

**Painted Black**  
**Chapter Three**

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The warm water rushed from the faucet in an elegant trickle, streaming down the white porcelain of the sink like a clear mountain spring rushing over the chilling ice of the Nibel Mountains, with the same whisper of water, the same fresh smell of peace and tranquility. That wasn't what she wanted right now. That wasn't what she felt like. Any peace had been ripped from her. All the calm had been destroyed, all the clarity had been doused in a black darker than any moonless night. She didn't feel like peaceful mountain springs on a crisp winter morning; she didn't feel like a quiet recluse watching the water stream over white marble stalactites.

Tifa turned the handle of the faucet until the water gushed out in a wild frenzy, filling the sink with its wrath and fury. There, that was much better. She pushed her hands under the stinging water, washing away the drying blood on her hands in a river of crimson. It was perhaps the most disgusting and vile thing she had seen in a long time, that river of blood. It somehow seemed suiting.

She snatched her hands from the water and pulled at the lever of the soap dispenser, waiting impatiently for the pink liquid to squirt out into her palm. Nothing. She frowned and pulled on the next one. A tiny drop sputtered out. "Damn it!" she growled, moving on down the counter until she reached the last one. "How can none of these have any soap?!" she demanded, her voice echoing loudly through the empty bathroom. It resounded off the walls, ringing in her ears with its own loudness and despair. Who cared about the damn soap when the man she loved was hurt?

The tears that had gone unshed for Cid, suddenly filled her eyes until she was forced to cry them away lest she blind herself with their hot fury. Cloud was shot. He was possibly as good as dead; she didn't know. Nobody would tell her anything about his condition, if the materia had worked, if he was going to be okay. They just sent her the damn bathroom to clean herself up. And it hurt. What was she supposed to do? How could she be strong when she had no clue what was happening, when Cloud was hurt and she couldn't help him?

What if he died?

"Oh, God..." She leaned heavily on the counter, suddenly aware of the fact that that could happen. It was almost as if she had been hiding that from herself. She somehow knew it was a possibility but never acknowledged it as a feasible outcome. And she knew why she did it, too. It didn't make her any more pleased with the fact that she hadn't taken it into consideration.

She and Cloud had, literally, screwed up.

She was pregnant with his child. What was she supposed to do if he were to die? What would she tell that child when he was old enough to understand? What could she tell her friends? She wasn't even married to Cloud yet. That event was always on the horizon, waiting there patiently until they had enough money to pay for a wedding and raise a baby. Now, they were going to have a baby with no money, no wedding. And if Cloud died now... She felt the tears burst to life again, flowing down her cheeks with renewed strength.

"Tifa?"

Tifa turned quickly from the door, wiping her face with one hand, holding her breath back against the sobs. When she thought that her cheeks were pretty dry, and she had regained her composure, she turned back to girl standing in front of her. She barely held back a grimace. Yuffie.

"What?" she asked, forcing the word quickly out of her mouth, so her voice couldn't betray her.

Yuffie walked closer, turning off the faucet she had left on and stepping over the small puddle of water that had overflowed onto the counter and then to the floor. "What is it, Tifa?"

Tifa didn't want to say anything, didn't want to divulge her secret. But the girl – no, the woman – standing before her had such a look of concern in her eyes and etched in her face that she no longer seemed to be the loudmouthed, stealing brat

Tifa had known her as. It was that concern that broke down her walls, that made the tears reform in her eyes, and that let a strangled sob loose from her throat. Yuffie Kisaragi was a woman now; she would understand. Tifa collapsed into her arms.

"Yuffie, I'm pregnant," she wailed, holding onto the thin ninja as though she was the only that kept her from drowning in a river of her own tears. The sobs wracked her frame, burned at her throat and lungs until she could scarcely breathe. Yuffie wrapped her own arms around Tifa, rubbing her back gently as she cried, rocking back and forth from side to side. "And Cloud might die!" she continued, gasping out each word in a muddled mush that was barely comprehensible.

Yuffie shook her head. "No, he's not," she said softly, her voice soothing. "He's stronger than that." Tifa didn't respond, and Yuffie just let her cry away all her fears and worries and frustrations until the last tear had been shed and the last sob had dwindled down to sharp gasp ended in a soft hiccup. Yuffie smiled and broke the embrace, her grin wide. "He'll be up and ready to carry you over the threshold in no time."

