

MEMPHIS

A NOVEL

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CORMIER

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This book is dedicated to my daughters Angelina & Priscilla; may you always know your worth and chase your dreams with courage and determination.

And for my mother Susan, whose love and wisdom taught me to dream.

Trigger Warning: *This novel contains themes of domestic violence, sexual assault and illicit drug use that may be distressing to some readers. Please proceed with caution.*

PREFACE

THIS STORY BEGAN as a whisper on long commutes to the office—a character I couldn't shake, a voice I couldn't silence. Memphis lived in my mind long before she made it to the page. I wrote her story because I had to.

At its heart, *Memphis* is about living up to your full potential and breaking free from the confines that seem impossible to escape. It's about the strength buried inside us all—the kind that surfaces in our darkest hours, pushing us through hopeless situations when we think we have nothing left. More than anything, it's about healing after trauma, and the quiet courage it takes to reclaim your voice.

I didn't write this novel to relive the pain. I wrote it to transform it. For every woman who's had to rebuild from ashes, for every child who's witnessed violence and carried it in silence—this is for you.

PART ONE

CHAPTER 1

AUGUST 1977

MEMPHIS HURRIES TO get the plates onto the table -wise to set them down gently. The clock ticks louder than usual, its hands creeping toward eight. No time to spare. She wipes her hands on her apron and heads down the narrow hallway, the faded wallpaper brushing her shoulder. In the spare bedroom, she pauses. The door's already ajar.

"Breakfast is ready. Church starts in an hour," she says, knocking gently as she pushes the door wider.

Johnny's sprawled facedown on the couch, shirtless, one arm draped over the edge. He lifts his head, squints at her, then rolls over, eyes shut again. She waits. Nothing. Of course. She turns on her heel, heart tight with urgency. If they're late, it'll be her fault—never mind who stayed in bed. Rushing back down the hall, just as she rounds the corner to the kitchen, small fingers grab her hips. She gasps, half-laughing, half-startled, and glances down. Michael grins up at her, mischief glowing in his eyes.

"Oh baby, you scared me," she tells her son.

"I got dressed *all by myself*. Can we eat now?" Micheal smiles.

Freckles dot his cheeks and nose, scattered like stars, and Memphis prays they'll stay, never fading into adulthood.

“As soon as your Daddy gets up, yes - we can eat.” Memphis runs her hand through his brown locks.

“Ok,” Michael says, a crease of mild disappointment tugging at his lips.

Johnny brushes past them, dropping heavily into a chair at the round kitchen table. The vinyl squeals under his weight, the orange pattern clashing with the mint-green walls.

“God damn, boy,” Johnny says, eyes narrowing as they land on Michael’s wrinkled t-shirt and faded jeans. He gestures with a cigarette hanging from his lips. “You dress yourself this morning, or what?”

He exhales a slow puff of smoke and drawls, “M darling? You think it’d be too much trouble to put a decent outfit on our boy?”

Memphis kneels beside Michael, her voice soft but firm. “Of course! C’mon, baby, let’s change your shirt.” She slips her hand into his, guiding him away.

Johnny rolls his eyes, waving a hand toward the stove. “Well, get my food first, geez! Y’all gonna leave me sittin’ here while you do that? Nah uh. Bring that here.” Memphis does as she’s told.



Johnny steers the car into the church parking lot, the tires crunching over gravel as the clock ticks dangerously close to service time. He barely shifts into park before he swings the door open. Without a glance at Memphis, he strides toward the rusty black Chevy beside them, bending low to the window. His broad shoulders hunch as he leans in, blocking the morning light. Bobby slouches in the driver’s seat, his thick beard dusted with crumbs and ash. A stray thread clings to the dark mass of hair, making it hard to tell whether he’s slept, eaten, or smoked more recently. The stale scent of cigarettes and sweat clings to him, in sharp contrast to Johnny’s clean-shaven

