



JESCIE HALL

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Know that the right one will love you, especially for those shadows in the  
deepest part of your soul you silently conquer every single day.

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I'm staring into the eyes of John Travolta while a warm tongue slides into my ear.

What's more cliché than a poster of Pulp Fiction in an old, degraded nightclub? I could be Vincent Vega. I could kill people for money, I think. mean, why not? I'm slowly killing myself every day, and that's just for fun. Plus, I'm great at the twist.

*I'm tweakin'.*

Hot off this molly, coke has my heart racing, hands shaking from the alcohol. I think the effects of the shrooms are finally coming into play. I'm a walking D.A.R.E. advertisement, showcasing to these kids just how fun life can be when you don't have responsibilities or morals.

I'm sleepwalking again, about to fall off the edge of the world. Do I even want a reason to wake up? At this rate, I feel like if I don't keep up my habits, I won't even know how to function anymore. Purpose? What the fuck is purpose?

It's hot as hell in here. I thought California was going to provide a nice chill, warm air. Low to mid-seventies is what Hawke said. Then again, I am

smashed in the basement room of a smokey club between a sea of dick and drug-hungry women, most of them as fucked up off this shit as me.

The rumbling sound of deep bass fills the dimly lit space while I float along in this fog of sedated feelings, and my heart races an entire marathon without me. One chick has her tongue in my ear while Kiara, I think it's Kiara, has her nipple in my face, riding my lap, waiting for me to suck it. I want this. I want this so badly, but I feel like I'm being choked, and not in the way I like.

"I'm hot y'all. I need air," I announce to their whines as I get up off the couch, letting them melt back into the seat without me.

I squeeze my way out the back of the tiny club, passing walls of graffiti scuffling through trash on the dirty cement floor, and pushing through the smoke and flashing lights. Stumbling slightly, I walk towards the exit when I see a shadow of someone standing in the corner alone. I lean back against the wall for a minute, feeling like I might fall over if I keep walking. The high is hitting me hard and the walls are literally melting around me.

I need to focus on something steady. I roll my head back over to the corner and see this shadowy figure again. Every so often, the light flashes in that direction. It's a girl with short black hair. It's Mia Wallace from Pulp Fiction. She's come to life. *Holy fuck, I'm Vincent.*

I walk closer and see she's actually not that lonely. Not even a little. She's currently got her tongue in another girl's mouth, a redhead, their hands all over each other, touching necks, breasts, all that, and hopefully more. Being the creep that I am, I lean against the wall, kicking a foot up to stabilize myself while I continue watching the show.

"Jesus, this is hot as fuck," I say to myself, loud enough to get the attention of this Mia look alike against the wall.

1 The strobe light hits them enough for me to see more. She's staring right at me. Green eyes, wild like a snake. Her jet black hair seems to make them pop all the more, that or maybe it's the redness surrounding her irises.

1 Grabbing the back of the hair of the girl in front of her, she pulls her head to the side and begins licking up the side of her neck.

I "Oh my God," I groan again, watching with fascination as I bite my knuckles before me. Her eyes lock on mine.

She gives the redhead one more quick kiss before smiling and shooing the woman off. I cock my head at this siren, wondering where she plans on striking next.

, "You liked that," she purrs, her voice like velvet cutting through the air as she prowls towards me.

I "Uh-huh," I reply simply, like an idiot, mouth unable to form a word.

2 "I liked you watching," she says softly, closing the space between us.

s Now that she's closer, I notice her eyes are the craziest shade of green I've ever seen. They're reptilian. Browns and greens swirled together in a wild arrangement reeking of a cold-blooded vibe that's sure to seek and destroy. She thrives at night. I can feel it. The red streaks adding to the sexy dynamic of a chick who's living her fucking life right now.

*I want in.*

s She stands before me for a moment. Staring at me with a mysterious look like she sees a good time before her, a wild night with a man who's capable of doing the nasty things she desires. Or maybe she's just absorbing my style and the strung out, grungy look I've got going for me.

I stare back down at her for a minute as the lights flash across her cheeks and her little button nose that's pierced with a tiny gold ring, adorably reminding me of someone. I think? Fuck, maybe she's just the woman of my dreams.

tdon't know. I'm so fucked up right now. This could not even be real. I'm  
prolling and need some contact.

“Have you ever felt like you were supposed to meet someone?” I ask  
lcocking my head to the side.

My mind is blown by the irony of my Pulp Fiction reference before seeing  
yshe looks like the woman from the film. We're two fucked up souls, lost in a  
sea of drugs, meant to hook up. Fucking destiny.

2 “No. Never,” she says harshly, with a devilish grin.

1 “Damn, I thought for sure this was fate.”

“Fate? You just saw me kissing a woman. How do you know I even like  
smen?” she questions with a playful smile.

“You might not like men, but you'll like me,” I say, laying on the charm.

She laughs, tucking her straight black hair behind her ears, and it's the best  
thing I've heard in a while. It's a sweet, innocent little giggle from a girl who  
e isn't sweet or innocent at all. She's a total contradiction and I like it.

1 “You're fun,” she says, her lip still pulled up in one corner.

2 The curve of her lush lips has me imagining them everywhere on my skin  
cI see her sex face above me already, riding me with her eyes on me, mouth  
dropped open in indescribable pleasure. She's moaning and begging me to  
slow down, the feelings too intense, until I bring her to the edge of orgasm a  
;she quivers above me, letting go. God, I want to see her sex face.

2 “God, I want to see your sex face.”

; *Shit, I said it out loud.*

Her eyebrows shoot up with a humorous look.

, “No filter, huh?” she asks, leaning into the wall next to me.

g “None, baby,” I say quickly, turning my body to face her with a grin.

I Her head rests against the cold, concrete graffiti wall, some of her hair

asticking to it while the other part hangs across her left eye.

“Why are you smiling?” she asks with a grin.

“, “I’m always smiling. Why are you smiling?” I retort as we stand there leaning against the wall, just smiling at each other like we’re in on our own little secret.

a “Wanna smoke?” she asks, holding up a cigarette between us.

“Only if you put your lips on it first.”

I say the phrase, then wait for her reaction; the intention known. It could be a lot of things, my dick for one. I bite the tip of my tongue playfully, waiting for her response.

“I’ll break your heart, you know,” she comments, making me pause.

“Gotta have a heart to break, sweetheart. And trust me, there ain’t nothing tin here worth reviving.” I pound my fist on my chest with a cheesy grin.

o She walks around me, her eyes never leaving mine before she settles against the wall to my right.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn ya.” She blinks flirtatiously, giving me a wicked grin, before rolling off the wall and walking away.

n I stand here stunned for a moment. I think I just met the female version of myself. This is what I’d look like as a chick. I’m hot as fuck. I’m into me.

s After realizing I’m daydreaming about how strange it would be to not have a dick between my legs, I shake my head, searching for her, only to find that she’s gone amidst the bodies, smoke, and flashing neon lights.

*Outside.*

Making my way through the smoked out hallway, I stumble slightly gripping the cool, cement wall for support. I’m totally fucked up right now. The music beating through my chest is making me feel like my heart is drowned by my surroundings; the lights dragging out into long streaks around

me. I feel trapped. Trying to focus on finding the exit, I see a red sign and push forward through the crowd of people hooking up. Finally getting to the rusted double doors of this grunged-out basement nightclub, I break free.

1 I see a few people smoking outside near the dumpsters; two guys and this mirage of a goddess I can't unsee. They're already all over her. She definitely radiates like a flower, bringing you in with her beauty, only to drown you in her poison. An addicting toxin that pulls people in, slowly killing them in her presence. Dammit, if I don't love it. If it isn't clear already, I gravitate towards toxicities like a moth to a flame.

Her eyes find mine immediately, catching my presence. I keep my distance, sitting back against the wall opposing her, lighting up a cigarette while the guys keep trying to talk to her.

One touches her waist playfully and she leans into it, still gazing in my direction. I give her a little head nod and she takes the cue. Walking through the group of men, she comes straight over to me. She presses her little frame up against mine, holding my hips as my mouth drops in surprise. Taking the opportunity, she slides the cigarette from between her lips, stained with her blood-red lipstick, and sticks it between mine. She has no problem poking through people's bubbles. That much is apparent.

e "My lips were on it first," she purrs with a grin, then turns to walk back towards the guys.