Tifa giggled lightly, her energy taken away by her crying. "You think so?" She glanced at herself in the mirror, frowning slightly at her frizzled hair and red, puffy eyes. "I think he might topple with the weight."

Yuffie laughed, glancing at her. "Girl, the old man could pick you up and not hurt his decrepit back."

Tifa smiled, but the gesture inverted with a sudden thought, pulling her features into a solemn frown. "I feel so horrible," she declared, breaking the light mood that had been set.

Yuffie straightened a strand of her hair with one hand, adjusting the front of her shirt with the other. She stopped, leaning on the counter as she turned to Tifa's grave expression. "What about?"

"I've forgotten all about him," she said sullenly. She shook her head slowly. "I can't even think about him. All I see is Cloud. Even when I try to worry or wonder about his condition, I always see Cloud. I feel bad about it. He's my friend, too. He deserves my attention. I just... can't."

Yuffie swallowed slowly and nodded. "I see," she replied, her brow furrowing. It really wasn't fair to Cid. Between the two of them, he was probably worse off than Cloud could ever be. They had materia and stitches to piece together a flesh wound. How could you ever sew a mind back together? A needle and thread didn't seem to be adequate. But, she couldn't tell Tifa that. That was the last thing she needed on her mind. "Don't worry about it," she declared, forcing a chipper note into her voice, hoping that Tifa wouldn't pick up on the fact that she was lying through her teeth. "You worry more about Cloud because you love him," she explained. "Love is the most important kind of friendship. What's between you and Cid is just, well, second to that."

Tifa gave a sideways glance to Yuffie, feeling no better about her emotions and thoughts. She had to admire the other woman, though, for trying to comfort her and rationalize things for her just so she wouldn't have to do it herself. It was a kind gesture if one thought about it in passing, but pondering over it a long period of time would just prove that it was all one well knit lie and was really meant to comfort for only a short while. Tifa only thought of it in passing. The long pondering could wait for another time.

Yuffie pulled together locks of Tifa's long, brown hair, yanking the red tie from its normal position. She smoothed it out and redid the tiny ponytail near the bottom. "Come on, Tifa. Let's go see what's up."

Tifa smiled her thanks, pulling a paper towel from the dispenser near the door and wiping her hands completely dry. There was still some dried blood underneath some of her nails, but cleaning that would have to wait a bit. She threw the crumpled ball of paper away, glanced at the mirror, and wished that it didn't look quite so blatantly obvious that she'd been crying. After a final rub of her puffy eyes, she followed Yuffie out the door.

Walking down the hall, she let her mind wander as she glanced into each of the rooms, absentmindedly wondering what had happened to every patient she passed. She wondered if they had a wife or a husband crooning over them, if they were alone in the world, wishing for company. It was depressing, yet oddly intriguing. So wrapped up in this little game, she

walked right into somebody.

Falling back and rubbing her head, she glared angrily at the shabbily dressed man in front of her. "Damn it," she hissed under her breath. "Walk down the right side of the hall. Didn't you learn anything in school?"

The man shook his head slowly, offering out his hand. "Nothing really," he replied. "Miss Lockhart, I presume?"

She glanced at his cracked and callused hand, distrust in her gaze. She noted his bland features, blond beard over a tanned face, bleached yellow hair to the point of being white. He looked familiar, as though she should know him, but she knew that she had never seen him in her entire life. "Do I know you?" she asked carefully.

The man dropped his hand, his cheeks burning hot with embarrassment. "Excuse me," he apologized, his voice very low. "I'm Hans Aeda, Cloud's father."

Tifa frowned. "Cloud's last name is Strife," she said. "He never had a father." She skipped over the memory tugging at her mind, the discussion they'd had over Cloud's father, a man who was supposedly in Junon. It wasn't impossible. They were back in Junon, right now. The man, Aeda, could have certainly found out that Cloud had been hurt or Cid had been poisoned by the Lifestream. News always traveled fast among the poor. How would she know if he was for real or not?

Aeda nodded his head slowly, shuffling his feet. "I was never married to his mother, no," he admitted. "Strife is a name she undoubtedly made up for him so that he could have a father where I failed. No doubt this fictional father is a lot better than me, but I want to just be his dad, for once. I came here looking for him. I had heard that he had gotten hurt."

