

Taylor Dinwiddie

Sweet Relief

It's late. My leg bounces uncontrollably as I take a seat before the altar. It's adorned with fifty unlit candles and miniature palm trees that barricade a human-sized Cross; the centerpiece. I unlock my phone again, anxiously anticipating a notification, but I'm greeted with nothing. The empty wooden pews remind me of my impulsiveness. I shouldn't have lied. And I definitely shouldn't have come here.

Bloop

My phone buzzes with a familiar tone, signaling he's here. I feel ridiculous. But Grindr always does this to me anyway. Some shallow mix of shame, regret and relief. Sweet relief. Technically, there's still time to cancel on him, but deep down... I know I don't want to.

Yo, you gonna come get me? I'm outside

I'm jittery after reading his message, my inexperience spiking my anxiety. I've only seen a few pictures of him, but it never crosses my mind until now that he could be a murderer. Or a psychopath. Or both. But he's probably just lonely... just like me. I peer through the side door window and see his pale skin and bright smile, contrasting the dusky night sky. Ugh, another white boy. I knew it already, but I'm disappointed at my own tendencies.

"Ah... you're just as hot as I'd hoped," he leers down at me. My breath hitches, whether it's from his compliment, or the irritatingly perfect cheekbones, I'm unsure. I take a small step back and gesture him inside the chapel. I never know how to react and I internally curse my own hesitation... I can't show weakness. "You new to this?" his face softens, indicating his understanding. Well, at least he's not a murderer, I think. "That's okay, we'll take things slow. This is a pretty weird place for a hookup, though."

“Being the son of a pastor has its perks, I guess...” The church keys in my pocket jingle and the man’s face briefly displays his surprise, before he masks it with a seemingly sincere smile again.

“That’s kinda kinky,” he laughs, trying to relieve some of the tension that my entire body continues to ooze. “I’m Jackson by the way,” he shares as his smooth palm caresses my left cheek and my eyes instinctively close in reaction. I can’t see it, but I can feel that he takes a step closer and the back of my thighs hit the pew in the front row.

“R-Richie,” I stutter in reply.

“Just relax,” he serenely whispers in my ear as he slides his hand down to my shoulder. I slowly open my eyes and tilt my head up to a peaceful crinkle, his eyebrows lifting along with his smile. I’m helpless to resist. It’s okay, I tell myself, I’ll repent tomorrow in Sunday School. Jackson’s eyes are trained onto me, eagerly anticipating my every action. I can tell he takes pleasure in making me squirm, even as we’re both still fully clothed. It seems like a game to him, searching for any way to quicken my already staggered breaths.

“H-Hey... what’s... that?” I ask as the subtle sound of footsteps vaguely reaches my not-completely-coherent mind.

“I’m sure it’s nothing, don’t worry about it,” the voice is slightly muffled from his place at my neck, no doubt leaving a hickey.

I’m broken from my trance when the footsteps grow louder. Someone else is here. I remove Jackson from my neck and signal for him to be quiet with my finger. There’s no time to panic, I just need to hide. I drag the taller man up onto the altar, wincing as we taint it with our sacrilegious behavior, and sneak into the hidden room reserved for acolytes. Jackson is amused

by my apprehension more than anything, according to the glint in his eyes. But my mind is racing with possibilities. It can't be my parents since I have their keys, but I'm unsure who else has access to the chapel.

“Hey, Richi—“ I clamp my hand over Jackson's mouth to stop him from saying any lecherous comments, but it only seems to encourage him. He takes the opportunity to leisurely lick my palm and quietly chuckles at my shiver. He's doing just enough to stress me out, but not enough for us to get caught. As the footsteps grow louder, I hear the subtle hum of the tune “Jubilee” and immediately recognize the culprit. The Sunday School teacher. She was probably here to prep for her class the next morning and tidy up her room. I can't believe I was this stupid.

“Richie is going to love what I got him for Easter. *sigh* He's always such a good kid...” I can hear her wistful tone clearly from the Sunday School room next door. The weight of her praise is crushing, compounded by my guilt. Jackson seems to notice the shift in my demeanor, even through the darkness and he mitigates his playfulness. The woman rustles around for a few more minutes before she retreats to the church's entrance. I'm safe now... but I can't look Jackson in the eyes anymore. We exit our hiding place and Jackson tries to resume where we left at the foot of the altar, but my body won't respond.

“... please leave.” I can't stop myself from meekly uttering the words.

“Wha—?”

“GET AWAY FROM ME” I find myself shouting uncontrollably. He's bewildered by my outburst, but quickly composes himself and exits the same way he came.

He sickens me. I brought a white man in a black congregation to create an unholy hymn.

I'm riddled with shame, but I look up to the cross, desperate for guidance.

Why... Did You make me this way...?

My question remains unanswered.