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Opening extract from

Demon Road

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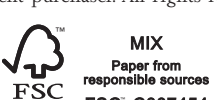
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Twelve hours before Amber Lamont's parents tried to kill her, she was sitting between them in the principal's office, her hands in her lap, stifling all the things she wanted to say.

"We don't stand for troublemakers in this school," said Mrs Cobb. She was a fleshy woman in her fifties who wore a necklace so tight that when her neck quivered and her face went red, Amber expected her head to just pop off, maybe bounce on the floor and go rolling underneath her massively imposing desk. That would have been nice.

"There is a reason we have been placed in the top three educational facilities in the great state of Florida," Cobb continued, "and do you know what that is? It's because we run a tight ship."

She paused for effect, as if what she'd said needed to be absorbed rather than merely tolerated.

Cobb inclined her head slightly to one side. "Mr and Mrs Lamont, I don't know you very well. In previous years, there has been no reason to summon you here. In previous years, Amber's behaviour has been perfectly adequate. But your daughter has been sent to my office three times in the past month for

altercations with other students. *Three times*. That is, I'm sure you'll agree, beyond the pale. Speaking plainly, as I feel I must, her behaviour this semester has worsened to such a degree that I am, regrettably, forced to wonder if there might have been some drastic change in her home circumstances."

Amber's mother nodded sympathetically. "How terrible for you."

Her parents were, as expected, completely calm in the face of overwhelming stupidity. That specific type of calm – detached, patient but at-times-veering-into-condescension – was pretty much their default setting. Amber was used to it. Cobb was not.

Betty Lamont sat in her chair with perfect posture and perfect hair, dressed smartly yet demurely. Bill Lamont sat with his legs crossed, hands resting on the understated buckle of his Italian belt, his fingers intertwined and his shoes gleaming. Both of them good-looking people, tall, healthy and trim. Amber had more in common with Mrs Cobb than she did with her own parents – Cobb could, in fact, have been Amber in forty years' time, if she never found the discipline to go on that diet she'd been promising herself. The only thing she seemed to have inherited from her folks' combined gene pool was her brown hair. Sometimes Amber let herself wonder where it all went wrong with her – but she didn't ponder that mystery for very long. Such pondering led to the cold and darker places of her mind.

"It gets worse," Cobb said. "The parents of the other girl in this… *fracas*, we'll call it, have intimated that they will report the incident to the local newspaper if we do not take appropriate measures. I, for one, refuse to see this school's good name dragged through the mud because of the actions of one troublesome

student." At that, Cobb glared at Amber, just to make sure everyone present knew to whom she was referring.

"Can I say something?" Amber asked.

"No, you may not."

"Saffron's the one who started it. She picks on anyone who isn't as pretty and perfect as her and her friends."

"Be quiet," Cobb said sharply.

"I'm just saying, if you want to blame someone, then blame—"

"You may *not* speak!"

Amber answered her glare with one of her own. "Then why am I here?"

"You are here to sit and be quiet and let me talk to your parents."

"But I could let you talk to my parents from somewhere else," Amber said.

Cobb's face flushed and her neck quivered. Amber waited for the *pop*.

"Young lady, you will be quiet when I *tell* you to be quiet. You will respect my authority and do as you are *told*. Do you understand?"

"So I'm not allowed to speak up for—"

"*Do you understand?*"

Her mother patted Amber's leg. "Come on now, sweetie, let the nice old woman speak."

Cobb's eyes widened. "Well, I think I have identified the source of the problem. If this is how Amber has been raised, I am not surprised that she has no respect for authority."

"Naturally," Bill said, as composed as ever. "What's so great about authority, anyway? It takes itself far too seriously, if you

want my opinion. You have a little problem that you blow all out of proportion, drag Betty and myself across town for a meeting we're obviously supposed to dread, and here you sit at your ridiculously large desk like a mini-despot, assuming you wield some sinister power over us. Betty, are you feeling intimidated yet?"

"Not yet," Betty said kindly, "but I'm sure it will kick in soon."

Amber did her best not to squirm in her seat. She'd seen this enough times to know what was coming next, and it always made her uncomfortable. Her parents had only so much tolerance for people they viewed as irritations, and the level of punishment they doled out depended entirely on how they were feeling on any particular occasion. The only thing Amber didn't know was how far they intended to take it today.

Cobb's unremarkable eyes narrowed. "Obviously, the apple hasn't fallen far from the tree. I can see where your daughter gets her attitude."

Mrs Cobb was now little more than a lame wildebeest, the kind Amber had seen on nature documentaries. Her parents were the lions, moving through the long grass, closing in on both sides. Cobb didn't know she was the wildebeest, of course. She didn't know she was lame, either. She thought she was the lion, the one with the power. She had no idea what was coming.