"From who?" she demanded hotly, her anger mounting. She could not believe this man! He came out of the middle of nowhere, showed up after twenty-one years of hiding, and had the gall to expect that Cloud would accept him with open arms. The man had ruined his childhood, had made his entire life a lie. He had broken Cloud down with just a mere appearance. He might as well have been the one who set that lamp on the nightstand by the bed, too.

He smiled weakly. "Does it matter? People talk a lot, you know. About you."

She scowled deeply. "What is that supposed to mean?!" She shook her head, cutting him off before he had done anything more than open his mouth. "Never mind. I don't give a damn what it means! Why are you doing this to him?!" She pushed by him, and he grabbed her arm.

"Please..."

She ripped her hand from his grasp. "No, I don't want to listen to you! All you ever did is hurt him! He doesn't deserve that. He doesn't deserve to have a father who screwed some girl for a good time and didn't have the guts to stay with her." She started walking away again. "I hope Cloud never sees you again. It's your turn to hurt."

She didn't look back at the shabby man, fuming as she hurried away from him. If she stayed there any longer, she might focus all her anger into one good smack in the nose. Hans Aeda would be in good hands at the hospital. Too bad she would probably get thrown out. She turned the corner and came face to face with Yuffie. The ninja seemed to have slipped out of her mature, womanly persona back into her usual self where she no doubt felt more comfortable around guys. Tifa glanced at her and knew she wouldn't say anything about what they had talked about to anyone.

"Who was that?" Yuffie asked, straightening her shorts as she fell into pace alongside Tifa. Tifa sighed and frowned, her anger re-igniting though it was not as profound as it had been a few moments ago.

"A nobody, Yuffie," she replied, wearily. "Nobody."

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Barret's leg was jiggling uncontrollably, moving up in down in such a manner that it was more than likely a tick that most humans acquired when they sat down at a table. Red XIII growled at the movement, watching its irritating motion carefully. It was decidedly an annoying habit that humans had. He certainly never did anything quite that irritating when he was

sitting. He never did much of anything when he was sitting besides flick his tail back and forth and watch.

"Would you stop jiggling?" he asked, his voice low and threatening. It had been the third time he asked Barret to stop moving and distracting him while he was thinking. The man had just apologized and was back at it a few minutes later.

"I can't help it," he declared, leaning back in his chair. "It's gotta minda its own."

Red XIII snorted at that absurd comment, shaking his head. "I doubt the validity of that statement... foo'."

Barret bristled at the comment. "Shu'up," he ordered. "Jest shu'up."

Red grinned, flashing his sharp teeth in the light. He then walked over to where Barret was sitting, nudging Marlene where she was sleeping. He sat down in front of her chair, setting his head on Barret's knee. "It was just too easy, Barret. Even I can't help myself sometimes."

Barret shook his head, scowling. "Ya got the worst self-control, I ever seen."

Red grinned again, moving his gaze down the hall where Yuffie and Tifa were walking towards them. After Cloud had been shot, Barret and Yuffie and gone after Vincent, Tifa stayed with Cloud, and Red with Cid. They had agreed to come back to the waiting room to regroup and figure out what they were going to do next. Red had some ideas, but he knew they were going to be shot down by Barret, so he had waited for the others.

"How's Cloud?" Tifa asked, sitting down on the edge of the chair next to Barret. Red stood, stretched and sat back down again, a yawn cracking his mouth wide open.

"Oh, excuse me," he said, smacking his lips. "Doctor Parson –"

"What a prick," Yuffie interjected.

Red did his best to raise his eyebrows at her. "May I continue, Yuffie, or do you have some more illuminating information to add to the conversation?"

Tifa frowned. "Just go on." Yuffie stuck her tongue out at her, a gesture which Tifa, after a moment of indecision, mirrored. Red XIII watched the exchange with a growing amount of irritation. He cleared his throat. "Ladies?" They snapped their attention to Red. "As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted, Doctor Parson says that while Cloud is not quite out of the woods yet, he will probably make a full recovery within a couple of days."

Tifa smiled, her breath taken away with relief. "Thank God. When can I see him?"

Red shrugged. "How am I supposed to know?" he countered. "I'm not the physician here. Go talk to the so-called 'prick'."

Yuffie smiled briefly. "He can be taught." Her humor had disappeared in a moment, though as she glanced at Tifa. "What about Cid?"

