

## 5 - Clarity and Cleanliness

It was only the slight downward incline that offset the annoying tilt in his car seat. It was what brought Daniel's head from a resting position to one that roused him awake.

"I think he's awake," Naomi mentioned in a quiet voice, and Rose giggled back just as softly.

"Danny's always been bad with long car rides..." then her voice picked up to address the boy strapped in the back seat, "Danny, you awake? We're home!"

And all Daniel did was frown. His pissy mood was only heightened by the audacity of his sister to think any of this was pep-worthy. He knew exactly what she was doing: trying to make the best of a bad situation, only their ideas of "bad" were completely warped. Daniel's life was being uprooted and turned upside down, all without his consent. Yet to Rose, her little brother was just having a tough time adjusting to a necessary change...

"Danny?" Rose spoke up again with a patient smile, leaning her head over the edge of her seat. She watched him and his sideways look, quietly and dully staring out the window beside him. "If you don't say anything, I'm still gonna think you're sleepy..." she started to warn in a sing-song voice. "That means I'm gonna have to carry—"

"--*Yes*, I'm awake," Daniel spat much more coldly, without even the courtesy of eye contact. By the sound of silence thick in the car's air, he'd done a bang-up job of making things awkward. *Good*. He didn't watch for it, but he certainly heard his sister slowly slip back into her own seat.

"I'm gonna go get his stuff..." Rose excused herself out the passenger side, and Daniel promptly spun his head the other way just to avoid the sight sliding by his window. Other than her towering shadow he ignored her completely. He was so determined to avoid his sister that his focus couldn't even see whether Naomi was quietly judging him from the front seat or not. She probably was, but his breather with her was nothing more than that.

Crying in Naomi's shoulder didn't excuse all the things his sister had done to him, has continued to do, and will likely go on to do. Good intentions or not, regardless of his own self-sacrifice, if Rose was going to tear his life down, then the least he could do was make her feel like shit about it.

The least he could manage for himself was pushing down on the button to his seat, popping open the buckles over his shoulders and between his legs. He leaned out and opened the car door, pushing it open with both hands. With his final bit of tact he awkwardly lifted himself over the plastic block separating his legs then dropped to the interior of the car.

Finally his feet touched the real ground and his dismount was complete.

“Naomi didn’t lift you out...?” Rose was suddenly peering around the back of the car, asking or saying something that yet again irked the boy to no end.

“I’m fine,” Daniel scoffed dismissively, sighing all the way to the front of the car and around, just to avoid sister dearest. And while he walked his eyes scanned the expansive front yard just briefly, taking in the high walls, thick, green bushes. His last sight was the towering monument that he would now be confined to. He craned his neck and leaned his head back just to capture the sheer size of it from being so close.

A pair of feet crunched across a few lone pebbles on their way to be beside Daniel, which instead of his sister was Naomi leaning out for the grandiose door with a key. Though, seeing the brass shimmer slip into the slot had him thinking of another thing.

“If I’m actually being forced to stay here, I’ll need a key.” While it could’ve gone better as a request, Daniel opted to speak in absolutes.

“You can talk to Rose about that,” Naomi was as standard as ever, twisting the key, pulling it back and opening the door.

More talking to Rose? Hardly preferable. “You’re the maid, aren’t you? Doesn’t that stuff fall under your role, or whatever?”

“Not without Rose’s permission,” she stood by the door and made way for the shorter man. “I’m not working today either. Sundays or Saturdays.”

He stopped right on the doorframe. “You’re not?” From head to toe she was in street clothes; far from the posh, milky white and jet black uniform she was first seen in, but a change of clothes didn’t necessarily cause a change in attitude, demeanor, or look. Maybe it was a quality of her poker face and that she had been doing very maid-ly things all day. “What about yesterday then?” Did she not put together an entire dinner plus dessert?

Her head tilted just the slightest bit as she said simply, “Well, I did that for you.” She turned her head and spotted Rose bringing up the rear, luggage in hand, “But Rose is also my friend.” Her hand was suddenly on his shoulder, guiding him far enough inside to give Rose the clearance to get in herself.

Rose came in with a refreshed smile and sense of spunk. “Danny, your room’s upstairs and it might be a little bit of a walk... How about I–”

“--Naomi, can you carry me?” Daniel immediately interrupted, denied, and deferred to someone else. His sister’s jaw hung open but her words didn’t keep coming. Daniel watched Naomi’s eyes go over his head, right where his sister stood.

Make no mistake that Daniel was warming up to Naomi. Maybe she had reached an acquaintance level, but as annoying as even she could be, what mattered most was how Naomi was only a proxy for his sister’s bidding. If he really did have it his way, which he never did, there wouldn’t be any carrying at all. Hell, there wouldn’t be any familial evictions either. But before his sister could even finish he knew how it would go. She would offer, he would refuse, then Rose, and then eventually Naomi, would batter and beat him down with endless reasons and insistence for why he should be relying on them for the most basic of things.

But since he expected all of that, he thought better to make the most of what little choice he had left by neglecting his sister as much as possible. Giving the cold shoulder had never felt as good as this.

“Uh-m, yeah, that’s a good idea,” Rose started with a burst, but the pep simmered down quite quickly. “Naomi, would you mind?”

Before she answered, Daniel was already being lifted and sitting against her hip.

“That’s fine.”

