hand through his hair. "Lea, you have to listen to me: They're not training you. They're controlling you—with fear, with a loyalty kill, with the threat that they'll kill you too... You just don't know it yet because they won't teach you that in training. But that's the only thing you need to know."

After Jax left, I laid in bed, dreading the moment my body gave in to sleep. When I finally succumbed, Tristan was there again, soaking wet and standing above my bed screaming. I awoke trembling, curled on my side, eyes wide open. I saw his outline in the dark, around my room, in the doorway. I pulled my knees to my forehead and pressed my palms to the sockets of my eyes and cried. I couldn't take it.

I just wanted to sleep.

Always check the kill. Even if you've witnessed the death, you can never be too sure. Removing any part of the body for evidence is too suspicious; attending the funeral of the victim is the best option. Another member of the assigned squadron goes to the service to keep the killer's cover.

Jax shrugged a white dress shirt over his head. He never unbuttoned it, and it was the only one I ever saw him wear. Three buttons pulled at the seam, leaving small gaps that exposed faint scars beneath. He pushed his shoulders forward; this sealed his shirt, but he couldn't stay like that through the entire funeral.

"How long have you had that thing?" I asked.

Jax sifted through hangers in his closet. "Um, I don't know, since my first funeral? Two years maybe."

"You left it on the desk," I said, holding up his suit jacket. "Seriously, you should consider investing in a new shirt. Just consider it. Or maybe you don't know how to properly wash it."

"It doesn't matter. I'm not going to need it much longer."

"Are you...getting extracted? What did you—?"

"I want out."

A knock sounded from the hallway.

"Hi, Lea," his mother said when she entered the room, dressed in a knee-skimming pencil skirt and a purple blouse with frills at the shoulders. Her rouged cheeks always looked even rounder when she smiled, and her

eyes squinted into lines. It made her seem so cheery, but her voice sounded flat. The bags beneath her eyes looked even more swollen than usual. “Nice to see you.”

“You too, Mrs. Hale.”

“Jax didn’t tell me if you were staying for dinner. I’m making *au jus*, if you’re interested. I don’t know when your mom wants you back. Are you going to that funeral tonight, too?”

I looked at Jax, who had folded his arms. “It’s up to you.”

“Oh, I’m not going tonight, but sure, I’ll stay. Mom’s probably heating up leftovers, anyway.”

“Great. I’m going to change and get started soon. Dinner should be ready in an hour,” she said, slowly pulling the door closed. “It’s always nice seeing that extra seat filled.”

When she left, I hopped up on the desk. “I’m pretty sure she says that *every* time I stay,” I said, turning to Jax. “I love your mom and all, but it’s so morbid! I don’t just want to fill Jeff’s chair!”

Jax cast his eyes to the gray-blue carpet.

“Oh, sorry, I didn’t mean...”

He shook his head. “Don’t worry about it.”

“You know it’s a terrible idea to leave, right? Training teaches you to remain with the syndicate as long as they employ you. Defecting will result in extraction. You know that.”

“Yeah, and what happens when they’re no longer interested in employing you? They’re just going to ‘extract’ you no matter what. *Training* isn’t telling you everything. Think about it... Who drops those files off to us? Don’t you want to know? It could be my Trig teacher, for God’s sake; I don’t know. What kind of agent decides who we’re going to kill that week, huh? They don’t teach you that in training. I’m tired of not knowing. I’m tired of them controlling us. After today, I’m done.”

Targets are distributed to the killer with one week to do the job. They are typically members of the opposite sex or someone close to the killer—the former allows for myriad opportunities to get near the victim, while the latter allows the victim to suspend suspicions, as well as supplying plausible opportunities for contact.

“I wonder if they have any sage,” Amelia said, taking up a booth with a perfect view of some hippie shop across the way from the pizzeria. Her dark brown hair was pulled back into a high ponytail, her makeup as flawless as ever. “It’s good. It’s a cleanser.”

"I didn't call you here for that," I said, tapping my fingernails against the laminated menu pressed tightly against my chest.

"Do I get to eat for free?" she asked. Amelia grabbed the menu and flipped through. When she got to the children's section, she found the crisp sheets of paper I had pulled from the manila file.

"I got it as I was running here this morning. I didn't think it could wait."

I knew most of the information in the file and had memorized the rest. Jackson Hale. Male. Eighteen. Senior at Razorback High School. College applications submitted to Princeton, Rutgers, and NYU. Height: Six feet. Weight: One-hundred sixty-two pounds. Parents: Jeffrey and Rosa Hale. Siblings: Mary Hale; Jeffrey Hale, Junior, deceased.

Jax was, by the syndicate's standards, the perfect target.

"Well, this sucks," Amelia said. "Hazards of the job, I guess."

"I knew there was something wrong with him, and then the other day he started talking about getting out—and now they're extracting him. And I have to be the one to carry it out! God, these targets are sick," I spat.

"That's what I thought when I was assigned Mammy," she said, her eyes still glossing over the file. That was her loyalty kill. I wondered if Jax was mine.

I sat down in the booth across from her, dragging my hands along the sides of my head. "Amelia, what am I supposed to do?"

"Well, just how much do you fear the syndicate?" she asked, placing the menu down and pointing at a slice of Greek pizza. "To go, please."

Extraction will result from failure to eliminate the intended target, abuse of information, homicide of one's squadron, treacherous behavior, and disregard of proper conduct. The target will be treated like any other—kill quickly; kill without mercy.

I wasn't surprised to see Jax at school the following day; he probably thought the syndicate wouldn't send a killer to take him out with so many other people swarming around. He was right: I wouldn't think to carry out the kill in between classes—but I made sure to corner him the second he moved to open the driver's-side door to his Grand Am.