face and close-cropped caramel hair. Memphis catches herself wrinkling her nose, wondering if Bobby's shower habits ever cross his mind, even for church. Meredith sits in the passenger seat like she's stepped out of a catalog—back straight, hands folded neatly in her lap, not a hair out of place. In the backseat, Sarah leans forward slightly, her wide eyes tracking the scene outside. She doesn't speak, just watches—still and quiet—while the two brothers argue in the driveway, their voices sharp against the hush inside the car. Memphis steps out of the car, offering a quick nod to her in-laws, her lips pressed into a polite smile. Her hand tightens around Michael's small fingers as they walk toward the church, her mother Doris close at her side. Behind them, Johnny's voice rises in animated laughter, his words mixing with Bobby's as they swap details about some bar fight from the night before. The faint mention of punches and curses drifts in the air, tugging at her nerves. She quickens her pace as Billy, the youngest of the Freedman brothers, pulls into the church parking lot. Their rowdy banter trails off behind her as she grips the worn wooden handle of the church door. It opens with a soft creak, letting a wash of cool air kiss her face. Inside, the hush of the sanctuary greets her—the scent of polished wood, the low hum of early arrivals, the dim light filtering through stained glass. She barely takes a step before she spots Pastor Wyatt and his wife, Shirley, moving toward her with easy smiles that carry years of Sunday mornings. Just as their greetings begin to form, Doris swoops in, cutting them off with the sharpness of her voice, ready to claim the moment for herself.

"What's that godawful smell? You smell that, Memphis?" Doris says.

Memphis closes her eyes, mortified. When she opens them again, Shirley is wearing a strained smile.

"Hi there, Doris. Good day to you," Shirley says, her voice steady, though her smile tightens just a touch. She glances at Pastor Wyatt, his lips parting, about to speak—until Doris barrels on.

“Ah, well, no matter. How are you, Shirley? You look amazing! Did you lose weight?”

Shirley’s brow lifts slightly.

“I wouldn’t know if I did, but thanks for the compliment,” she replies, her eyes sliding back to Memphis, bringing warmth with her gaze.

“Memphis, honey, how are you?” She pulls her into a gentle hug, the scent of her perfume mingling with the cool church air. “And Michael, are you excited for service today?”

“Yes, ma’am!” Michael chirps, his face lighting up.

“Well, good! You can find a seat up front. We’ve got some beautiful gospel singing this morning. I know you’ll love it, Memphis.”

The Church has always been a refuge for Memphis—not for the religion itself, but for the escape it offers. The chance to slip away from the confines of home and see the few people who bring her comfort. The Wyatts had always been part of that solace. They’d been there for her before Johnny, when she used to sing in the choir every Sunday. Memphis spins at the sound of the heavy door creaking open. Johnny strides in like he owns the place, voice echoing through the sanctuary—loud, smug, impossible to ignore. Bobby and Billy swagger in behind Johnny, laughter sharp-edged and too loud, like they’re daring someone to tell them they don’t belong. Meredith and Patty follow at a distance, their heels clicking softly against the floor, steps hesitant, eyes scanning the room like it might bite. Memphis watches them, catching the tight lines around their mouths, the way their shoulders dip inward. She knows that look—she wears it too. Being married to men with quick tempers had turned them all into quiet shadows. Meredith, Patty, and little Sarah slip in beside Memphis, their movements small, like they’re trying not to disturb the air. Together, they head into the chapel, quietly claiming seats near the front, where the gospel singing will soon begin. The church hums with the quiet rustle of hymnals and whispered greetings as