With her other hand Naomi shut the front door. Now they were bound for his room. The second story, five-million miles away, one off in no-man’s land. He didn’t even want to ask just how permanent of a living situation this was.

Daniel rolled his eyes just as the lead started to move. “Aren’t there any rooms on the first–h-hey!” His foot spasmed as a foreign tickle brushed against his ankle and wedged itself between his foot and shoe. A tendril that wiggled and levered itself until the footwear popped loose and dropped to the floor.

“You’ll get the floors dirty,” Naomi explained without even eye contact, watching her own hand undo his other shoe with her finger.

“And *you* won’t?” Daniel bit right back, but he could feel them rising and falling, just as Naomi slipped off her own untied shoes.

“No, I won’t.” And like it was some kind of power move, Daniel could see the movement inside her black socks; flexing toes as they wiggled with newfound freedom.

“Danny, when did you get those shoes?” Rose asked with a hint of obsessive concern like she always had. With much less worry, Daniel glanced down at the things that got him from place to place.

He shrugged with indifference. “A year before I graduated, I guess.”

“A year before—!” Rose gasped, and her brother cringed. Was it really that big of a deal?

Sure, maybe they weren’t as white as they used to be. Maybe the siding was starting to snap from how much he bent on his toes, and so what if the aglets were cracking and the laces were starting to fray? By his light-pocketed estimates, there was at least another good two years of life left in those. Not to mention, the one silver lining to being so small is that it didn’t take long to fill out his maximum potential. When your size peaks as a kid, suddenly the only thing between you and a longer lasting wardrobe was just taking care of your clothes. Unfortunately, that wisdom was learned from his mom; someone who had to be harder and harder pressed into throwing out clothes dated from second, third, fourth, fifth grade and so on. And naturally, Rose was always in the camp that made him look the cutest...

“We’ll figure something out tomorrow,” Rose decided with a resolute look, far more than Daniel would have ever liked. She had a determination like she was a knight given a quest by the king himself. Meanwhile the poor prince was being carried by the hip to his royal chambers.

The room was just as he had left it that morning, albeit much tidier than he had left it when waking up.

“When did you make the bed?” Daniel asked Naomi as she set him on his feet.

“After I made breakfast,” she explained as she tightened the corner of the bedding with a dutiful tug. “Is this everything?” Naomi asked Rose as they stood hip to hip over his meager amount of possessions.

“Mhm, it should be. Hey Danny,” Rose turned around with her hands on her knees, “did you maybe wanna snack while Naomi takes care of this?”

“No. I don’t want anything,” he turned her down quite readily. “And I can unpack— just leave my stuff alone.” He psyched himself up then swung his leg high, leaping and climbing the bedside to

get on top where Naomi was dissecting his luggage. “Naomi, let me take care of this,” and he reached his hands in, but they were ignored like a gust of wind and Naomi moved right through them.

He then watched her pull up an old shirt and barely drape it against her nose like a mask. A small sniff was all she needed to shake her head to herself, setting it off to the side.

“What? What’s wrong with it?” It couldn’t be that bad, right? Given the laundromat was a block away, he just needed to have enough things to last until the monthly holiday known as clothes-washing day.

“Stinky,” was all she said, and now Rose was reaching into the bag too.

“These jeans look a little worn, Danny…” his sister off-handedly commented as she rubbed the material between her fingers.

“Yeah, well sorry it’s not brand new.” Seriously, did she just want to poke fun at every little thing he owned?

“I’m not saying it to be mean…” Rose softly explained, but set the pants down before pulling out a different article of clothing. Her obsessive worries stayed the same.

Before he knew it the bag was empty and piles had been made. Two, to be exact, and far from a place that’d be considered equal in distribution. The much shorter stack was made up of the barest essentials. Two shirts, a pair of boxers and shorts he could only ever remember wearing once, and that was it.

“Why’d you separate them?” Daniel frowned, as apparently those few things didn’t make the cut. Naomi took the much taller pile and plopped them back into the bag. “I’ve barely worn this stuff; it shouldn’t need to be washed?”

“It does,” Naomi disagreed, then zipped the bag shut. “I’m going to wash these,” she explained to Rose with the few things draped over her arm.

“And what about the rest of my stuff?” Daniel interrupted with a frown, and his sister had the nerve to give him a pitying look.

“Danny…you can’t wear that stuff, you know?”

“Wh-what? Why not? That’s practically everything I have!”

“It’s worn, and old,” Rose frowned as she took the bag. “I’m not gonna let you wear a bunch of old clothes.”

“Are you joking? N-no! There’s no way you’re throwing all that out! That’s *my* stuff! You have no right! I’m not spending all my money on new stuff just because *you* somehow think I should!” Was she actually serious? Throw out his entire wardrobe and charge him for a new one? When was he supposed to get his own fucking sense of agency back?!

“Danny, relax,” Rose tried to hush him, but his fuse only burned shorter.

“Don’t tell me to *relax!* What– you take me from my home, my job, and now you want me to spend the last of my savings?!”

“Hey– heyy!” Rose raised her voice, but she didn’t sound any less soothing. “I’m not gonna make you spend anything! *I’m* taking care of it,” she proclaimed with a hand on her chest. “And this?” She held up his bag. “I promise it’s not going anywhere or any of the stuff in it. I just wanna put it someplace where it’s out of the way, okay?” Every sentence she spoke was calm, slow and carefully enunciated like she was talking to a preschooler.