"He was pretty unintelligible when I was around him though I did manage to pick out a few of his favorite choice words," he commented dryly. "There's no way of knowing whether or not he's suffering from any permanent damage to his brain. They sedated him. He was pretty agitated. My guess is that he's aware of the fact that Cloud was hurt. What exactly it was that caused him to respond earlier... I dunno. It's almost as though he locked himself up somewhere and decided to take a little peek outside and got confused."

Barret shrugged. "Whatever. Don't matter much, though. Long as he's not dead, right?"

"You could put it that way, I suppose," Red replied. "What happened to Vincent?"

Yuffie frowned. "That little snake... he tripped out on us, Red. He could be anywhere. He was gone before we even got into the hallway." She crossed her arms, scuffing her foot against the tiled floor. "Why the hell would he want to do that, anyway? Shoot Cloud... Maybe he's a loon."

Tifa frowned. "I doubt it. Let him go, though. We can find him later if we want." Her eyes wandered around the people in their small group, suddenly all too aware of the missing members. The group seemed too empty without them, as though it was missing key components. She brushed it off, pushing it to the back of her mind. They would be while again, soon. "What's important now is that nobody's dead," she said finally, looking and finding an agreement in everybody's eyes.

Barret nodded enthusiastically. "I'll drink to that." He frowned, a dark look coming to his eyes. "But I don't like this idea 'bout not going after Vincent," he growled, angrily. "We gotta catch this bugger before he goes and tries it again."

Tifa shook her head. "We don't even know what he was trying to do!" she exclaimed. "How are we supposed to find him? Persecuting him on the basis that he shot Cloud is absurd! We have no idea what his motives were."

"What difference does it make?" he demanded, clenching his teeth. "What matters is that he did it, end of story."

"Damn it, Barret! We can't go into this without knowing the whole story. It isn't fair to him."

Barret scowled. "And who was that that said life wasn't fair?" he asked. "He did, so I don't see no reason why we can't hunt 'im down!"

"Barret!"

"Both of you, just shut up!" Yuffie ordered, cutting off either of them before they could utter another sound. "This isn't worth it right now."

"It is if he's comin' back," Barret commented, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms over his chest.

Yuffie glowered at him. "But he's not, at least not right now. If he wants to kill Cloud, he'll do it when Cloud's vulnerable, and he's anything but that right now. Vince ain't gonna come back here when he knows he gonna have to deal with the four of us to get to him, so we don't have to deal with this right now. What I say is that we find a hotel, check in, get some sleep, and come back in the morning."

Tifa shook her head curtly. "No. I have to talk to Cloud; I have to be here when he wakes up."

Yuffie turned her glower on Tifa. "Fine. I don't give a damn what you do. I'm taking Marlene to a hotel, Barret, because she is definitely not staying here all night."

Red nodded. "I second that. I think we all need some rest so that we're thinking clearly tomorrow."

Barret frowned. "I still think we oughta go after that punk."

"We'll do that later," Yuffie replied, pulling the big man to his feet. "I'm tired! I wanna nice, big, soft bed with four pillows and a goose down quilt. I wanna nice, long shower. Just get me out of here!"

Red grinned as Barret picked up Marlene. "Big bed sounds like a pretty good idea. Who's going to pay for it?"

Yuffie dug into her pockets. "I got money, fur ball. You sure you don't want to come, Tifa? It'll be nice."

Tifa sighed and shook her head. "No... no, thanks. I think I'll settle for this comfy plastic chair."

Yuffie shrugged as the troop started to the exit. "Suit yourself."

Tifa nodded, pulling her feet up into the chair and watching as they all disappeared around the corner. She wanted to go sleep so badly, but she couldn't miss the chance to talk to Cloud alone. This would be possibly the only chance she would get in a long time. She had to know what he thought about the situation with their unborn child, what he thought about his father. He still had yet to wake, so the time for that to happen seemed to grow distant with every second that ticked by. It looked like she was going to have to settle for the comfy plastic chair for a long time.

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"Miss Lockhart?"

She wearily opened her eyes, blinking the unfocused hallway out of obscurity and the blurry shape in front of her into a recognizable face. Parson was shaking her shoulder, calling her from her weary, dreamless sleep. The first thought that struck her mind was that she didn't want to wake up, that she didn't want to see his young, freckled face anymore. She was tired of it all. She didn't want to hear the jumble of long, official-sounding words that supposedly described Cloud's condition.