Grabbing her wrist, I pull her back into me, making her gasp in surprise as her chest presses against my torso. Her tight little body feels good against mine. I gaze down at her. Her full red lips are parted, and she's clearly waiting for me to say something. I like her waiting for me.

s "We should definitely be having sex right now," I say, taking a puff of the cigarette and blowing it out while I eye her.

l “No filter.” She laughs, avoiding my statement.

e “I see something I want and I need it. It’s who I am. I have an addictive personality. I’m weak, I give in to what gives me pleasure,” I continue splacing the cigarette between her lips so she can take a puff. “But with you maybe I should go slow?”

1 Blowing out smoke to the side of me, she brings a beer bottle to her sweet rlusciuous lips, taking a swig while looking directly at me. She’s got crazy eye econtact. She communicates without communicating, but I have yet to learn her language.

y “I don’t go slow.” She teases me with her eyes again, giving that wicked elittle grin.

This little vixen is going to slowly wrap herself around me, making me fee yall warm and fuzzy before strangling me with her reptilian strength, and I’n here for the pain.

e I take the beer from her, grabbing the neck of the bottle, swallowing the erest of it. Throwing it into the dumpster beside us, I wrap my arm around her neck and lead her around the building. She giggles and follows my lead gturning back to the guys, saluting them with two fingers.

“Your place or mine?” I ask, walking towards the parking lot.

κ “Presumptuous,” she says, turning her chin to look up at me as we walk.

“Bold,” I reply.

s “Cocky?” she asks.

t “Confident.” I grin.

y “Cheeky.” She smiles approvingly.

I’m loving the playful banter already. How is it I feel like I’ve known this e chick forever? Some people just vibe differently together. Me and her are definitely on the same wavelength.

We get to my car and she perches herself on the hood, legs wide before me. In the streetlights, her style is finally exposed, showcasing these sexy, long legs covered by fishnet stockings and black ripped-up short shorts. The lack of a bra is evident with the way her black-and-white striped shirt fits tightly across her chest. What's also apparent is the piercing on her right nipple. *Holy fucking hell.*

Layers of necklaces cover her neck and there's a snake tattoo sliding up and around her thigh, peeking through the tights. Her high-heeled black tie-up boots tell me she's wild as fuck on a school night.

"You know, my boyfriend wouldn't appreciate your advances," she says tapping a finger to her curved lips.

"Boyfriend? I thought you were a lesbian?" I cock my brow, walking between her legs, placing both hands on the hood of my car to trap her against it.

"I'm a free spirit. I love beautiful people. Guys, girls... It's the soul that's attractive, you see."

"I get hard for a sexy soul," I admit, agreeing with a serious tone.

She laughs at me, really laughs as she looks me up and down, and it makes me feel somewhat validated.

"We have so much in common." She grins, running her hands up my arms the sensation leaving a trail of fire on my skin.

"We like to party and fuck. Soulmates." I bring my hands up to her waist holding her tiny frame.

"Did you know that hot water turns to ice faster than cold water?"

Her totally random statement leaves me shaking my head, attempting to process. She is so quirky.

"Um, no. I guess I didn't."



e She wraps the back of her calves around me, tightening her legs and pulling me flush against her on the hood of my car. I groan as my dick presses into her pelvis. She lays back as I brace myself with my hands around her.

t Pulling me down with a fistful of my shirt so we're face to face, she whispers against my lips, "I'm so hot for you, but I'll turn to ice before you get the chance to cool."

- I gaze from her wild green eyes to her plump, red stained lips, knowing she's my new toxic substance of choice.

, "Worth the burn."

I lean forward, pressing my lips against hers, unable to hold back the contact I so desperately need. She moans into my mouth and the sound exhilarates me. I slip my tongue between her soft lips, finding hers. Her tongue toys with mine, and I feel a tongue ring.

s I have no idea how I didn't see it before, but it's probably the hottest thing I've ever felt. It feels so good and tastes even better. She tastes like she looks fiery with a spice of trouble. She pulls on my shirt, getting my chest flush against her on the hood of the car as we tongue each other, living for the connection, living for the moment.

, "Han!" a man yells out.

She pushes me off her gently as I open my eyes that had fallen closed during our kiss. We're both just looking at each other, breathless, as if we weren't expecting this heat between us to ignite the way it did. She's staring into me with those killer eyes, lips curving into a smile as she does. My chest is heaving, but not from the heat; this time it's from her. She's electricity shocking the fuck out of me.

"Gotta go," she says calmly, sliding out from under me, instantly making

lme feel her loss.

κ I turn to see a rough-looking guy in all black waiting for her by the door  
lholding it open with one arm.

“Boyfriend?” I question, calling out to her.

e “Hardly,” she responds, rolling her eyes.

1 I love our one-word conversations, so I continue it as she walks away.

“Name?” I ask, cheesing as I bite my lip.

g I thought I heard that guy call her Han, sounding like John, but way hotter  
because you know, she’s a girl.

“Never.”

e “Uncool!” I yell towards her, grimacing through my grin.

d “Ice cold,” she comments with that wicked grin, turning on her heels to jog  
roff toward the door with her sexy ass.

“Ice fucking cold,” I say to myself, shaking my head.

g I lay back on the hood of my car, staring up into the darkness above me  
,My mind is all over the place, as I wonder if any of the past ten minutes were  
neven real. There is a high probability I might’ve imagined it all.

e *Yep, I could definitely be Vincent.*

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“Get the fuck up!”

I groan, grabbing my head at the loud noise reverberating through my painful skull. It feels like metal, and the noise is like an annoying ping-pong ball bouncing back and forth inside.

“Kid, get up!”

I get hit in the head with a pillow, making me sit up straight, eyes unable to open in the brightness of this room. Why the fuck did they put me up in the room with all the sun? Don’t they know me at all? I need darkness. Lots of fucking darkness.

“Leave me to die in my own waste, please.” My cracked, gravelly tone sounds like I was on a bender. Accurate.

“Bro, you’ve been here two nights already, haven’t seen you in the light. Get the fuck up and wash your nasty greasy-ass mop. We have a guest coming over,” Hawke says, opening the windows of their disgustingly gorgeous beach home.

Yep. I’m at Hawke and Cole’s beach house. My good friends and newfound lovers told me to come fly out for the summer, specifically to work

with my over-protective brother-from-another-mother, Hawke, now that they are all comfortably moved in.

A fresh start for me in their new fresh start. His reasons for bringing me here are probably different from the reasons I came. I want a new sea of fish to fuck. He wants me to get an actual job that doesn't involve slinging dope. We'll meet somewhere in the middle, I'm sure.

The place is insane. It's got nothing but views of the ocean in every floor-length window that faces it. The beach is down below, ready for me to fuck it up with some wild, sandy sex. I've already envisioned it. Just like the ocean sex. Salt and sand in places unimaginable. I can't wait for the chafe.

g "You know me. I thrive in the night. Call me Goliath. Stone by day  
g warrior by night." I recite the opening to my favorite cartoon in a dark voice.

"Ten minutes. She'll be here in ten minutes."

o "We were betrayed by the humans we were sworn to protect..." I continue the introduction to Gargoyles in my drunken state before sitting up abruptly

e "Wait, did you say she?"

f I snap out of my nostalgic moment when I hear the mention of a chick.

e "Cole's sister, you idiot. She'll be here soon, so get yourself together. You smell like a wet dog."

I lift my arm, smelling my armpit before making a funny face at him.

.. "I like the smell of mutt. It's endearing. Bitches love it."

t He scowls at me, looking down at me in disgust.

y "I mean bitches, like literally bitches." I sigh as he continues to glare at me. "Female dogs? Because I'm a...dog? Do you, you get it? Fuck, it's too early for this." I run a hand down my burning face.

k He rolls his eyes and walks back out into the massive living space separating my room from the other half of the house.

y After showering, snorting a line off the bathroom counter, and throwing on my black ripped jeans paired with a ripped-up, holey t-shirt from an Ohio band concert, I scruff my white blonde hair in the mirror. My eyes are still bloodshot from the night before, but the eyebrow ring distracts from it. I think. Fuck, who am I kidding? This is me. Strung out and living off stimulants. Take it or leave it.

r “Big Bird! Come to mama!” Cole screams out, running towards me in the living room once I make my appearance, grabbing me into a big hug.

n Big Bird. She still hasn’t dropped it. I got high as fuck hanging with them back home before they left and, for some strange reason, started announcing every letter of the last word of the conversations. “D” is for disaster, “C” is for cunt. I began teaching an alphabet lesson, and apparently the nickname stuck.

e Truth be told, I feel kind of bad right now. I’ve been here for two days and haven’t even seen her yet. I’m so shady for that shit. I need to get my act together.