Pastor Wyatt takes his place at the pulpit. His deep voice fills the room, steady and familiar, as he offers his opening words and introduces the choir. A sea of fresh, eager faces rises, and the first notes of *Amazing Grace* drift into the air, soft and reverent. Two elders move through the aisles, the wooden donation box passing from hand to hand with the weight of expectation. Memphis shifts slightly on the old church bench, the wood creaking beneath her. Her hands rest in her lap, fingers brushing the worn fabric of her dress. Johnny sits beside her, arms crossed, his eyes flicking lazily over the congregation. She glances at the donation box as it nears, feeling its presence like a small pressure building. But when it reaches Johnny, he doesn't move. Not a coin, not a bill—nothing. His jaw is set, the look in his eye daring anyone to question it. Memphis says nothing. It's not her place, not when it comes to money. Johnny had made that clear years ago. He controls the finances; she handles the house. Her role was carved out early—cooking, cleaning, raising Michael—and the rest? That belonged to him. She accepted it, but in moments like this, the division feels heavy. Her eyes drift back to the choir, soaking in each note, every melody pulling her deeper. The music speaks to her in ways the sermon doesn't, filling her chest with something lighter, something she needs. She watches the young singers sway, their voices rising higher, the sound enveloping her like a warm embrace. Still, a small, cold knot tightens in her stomach when she steals a glance at Johnny's empty hands. Her mind wonders to a time long ago when she ten years old.

"Mom!" she called, her young voice tinged with hope, as she shuffled into the cramped living room, where Doris was sprawled on the couch, a cigarette dangling from her fingertips, the television flickering in the background. "Can I join the choir?"

Doris barely glanced up, her gaze fixed on the screen. "A choir? Memphis, that's a big responsibility. No, you'll just tire of it in a week."

Memphis's chest tightened. "But I love singing. It makes me feel... alive." The words hung in the air, heavy with longing.

Doris exhaled a long, bored sigh, extinguishing her cigarette. "Then talk to Shirley Wyatt. If she thinks it's a good idea, maybe I'll consider it."

Weeks passed, each day an eternity of pleading. Then, one bright Saturday, Memphis found herself standing in front of Shirley's door, her hands trembling with both fear and excitement. She poured out her heart, her voice quaking but steady. Shirley's eyes widened, her smile warm and understanding. "Let's go talk to your mother."

When they arrived at the trailer, Memphis's pulse quickened as she watched Shirley engage with Doris, the pastor's wife's enthusiasm a stark contrast to her mother's indifference.

"Doris, Memphis has a beautiful voice. She shouldn't miss this chance." Shirley told her.

Doris shifted, her expression unreadable, "If you promise to bring her yourself, Shirley, I reckon she can do it."

Relief crackled through young Memphis like electricity. She nearly skipped down the steps, her heart soaring—finally, someone believed in her. The years raced by like leaves caught in a storm. With her voice always at her side, Memphis thrived in the choir, standing at the front every Sunday as the notes wrapped around her like a warm embrace. Then Johnny appeared—charming, relentless—pulling her into a world where those bright dreams began to fade.

"You're mine now," he'd say, his voice low, as he brushed a stray hair behind her ear, but his words carried an invisible weight. "We'll build our life together." And so, she became a shadow of the girl who sang with abandon. Days turned into years, and the vibrant Memphis faded, replaced by a woman who meticulously arranged the home and followed Johnny's every whim. The choir's hymns became distant echoes, swallowed by the hum of daily obligations. Pastor Kevin stands at the pulpit, his voice warm and resonant as he