Cloud.

"I'm awake," she declared, all sleepiness gone from her countenance. She was wide awake now, the thought of her injured lover jolting her away from the lulling forces of sleep as though it was a bucket of water. He didn't deserve to be left all alone just because she was tired. He needed someone by his side – well, maybe not "he needed". Maybe she needed to be reassured that he was okay. The doctors and nurses and even Red could tell her his condition was "stable" and he was "expected to make a full recovery", but, she would never believe it without seeing him herself. She needed it.

Parson straightened and ran a hand through his hair. "Glad to see that, Miss Lockhart," he replied, half-heartedly. "I was thinking that maybe you would never wake up. I'd say that you were suffering from fatigue to be caught sleeping in own of those uncomfortable chairs. Go home, or to a hotel, and get some rest, okay? I would hate to have to treat one more of your group."

Tifa frowned and pushed herself free of the uncomfortable chair, finding quite to her dismay that her limbs basically refused to answer her. She stretched and was awarded with a free cracking joints. "Who cares about me?" she asked. "What about Cloud? Is he alright?"

Parson shrugged. "Go see for yourself. Room 208."

He didn't have to even say the words; Tifa was already walking down the hall before they left his mouth. Her footsteps were quick but even as she fought to control all the worry threatening to spew forth from her being. She wanted to run to his room, almost needed to run there so that she could see him. The worry wanted her to run, the fear and anxiety... they all needed to be relieved as soon as possible. But she wouldn't run. She had more self-control than that. Or, at least, she thought she did.

She burst through the door of the room, stopping short a few paces into the room, her breath catching in her throat. He was there, propped up in a hospital bed, breathing, living. He hadn't died through the long hours the doctors had been working on him. His life hadn't been cut short by some unlucky star. His blue eyes found hers, albeit a little tiredly, and he offered her a weak smile. It wasn't just a sad, reassuring smile, so pathetic in nature that anyone could see through it. It was a genuine smile, a real smile, the smile they always shared between them.

"Oh, Cloud..."

She was running toward him then, tears flowing from her eyes as she gathered him in a tight hug, leaning heavily on him

despite the fact that it was he who was wounded. All the tension and fear and worry that had been building up inside her was washed away with the tears, and she felt that if she held him forever like this, felt the warmth of his arms around her, then everything would always be okay.

“Why are you crying, silly?” he asked, his voice soft in her ears, his breath warm on her neck.

She shook her head, gasping with the sobs that were consuming her again. No matter how hard she fought it, they would always come back to her, break through her walls, crash through her defenses and spew forth. “I was so scared,” she said quietly, resting her head comfortably on his shoulder.

He laughed then, a short sweet sound that seemed laced with a slight pain. “About what? Of course, I’d make it. Was there ever any doubt?”

She took a shuddering breath that was all the answer he needed. She had doubted it; she had thought that maybe he would die. He knew she had. He knew that there was always that fear with her, no matter what he did to try to alleviate it. It was an uncomfortable subject for him. She was always so worried about him. He had never had that before, he guess he didn’t know how to deal with it. He changed the subject.

“How’s Cid?” he asked. “And Vincent? I bet he was a bit surprised – ”

Tifa cut him off sharply, her tone strong, too strong. “They’re fine.” Her words were said hastily, but Cloud let them go, not wishing to linger on them too long. They didn’t sound like a lie; he had known her long enough to tell when she lied. She would always speak rather dully, like her heart wasn’t in the words. What she said was true, at least partially so. But it didn’t really matter right now.

She pulled her head off of his shoulder, turning to look at him, her eyes locking with his. “Oh, God, Cloud. I was so scared,” she whispered, tears still flowing down her cheeks though not with the same ferocity. “I was so scared. I thought I lost you.”

He didn’t respond to that. He didn’t know what to say. He was afraid that anything he did say would be inadequate, would somehow fall short of what he really meant. He didn’t know what he meant. Why did she always have to do this to him, make it so he couldn’t speak the right things, or even think of anything to say?

She didn’t expect anything. “Just hold me, Cloud,” she declared softly, her voice carrying over the silence in the room. He did, pulling her close to him in a loving embrace. And there were no words to be said. They didn’t need words, just to hold each other in their arms and feel whole, just to be with each other. No words, no lies, no anger or fear. Just silence. That was how it was supposed to be, forever. If only forever didn’t prove to be so short.