However, as honest and sincere as she was, it didn’t diminish the ugly look in Daniel’s eye.

“Ou...out of the way? What, do my *poor* people things disgust you, or something?”

“That is *not* what I said,” Rose frowned at the contradiction.

He threw his hands up in the air. “Well, what is it then?! You said you’re my big sister, then you said about what *you* aren’t going to let me do X, Y, Z! You’re treating me like an animal or some...some pet!”

“Is it wrong for me to want my little brother, my family, to have nice things?” Rose sighed.

“Is it wrong for *me* to have my *own* things?!” Daniel shouted right back,

“And they *will* be your own things!” Rose insisted, but even her patience was running thin. That being said, Rose’s version of a temper or blow-up hardly had the outward ferocity her much shorter counterpart did. And angry as she could be once in a blue moon, her soft voice got tougher, but only relatively. Slightly tough was still soft-spoken in her book...

As per usual, Rose wasn't budging and Daniel was running out of things to argue or say. No matter how much he believed in his own choices, it didn't matter if he couldn't convince the largest person in the room. Person *or* people.

"Get out."

"Get out?" Rose repeated with a crease between her eyebrows.

"Get out," Daniel repeated. "Or what, is this not my room either? Was that a lie? Just like dropping me off at my *actual* home was? Can I not have privacy?!"

"Yes, Danny, you may..." Rose answered with a sore, hurt tone, but drifted to the door with his bag in hand. Yet another loss he'd have to cut. He watched Rose and Naomi every step of the way, waiting expectantly for them both to leave. The final irk though that even in passing they could somehow still burn him was not even bothering to shut the door. Promptly he marched across the floor and with both hands made the most triumphant slam he could, and thus took a calming breath.

It was like being in his own apartment again, albeit far fewer walls, much larger furniture and a total relocation from the original complex. Was he really stuck here? No, he couldn't be. This was ridiculous!

And in search of someone who could possibly attest to the madness, Daniel pulled out his phone and hurriedly dialed.

It rang...

And it rang...

And it rang...

And-

"Danny?" the other end of the line answered.

"Mom?"

"Danny? Honey, are you there?"

“Yeah, I am— and Mom, please, *Daniel*.” The continuous mistake she always made and he even suspected was intentional immediately undercut whatever sympathy he thought that there might be.

“*Daniel*, when are you gonna let all this name stuff go? Danny or Daniel, you’re still the same special guy to me!”

He quietly wiped his face of any embarrassment and annoyance he may have been feeling.

“Thanks, Mom, so that’s why it shouldn’t be any problem calling me Daniel?”

“And also why there shouldn’t be a problem with Danny,” she twisted the words right back just as much. “And hey— I don’t like the way we ended our conversation the other day?” His mom was upbeat, but the disappointment in her voice was clear.

It was hardly what he wanted to talk about, but even in spite of the subject matter he knew how to feel guilty too. “I...I’m sorry about that. You—... We were talking about something I didn’t want to.” And paradoxically, it was the very thing he hoped to discuss now.

“I’m sorry if I made you feel uncomfortable,” his Mom apologized, something he could never fathom his sister truly doing. “I was afraid you weren’t going to want to call me, you know?”

“I—” he scoffed, shaking his head. “No, mom. I was still gonna call you... Look— can we please just forget about that? I’m sorry.”

“Water under the bridge, hon.” Just like that, the hatchet was buried. And a new one was unearthed... “Soo...?” his mom’s voice amped in enthusiastic curiosity and his own fire was growing meek. “Is it okay if we talk about last night?” She asked for permission yet her feelings were already overflowing. Even as the difficult, troubled son he knew not to expect otherwise. She had to have known this much by now, given mother and daughter were linked from ear to ear.

“Yeah...” Daniel tried to keep it extremely brief. “I saw Rose.”

And his mom erupted with joy. “Honey! That’s great! That’s amazing! Th-that’s...!”

“Mom...please don’t cry.” The more he listened the more they deviated. The more he lost the point on his stick.

“I-I’m sorry,” she laughed, “I just...I really wish I could have been there... Did you call her after you talked to me that night?”



Naturally she wanted the details, and not that Daniel minded so much, but he wanted to move things along. “I texted her... Went to her house, had dinner, and that’s it.”

“*And* the picture?” his Mom sounded stern, like a grave, important detail had been missed. “You two look so good together! Awh...I wish we all could have been there! Ou– wait, what if we all line our schedules up? Your dad and I can fly over so we can all do a big family get-together!”

“Mom, can we–”

“It’s been *years* since we were all together at the same time!” his mom pouted, just like his sister, “No– it’s decided. We *have* to do it!”

“*Mom!* Please? Another time? I need to talk about something else!”

“Oh, okay,” she seemed to hardly mind being curbed suddenly. “Sorry, honey, I guess I got a little excited. But that picture of you in Rose’s lap is going on the calendar this year, you know?”

“Y–” he honestly didn’t like that, but he was used to losing if it meant having a snowball’s chance in hell of at least winning at something. “Sure. Fine. Can you please hear me out now?”