I lift her up and she wraps her legs around my waist as I twirl her while she squeals. I set her down as she scruffs my blonde, unruly hair playfully.

“I see you’ve changed your mind and realized this connection we have,” I say in a serious tone, knowing Hawke’s watching.

I live for pissing him off. It’s so easy. Just hit on his Cole and he’ll send flames at you through his eyes.

t “Hmm...not quite,” she says with furrowed brows. Her expression changes and I can feel the excitement radiating off her. “Let me show you around!”

She drags me all around the place, showing me everything with such excitement. The house is literally outstanding. I’m really fucking happy for them. I am.



After everything Hawke's gone through, they deserve every bit of the happiness they seem to share. I never thought I'd see Hawke wifed up, but Cole changed him. She saved him. Literally put her life on the line for him. Loyalty, a beautiful thing. It almost makes me want to see if I can find a connection like that. Almost.

"My sis is gonna be here soon to have lunch with us before the party tonight," she says, smiling, checking her watch as we sit down at the outdoor patio on the ground floor of their place.

Her cheerful face immediately drops into a scowl as she glares at me, scaring me with a sharp look in her once kind eyes.

"What?" I ask, with wide eyes.

"Don't you even think about touching her," she scolds abruptly. "She won't like you, so don't even try."

"What?! This is ridiculous!" I scoff. "You have a sister. I'm definitely going to fuck her, just off principal."

Hawke pinches the bridge of his nose, shaking his head while blowing air to the ground.

"I'm sorry, but it's true. If I'm not allowed to fuck you, I'm definitely fucking your blood sister. Like, duh."

Cole stands immediately, walking towards me with a finger pointed aggressively. "I'm telling you for your own good. Don't go down that dark hole."

"I'ma be all in that hole." I wiggle my head back and forth, taunting her as I talk. "Sliding through again and again. I'm about to set up camp in that hole and live there all summer like a hippie mountain man."

"Nic-Nac!" a voice yells, disrupting our conversation.

Both of our eyes stay focused on each other. Hers widening in shock, mine

ewidening in excitement as a grin grows.

t Cole's scowl changes into a big smile that's more like the Cole I know. We  
.all turn our heads up to face the voice that's coming from the patio above us.

a My heart nearly stops in my chest. It might have, if not for the coke  
keeping me alive.

y She's leaning over the railing, her black hair falling around her face, he  
rgreen eyes focused on us, her mischievous grin already in place.

It's her.

, It's fucking Han.

She bounces her quirky ass down to us on the patio, giving Cole a huge  
squealing hug before turning to face me. I stand from my seat, awkwardly  
etrying to put my hands in my pockets but failing miserably because, fucking  
skinny jeans.

y She's wearing this black crop top shirt with the phases of the moon, paired  
with these shiny latex shorts that are tied up with string. Her huge clunky  
rblack boots don't seem very beach friendly. This is not a brunch-type outfit  
but her not caring at all makes me like it all the more. Her tattoos are al  
yexposed now, and I see the snake wrapped around her thigh that slips up he  
side, coming out of the top of her shorts near her hip.

d *Good fucking God. How is this Cole's sister?!*

k I see it now that they're standing next to each other. That button nose.  
should've known.

s She smiles at me and I can't tell if she's doing it on purpose or not. Doe  
ashe remember me?

“Jo, this is Kid, Hawke's good friend. He's staying with us for the  
summer.”

e She tucks her stick-straight black hair behind her ear, tilting her chin up to

me as I wait to see where we go from here.

e Jo?

“Wait. Oh, yeah!” Her eyebrows knit together as her mouth drops open in surprise. “You’re the guy I was making out with last night,” she says bluntly smiling while nodding her head.

r I bite my bottom lip, making a pained face at Cole. Hawke falls back into the patio chair, his head facing the clouds as his hands drop to the ground beside him as if someone just shot him dead with an arrow from the sky.

“No, you didn’t,” Cole says disappointingly, her face a sad little frown.

, “Yep,” I say, more to Han than her. “And I’m the guy you’re going to be fucking tonight.”

g “Dude,” Hawke groans from his seat, shaking his head at the clouds.

Han laughs, turning to face Cole, pointing at me with an upturned hand. “I’ve always like this?”

y Yep. I love amusing her. Favorite new hobby. Fuck competitive duck herding. I’m making Han laugh.

l “Unfortunately, yes,” Cole admits.

r “I thought your name was Han? That’s what your boyfriend called you,” I say to her.

“Boyfriend? She doesn’t have a boyfriend,” Cole interrupts, looking sideways at her. “Why did you tell him you had a boyfriend?”

“I just wanted to fuck with him,” she says to Cole like I’m not even there before turning back to face me. “I’m Johanna. Jo by family, Han by the people I fuck.”

e My mouth drops open as I gaze between her and Cole.

She’s as blunt as they come.

o *I think I’m drooling.*

“I knew this was going to be bad.” Cole sighs, running a hand through her hair as she joins Hawke on the seat.

1 After the fun little introduction, I sit back on one of the lounge chairs, facing the beach, letting the warm air hit my face as I try to sober up.

Han eventually plops herself directly in the same seat as me, even though there are like seven of them available, while Cole and Hawke head inside to get some food and drinks from the kitchen. No bubble.

“So, Kid,” she begins, leaning in closer to me, tucking her chin against her bony little shoulder with a knowing smirk. I’m waiting for it, waiting for her to hit on me so we can hurry and do this already. “What’s your favorite sex animal?”

I’ve never heard a question asked in such a sexy tone. God, she’s so random and constantly throwing me off guard.

“Blobfish,” I answer after a moment to think.

κ “Random,” she responds, drawing her brows together.

“Honest.”

“Why?” she asks.

I “They have no bones. The dark environment in which they survive literally supports them. Plus, they got a bad rep. They aren’t ugly until you remove them from their comfort zone.”

“So you can relate?” she questions, rolling to her stomach, our thighs touching, crossing her legs up behind her.

e She’s attempting to get to know me by acting like she’s not getting to know me.

“My dark environment is the only sustainable living situation for me. So yeah, I guess so.” I shrug, then stop myself. “But, I do have bones. One big one in particular.” I give her the sex eyes.

r “A femur?” she asks with excitement. “No way, I got one too!”

She’s playing with me. I narrow my eyes at her, grinning, while trying to figure her out.

Before I can come back with something, she’s standing up at the edge of the chair, facing me. I sit there, watching her next move like she owns the world and I’m just the blobfish living in it. She instantly has all of my attention. Grabbing the hem of her crop top, she pulls it up and over her chest and down her tatted up arms, revealing a green, string bikini.

r *Yep, that bone is coming into play.*

a Her playful green eyes stay on mine as she unties her shorts, pulling them down her legs before removing her shoes. She stands there in nothing but the swimsuit before me and my eyes are darting all over to every part of her I can see. I cough, choking on phlegm as I get the full view of her nipple ring pressed against this tiny suit. The snake on her thigh begging me to pet it just like the nipple ring is begging me to suck it.

“I’m going surfing,” she says nonchalantly, as if this is normal while she walks backwards towards the beach, her black chin length hair blowing into her face. “Come on!”

e I look back at the house in search of Cole and Hawke.

“They’re fucking again. C’mon! Let’s go!” she demands, grabbing a board that’s stuck in the sand and carrying it out into the water.

Who the fuck is this chick? She’s blunt, sexy, likes to party, likes to fuck. She keeps me on my toes, never know what she’s going to say, eyes that melt and a body that’s too hot for her own good, oh, and now she surfs? Yeah, okay.

g I slap myself across the face quickly just to make sure I can feel it. Reality for me tends to bend from time to time. I walk towards the water, the warm

sand beneath my bare feet. I find a spot and plop down, leaning back on my hands to see her in action. She's insane. I'm watching her as she does a duck dive with her board under a wave, wetting her hair as she turns back to me with a smile.

She perches herself in the takeoff zone, waiting for her wave. Finding it, she drops in and quickly pops up on her board. She rides like she owns the water and it owes her a favor. Riding the wave out, her thighs move the board beneath her like a professional. Saluting me at the end of her ride with her two fingers, she hops off and disappears into the water.

Her board washes up towards the beach and it's then that I realize she didn't even have it tethered to her. I stand up, squinting my eyes as I search the water. I get nervous when I don't see her. It's been a full minute at least. I take my shirt off and start running towards her. I walk through the waves swimming out towards where she disappeared beneath the surface.