"I need a ride home." I slid in between him and the handle. "My mom can't pick me up today so...can you take me?"

"That's not going to happen."

"Well...you know I can't exactly drive myself."

"That's right," he said with a laugh. "Killer still can't drive. Classic."

"Jax, what's your problem?" I scowled. "I'm getting there. Amelia's been teaching me on the sly."

"Do I need to point out your first mistake?"

"Oh my God, Jax, just give me a ride!" I folded my arms and kicked my heel up against the car. "I'm not going anywhere. And acting like this isn't going to help your case."

He grabbed the handle anyway, his forearm pressed against the curve of my back, his face inches from mine. "You know we're not supposed to be talking at school, right? What's gotten into you?" Killers weren't supposed to associate beyond the realm of a mission or the privacy of their own homes. Any kind of cavorting outside the syndicate could lead to suspicions, connections... Things that could get us discovered.

"Technically, it's after school," I joked. "Besides, you've already managed to get yourself extracted, so what's the harm?"

"You're not thinking of yourself in this," he said, his breath tickling my cheek. "I could get you killed."

"I know, but I need a ride—just this once," I said. "We've always got each other's backs, right?"

"In a life or death situation. That was the protocol. *Was*."

"This could be life or death."

"Go get a ride from someone else, Lea. I'm not required to do that anymore." He pulled the door handle, but I slammed it shut.

"Jax, what's the problem? When did you stop being my friend too? Just this once. I promise."

"All right," he sighed. "Someone's more likely to see you standing here than sitting in the passenger seat so just...get in."

"Are you scared?"

Until I asked, the ride had been mostly silent. His eyes kept flicking to his rear-view mirror. Amelia had delivered a new poison to me early in the morning. It would mimic a cardiac arrest. The vial felt more comfortable than it had the first time around. It was tucked safely beneath my tongue. I could feel it. I just had to transfer it.

I looked over at him, but his eyes were on the road, his neck craning to check his blind spot, his left foot tapping, his eyes back in the rear-view mirror. I thought about kissing him. I was going to kiss him because I wanted to. Because I thought I wouldn't get another chance to. The last time we kissed I was seven, and he was eight, and we had accidentally run into each other during coed soccer practice. Our teeth crashed together, and I didn't kiss anyone again until I was twelve because it hurt so much.

"Oh, Jax, my house is right here," I said, jumping up a little too quickly. "You always drive past it. Come on, you were just here."

"You're right," he said with a laugh. "I don't know why."

"Clearly you need to spend more time at my house than I do at yours." I caught his eye and smiled.

He put the car in park but didn't unlock the doors. It was a familiar sight, seeing him look over, lean in a bit closer. I just had to close the gap. I felt for the vial, but my stomach lurched. I couldn't do it. I thought, if I killed him, I'd dream about him forever, his eyes black as he stared at me. As he screamed at me.

"Why did you defect?" I asked. He leaned back in his seat. "You knew they were just going to extract you so...why?"

"Because of you—because of what they did to you. We grew up together, but... They've messed you up and...you've changed. I mean, Lea, you wouldn't even eat cookie dough off a baking sheet as a kid because you weren't supposed to." His face twisted in anger. "It's my fault, but they got a hold of you... I thought I could handle what I was doing, but when they brought you down too...I wanted out."

Because of me. "Jax, I'm still—"

"You're not the same, Lea. And you don't believe that. I know you don't." He caressed my cheek before turning his attention to my hair, running a finger along one of the curls and sighing. He'd never touched my hair before. I hoped it wasn't too frizzy. "Look, Lea...I'm leaving tomorrow. It's not safe here. You can come with me."

I could go with him. I could get out too.

If the killer should ever become the target, hide in plain sight. Hide in public. Hide where there are witnesses.

"You know, this probably isn't the time, but I hate trains."

Jax took my hand and led me on board; I was shaking, and my palm was probably sweaty. "And why is that?" he asked, handing me my bags when we sat down. "Is it because you're not in control of your own fate?"

"Something like that." That had to have been part of it. Killing Tristan unnerved me, but there was still something in the way I controlled his life—that I could have ended it any time I chose. I fancied myself the kiss of death in that moment. However, there was no one on board the train whose life I could control to make myself feel better; I couldn't even control my own.

I wasn't able to talk for the first few minutes the train was in motion. When the silence became too heavy, Jax sighed loudly.

"Why are you so quiet, Lea? Are you nervous?"

Someone who wasn't nervous would have said something witty. Or they would have just been honest.

"Yes."

But that didn't mean he could know the truth.

"You must be nervous, too, though," I said. "It's not like you're being any chattier."

He leaned in close and laughed. "Being free...it's a weird feeling. I spent so long wondering what would happen if we got caught, if I didn't do my job, what if, what then... Didn't you wonder what would have happened if someone caught us?"

"I tried not to. I thought it would've been worse to not eliminate the target."

"I don't think so. Well, clearly," he said, and his laugh sounded hoarse.

"Guess I feared the syndicate more than you did."

I kissed him. It tickled when his palm grazed my cheek, the tips of his fingers brushing the top of my ear and twirling loose strands of hair. I kissed him because maybe I thought that I needed a trademark, like the greats. Prickles rushed up my spine, like he was running his hands along my whole back. I kissed him because he should have known better. There, on the train, I finally knew what it was like to kiss Jax, and it was nothing like on the soccer field. His lips were wet, and his fingers moved to the nape of my neck. It didn't last long. It was unfair, like how short the sunset is compared to the dark.