“Absolutely.” She had gone bubbly, and Daniel still didn’t feel like they were on the same wavelength. She was happy. Excited, and totally over the moon. Daniel had gone and done something completely and totally against his better judgment. He had opened Pandora’s box and now all this turmoil he was knee-deep in was the result of it. Everything at this point felt like the end times to him, and it was only getting worse.

And yet, it was probably the best day of his mother’s life. After all, what more could she want? Her family was fractured and these past two days were the first signs in a long, long time of “healing.” Her own flesh and blood she was tortured seeing at odds with one another were finally reuniting, and the impossible seemed possible again.

Even if he was in the right and truly cheated, there was some hesitation in what he was about to say. He was about to put in his mother’s mind the idea of a wedge again that’d make the horrors far too real all over again. But he had to, because even in a situation like this, wasn’t it only right that he put himself first?

So he prepared for the worst and braced himself for the shock.

“...Mom, Rose kicked me out of my own apartment.”

“Oh? I know.”

A long, uncomfortable silence hung over the phone.

“Danny? Are you still there?”

He was far too blindsighted to even correct her. “Y-yeah...? Mom, did you hear what I just said?”

“You moved out of your apartment, right? You’re at Rose’s, aren’t you?”

His center of balance was going, and slowly he stumbled back to lean against the bed.

“I-I...I am, but wh-what? You knew?”

“Well, Rose just talked to me a few hours ago... She said you were having a tough time with it, though.”

“Yeah, and I really fucking am!” Daniel shouted. Christ, were his own personal issues not even his information to share anymore? Rose already talked to their mom? *When?!*

“Danny, it’s nothing to swear about, okay?”

“*Mom!* She *kicked* me out!” Daniel cried, “Out of my own apartment! My own house! I won’t even be able to keep my job because of her! She just showed up and ruined my life! A-and...and you’re just gonna act like that’s...like that’s normal?!”

“Honey, just take a deep breath, okay?”

“Why, is breathing gonna make Rose finally go away?!”

“*Danny!*”

“Why are you okay with this?!” Daniel angrily asked. “Why do you sound like you don’t even care?!”

“Danny, I *do* care,” she finally answered in a calm voice, like things were finally serious again.

“Then why aren’t you mad? Why doesn’t this bother you?!”

“It did, but now it doesn’t.”

“*Now* it doesn’t?!” Why in the hell was everyone always off in their own fantasy land?! Why didn’t anyone actually understand what he was going through?! “B-but...she just took me! She forced me to leave my own apartment! She can’t do that! J-just...” It was embarrassing and shameful, but far less than it would’ve been had he not tried advocating for himself. The sad truth was he couldn’t get Rose to budge on his own, hence why he had to rely on someone else. “Just tell Rose to let me go back home!”

“I know you’re upset, hon...but...I think the situation right now might be better for you?”

And his heart shattered.

“What?”

“Danny– your sister told me about your apartment. The one that *I* cosigned on? You never said *anything* about it the way Rose did?”

“Say *what*?” That it was some horrid shithole filled with mold, cracking walls on a building ready to collapse at a moment’s notice? Yeah, sure, maybe it wasn’t the greatest, but Daniel was more than certain that it was the farthest thing from whatever his sister’s hyperactive imagination could ever concoct. Whether it was out of maliciousness or plain ignorance, his sister could hardly ever gauge a legitimate danger.

“Mold?” his mother stated accusingly, and Daniel rolled his eyes. “That you don’t even have a bed?”

“I do,” he bitterly corrected.

“Daniel, a couch is not a bed.”

“It’s a *pull-out*! Did she tell you that part?”

“She said that the water isn’t clean. Your fridge had barely anything in it, and your cabinets were empty? Danny, have you been eating?”

“*Yes!*” Eating well? For his own case, he chose not to elaborate. “And the water isn’t dirty! I use it every night!”

“And what about the neighborhood? Danny, when I cosigned that lease, I thought you were making a safe decision?”

“I *did* make a safe decision! Just stop listening to Rose, mom! She’s lying! I’m perfectly fine! Are you really going to believe her over me?”

“It’s not about picking between my kids, Danny, it’s about making sure you’re all safe, even if you’re out of the nest. She also told me about the kind of work you’ve been doing...” a small, disappointed sigh came from the other end. “I...I don’t want to talk about this any more than we need to, but Danny, I don’t like what I’ve been hearing.”

“SO JUST STOP LISTENING TO ROSE!”

“--And I know how much being on your own means to you,” his mom continued, “and I’m sure you can be just as independent right now. Do not hold this against your sister. She’s worried and concerned about you, Danny, and I am too. Can we not worry about you?”

“Do whatever you want, just don’t get in the way of *my* life over *your* feelings!” It was quiet and to himself, but finally he stomped his foot in a boiling kind of rage he couldn’t express otherwise.

“...I know you’re upset, and I know you feel like things aren’t going your way right now. Life is hard, Danny, and I just wish I could convince you that it’s not something you have to shoulder all by yourself?”

It felt hopeless. His sister got to their mom first, so naturally the game was over before it had even started. The odds were never not stacked against him, and this was yet another unfortunate example of that.

He wasn’t saying anything back; too lost and upset, so his mom kept going.

“Danny, I’m canceling the lease.”

The one thing that could garner a response from him. “What?! *No!*”

“I’ve thought about what Rose told me today, and that’s on top of me having my concerns from the start.”

“That’s a lie! You’re just doing it because she told you to!”