"Fuck!" I yell nervously, pushing my lengthy body through the water. "Han!"

Just as I get far enough out to where the water hits the middle of my chest, she pops up out of the water, the smile already in place.

"Jesus, fuck..." I groan, gripping my chest.

I can't take the stress. My lungs are burning.

"I saw a blobfish," she calls out, swimming over to me. "Tried to bring it up, but remembered it'd be uglier up here."

I shake my head, running my hands through my hair as I attempt to regulate my breathing.

"You're insane." I groan.

Her eyes narrow as her smile drops.

"What is sanity?" she questions, challenging me, and I feel the depth of her

in three words.

She swims up beside me, our bodies being lifted and dropped softly by the waves of the salty water surrounding us. She faces me as our knees gently rub together beneath the surface. The reflection of the ocean makes those eyes even more bright. They're striking, making me feel small in her vision.

"Did you come to save me?" she questions, cocking her head to the side while keeping herself afloat with her hands.

It's clear by the fact I still have my jeans on that this wasn't a casual swim.

"Yeah. Yeah, I did," I breathe, still trying to calm my nerves. "I got scared."

Her thigh rubs against mine beneath the surface, sending a bolt of electricity through me. We're moving in closer and closer. She places her hands on my shoulders, wrapping her thighs around my hips, holding on.

I grab her waist, holding her in place, loving the feel of her warm skin against my hands beneath the cool water.

It's strange that it feels so natural to just be touching her like this when I don't know her at all. Placing her nose against mine, I wonder for a moment if she's going to kiss me. But she doesn't. She just stares at me with our noses touching, looking like she has so much to say, yet no reason to tell me.

"You can't save a person who doesn't want to be saved," she whispers through her smile.

A wave comes crashing into us as we separate. She swims back toward the shore, so I follow her like a curious scientist, discovering a new rare specimen from the sea. I've never been the type to follow the lead. I'm the leader, I'm the smooth-talker. Yet here I float, waiting on her next move.

Nothing about her is normal, and it's got me hooked like a fish out of water.

A blobfish, to be exact, set to die a slow, torturous, and ugly death.

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“Why didn’t you tell me her sister is hot as fuck?” I ask, scratching my head. “I feel like this could’ve been solidified a long time ago.”

“First, her sister is practically insane, so good luck with that,” Hawk explains. “Second, don’t even try it. Cole will kill you.”

“I knew it. She’s jealous. She’s always wanted all of my attention,” I shrug before getting hit in the back of the head, sending my blonde overgrown hair flying into my eyes.

I knew I had it coming. Doesn’t mean I won’t keep doing it, though.

“Lay off. There will be plenty of girls for you to fuck around with at the bonfire tonight. Maybe you can get your dick wet by something other than the ocean this time.”

“Hey now! I was trying to save her!”

“She’s practically a professional surfer. She doesn’t need your puny toothpick ass trying to scoop her outta the water.”

I frown, wishing she did need me. For something. Anything.

“You guys about ready? We’re going to walk down. Wanna just meet us there?” Cole asks, peeking into my designated room for the summer.

I try to sneak a peek at Han, but don’t see her behind Cole.

“We’ll meet you there baby,” Hawke replies, gripping her face by the cheeks, kissing her on the lips. “Stay together till I get there.”

“So cute,” I say in a sweet tone. “I can’t wait to catch y’all having sex.”

“Gross.” Cole twists her face at my comment, turning to leave.

“Maybe I’ll join in if you’re adventurous enough. I mean, I’m assuming that’s the real reason you wanted me here this summer. To add some spice to your sex life? Solidify our throuple?”

“Mmm, about that…” Cole scrunches her nose, tapping her lip.

“You should stop talking,” Hawke warns me in a deep monotone voice.

I flip him off to the right of me, continuing to talk to Cole, “Y’all are no fun.”

“Oh, we’re fun.” Cole waves her eyebrows at Hawke.

His lip finally curls into a smirk, his eyes tracing her body from head to toe and back.

“I’ll believe it when I see it.” I scoff.

I love seeing women’s sex faces. It turns me on unlike anything else. I’ve already envisioned Cole’s. Even though she’s practically my sister, I’d still love to see her getting fucked. I’m sick and twisted. It’s who I am. I’ve embraced it.

She bites her tongue playfully at Hawke before turning to leave.

“It’ll happen baby! I wanna see that sex face!” I call out after her.

I grunt as Hawke punches me in the chest.

“It’ll happen,” I continue with a pained groan.

Approaching the bonfire with ecstasy in my system, I laugh alongside

sHawke as we reminisce about the stupid shit we did when we were younger  
Okay, more like a few months ago, but who's counting?

Hawke's got a new lease on life. Given his second chance, he's definitely  
emaking the most out of it. After he and Cole bought the house on the beach  
he started looking around for investment properties. They've bought several  
beach houses and complexes nearby, renting them out for vacationers, pulling  
in extra money like crazy, as if they needed it.

g The money they got from the settlement from Hawke's wrongfu  
onconviction was outrageous. Not only that, but Cole got a deal with a  
publishing house to sell a new fiction novel she recently wrote. Inspired by  
their recent events, she dove into her craft and was about to become a  
household name. I'm sure of it. Hawke enjoys working with his hands  
though, always has, and repairing these properties seems to give him purpose

They invited me here to find my purpose. But my only objective at the  
moment seems to be getting fucked up and unraveling the mystery that is the  
egreen-eyed, free spirit with multiple names.



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eThere's at least thirty people at this bonfire, drinking, dancing to music  
getting fucked up on pills and edibles. Hawke immediately finds Cole.  
watch as he wraps his arm around her, pulling her into him as he sucks her  
neck. I'd say it was the molly, but truthfully, that dude is just obsessed with  
her.

She must have some great pussy, because the man is whipped. *I really  
need to see if it runs in the family.*

I peer around the bonfire, checking out a couple of cute blonde girls who are giggling and drinking beers across from me. One of them looks in my direction, giving me the cutesy come hither look. Yep, we're doing this.

"Smash Tarah. She's got her clit pierced." The familiar velvety voice rings out beside me, making me feel her in my spine.

I turn, looking down, and see Han standing next to me. Her black hair is parted down the middle in two little lopsided buns, the straight strands hanging down, blowing gently in the wind. She's wearing a large oversized flannel button-up shirt that looks to be a guy's, over a white, damn near see-through crop top with a yellow, melting smiley face on it. Her tanned legs are exposed with the tiniest pair of ripped jean shorts. She brings her ring-fingered hand holding a beer bottle to her lips, still looking over at clit-pierced Tarah.

"How do you know that?" I question, cocking my brow.

She turns and looks up at me with a smirk. That one look, that one face...it's all I need to know.

I turn back to see Tarah looking in our direction. She's attractive. A different type of attractive. She looks like she's playing the part of the Cal beach girl who's attempting to prove something, whereas someone like Han just does whatever the fuck she wants. Wearing whatever the fuck she seems to find around her and calling it style. Confidence radiates off her like the sun, sending heat waves straight to my cock. It works for her while Tarah tries by faking it.

She starts her trek over to us, but when I turn to face Han again, she's gone.

Tarah and I hit it off. She's currently straddling my lap in a beach chair telling me all about the wild things she likes to do, including deep-throating

until she chokes. Don't get me wrong, I'm totally down to find out more about that, but I can't help wanting to look around for Han to see what kind of crazy shit she's getting into.

s After hooking me up with Tarah, she just disappeared.

Cole is currently on top of Hawke as they tongue each other, clearly living off the high of their molly. They always do this, act like they want to party with everyone, but once the pills kick in, all they do is find a place to touch and lick each other. Damn animals, I tell you.

e After making out with Tarah for a while as she dry humps my lap, giving me a half chub, I excuse myself to get another drink from the cooler. I'm really not that interested in getting more to drink. I just want to take a look-around, needing a breather and some darkness to let my mind calm down from this shit flowing through my system.

I walk away from the fire. The further out I go, the darker my surroundings become. I fall down into the sand, laying on my back to stare up at the stars.

*What am I doing with my life? What am I doing here? What is my purpose?*

i I float in my self-reflective high, contemplating the next phase in my life when I hear muffled voices to the right of me near the rocky area by the water.

e "Han, think about it," a guy's voice says. "I meant what I said."

n She laughs at him before I hear what sounds like kissing noises.

"Shut-up Slate," she says. "I'm not here for that. I'm here for the drugs."

s "We'd be so good together." He groans and I hear kissing sounds again.

"I'm good together," she replies confidently.

