

LOSER BABY by Jason Bovberg

EXCERPT

0 Jasmine

Smack in the middle of Santa Ana on a Friday night, gang-funk psychedelia, the animal snarl and faint butane odor of nitrous-juiced import cars, the streets undulating and ratcheting like a grungy arcade game—*rumble, whoosh, clickety-clack*. The city was still new to Jasmine Frank, this sprawling expanse of damp concrete, swaying palms, salty beach sweat, and steaming antifreeze. The japchae and the spicy fish tacos and the pulsating afro grooves, the cackling Chicano rap, the cacophony of indecipherable shouts coming at her along Westminster Boulevard—*yes!* She got off on the staccato ghetto thrill of it all, closing her eyes, lost in the jagged rhythms, the music and the traffic, crisscrossing like a spastic radio dial. A constantly moving mobile night life.

Sooooo different from what she and Jordy were used to back home in that deadened whitebread cul-de-sac, north Garden Grove. In their new life, it felt as if there were raging pool parties around every cinder-block corner, drugs and condoms handed out like candy, cool kids as far as the eye could see. Plenty of assholes, too, but who cared about them? You just ignored them, and they went away, bothered someone else.

Jordy's voice whispered hot in her ear, but he wasn't in the car with her now, he was back at Tommy's party. She couldn't catch her brother's words. It was as if they were buffeting on the humid wind outside her window. Or maybe she didn't *want* to hear him. She tuned him out, left him back at Tommy's house. She laughed at that, then felt a little bad. Just a little.

The inside of the car looked new—it even had a spiffy aftermarket audio deck with a touchscreen—but it was an older ride, some kind of Volkswagen according to the steering wheel. The driver (*what was his name, again?*) had let her thumb down her window to let the night in. She'd made him turn off his USB stick full of sugary pop right away, in favor of the night song. The hazy world swirled, and her body with it. She grooved in the contoured seat.

Jasmine glanced over at the dude, caught him ogling her legs, which she knew looked fabulous beneath the hem of her blue dress. His gaze both mortified and delighted her. Dude was OK looking

but nothing special, and of course she knew what he was after. But she aimed higher, deserved better. Deserved more. That's what Jordy told her, and that's what her mom used to say, too.

Hell, the guy was good for a ride, anyway.

"How much farther, my duuuuude?" she sang out, full-throated, and she swore she could see her voice splay out colorfully and blast out the window into the night.

LOL, she thought, like actually conjuring the individual letters. She giggled, loving it. *What's wrong with me?*

"Few miles," he said, smirk-voiced.

He was wearing a silly dark fedora that he thought made him look sophisticated or something, but she knew it was only there to hide his thinning hair. She remembered him from the vitamin store a few days ago, when this all started. He was harmless, like a puppy dog. If you'd told her then that she'd end up alone with him, shotgun in his VW a few days later, high as shitballs, rushing through the late-late Santa Ana night in search of burgers, she'd have laughed in your face. Nice eyes, though. A good set of blue eyes could take a guy a long way.

She found herself balling up her fists and drumming the dash and screaming, *"Fuuuuuck iiiiiit!"*

Holy crap, *something* was in her system, gooey and euphoric, making her feel as if her head was twisting up and away like some fancy warm firecracker. Everything exaggerated, everything spinning out, like just now this hopped-up neon-yellow Toyota ahead of them, its tires chirping on the concrete of the intersection, couple of teenagers' hands waving frantically out the sunroof. Heading toward the beach, probably, the bonfires, the giddy drunken dancing at the shore. Jasmine squealed laughter, wanting to go with them.

But she was hungry, *Jesus Christ! Whooooa hoooooooo!*

Food first.

"Well, hurry up, then!" she said nonsensically, realizing after she said it that she was responding to whatever the driver said a few minutes ago.

They were stopped at a light, and she was tapping her foot.

"This probably isn't the greatest idea, you know," he said, right hand resting on his short-throw gearshift. "Tommy's gonna be pissed. At *both* of us."

"Jeez, man, you're bringin' me down."

"You don't want Tommy pissed at you."

"Awww, he's a big ol' softie."

"I'm serious."

“He’s cool.”

He gave her a look. “Girl, you’re thinkin’ of someone else.”

“Sheesh, I’ve known Tommy forever.”

“Be that as it may, you don’t—”

“Hold up, did you just say, ‘Be that as it may?’”

A pause. “Shut up.”

Jasmine started laughing so hard that she could barely breathe. After a while, her leaking eyes opened blurrily on the car next to them, and she saw a large Hispanic man staring at her as if he couldn’t figure her out. That was fine with her. She waved goofily at the dull-faced man, and then he pulled away when the light turned green. A few moments later, someone passed them in an underlit red Subaru WRX, sound system booming, windows tinted so black that it was like looking into the devil’s eyes. The rally car swerved liquidly around the traffic ahead of them and was gone as if it had never been.

“Ooooooh,” she breathed.

Her laughter had run its course. It seemed like they were hitting every goddamn signal, and it was harshing her chill.