“And I’ll say it as many times as I have to: Rose isn’t making me do anything I wasn’t already thinking myself, sweetheart... I’m your mother and I’m always going to love you, which is why I’m willing to do something that makes you mad at me if it’s in your best interest. Nobody is lying, okay? I love you, your dad loves you, and Rose loves you. We all just want what’s best for you.”

“Y-you...!” Why? Why was he tearing up? Why was this so unfair?! “You can’t...! You can’t do that...!”

“Danny,” she softly explained, but it didn’t change how heavy-handed the gesture felt, “I cosigned your lease, remember? I have the right to void it for whatever reason, and as your mother I am doing that.”

“B-but the—!”

“Don’t worry about the fees. I’m taking care of it and so is Rose.” *Of course she was.* Leave it to Rose to try and absolve herself of any guilt. “And I’m sure you may have already, but please don’t give Rose a hard time about this? If you’re gonna be mad at anyone, then please be mad at me?”

“How about both?” Daniel scoffed, sniffing as he wiped his eyes. He didn’t get an answer for that.

“I want you to stay with Rose. She’s missed you for a long time, and I know how hard you’ve been working, Danny. I just want you to take a break, okay? Just focus on yourself, okay?”

“And what, you’re just gonna magically hope that living in the same place as Rose is gonna magically make us loving siblings again?” *Did they ever love each other?*

“Whatever happens, I know you’ll be in a safe place.” And that was precisely the reason why she wasn’t in tears by this point, and Daniel knew it too. He couldn’t stand it. His conversations with his mom ended in tears, all because of her son’s pathetic self-made image. A lone little boy all by himself in another state in a run-down apartment. How couldn’t she cry? She couldn’t afford to fight with her son when she needed to know that he was safe and alive. But now with his big, responsible and successful sister in the picture, there was pushback. They could argue and bicker and there would still be a point of contact. She’d know he had four walls, security, and someone looking after him.

Unlike women and girls, men and boys just weren't afforded that same kind of stigmatized independence. The poison of social politics was rich in his family's veins, and this was the fullest brunt of it.

"I'm hanging up," Daniel declared in a quiet, sore voice.

"Okay, Danny. I love you, you know?"

He hung up.

And the creamy white walls surrounding him couldn't have looked any more red. He paced and raced around the room, fighting the urge to scream. He wanted to kick and punch so many different things, but the might of everything in his way just seemed like they'd break his bones before he broke them. So he went back to the first idea.

*"FUCCCCKKKK!! FUCK! FUCK! FUCKING-FUCK!"* But as great as it felt to scream, the volume nor the words could even come close to describing how he felt. He was losing everything, and absolutely no one cared. Or on the contrary, many did, just that they cared to see things go the exact opposite way for him.

His sister was plotting against him, and now was his mom. His dad was just a pawn without any power; someone who he loved, but knew there was no point in trying to confide in. He was trapped, both literally and metaphorically. Nowhere to go. Nowhere to turn. Nothing at all to do but scream, kick, and punch.

So he continued to yell and continued to scream with reckless abandon. He had nothing but his own lungs to try and reach a place where he could bear to even exist in this place. Everything about it was Rose. It was a prison. Oppression. Rejection. Manipulation... Everything wrong with his life and the world he lived in. He hated it all and he hated himself. His own powerlessness. His inability to fight what others decided for him...!

His chest was heaving and as hot as his face felt, as itchy and red as his ears got, he sobbed. He had no recourse. He had no way to cope other than let out a sheer amount of rage. Finally on the eighth lap around the room he spotted the thick, long pillows along the bed, which he angrily swiped and tugged off the side, swinging it around like a giant battering ram.

"I FUCKING HATE EVERYTHING!" he screamed as he tossed the cushion forward. It plumped against the giant wardrobe, but it was as if he did nothing at all. Nothing more than a door on its hinges just barely moving.

“--Is everything okay?”

And like last night, sitting on the toilet and caught in the most embarrassing way possible, there she was. Naomi, yet again finding Daniel in one of his most humiliating circumstances. Like a little boy caught with his pants down (only figuratively this time), he froze with wet cheeks and a red face.

“I-it’s *nothing!*” he shouted with a dismissive swipe. His head had yet to turn around and face her.

“I’ve been hearing a lot of screaming,” Naomi’s voice was getting closer. *Fuck! Don’t come over here! Just leave!* “Screaming isn’t nothing.”

“It *is* if I say it i-!” he swung his arm wide but a warm hand caught him by the wrist. Finally he spun his head as he grit his teeth, staring back at a face that looked far from impressed.

“Were you going to hit me?” Naomi asked. It wasn’t charged and hardly offended. Neutral, just like always.

“H-hit...? *No!* You were just in the way!” Daniel shouted and tried to pull his arm back, but she didn’t let go. Naomi was on her knees and still her head hung over him, and while he fought the pointless fight of trying to get away, she looked over at the wardrobe.

“You’re throwing things?”

“Just *leave* already!”

“And I didn’t leave you the first time today, so why would I the second?” She was very right, and that’s what irked him the most. Suddenly he was just a magnet for attention and it couldn’t have made him angrier.

He went to yell, but he caught himself. “I-I...I just am processing stuff right now. That’s it. So please, can you just give me some privacy?” Before he got into another screaming fit all over again.