wraps up the service. “Thank you all for your generous donations,” he says, smiling at the congregation. “God bless, and God-willing, see y’all next week.” The final hymn dies away, and the Freedman family spills out of the church, their laughter and chatter weaving through the afternoon air. Johnny’s brothers and their wives gather around the car, voices rising with energy as they settle inside, ready to head south toward old Nashville. Memphis lingers, eyes following them, a tight knot of comfort and longing twisting in her chest. The Mustang Shelby gleams in the sunlight, its sleek curves a badge of Johnny’s pride. Only he gets behind the wheel, tearing through late-night streets with his brothers while Memphis stays tied to the house. She often drifts into daydreams—wind in her hair, open road ahead—but Johnny’s harsh words cut through: “You’d crash it, waste my money.” Memphis slides into the car, thankful for the ride yet keenly aware of the walls Johnny’s built around her. She’s always wanted to learn to drive, but he thrives on making her beg for every favor, savoring the control it gives him. Their modest three-bedroom rental home stands proudly, a far cry from their roots in Appalachian trailer parks. She sees envy flicker in her brothers-in-law’s eyes during family gatherings, each visit a reminder of Johnny’s triumph. He enjoys hosting, relishing the admiration while she manages the details, the invisible hand that keeps everything running smoothly. Doris’s camper sits beside the house—a constant boundary Johnny insists on, close enough to keep an eye on her, but far enough to keep her at arm’s length. “I don’t want her underfoot,” he’d say, the words lingering in the air.



Johnny’s drawling voice drifts through the open kitchen window. “Get me another beer, darling.” It’s thick with expectation—too easy to slip on words, like the corner of a familiar, dangerous dance. Memphis’s knife glides through bright orange carrots, when Mere-

dith's voice rings behind her. "We're trying to have another baby," she says to Doris. Memphis opens her mouth to offer congratulations. Then—KABOOM. A gunshot explodes in the yard. Why are they shooting now? *Where's Michael?* Her breath locks in her throat as she peers through the window. Johnny is in the yard. And his brothers. And Michael. They're clustered together—Johnny leaning over, animated, showing Michael how to grip the gun. His hands are too small for such a thing. Johnny's lips are moving, explaining—but the words are lost to the pounding of her heart. The carrots slip from her fingers as she springs upright, boots skimming the linoleum. She charges through the kitchen and barrels out the front door.

"Y'all shooting guns right now? Maybe it'd be better to head to the field before someone calls the Sheriff?" Her eyes lock onto the fear in Michael's, while Johnny's face twists with irritation.

"Michael, honey, come inside with me," she urges, arms outstretched.

"Hell no," Johnny slurs, waving a dismissive hand, "What you think we're doing out here? I'm teaching my boy how to shoot. Leave us be, M. Go'n get me a beer."

Memphis feels the familiar surge of anxiety. She's not going to let his drunken bravado intimidate her, especially when he's got no business giving their six-year-old a handgun. With measured steps, she approaches Michael, keeping her tone light.

"Michael is too young to be handling guns. Let me take him inside, and I'll get you another beer, okay?" Memphis speaks firmly, her hands settling onto Michael's small shoulders.

Johnny's eyes burn into her, dark and unsteady. The weight of his stare pins her in place. His brothers hang back in the yard, quiet now, watching. Memphis tightens her hold on Michael's shoulders, feels the rise and fall of his breath beneath her hands.

Johnny lunges forward and grabs her wrists, yanking them away.

"I told you," he mutters, his words slick with bourbon, "go on inside and leave us be."

The sting in her arms doesn't matter. Not now. Not with Michael staring up at her like he's waiting to see if she'll break. "No, Johnny." Her voice doesn't shake. "I'm taking our son inside. You wanna shoot? Fine. But not here. Not with him watching. If you don't leave, the sheriff's coming next—and you know he will."

She presses Michael closer, easing his small body behind her. They turn. One step. Then another. On the porch, Doris stands stiff as wood. Meredith's hand clamps tight around Patty's. Little Sarah peeks between them, eyes wide. Almost to the steps. Then—Sarah gasps, sharp and sudden, her hand flying to her mouth. Memphis freezes. In a flash, pain rips through her scalp—Johnny's hand tangled in her hair, jerking her backward so hard her feet nearly leave the ground. The world tilts. She stumbles, heart slamming against her ribs as he spins her to face him. His breath is hot and sour, his eyes wild. And in his other hand pointed at her forehead—the gun, glinting like a promise.

"Next time you disrespect me in front of my son is the last time. You hear me?" His voice is low and dangerous, the threat clear.