; I think about her answer—I'm good together. As if her being with someone would make her fall apart. She's only together if she's got herself.



understand that more than I wish I did.

I hear her suck in a breath of something. A joint? Cigarette maybe?

“You’re gonna be so fucked up.” He laughs, clearly giving in to whatever she’s trying to do.

“Is that not the point, to fade into oblivion?” she responds.

“Johanna!” I yell out from my position in the sand, attempting to stop whatever is going on over there while simultaneously not moving.

A moment of silence eats me up inside.

“Kid?” I finally hear her call out. “Is that you I hear?!”

I’m still facing the sky. I hear her shuffle over to my position in the sand.

“What the hell are you doing over here? You get lost, Big Bird?”

She leans over where I’m laying, blocking the stars, the strands of her hair curtaining her face.

“Don’t call me that.” I scowl.

I hate that nickname. Makes me feel like an idiot child, and that’s the last thing I want Han to think of me. I want her to know I’m a man.

“Why not? Cole does,” she says, grinning from above me.

“You’re not Cole.”

“No, I’m not,” she says with a hint of attitude.

Something about that ticked her off. I meant it like she could be more to me than Cole, but I think she took it like I don’t know her, like I know Cole. I don’t fucking know. I’m stoned and stuff.

“Are you mad at me? Are we fighting? I don’t wanna fight Han, I wanna make up. Let’s make up.” I wave my fingers towards me. “Come here, kiss me away.”

She bends down, leaning over the top of me, her smile back like it never left.

“You’re an idiot.” She takes her hand ruffling up my hair, before getting her legs under her to stand up.

r I grab her wrist, pulling her down on top of me. She squeals slightly as grab onto her, forcing her to straddle me.

“Don’t hate me forever, beautiful. We have a future to get to, you know.”

p She wiggles herself against me until she’s comfortably straddling my body tanned thighs on both sides of me with her hands planted in the sand near my head.

“The only future to get to is this high that’s about to hit,” she says above me with a curved lip.

“Han, you ready?” the guy known as Slate says from afar, ruining the fucking moment.

She cocks a brow, making an amused face at the interruption.

“Nah, she’s busy,” I call out, staring into those green eyes, making her shake her head at me.

“Whatever, I’m getting a drink,” Slate says, wandering off.

She salutes him with her free hand, still gazing down at me. I love that she literally seems to be unaffected by Slate’s annoyance. She does whatever the fuck she wants. Her salute, another quirky element that makes up the peculiar creature before me.

I “Have you ever been to the dark side of the moon, Kid?”

I will never get enough of her impromptu questions.

a “Not yet, Han, but it’s on the bucket list. Have you?”

t She doesn’t answer me, just eyes me up and down. It always feels like there’s so much underlining depth to these questions she asks. They seem random, but I feel like it’s her own strange little litmus test of getting to know people without them knowing it. She’s tricky like that.

g Her hips roll slightly into mine and I feel myself grow hard instantly. Funny how that works. Tarah damn near needed to rub this log until the forced friction caught fire, and here Han can sit on it and instantly I'm erect.

Leaning up off her hands, she tightens her little lopsided buns, putting all of her weight directly on a certain area that's enjoying the pressure. I hold her thighs, stabilizing her, of course, while she completes fixing the hairstyle. It's effortless, her good looks. That nose ring fits her face to perfection.

"What happened with Tarah? Did that not pan out?" she asks, her hand now resting on my stomach.

"It did."

e She smiles widely, and it bothers me. It doesn't seem to bother her in the least.

"The clit piercing is wild, isn't it?"

r "I wouldn't know," I answer, catching her direct gaze.

She pauses, turning her head slightly, as if understanding that I don't care about Tarah. I came here to find her. I want to know her, not clit-pierced-try-hard. I want to know what makes her laugh, what she was like in high school, why she wears her hair in that quirky, signature way. I want to know why she moved to California, what her first time was like, who motivates her, what her favorite taste is. I have a strange, insatiable need to know Han.

"I keep trying to get Slate to do it for me, but he says I'll regret it. Gave me this instead." She opens her oversized flannel shirt showcasing her tight smiley faced crop top. She pulls the bottom of the hem up, letting her breasts bounce out of it, showing me her nipple piercing.

1 My thoughts are liquified as my mouth drops open at the sight of her bare breast above me. It's fucking perfect. Not too big, not at all small. A perfect perky handful with the sexiest barbell running through the pebbled nipple.

. I'm speechless. Blinking wildly, my jaw hanging to the side of me in the sand.

"Oh my God, chill Kid." She laughs at my inability to form words. "Have you ever seen a nipple before?"

r "N-nuh...none like that," I slur, my dick forming into a painful, gargoyle style rock.

Her eyebrows knit together as she looks curiously at me.

s "You're turned on right now." She stares quizzically with narrowed eyes.

I release a breathy chuckle with my mouth still open. I look down to where she's literally straddling my rock of a dick.

e "Yeah," I say in a breathy tone.

"That's hot." She releases a breathy moan, toying her tongue ring against her front teeth. "We should fuck sometime."

She says it like she's asking me to go grab a cup of Joe, with a little shrug and a peppy tone.

- "Yeah." I nod a bit too eagerly, my head digging a hole into the sand, beneath it.

e "Later though. I need some sour gummy worms like yesterday." She groans, tossing her head back, exposing her beautiful throat to me.

I blink my eyes profusely. I can't keep up with this chick. She's a whole mood every five minutes. She's moaning like sour gummy worms are the key to her orgasm. I want to fuck her until she cries. *I'm so twisted.*

t "I love sour gummy worms," I say instead.

"So much in common." She shakes her head with a smile before hopping off me, wiping herself of any sand and giving me a hand.

; We head back towards the fire where the party is still happening. Tara and her friend spot me immediately as Han and I walk up towards the chair

her arm linked through mine, not seeming to notice the sad look coming from the Cali beach girl who tries.

I don't think this woman ever has a care in the world. She's just coasting through life doing whatever she wants, whenever she wants, and everybody seems to love her for it. Guys, girls, you name it, everyone sees her. She lights up a space like a bolt of lightning when near it. It's wild. To be honest I don't think people know how to take her. She's a total enigma, and instead of trying to solve the puzzle that is her, people just go along with her scattered pieces, calling it art.

She runs over to a small canvas satchel hanging on the back of one of the chairs around the fire. Slate makes his way to her, seeing as she returned. I can't tell if they're just friends, fuck buddies, or what he is to her. My guess is it's complicated to him and not complicated at all to her.

Tarah sits next to me on one of the lounge chairs, asking me if I want anything to drink. She brings me back a beer and two shots of whisky in some red solo cups, so we tap our cups and take them together. She curls up in between my legs, backing her ass up into my dick before her hands rub along my pants. I'm enjoying the distraction, the touching.

But I'm not distracted enough. Turning my attention to Han again, who's talking animatedly with Slate, she laughs hysterically at something he says. I'm finding that the ability to make that girl laugh is something I want to own alone. I highly doubt Slate is that fucking funny. He's literally named after a rock. I'm fucking funny.

She digs out a small plastic bag from her canvas, then elbows Slate playfully before walking around the fire. I focus my attention back on Tarah whose hands are making their way up my thighs. She leans her blonde head

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of hair against my abdomen, watching the fire and talking with her friend who's across from us.

“Open up,” I hear the velvet tone, shooting a bolt of electricity through me straight to my dead heart.

I look up and Han is standing behind the chair, her lips so close to my ear. She's holding a gummy worm between her teeth, edging me to open my mouth and take it from her. I bite the other end of it, attempting to take it, but she pulls back a bit, playing a sexy little game of tug of war of the tongues. She finally gives in as I pop into my mouth.

“My lips were on it first,” she whispers against my ear before smirking and walking away.

I watch her, my eyes peeled to hers, until she fades out of my sight into the darkness of the beach.

So that's our thing now.

I have inside jokes with Han.

The Han.

The girl everyone seems to want but can't have. The unobtainable wonder that leaves me constantly needing to solve the colorful Rubik's cube that is her.

Puzzles; suddenly my thing.