“This is a tantrum.”

The words sunk in.

“I...” Daniel tried to force a laugh to try and highlight some kind of absurdity. “No. This is *not* a tantrum. Do not call it that.”

“What would you call it then?” She tilted her head, patiently waiting for an answer.

“Th-this is...just a...frustrating thing, okay! But it’s my business! Stop butting in!”

“Is it not my business if I have to clean up the messes you make?” Naomi poked him with more precision and it nearly made him buckle.

“*I’ll* clean whatever I have to! I’m not breaking anything!” Though he wished he could have...

“Do you want to talk about your tantrum?” And as demeaning and belittling as it sounded, her words came across as honest, or at least not impure.

“It’s **NOT** a tantrum!” and he pulled back harder, but his feet started to slip across the carpet.

“It is, because you’re throwing one right now,” Naomi said. “Last chance. Do you want to talk about it?”

“No I do *NOT!*”

And despite the trap he was in, he still poised himself like there was about to be a fight, but Naomi simply nodded.

“Okay.”

And he was lifted by the armpits.

“H-hey! Let me go!” Naomi started to walk as he was carried and they left his room and walked down the hallway.

“I’ll put you down soon.”

“No, not soon. Now! You have no fucking right!”

“Please don’t swear.”



“Or what, it’ll hurt your feelings? Like I give a *shit!*” Swearing was the smallest thing he could do to actually burn off some steam. Anything to help cope like an alcoholic needed their drink or a smoker needed a light.

“I’m asking nicely.”

“Yeah, and I’m not,” he scoffed, still trying to wriggle out of her hands, but Naomi had an unfortunately good grip. “Why, gonna tell Rose what an unpleasant guest I’m being? Fine! Go ahead! See if I care!”

“Rose isn’t home right now.”

She wasn’t? Where did she go? Didn’t they just get home? “W-well fine, tell her when she gets back then! Hell, tell her about how I shit myself too! Tell our ‘secret!’” He laughed maniacally. “Yeah, as *fucking* if. Like anything is a fucking secret from her...”

He was swapped and held against her bountiful chest, cushioning his head while she flipped a switch and they entered a large, grand bathroom. With far more space and a full, massive tub, it seemed more impressive than what his meager one had to offer. Then again, he had no right to compare. After all, he’d never had a bedroom with a toilet connected to it to begin with. Well, assuming you didn’t count his living room setup...

“Why are we even in here...?” Daniel asked with a pissy attitude still fresh in his voice.

“Three things,” Naomi finally put him down, and Daniel’s first instinct was to leave. But either Naomi was nimble and quick or Daniel was just an open book. Either way the fact he was read and a hand on his shoulder steering him back inside had him even more annoyed.

The big door was promptly shut with a soft click, and now there was nowhere to go. So he turned around, crossed his arms and looked up at the maid.

“Let me out.”

“After.” Naomi answered as frugally as she always did, opening a closet door and bundling things in her arms. From a thick, fluffy towel to countless cleaning supplies. Her foot swung inside the closet and hooked a stool she dragged across the tiles with her toes. Right until it was in front of Daniel.

“Please sit,” she asked without a moment of eye contact.

“What?” He looked down at the stool, then back up. “No. Why?”

And it was the first time he heard a sigh come from the woman. All the things she held were placed on the side of the tiled rim of the tub and she focused back on him. Against his will he was lifted once more, only now his bottom was forced onto the stool. But there was more. The stool came to life, because he was almost immediately being driven for a head-on collision to the empty corner in the bathroom, but just when his nose was a few inches from the corner, he stopped.

“Ten minutes,” she declared.

“Ten minutes?” Daniel blinked with no less confusion. “Naomi, what are you— *hey!*”

Just as he turned his head and torso to talk, Naomi’s hands gently but firmly steered his sight and position right back at the corner.

“Ten minutes,” she said it again, and the act was finally clicking for Daniel.

“W-wait,” he turned around again. “You can’t be serious— right? There’s no way! You’re not putting me in a fucking timeou—!”

And a soft, bite-sized mound of something was stuffed inside his mouth. Immediately his tongue touched it and the metallic, foreign taste was creeping over his tongue and into his taste buds. The horrible taste of something he had never experienced until only as a kid. Unfortunate memories came back to him when he first learned the concept of swears. Mom didn’t like that. Not one bit. After all, it ended in...

“*S-shoap?!!*” Daniel coughed and spit up what was left, but he was trying to pick up a puddle by this point. It adhered and glued to his mouth, leaving a sickly aftertaste that had him scowling and frowning. “Why would you do that?!”

“Because we do not swear,” Naomi instructed and explained, and with a hand against his shoulder and one on the collar of his shirt, she promptly turned him back around, “and we stay in timeout until time is up.”

His fists were drilling into his thighs, and he turned around once again. Just licking touching the roof of his mouth with his tongue was enough to elicit that horrible taste of cleanliness...! “You can’t put me in timeout! You’re not the boss of me, and—”

Another nibble of soap was forced inside of him, and just when he tried to spit it out Naomi's finger pressed down. It wasn't hard and it didn't hurt, but the soft chunk deformed and depressed into something far harder to remove. She dropped a bomb in his mouth and set it off.