Horror tightens in her chest as she nods, throat too dry for words. Michael's cries slice through the yard like glass, high and panicked. Doris shuffles down the porch steps, voice low but sharp. "Johnny, cut it out."

With a grunt, Johnny shoves Memphis hard. She hits the dirt—elbows first—gravel biting into her palms. The sky spins.

"Mama!" Michael scrambles toward her, hands shaking as he tries to help. She catches his wrist, meeting his eyes—wide, wet, terrified. Her knees protest as she pushes up. Together, they bolt toward the house.



Memphis crouches on the cold bathroom floor, fingers working at the grime caked on her knees. A low, muffled voice seeps through the door, cutting through the quiet like a shadow.

“Memphis? The Police are outside and they want to talk to you,” Meredith whispers urgently.

Tears streak her cheeks as she hurriedly smooths her hair, then opens the door. Meredith and Patty trade uneasy looks—Patty’s eyes snap to Memphis, and she steps forward, worry spilling from every movement.

“The Sheriffs want to arrest Johnny. Someone called them and said he hit you. Be careful now. Michael doesn’t need to see his Daddy going to jail tonight, does he?” Her sister-in law warns.

Fear coils tighter around Memphis. She steals a glance out the window. Two sheriffs stand in the yard, boots planted heavy, claiming the ground like they own it. One is a mountain of a man, broad shoulders filling the space. The other is smaller, but his grin—wide, easy—doesn’t match the thick tension. They’re trying to separate Johnny and Billy, chests puffed up like two cartoon roosters ready to fight. Doris edges close to the big sheriff, that familiar glint in her eye softening into a practiced smile—warm, disarming. Memphis watches, knowing that look all too well: Doris weaving her charm, bending him just enough to keep Johnny out of jail. The unspoken truth hangs heavy—if Johnny lands behind bars, Doris loses her unpaid bar tabs, and maybe a little more. Steeling herself, Memphis steps outside onto the porch, where Michael sits with his cousin Sarah, worry etched across his small face. She walks past the kids and down the steps, locking eyes with the Sheriff talking to Doris.

“Hello, Officer. What’s the trouble?” she asks, trying to sound calm. The unusually tall Sheriff’s salt-and-pepper hair is neatly styled, and fresh stubble hints at a rushed morning. A pen peeks from his brown shirt pocket.

"Are you Memphis Freedman, ma'am? Johnny here's wife?" He hooks a thumb toward Johnny, who glares at her.

"That's me," Unfortunately.

"Let's go over here, ma'am. I have some questions for you in private if you don't mind." He guides her away from the house.

"I don't mind at all. What's the trouble?" She asks, trying to keep her voice steady, but she realizes she's repeated the same question.

"Ma'am, we got a call from one of your neighbors saying your husband struck you, pointed a gun to your head in front of your boy, then threw you to the ground." He says.

Memphis gasps, the weight of his words crashing down on her. *How has Sunday dinner—talking about babies and fetching a beer—turned into this?*

"Now, ma'am, everyone in the house—including your mother—has denied this happened. But all I need from you is a simple yes, and I will lock him up right now. I will make sure you and your boy are safe for the night. I just need a yes."

The sheriff's voice is low, steady. Dust swirls around his boots as a breeze cuts across the yard. His hat casts a shadow over his eyes, but she can still see the weight in them—tired, knowing, waiting.

Memphis stands with her arms crossed tight over her ribs, her body still and braced like a wire about to snap. The porch behind her creaks faintly. Johnny's presence hovers there, silent but sharp. She doesn't dare turn to look. Her gaze stays locked on the sheriff's badge—something to focus on, something that won't flinch.

"No. My husband didn't touch me," she says, each word careful, like she's stepping across glass. "He accidentally shot off a gun in the yard, and we had a little disagreement about that, but I'm fine."

The sheriff exhales slowly through his nose. His glance flicks toward the porch—where Johnny leans against a beam, arms crossed, cigarette burning low in his fingers. His eyes are on her, jaw clenched. Watching.