"You've just said, essentially, the same thing twice," Bill pointed out to her. "Added to this, you seem to talk entirely in clichés. And we've been entrusting *you* to educate our daughter? We may have to reconsider."

"Let me assure you, Mr Lamont," Mrs Cobb said, sitting

straighter and smoothing down her blouse, "you will not have to worry about that any longer."

"Oh, excellent," Betty said happily. "So you'll be leaving the school, then?"

"No, Mrs Lamont, it is your *daughter* who will be leaving."

Betty laughed politely. "Oh no, I don't think so. Bill?"

Bill took out his phone – what he half-jokingly referred to as the most powerful phone in Florida – and dialled a number.

"We do not allow cellphones in the Principal's Office," Cobb said.

Bill ignored her. "Grant," he said, smiling when the call was picked up. "Sorry to be calling in the middle of the day. No, no, nothing like that. Not yet, anyway. No, I'd like you to do me a favour, if you would. The principal of Amber's school, you know her? That's the one. I'd like her fired, please."

Faint fingers of a headache began to tap on the inside of Amber's skull. So this was how far they were willing to take things today. All the way to the end.

"Thank you," said Bill. "Say hi to Kirsty for me."

Bill hung up, and looked at Cobb. "You should be receiving a call any moment now."

Cobb sighed. "This isn't amusing, Mr Lamont."

"Don't worry, it's about to get decidedly funnier."

"I have made my decision. There is no arguing—"

Bill held up a finger for quiet.

Cobb was obedient for all of four seconds before speaking again. "If you're not going to talk rationally about this, then I have nothing more to say to you. It is unfortunate we could not work out our—"

"Please," said Betty. "Give it a moment."

Cobb shook her head, and then her phone rang. She actually jumped.

"I'd answer it," Betty advised her gently. "It's for you."

Cobb hesitated. The phone rang twice more before she picked it up. "Hello? Yes, yes, sir, I'm just… what? But you can't do that." She turned her face away. She was pale now, and her voice was hushed. "Please. You can't do that. I didn't—"

Amber heard the dial tone from where she was sitting. Cobb sat frozen. Then her shoulders began to jerk, and Amber realised she was crying.

Amber felt queasy. "Bill," she said, "maybe we don't really have to get her fired, do we?"

Bill ignored her and stood up. "Right then," he said. "Amber, we'll let you get back to class. You're working at the diner later, aren't you? Try not to eat anything – we're having duck tonight."

Her folks headed for the door, and Amber looked back at Cobb, who stood up quickly.

"Please," Cobb said, wiping the tears from her eyes. "I'm sorry. You're obviously very important people and… and Amber is obviously a very special girl."

"Very special," said Bill, one foot already out of the office.

"I'm sorry I didn't recognise that," Cobb said, hurrying out from behind her desk. "Special students deserve special treatment. Latitude. They deserve latitude and… and understanding. Leeway."

"Leeway, latitude and understanding," Betty said, nodding. "They've always been our touchstones for a happy life."

"Please," Cobb said. "Don't have me fired."

"Well, I don't know," said Betty. "It's really up to Amber. Amber, do you think Mrs Cobb should keep her job?"

There was some part of Amber, some sly and distant part, that wanted to say no, that wanted to punish her principal for her shrillness, her pettiness – but this was a part that wasn't thinking of Cobb as a person. No matter how much Amber may have disliked the woman, she was not prepared to ruin her life just to teach her a lesson.

"Uh yeah, she can keep it," Amber said.

"Thank you," Cobb said, her whole body sagging. "Thank you."

"Wait a second," Bill said, stepping back into the office. "Mrs Cobb, you accused us of being bad parents. If you want your job back, you're going to have to do more than just apologise."

"Oh yes," Betty said, clapping her hands in delight. "You should beg for it."

Amber stared at her parents in shocked disbelief, and Cobb frowned.

"I'm sorry?"

Betty's smile vanished. "Beg, I said."

Amber had been wrong. She thought she had known the full extent of her parents' punishments, but this was a level beyond. This was vindictive, like they were running out of patience on some scale no one else could see. This was something entirely new.

Cobb shot a quick glance at Amber, then looked back at Bill and Betty. "Uh… please," she said quietly. "Please can I keep my job? I… I beg of you."

Bill shrugged. "Yeah, okay." He swept his arm towards the door. "Shall we?"

They left the office, left Mrs Cobb standing there with tears running down her face, and walked the length of the corridor

without speaking. Right before her parents turned right, for the parking lot, and Amber turned left, for the classrooms, Bill looked at her.

"This girl you had the 'fracas' with," he said, "Saffron, right? Wasn't she a friend of yours?"

"When we were kids," said Amber, her voice soft.

He nodded, considered it, then walked away.

Her mother patted Amber's shoulder and looked sympathetic. "Children can be so cruel," she said, and followed her husband.