Daniel coughed and rubbed his tongue with a sickly feeling. It wasn't sweet or sour, and just a bitter blandness. Almost as if it wasn't meant to be eaten. The taste consumed his mouth though and with it inside of him he couldn't escape the paralyzing and fidgety feeling.

"*S-STOP IT!*" he yelled.

"And please use your inside voice," Naomi turned him back around with an exhale. "I'm not saying I'm the boss of you."

"So then let me go!" His voice did go down some.

"No."

"Why not?!"

"Because you need a bath."

"Fine! I'll bathe!" and he backed out his stool, but she promptly pushed it back in. He made another downright aggravated noise.

"Timeout is ten minutes," Naomi declared, almost like a schoolteacher reminding her student. "I asked if you wanted to talk about it. You didn't want to. Now you're reflecting on it." He could suddenly hear a gushing faucet behind him.

Yet again, it was a predicament he couldn't physically resist, all because someone far bigger than him decided to do things their way. He couldn't run, he couldn't hide. Hell, he couldn't even turn his face from the corner. A disgusted look was shared with himself as he gently moved his tongue inside his poisoned mouth, trying desperately to wash away the taste of the cleaning product with his own saliva. This wasn't real, right? A twenty year old being treated like this?

Thankfully with his back to her he could safely roll his eyes. "F-fine... If I talk to you about it I can come out of the corner, right?"

"No," she answered with just as much attention.

"What? Why not?! That's what you said, didn't you? If I talked, could I?!"

“That was before, this is now,” he could hear her hand delicately splash the water. “We can still talk if you’d like, but you’re staying in the corner. Nine and a half minutes, now.”

“*What*, did Rose tell you to do this before she left? To force you to talk with me or keep tabs on me, or whatever?”

“No. I decided you needed a bath.”

“*You* did?” There must have been some miscommunication. When did *she* hear it from *Daniel* that he needed a bath? “Well– no?” His utter disdain couldn’t be misplaced. “I don’t want one. I’m fine.” He crossed his arms, but again, all the gestures he made were just between him and the two walls his nose was forced between.

“You still need one,” Naomi overrode his opinion yet again with more busywork in the closet.

“Yeah, and why’s that?”

And it was unfortunately something he wished he hadn’t asked.

“I promised it’d be our secret,” Naomi started, “but not telling Rose about your poopy undies doesn’t make the smell go away, Danny.”

Her words were without charge or seeming intent. All she did was make a statement, and yet it had the boy blushing on the stool. He didn’t know what was worse, the mention of his accident or what she called his underwear. Suddenly his illusion of privacy was pleasant, what with the downright discomfort on his face and embarrassment.

“It’s nothing to be upset about,” she nonchalantly continued, “but it doesn’t change that you need to be cleaned.”

Suddenly he was desperate for a change in topic and fast.

“Wh-why... why is Rose even out?”

“Shopping.”

Her one-word answers were really getting to him.

“Shopping for *what*?”

“Do you want bubbles?” she asked, and he blinked.

He frowned up at the tiled walls like they were the ones speaking. “...What?”

“Bubbles,” she repeated.

“B-bubble what?”

“Bubbles in your bath.”

What did bubbles have to do with anything, and why was she changing the subject?

“N-no? I don’t care! Just answer my question!”

“What’s your question?”

“My question about Rose going shopping—!” He turned around in a burst, but no matter what she was doing, Naomi somehow always knew when he’d make his move. Not more than a second of rebellion burned before his nose was back in the corner. “WHAT IS SHE BUYING?!”

“Shh,” she hushed. “Indoor voices.”

He couldn’t remember the last time he had to go through so many gymnastics and jump over so many hurdles just to get the answer to a simple goddamn question, it was starting to make his head spin.

“*Fine*,” he grumbled with a worsening look. “*What* is she buying?”

His heated question was hit with a splash of cold water. “I’m not sure. She didn’t say.” It sounded like her hand went back to sifting in the bathwater, slowly filling up more and more.

“That’s a lie.”

“It is?” Naomi sounded unsure, but to the agitated boy it read as doubt. She was flexible with her answers as rigid as she was with instruction. For someone who could speak in so many absolutes, suddenly speaking with speculation made it feel targeted and deliberate. Could he really not get a concrete answer out of her? Was she teasing him?

“You *do* know what she’s doing. You just don’t want to tell me. You’re just gaslighting me. You’re just trying to get me angry...!” And unfortunately, it was working.

“Why would I want you angry?” Naomi asked in a curious voice, just as her heel scooted Daniel’s stool back into place.

“How the hell should I know?” he shook his head in disgust.

“Don’t use that word, please.”

He had a double-take. “What, ‘hell’?” Since when did all this censorship start?

“Yes, please. It’s not a nice word.”

“Since when did my words bother you?” he rolled his eyes. The least she could do was give him a reaction that matched *her* words.

“Since you started staying with us,” Naomi answered over the sound of a turning faucet handle. The gushing water noise was gone. “Do you want to come out of timeout, now?”

*Timeout.* Let it be known that Daniel did not do timeouts. He merely sat and listened. The only reason he was like this was because he was *letting* Naomi get away with it. He was doing what he wanted because that’s what mattered most.

And acting in his own interest as of late also meant being a smartass. “Thought it was for ten minutes,” he spoke into the corner and his question bounced Naomi’s way off the walls.

“It is, but the water will be cold by then.”

