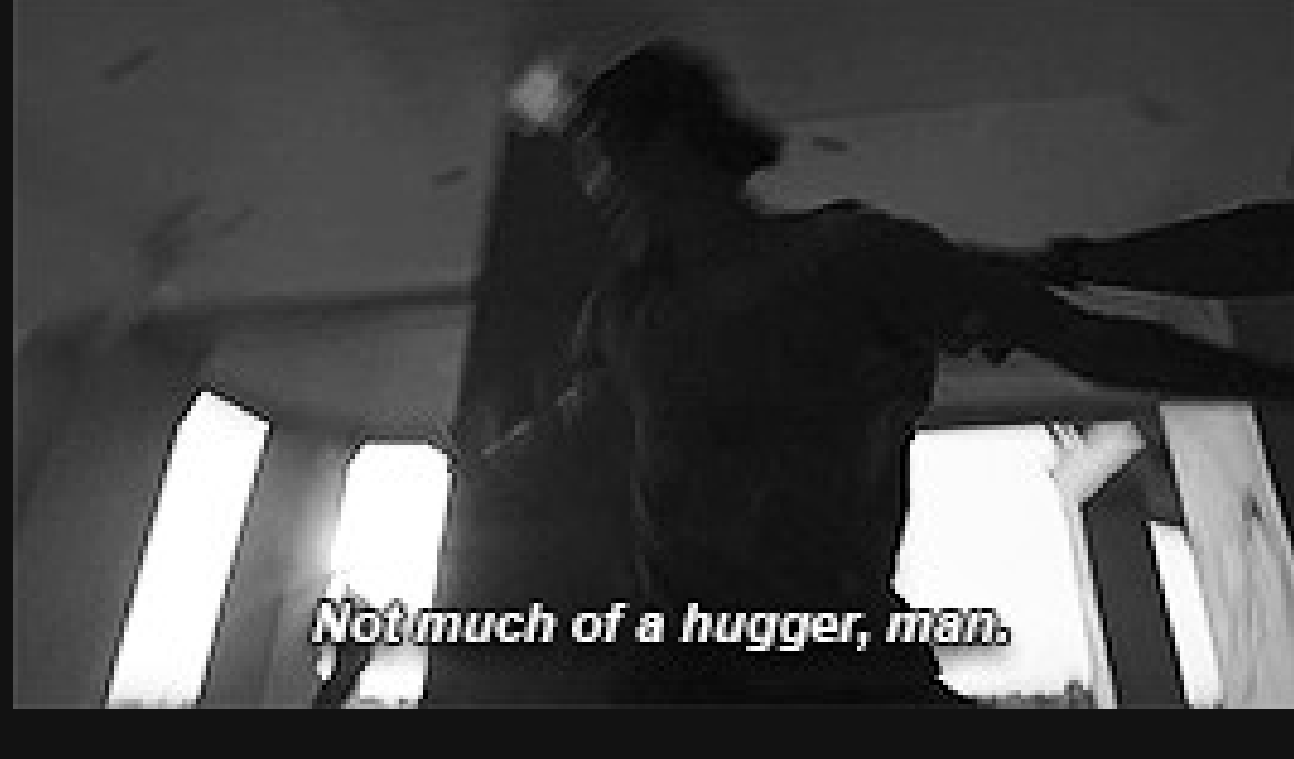


## Chapter One



I watched anxiously as my brother stood on the edge of the roof above me.

"John B, I swear to God," I muttered as he took a swig of the probably warm beer and lifted one foot to balance on the other.

"Lighten up, Jo."

I turned my glare away from my brother and to JJ sitting next to me on the scaffolding.

"That's what, a three-story fall to the deck?" Pope asked, squinting up at John B, "I give you about a one-in-three chance of survival."

John B stuck a finger in his mouth before holding it up in the air as if measuring the direction of the wind. He turned to look at me and JJ.

"Should I do it?"

"Yeah, you should jump," Pope answered, "I'll shoot you on the way down."

I rolled my eyes and began chugging the rest of my own beer as Pope held up a power drill.

"You'll shoot me?"

"They're gonna have Japanese toilets with total warmers."

I tossed my empty beer can at Pope, hitting him in the shoulder as Kiara walked out of the house.

"Of course they do," JJ said, giving me a quick smirk full of mischief, "Why wouldn't they?"

"This used to be a turtle habitat, but who cares about the turtles, I guess?"

Kiara walked out from under the scaffolding and looked up at John B.

"I can't have cold towels," I said, faking an offended tone.

"Can you please not kill yourself?"

"Don't spill that beer," JJ added, taking the last sip from his own. "I'm not giving you another one."

A gust of wind knocked my brother off balance, causing him to drop the beer.

"Oh, shit!"

I sighed as the can drops to the deck, splashing the liquid all over the unstained wood.

"Of course you did, like right after I told you not to," JJ said, rolling his eyes.

"Smooth."

"A-plus."

"Idiot."

Kiara, Pope, and I added to JJ's annoyance as John B groaned in frustration at the lost beer.

"Hey!"

My eyes went wide at the sound of a familiar voice, and Pope leaned over the rail of the deck to peep into the street.

"Hey, uh, security's here."

JJ grabbed my wrist and inspected it, tapping the bare skin.

"Hm, they're early today."

I inspect the invisible watch myself, forcing my eyes to go wide in mock surprise before turning to my brother.

"Let's go, Humpty Dumpty."

The five of us started hooting and hollering as we made our way out of the house. I climbed down the scaffolding behind JJ, hearing my brother making his way down behind me.

"Gary is that you?" JJ yelled, causing me to laugh as my feet hit the deck. "Gary, good to see you man."

"You're asking for it," Kiara laughed as we all ran into the empty house at the same time.

I followed JJ towards the front of the house, running into his back when he suddenly changed directions at the sight of Gary the Security Guy.

JJ grabbed my wrist again, pulling me in a new direction towards the back of the house. He dropped it when a second security guard came around the corner and tried to tackle us.

We both ducked out of the way and changed directions, and JJ yelled at the guy over his shoulder.

"Not much of a hugger, man!"

I laughed as I ran through a hole in the wall meant for a future window and into the backyard. JJ quickly kneeled in front of the fence, offering me a boost. I placed a hand on his shoulder and a foot in his cupped hands, and he forced me upwards enough for me to grab the top of the fence and scramble to the other side.

Pope landed heavily beside me, falling on his face, and JJ laughed while I helped him to his feet again.

"Get up, Pope. Fatso's coming."

The three of us started running again, and I looked over my shoulder as the security guy's shoulders and head appear at the top of the fence.

"Come here, you little pricks!"

I laughed for what felt like the millionth time that night and looked ahead of me just as the van pulled up. JJ, Pope, and I jumped in, joining a laughing Kiara and John B.

As last in, I went to slide the door shut, but JJ stopped me.

"Come on, Gary," he encouraged the running security guard.

"Dude, give it up," I yelled, "you're gonna give yourself a heart attack!"

John B laughed from the driver's seat as Kiara scolded the rest of us for making fun of Gary.

JJ leaned out of the van, the last can of beer in his hand offered out to Gary.

"You're so close! You can do it," he encouraged before tossing the beer to the poor guy. "There you go! They don't pay you enough, bro."

Kiara pulled JJ back in by the back of his shirt, scolding him to stop.

"Oh, come on," he laughed, "that sort of initiative is just begging to be punished."

I slid the door shut as John B finally began to drive the speed limit, bringing us back to the Cut.

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