"Are you sure he didn't point the gun at your head in front of your son, ma'am?"

The words are softer now, but they cut sharper. Her breath hitches before she can catch it. A lump rises in her throat. She swallows hard and lifts her chin.

"I'm certain, Officer. I just want to cook supper and sober up my husband."

The sheriff nods once, slow and reluctant. Gravel crunches under his boots as he steps away, but Memphis doesn't move. She stands frozen in place, her heart thudding like it's trying to claw its way out of her chest. The lie settles heavy on her tongue, bitter and necessary.

"Okay, ma'am. I'll let you get back to your dinner." Disappointment laces his voice, but it also offers her relief.

As she turns back toward the house, Michael's wide, worried eyes settle on her—tiny sparks of fear and longing. Her mother's voice floats from the porch—smooth, practiced. "Thank you, officers." The sheriffs exchange glances: alert, reluctant. The bigger one shakes his head.

"No crime here. Leave him be," he tells his partner. "Just remind him to keep that gun in a field, not the neighbourhood." He turns to Doris.

Johnny smirks, "Thanks for the tip, Officer. Have a good day now." The Sheriff's jaw tightens as they walk to their cruiser.

"Good one, trouble-maker!" Doris calls after Memphis, disappearing inside.



Memphis's hands hover over the sink as the steady clink of dishes shatters with a heavy thud from the living room. Her breath catches. Turning off the faucet, she tiptoes to the doorway, peeking into the living room. Johnny lies sprawled on the floor, having rolled off the couch, his snores echoing softly. Relief washes over her, and she

quietly flicks off the kitchen light before padding down the hallway to Michael's room.

"Knock, knock," she stands in the doorway. Michael sits cross-legged on the floor, engrossed in his Six Million Dollar Man coloring book.

She steps in, settling onto the edge of his bed, "It's 7 o'clock, honey. Ready for your bath?" She says.

"Five more minutes?" Michael pleads, his eyes not leaving his coloring book.

"Sure baby, I'll go get the bath ready." Memphis pauses, "Michael, do you want to talk about what happened before supper?" Her voice gentle.

Michael doesn't look up. He flicks a crayon across the page, his focus fixed, "What do you mean?"

"I just don't want you to be upset. And I want you to know that what happened is no one's fault. Sometimes families fight and people call the police, that's all."

Michael frowns, finally meeting her gaze, his small brow furrowing, "Well it was ss-ss-someone's fault,"

Memphis's chest tightens. His voice, small and sure, carries the weight of something bigger than his years. It's the weight of his father's actions, pressed too hard into his tiny frame.

"Baby, it was no one's fault. All mommies want to protect their children and I wanted to protect you. I think guns shouldn't be handled by children, but your daddy disagrees. He's eager to teach you and we had a disagreement—"

"Daddy's fault," he interjects, eyes wide with fear. "The police sh-sh-should have took him away." He stutters.

Memphis's breath catches. His words hang in the air like a heavy shadow. "I'm ss-scared of daddy when he hurts you."

Her heart twists painfully. She pulls him close, wrapping her arms tight, but the ache lingers. "Daddy has a drinking problem,

sweetie. He doesn't mean to hurt Mommy. And he didn't mean to scare you." Her voice wavers, each word a fragile mask she forces on herself. The bitter truth lodges in her throat—Johnny takes pleasure in the pain. But Michael... Michael is the one who'll bear the weight.

She kisses his hair. "I'm running the bath. Pack your crayons and meet me there, okay?" Michael nods, fumbling with his crayons. Memphis swallows hard, a tight lump in her throat. She walks down the hall, the night's shock buzzing beneath her skin, while a heavy pull of right and wrong tugs her off course—like a compass with a broken needle.

Memphis moves swiftly, hands steady. She twists the faucet, hot water rushing out, steam curling in the cramped bathroom. A fluffy blue towel drapes over the macramé toilet seat, pajamas—soft cotton, bright trucks mismatched in color—rest beside the tub, ready.