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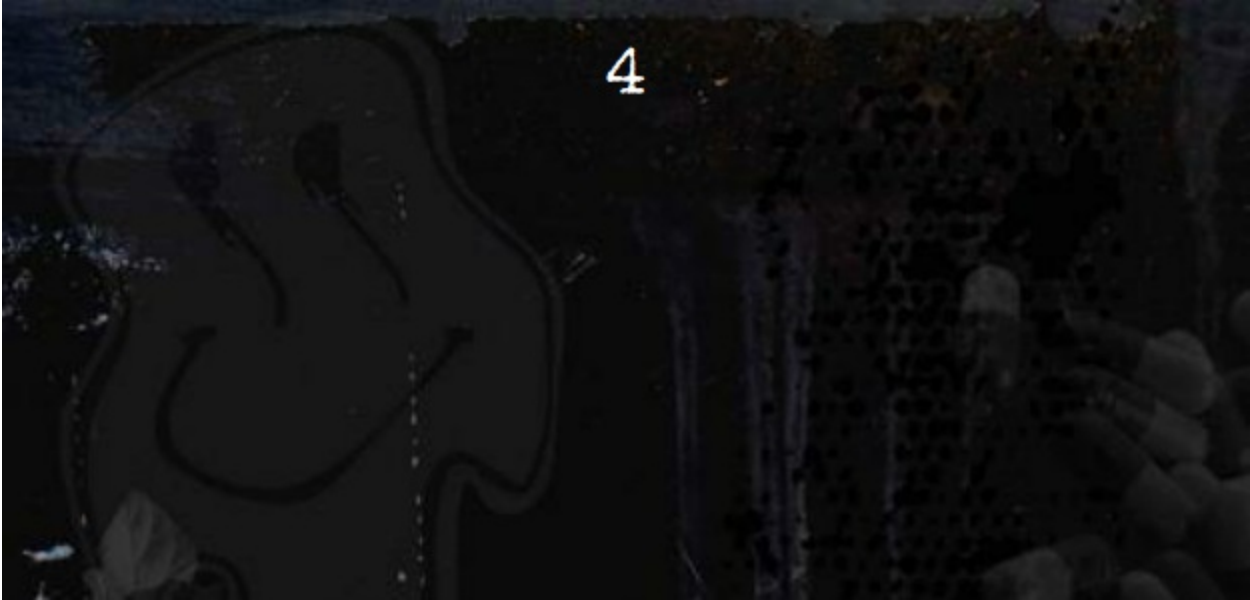
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She did what they said she does.  
She disappeared.

Disappeared like a mirage. One I was so close to touching. I could've sworn it was right there. I could've sworn she was real, but the more time that passes and I don't see her, the more I feel like I made the whole thing up in my head. Does Cole even have a sister? How fucked up have I been these past few nights?

"Bruh, let's go," Hawke says, pounding his fist against my door.

Today is the start of my internship. Okay, I'm lying, it's not an internship but I am becoming somewhat of an understudy. Hawke is taking me to some properties today, showing me the ropes, getting my hands dirty with some real work.

I don't even have clothes for this. My skinny jeans don't allow for much movement up on the roofs of homes and my joggers would get caught with all the zippers, leaving me hanging from the gutters. I've pictured it already. I'll find some old torn up jeans, throw on an old sweater and call it my work clothes.

I walk into the kitchen and find Cole making some breakfast. I perch up at the large granite island that was made for like twenty people to dine at as she turns to face me.

“‘E’ is for Eggs,” she winks, pushing a plate towards me.

“Ugh, thank you, babe. You always know how to fill me up just the way I need,” I groan sexually.

“Hurry the fuck up, Kid!” Hawke barks at me from the foyer, clearly not paying attention to our conversation.

He’s dressing in his work boots at the door, about ready to head out without me.

“Give me her number,” I say, shoving a fork full of eggs into my mouth.

“Whose? Tarah’s? I thought you got it already, along with everything else she has to offer this world,” she remarks.

“Don’t be jealous, baby, it doesn’t look good on you. You know you have my heart.” I grin, reaching for her hand.

“Fucknut, let’s go!” Hawke yells, getting pissed.

“Johanna. Give me her number,” I smile a hopeful smile, one that says I’m harmless.

“Ha! Yeah, no,” she responds quickly. “If she wanted you to have her number, you’d have it. Stay away. I’m literally warning you for your own good.”

“Pshhh.” I wave her off.

As if they knew what was good for me. I know what’s good for me, and it’s anything with the potential to be lethal.

I walk towards Hawke, putting my black boots on and lacing them up.

“Where is she, though? I haven’t seen her around in a few days.”

“It’s what she does. What she always does. She disappears. Don’t even go

there, Kid,” Hawke says sternly as Cole sighs, walking back towards the kitchen.

I sigh, resting my head back against the wall with a lazy smile, just thinking about her crazy, random, insatiable ass.

I “I’m already there.”



We get to work. Hawke has me on top of the roof of one of their properties fixing shingles.

Shingles.

The dirtiest work I’ve ever done was sell dope to a crack fiend in an old abandoned warehouse, not standing my tall, unbalanced ass on top of a house. I’m scared.

“Are you fucking scared?” Hawke asks, walking towards me on the edge of the roof. He’s demeaning.

“No, I just...the wind, it bends me like a piece of wheat grass.”

He puts his hands on his hips, giving me a look that tells me I’m an idiot. The sweat already dripping down his body from a morning of work. Sure, get why Cole likes him. He’s ripped the fuck up, tats everywhere, and he’s good with his hands. That well-rounded prick. Share the wealth. Looking like a dirty male model straight out of the pages of *Handy Man Heaven*.

I’m more wheat grass whereas he’s an oak tree. But wheat grass can be healthy for you when blended into a smoothie. I’m great for immune systems

“Here, peel this up. Like so.” He lifts the shingle above the broken one, showing me where it connects. “Take the nails out and remove it.”

e I do as he says, removing the nails. He hands me a new sheet, sliding it underneath and showing me where to nail it in.

t “Make sure to nail back in the other shingle you removed, four nails, about six inches apart,” he reminds me, as he works on another area.

“You got it, boss!” I reply in an exaggerated tone.

We work for hours and I actually start to get the hang of it. Roofing is kind of fun. I’m mindlessly working while listening to music, drinking beer, while at the same time, making money.

Hawke surprised me by actually putting me on the payroll for my help this summer. I just assumed the free rent was compensation enough, but he told me this could be my fresh start. Get some legal money under my feet to get me off and running. If this is work, then I’m actually kind of enjoying it.

d A few hours later, we meet up with an inspector who’s checking out the property to ensure it’s safe and up to code for renting. We follow him around the complex as he checks everything from the roofing we’ve completed to the foundation and everything in between. He’s kind of a prick, so I find myself sliding in and sweet talking all the problems right out of him. A quick “Yeah, that’s being ordered today,” to a cheeky, “C’mon man, you know that’ll suffice.”

I Hawke studies me with a hint of amusement on his face. The inspector leaves, giving us a good report, and he finally talks.

e “I think we found your niche,” he grins, rubbing the back of his neck.

“What’s that?”

e “You might need to get into the business side of things. Realtor or something. You could sell anything to anyone. A ketchup popsicle to a woman with white gloves, you sly motherfucker, you.” He playfully punches me in the chest.

t “What can I say? I’m good with my mouth.” I shrug.

“You definitely know how to sway people with your inherent charm. Put them skills to use and make some fucking money already.” He throws a bottled water at me from the cooler, making me laugh.

Might be something to think about.

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Later that evening, I get a call from Tarah asking me to come to a party at their friend’s house. The first thought that crosses my mind is that maybe Han will be there. I agree to go.

She clings to me immediately, but not in a way that tells me she needs more from me. She wants to hook up and party. I get that.

We get into the house, another nice ass beach house. These kids love to party off their parents’ income, I swear, and I’m here for it. I think they assume I’m some sort of famous rapper or something. Being oddly tall in this sea of Ralph Lauren polos helps.

They don’t question my random assortment of clothing, the vintage band t-shirt, my shredded black jeans, my random assortment of tattoos. Probably because it’s the style to look bummy now. Little do they know I’ve been doing it for years.

There’s no sign of Han here, and why would there be? She doesn’t exist.

Tarah and her beautiful brunette friend bring us drinks out on the deck overlooking the dark ocean. The sound of the waves meshing with the music coming from random speakers inside and outside. The entire deck has a glass surround with LED lights lighting up each post, the lights changing to the

beat of the music. It's trippy as fuck. Rich people love to spend money on weird shit like this.

a Some guys come over, introducing themselves to me. They seem pretty chill, but then again, I can get along with anyone. The conversation flows to us, debating whether Tupac or Biggie was a bigger influence, some real east coast/west coast type shit going down. The debate quickly becomes heated between two guys named Noah and Lucas, who've probably never lived without their parents' financial protection. Weird white boy shit.