“So I’ll just heat it up again?” He didn’t want to stay in the corner, not like he had to no matter what Naomi said, of course.

“No, you’ll use what’s already in the tub,” Naomi calmly corrected him. “I don’t like being wasteful.”

“That’s great, because I do.” Five points for Daniel with the witty comeback. He sighed as the game of quips was already getting boring. He was still upset and angry, but if nothing else, talking with Naomi made for a good distraction, even in spite of how annoying she was being.

Then two large hands softly perched on the boy's shoulders and the light he could see amidst his own shadow was eclipsed by the sudden giantess behind him. He could feel her warmth as her body stooped low just so her mouth could softly speak against his ear.

"Danny, I'm being patient with you right now because I know you're having a tough time. I'm giving you a chance to *show* that you can behave, and don't need time in the corner. Can you handle that?"

"H-..." The proximity and intimate voice from the typically distant woman had the boy on edge. Prickles ran up and down his skin, and as warm as she was in tune with the bathroom, a shockingly cold sweat was going down his back.

"*Danny...*?" the voice came again beside him and his body stiffened up even more. Was he flustered? Why was he so bothered...?!

"I-I'm fine!" he insisted and tried to stand, but Naomi forced him right back down.

"No, that's not what I asked," she scolded. "Can you handle behaving yourself?"

Handle behaving himself? What kind of question even was that...?! There was no mistaking it. The way she talked to him was downright condescending. Like she was somehow above him. Sure, maybe literally, but not figuratively!

"Do you want a cold bath?" she asked. The words had changed but the message did not.

Still, like any psychological tactic, it worked.

"No," he answered on a dime, sounding like there was pride that could somehow be preserved.

"Then will you behave?"

*Behave.* Why did she keep using that word? It was as if she was implying a difference in status. Like he was a lesser that needed to stay in line. What gave her the right? What gave her the authority?

So with such an injustice at play, Daniel fired back with the same exact approach. Albeit...less confidently. "W-will...will you be—"

"--I'm not the one sitting on a stool in the corner," Naomi crippled his confidence entirely. "Danny, last chance. Be good, or another eight minutes?"

Another eight minutes...? Eight, measly minutes. They meant nothing. The smallest sentence in the history of convicted criminals. Only it wasn't, because Daniel was innocent. He did nothing wrong, so there wasn't any time to serve. 480 seconds that had no right being on his record, including the 120 right before it. They'd pass like nothing if he sat it through, and sure, maybe the water wouldn't be as warm... But fuck, he didn't do anything to get in trouble! He couldn't get in trouble! This was beneath him! Just like he was beneath Naomi... LITERALLY! Not in any other way, whatsoever!

But if he did sit here and take the stupid punishment...was that an admission? Like he was validating Naomi's thoughts? *Proving* that he was a no-good misbehaving kid? He wasn't a kid and he wasn't misbehaving. He was just...frustrated.

Before he knew it there was an olive branch reaching down from above and right between his hands. A sizable paper cup filled with water was in Naomi's hand.

"Can you still taste soap?" she asked, and Daniel answered by taking the cup and taking it down like a shot; the only kind of drinking he was allowed to do...

"S-..." why did she even care? She's the one who made him eat it! "Sort of..." he mumbled.

So the cup was taken from him and filled back up again. Awkwardly, he sipped again.

"More?" she asked, and finally he shook his head. "Please turn around."

Not that he was being obedient, but he decided himself that he was done sitting in the corner, so by coincidence he did pivot in his seat.

Naomi was sitting there on her knees with her head tilted to the side and hands splayed on her thighs.

"Do you want to come off the stool?" she asked, and Daniel wrestled with even entertaining the question to begin with. Just acknowledging it meant she had power over him. But she didn't...!

"I want to get off," he stated rather than answered. It was his crafty way of doing one without the other.

"Will you behave?" She was calm, but her voice sounded slightly expectant, like a warning to get out the last of whatever mischief was left in him. And it was the stonewalling patience that she wore so proudly on her sleeve that had the boy in shambles. His imagination somehow



couldn't fathom a world where he made her cave first. Everything about her was iron-willed. From her demeanor to her mind, emotions and body itself she was large and in-charge.

"Y-..." he gritted his teeth as he started to look away. Quietly, just in case his own conscience might hear, he mumbled, "Yes..."

And the rarely seen smile started to glimmer through Naomi's lips.

"Good."

Then before he could stand, she had him by the waist and took him off the stool.

"Thank you," she added, then swam her hand through the water one last time. "This feels good," she decided, and Daniel, who could just see the top of the ornate tub on his toes, had yet to see much of anything.

"So is the water ready...?" he sighed, hoping to quickly forget yet another emotionally frustrating moment shared between them. One glance over at the stool was already giving him helpful ideas on getting into the tub.

"Yes," she said as she wrung out her hand, then turned to face him. Then with her hands she beckoned with her fingers. "Arms up."

An awkward silence ensued as Daniel showed his emotions as vividly as Naomi didn't.

"N-...no...?" He sounded unsure as well as confused. "Naomi, I'm all set now... You can leave."

"Danny, the water's going to get cold."

"Yeah, so can I please have some privacy to take a bath now?" Why were the simplest things with her always so difficult...?!

But the confusion was cleared in an instant. Only to sweep more chaos into the mix.

With a blank, but certain look, Naomi said,

"I'm giving you a bath."