The sharp scent of shampoo clings to the air as Memphis fingers through Michael's damp hair, smoothing it flat against his scalp. He leans into her as she tucks him in, his small weight settling quietly against her. Her hands linger on his back, pressing him gently into the blankets, anchoring her with the familiar rhythm of bedtime. Together, they slip into their ritual—the one constant that feels right amid the chaos. Soft voices blend, reciting their poem in the low glow of the night.

"Goodnight, Music City, off to Dreamland we go.

Send me sweet dreams that're witty, cause a nightmare'd be a pity,
In the South, we're never bored. From the South, amen my Lord."

Michael's giggle bursts free. He wraps his small arms tight around her neck.

"Goodnight, Mama. I love you."

Memphis holds him close, her heart tightening at the pure simplicity of his words, the quiet truth in his small voice. This fragile

moment feels like a lifeline—a thin thread of normalcy in a world that often feels broken. Once he's asleep, she slips toward her bedroom, the day's weight easing. But as the door creaks open, her chest tightens—Johnny sits up in bed, eyes bleary and bloodshot from drink, waiting.

“Why, darling! Did you leave your husband to sleep on the floor by himself?” His voice is slurred, laced with a mocking cheer.

A cold weight settles in her chest. Her eyes flick to him, stomach churning as dread coils tight. She stiffens, refusing to meet his gaze, then pulls her nightgown from the dresser—a thin shield against the storm she knows is coming.

“I didn't want to wake you. You looked quite content on the couch. Did you wake up on the floor?” Her fingers fumble through the drawer, desperately searching for distraction.

He laughs, then slips behind her, arms snaking tight around her waist. She stiffens as he hugs her tightly, his body pressing against hers in an unwelcome reminder of their intimacy. With a pause, he brushes his cheek against hers, his breath warm and heavy, “I'm proud of you.” The words feel like a twisted compliment, and she can sense the hunger behind them. Memphis's gaze flickers to the soft white fabric of her nightgown, but with Johnny's arms around her, it feels out of reach, trapped in a drawer filled with more than just clothes.

“You handled those cops well tonight,” Johnny murmurs, his voice low and rough with a trace of pride. “Those pigs should keep out of family business. I'm glad you didn't let them fill your head with nonsense. You know they don't like me.” He pauses, his hand tightening around her breasts. “But I'm still mad about you stepping between me and Michael. It was a father-son moment. I learned to shoot when I was his age—you had no right to make a fuss.” His grip relaxes, fingers moving to her chin to tilt her face toward him, his voice softening. “But I'll let you make it up to me.”

Memphis feels his hand guiding her, his lips pressing against hers with an unexpected gentleness. At least he's in a calm mood. She nods, watching his gaze shift from her eyes to her reflection in the mirror.

"That's my girl," he says, the smile on his face tightening as he pulls her close, his kiss turning possessive. She barely manages to pull back, mumbling,

"Let me change, hon." She recoils.

He frowns, eyes narrowing just for a beat, but he lets her go, nodding toward the door.

"I'm getting a beer. Be ready when I get back." He lingers for a moment before disappearing down the hallway, leaving her in tense silence.

The room feels still and heavy as she turns to her closet, reaching for the little black lace dress he always insists on. She slides it on, feeling the scratch of the lace against her skin, hoping the ordeal will be over soon. When he returns, beer in hand, his eyes darken with satisfaction as he takes her in.

"Mmm, there it is," he purrs, stepping closer. His hands find her hips, pulling her against him as his mouth trails to her lips, grazing them with bites that make her skin crawl. She forces herself to stay still, bracing against the urge to flinch as he fumbles with his belt, guiding her hand to follow.

"Let me get the door," she says, slipping free. She flicks off the light and shuts the door softly behind her, letting the darkness swallow the room.