“What’s your name again?” Lolling her head toward the driver.

“Mark.” He looked annoyed, and that made her start laughing again. “It’s Mark.”

When she caught her breath, she said, sighing, “Let’s fetch those burgers and then go right back to Tommy’s, all right, Mark? Sound like a plan? If I don’t get something to eat, I’m gonna faint dead away.”

Jasmine hardly knew what she was coming out of her mouth. She sounded like her mom, she realized distantly. Every once in a while she’d blink hard and fall into a clarity gap in which she could curse Tommy and that guy who’d given her the pills, Derek, the weirdo with the tats. She was surprised Jordy’d let that guy get within twenty feet of her. But shit, who cared, she felt *goooooood*. Although she could sense that she was approaching the end of it—*fuck!*

She gripped the straps of her purse tightly, like holding on to the lapbar at the top of one of the insane rollercoasters at Magic Mountain, way up I-5, north of Los Angeles. That’s what she felt like right now. She remembered her mom taking her and Jordan up there to Valencia years ago, blitzing on so many goddamn coasters and so much candy and funnel cake that they’d felt nauseated and lightheaded for days after. That was before Karl came into the picture, before the fun drained out of the world.

The purse straps felt funny. Slippery. She glanced down and found she was holding on to a Safeway grocery bag. It was heavy.

Whatever.

But then all of a sudden, beneath the chemical bliss of whatever she'd ingested, her throat was raw, and she felt like crying. It was as if she were catching intermittent glimpses of an abyss that was beneath her at all times. The sensation was all wrapped up in Jordy, her twin brother who she both loved and hated, and what they'd done months ago. Sometimes she knew *for sure* that they'd made the right decision and were on their way to a future that meant something—like, absolutely. Other times, she was certain that there *was* no future, at least along this path ... and nothing but doom lay on the horizon.

And now she knew she'd done something *extra* stupid, and she was heading toward an immediate future she wasn't prepared for at all. She *knew* these things, but her body wouldn't let her feel their full import. It left her fingers sweaty and shaking, barely holding on to this slippery Safeway bag. She pictured her mother's face, and then the tears were closer than ever. She felt as if her lips were on the verge of murmuring—*Mommy*.

"Here it is, coming up on the left," Mark said. "Yeah, I can definitely go for a Double-Double. This was a good call."

Jasmine perked up, leaned forward, took a look around, wanting to squeeze every last drop of whatever was vibrating in her veins.

Westminster Boulevard seemed abruptly empty now, desolate almost, and it felt like seven hours had passed since she'd gotten in this stranger's car.

"Where'd everyone go?" she whispered. "I mean, where'd everyone go?"

As the car slowed and eased into the turn lane, Jasmine felt a twitch of hollow nausea, and the eternal abyss—the one that was always beneath her—began to widen. She turned back to the open window, sucked in the night air in huge gasps, forced a beatific smile, tried to lose herself again.

It wasn't working.

Mark turned into the dark, empty parking lot and immediately began shouting.

Jasmine's head felt like a gob of Hubba Bubba. She felt Mark's frustrated temper like a soft pummeling up there, and she brought disembodied hands to her face to massage her temple. Without realizing it, her head had fallen against her door, and she was idly watching the dead-of-night traffic continue to drift down Westminster Boulevard toward the 405 overpass. It was an endless procession of vehicles even at this ungodly hour, and why was she even out here at the edge of nowhere with this

Mark person? The Safeway bag was even more slippery now, and it felt wrong in her grip, unnatural, and somewhere deep down she knew she was in trouble because of it.

Mark was still yelling, and now he was asking her a question, a repeated question, but all she could do was listen to the lonely night, the cars and vans and trucks *whooshing* past. She closed her eyes, locked onto the repetition, the endless mournful sighs and howls of tires on asphalt, rising and then fading into the distance, one by one. *That* was really what Santa Ana was all about—a bunch of restless people on the move, all the time, on their way to *anywhere else*.

Except her.

Except Jasmine Frank.

She would always be here, trapped in SoCal amber, looking outward and yearning for the other side. Even if she found someone to take her to Santa Ana's edge, like Mark had just done, she'd always be left gazing out into a great unknown, like a fish staring out of a murky bowl, and there'd always be someone yelling at her and telling her what to be or where to go.

As exhaustion began to press down on her, as well as increased nausea, Jasmine's awareness fractured, and Jordy's voice came into the mix, and then her mom's, and she just wanted to go home. *Home!* Not the little hovel in Santa Ana that she shared with her brother, but her real home, where her mom was, when the world was good and promising.

She lifted her heavy head from the door, and she turned toward Mark.

He stopped yelling abruptly.

"Hey, are you all right? Are you crying?" His expression was one of genuine concern, and she felt a sudden warmth toward him.

"I don't feel so hot," she said, smacking her lips with distaste.

"Let's get you home."

Every once in a while, someone said just the right thing. Today it was this guy's turn. *Mark*. That was his name. The man with the hat.

Jasmine smiled at him.

"Really?"

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