I can't relate to these people at all, but that doesn't mean I won't get fucked up with them or sell them drugs. Money is money, and these people have a lot of it.

I head towards the edge of the deck, looking down at the rest of the guest and party-goers after selling a few Percs. I'm slowly getting over my fear of heights, one shingle at a time. Leaning my forearms against the glass, I hold my beer by the neck of the bottle, gazing out into the reflection of the moon on the water.

s She crosses my mind again.

The dark side of the moon. The space she's hiding. What was the deeper meaning behind that? My mind races, trying to unravel the riddle. The dark side of the moon, something that's always there, yet never seen. A metaphor for reality, perhaps? What is sanity? Her words, leaving their scars on me.

A group of about five people are walking along the beach beneath us. The closer they get to the party, I can see they're turning to come up. All but one.

o One parts ways with them, walking off on their own. The only way I can tell it's her is by the shadow of her signature salute.

s It's Han.

e *Why isn't she coming up?*

I chug the rest of my beer, leaving it on the kitchen counter as I brush past all the party-goers to get downstairs. I hit the sand and start jogging in the direction she was walking. I see a tiny dot of a person and try to catch up. I'm coughing. Literally choking as I try to run to her. My lungs are so fucked from twenty years of smoking.

"Jo!" I yell, and she stops in place.

Slowly turning to face me with a confused look, she squints her eyes trying to see who's calling her by her family name.

"Kid?"

I run to her, then bend over immediately, grabbing my knees as I try to catch my breath, wheezing like a balloon that's slowly deflating.

"You alright?" she asks, her lips parting slightly as she takes in my deathly appearance.

I stand up, putting my hands on top of my head, opening my lungs to try to breathe easier. She glances at my lower abdomen that's exposed, possibly checking out the tattoos there, before her eyes find mine. Her smile reappears after she looks confused for a second. She changed her nose ring. There's now a gold ring in her septum.

"I'm great. Where are you going?" I ask, finally catching my breath.

She doesn't answer me, just looks behind her and back.

"Is it a secret? I'm great at keeping secrets. We should share some," I nod eagerly, making her giggle.

It's better than music to my ears. I take a moment to study her. Her green eyes light up with a hint of enthusiasm at the sight of me. She couldn't deny it if she tried. She likes me a bit. Like a person enjoys scratching a bug bite. It feels good, even if it hurts when you're done.

"What are your secrets, Kid? I can only imagine what you've got in you



tarsenal,” she says, turning to walk again.

2 I follow alongside her as we walk down the dark beach alone together.

1 “Um, let me think. What’s something no one else knows about me...”

1 trail, thinking for a moment. “Oh! I know! I used to fuck my algebra teacher  
in high school to keep my grade passable.”

Her face turns to me as we continue walking and I’m ready for the  
,backlash, the “you’re really fucked up” face, but with everything that is Han  
I don’t get what I expect.

“She was a recent grad, not some nasty old fat lady whose husband  
couldn’t get it up. Just throwing that out there. I do have some standards.”

She bites her bottom lip, trying to hold her smile while eyeing me.

7 “That’s insanely hot.” She smirks at me, then faces forward again. “I used  
to daydream about shit like that happening to me, but I was always so  
naturally good in school. Guess the opportunity never fell into my lap.”

7 “You daydreamed about being blackmailed into having sex with your  
teacher?”

s “Doesn’t everyone?” she asks, like it’s the most normal thing.

“No, Han.” I laugh. “No.”

She shrugs and keeps walking. Clearly not caring.

We get to this beautiful little cove that’s further away from the lights of the  
houses on the beach. She walks down to this little layout spot, dropping the  
canvas bag down her arm. Pulling out a little wool blanket and rolling it out  
onto the sand, she grabs out a bag of gummy worms from the satchel and  
another little container, a small tin box, before sitting down on the blanket  
with it.

“Your turn,” I comment, lying down next to her, silently wondering what’s  
in that little tin container. “Secrets. Tell all.”

Laying on her back, she looks to the sky. I do a quick scan of her body loving the outfit of choice today. She's wearing these cut-off shorts that cling to her hips but have random phrases splashed in spray paint all over them. There is a red dragon in the center of her black shirt that matches the color of the spray paint. Her choker looks like one of those that you'd only wear to a BDSM convention and, of course, the dirty, loosely tied converses just add to the appeal. Her hair is half up in a quirky ponytail that sticks up to the sky, the other stick straight pieces blowing all around her heart-shaped face.

I see her contemplating which of her secrets she wants unleashed and which she wants to keep to herself forever. Which secret of hers is the piece to her puzzle that I get a glimpse of? It's crazy to me that there are so many in there. She's a black hole in the flesh, absorbing anything of worth and substance around her, holding it hostage for her own pleasure.

"I fixate on changing the speed of time to reduce my anxiety about death."

Woah.

Her words float above us, between our bodies and the stars. I lie there next to her, dissect them again and again, attempting to understand. I turn my head over to face her. Her face is expressionless as she stares at the moon. How could she possibly change the speed of time? *Is she fucking with me?* That's the thing about Han, I can't ever tell.

"That's kind of depressing," I say, once I really think about it.

"Word," she says, agreeing as if we're talking about someone else.

But we aren't, we are talking about her.

"But why are you fixated on something so out of your control?"

"Because it's so intractable, so uncontrolled, is the exact reason it gives me unease. So much is out of our hands. Doesn't that terrify you? Knowing

everything that you are is simply up to chance? It makes the need to alter reality that much more relevant.”

l. The weight of this conversation was not at all what I was expecting. I’ve never thought about it so deeply. Then again, I’ve never really had to deal so closely with death like Hawke has. I haven’t ever had someone close to me pass, and maybe my naivety shows. Han seems to have dealt with death firsthand, and not in a natural way. Her story is smeared with the blood of someone else’s.

l She pulls out a gummy worm and slowly places it on her tongue while staring at me with those green eyes. I instantly feel the blood rushing to my dick. *How can she make something as innocent as gummy worms seem insanely sexy?*

“How can you make something as innocent as eating gummy worms insanely sexy?”

Fucking no filtered brain to mouth transaction.

t She smirks, chewing, then making a display of swallowing the worm letting me see the roll of her throat and then flashing me her tongue showcasing the missing contents. Things are painful in my jeans.

s “You can make anything sexual with the right attitude,” she comments.

“I want to stick my tongue inside you again.” I blurt out, staring at her like it’s painful.

It is painful. I want her. Bad. In every way you can want a person. I want to stick everything of mine into every orifice of hers. I want to tie her up and take her as rough as I need to, fucking these feelings out of me, forcing her to use her safe word just to calm that madness in me down.

g Her brows raise again at my garbage mouth, spewing trash everywhere go. Does everyone get this horny around her? I know I’m normally obsessed

rwith sex, but this is a sick obsession. *What is this poison she's feeding me?*

“That sounds fun,” she replies, simply. “But, aren’t I a little old for you?”

e My brows lower. This thought has never even crossed my mind.

o “No one is too old for me. It’s about the soul, remember? Your soul make  
eme hard. Achingly hard.”

1 She giggles, “Standards, right? How old are you?”

f I stop to think about it for a moment. I literally forgot I had a birthday  
about a month and a half ago that went unnoticed. Wow.

e “Um, I’m old enough. You?”

y “Older,” she says simply.

7 “I don’t care about that. Age is a number. Mentality is where it’s at.”

She says nothing. Just smirks at me with her side eye.

s “You seem somewhat mature,” she finally says, tipping her head back a  
bit, analyzing me.

I tilt my head at the comment, looking all around before connecting eyes  
l, “We’ll say I’m a work in progress.”

, She sighs, looking back out to the water. “Aren’t we all?”

I watch her stare out into the moonlight, knowing her mind is going a mile  
a minute. She’s got secrets, lots of them, and selfishly, I want to know them  
eall.

“But first...”

t She turns back to face me, sticking her tongue out playfully as she holds  
lthe tin between us, looking at me through her lashes. Upon opening, I see it’s  
oan assortment of drugs. Was she really planning on coming out here and  
tripping by herself?

I “Wanna fly?” she asks, looking over at me.

l I’ve done drugs. Lots of them. But I’ve never been asked to fly before. I’n

not even sure which drug she's referring to at the moment, but it doesn't even matter. I'd take anything she gave me just to share something with her. Wanna go to the depths of hell? Sure, Han. Wanna get stuck in a new dimension? Why the fuck not? I'm living, and I'm living with the only girl who's willing to hang off the edge one-handed with me. We're both fucked up in our own ways and it appears to be bonding us.

y "Give me my wings," I reply, propping up on my elbow, turning to face her on the tiny blanket.

She pulls out a little baggie containing two tiny squares of paper with Pokemon characters on them, Gengar and Charizard.

LSD.

We're about to trip on acid.

a *Holy fuck.*

She pauses, looking at me from the corner of her eye. "You ever done this before?"

"Nope," I answer quickly.

Don't get me wrong, I'm a druggie. But even druggies have their flavor of choice. Mine happens to be weed, alcohol, shrooms, cocaine, Addys, Oxys and Percocets. I've never tripped on acid. That's a whole new world of wonder.

"You want to?" she asks, cool as a cucumber.

s "With you? Yep."

s She sits there, staring at me for a moment, clearly going over something in that beautiful, quirky little head of hers. She looks at me, then back at the ocean, the sand, and then her gaze finds mine again.

"Maybe we should go to my place?" she questions.

1 My eyebrows raise with excitement, then lower when I wonder what vision

went through her head. My guess was me getting fucked up on acid for the first time, losing my shit, trying to drown my demons in the ocean while she tries to carry my six footed, fucked up ass back to land.

l “Yep,” I say quickly, not wanting to make her vision of me a reality. “You place. Let’s do that.

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went through her head. My guess was me getting fucked up on acid for the first time, losing my shit, trying to drown my demons in the ocean while she tries to carry my six footed, fucked up ass back to land.

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**T**here's a duck on the wall.

Not a picture of a duck either. An actual duck. A Mallard. Stuffed.

It looks like it went to a taxidermist from hell. Its beak is off-center, the mouth partially open, and don't get me started on the beady eyes. They look like those stick on eyeballs we used to use as kids, slapped on a dead bird. So much white of the eye is showing that makes him horrifyingly unrealistic. Those things aside, the most peculiar is the grotesque way the dead animal is wearing a tiny black sombrero. Did I forget to mention the harmonica glued to the side of the beak? This deceased animal is now a part of some sort of Gothic Mariachi band.

I realize I'm studying the bird, making a pained face, and I feel her eyes on me.

"His name is Norbert," she says in a bland tone behind me.

*Of course, she named him.*

"That's what I'd assumed. Glad you clarified, though. Don't want any confusion."

"I killed him. Then I kept him, as a reminder."

I don't know what she's talking about, but nothing surprises me anymore. She must sense my confusion and need for more to this story because she openly continues.

"He was choking on something down by the water, some plastic I think. He was in pain. I tried to get him to breathe, but he was too far gone already just slowly dying before me." She gazes directly at him, remembering. "I held his chest down. Suffocated him. It killed me to do it, but I couldn't watch him suffer anymore."

We stand there side by side, staring at him.

"Damn, Norbert," I comment, feeling bad.

"I had him stuffed shortly after by this cheap taxidermist down the road who specializes in these sorts of things."

The way she flips from something being so emotionally sad and disturbing to talking so easily about stuffing his dead body throws me through a loop. And a cheap taxidermist who specializes in what? Creating morbid mariach bands? I'm reminded of our discussion about her fear of dying while we were sitting by the water. She said she keeps him as a reminder. But a reminder of what?

"Some water for you," she says, snapping me out of my thoughts.

She got us some water, said we'd probably need it before we trip, and yet all I can think about is how angry her plants probably are at me. They have to be jealous.

I sit down next to her on her couch. The place smells good, like really good. Something tranquil, if tranquil could even describe a smell. Essential oils or something earthy that has me feeling comfortable. I don't know what girls do to make their places smell good.

The walls are painted green. Green like the color her plants should be. This

.woman has nothing but dead and decaying plants all around her apartment, as if we are in the Sahara desert. Ferns, flowers, more things I couldn't name in my life depended on it, all droopy and crusted, leaves falling off onto the floor beneath in some sort of sad release.

, The walls seem to try to breathe life into the plants with the stark contrast of bright green. It's the same exact color as one of the flecks in her right eye. This color would be too much for anyone else to tolerate, but to me it's soothing, while simultaneously stimulating. The soft lighting keeps the space pretty dark. There's a real cozy comfort here despite being surrounded by death.

d "Anyone expecting you anytime soon?" she asks, standing before me sipping her water as she tucks a strand of her dark hair behind her ear.

g Her body is to die for. I can't stop looking at the fact that her nipples are pressing against the soft fabric of her dragon shirt, attempting to pierce themselves free with their erect stance. Fuck, her tits are fantastic. I realize I'm gazing again, so I clear my throat and rub my eye as a distraction.

f "Hawke and Cole know not to expect me," I reply, kicking back and slouching into her couch.

She frowns a bit and I need to know what it means.

t "That's kinda sad," she answers, curling up next to me on the couch.

o Her eyes fall upon my shirt where her hand brushes something off of my shoulder. It's a touch meant for nothing, but I feel it everywhere.

y "Why is that sad?" I ask, our faces close enough for me to count the little freckles on her little upturned nose.

t She slowly drags her teeth against her bottom lip, still looking down at my shoulder, almost contemplating if this is even worth sharing.

s "It means you don't have anyone waiting for you," she says, her lips turned

sdown in disappointment as her eyes finding mine again. “You deserve to have someone waiting for you.”

e Her words make my chest ache. She thinks I’m worthy of having someone waiting for me? What does that tell me about how she feels about me? I’ve never felt worthy of that. I need to chill before I read too deep into this.

. She smiles, then continues, “Well, anyway...you should probably just stay the night.”

e It’s blunt, it’s straightforward, it’s to the point, yet it doesn’t hit the way I wished it did. She’s so nonchalant with it, not realizing asking me to stay the night with her sounds like fucking heaven to my ears. Why doesn’t it mean more to her? It bothers me that I want it to.

“I don’t know if I fit on this couch, might need to make room on the bed,” I smile suggestively.

e “Duh, of course you’re sleeping with me,” she replies. “I wouldn’t make you sleep on the couch.” She scoffs and laughs like it’s the most ridiculous thought that I wouldn’t be in her bed by the end of the night.

l *Why can’t these words mean more than they do?! I ache for her to feel them the way my dick does.*

She grabs her little tin, pulling the Pokemon tabs out before she straddle my lap on the couch, her legs surrounding mine, her center sitting directly on my cock.

Woah.

e “Ready Kid?” she asks softly, her sexy smirk radiating above me.

I take a deep breath, swallowing before adjusting myself beneath her. Fuck, she feels so good in my lap. I can’t help but to slide my hands up her exposed thighs. I’ve been restless, wanting to touch that snake that gets to live on one of the sexiest parts of her.

o “Open your mouth, baby,” she whispers, and my eyes roll to the back of my head.

e *She called me baby, and she’s feeding me drugs. I’m fucked in so many ways, shapes, and forms.*

Placing one on my tongue and the other on hers, she grins, then slips off of my back and cuddles up onto the space to my right while we wait for it to kick in.

I miss the intimate contact already, but pull my phone out of my back pocket and glance at it.

e

l **Hawke:** Use the code if you’re coming in late, gonna lock up.

,”

**Diego:** Dude, pussy on fire at the party. Get back here.

e

s **Tarah:** Where did you go? Come back, mysterious wanderer.  
I wanna ride your lap again.

l

I chuckle at the last one and Han catches on.

s “What is it?” she says, all cutesy.

o “Nothin’.” I smile, turning my phone off, setting it down on the wooden stump that’s serving a dual purpose as a coffee table before me.

I know she’s not the jealous type, but I still feel like sharing that bit of information would be rude.

o “I didn’t take you for such an earthy chick,” I say, changing the subject. “I mean, you have metal in your tongue.”

o “The plants? The green walls? Yeah, I get it.” She chuckles a bit, looking around the place. “But I need my cave to bring me back to life if the world

faround me doesn't."

I feel that. I feel that deeply. It's why I thrive in the dark. I've found many caves of my own. Although my caves are places that numb me rather than revive me.

"You've seen some dark places, haven't you?" I ask, unfiltered.

I want to know what's beneath her surface. The surface that everyone else stops at. I want to dive into her and fucking drown in her darkness, because I'm crazy enough to.

She giggles, looking down between us, then back up at me. "These aren't the types of conversations you wanna jump off while on acid."

"Alright, let's talk sex."

She gets seemingly more comfortable, crossing her legs beneath her and turning to face me.

"Let's." She wiggles her body.

"Craziest place you've had sex?" I ask.

"Car Wash," she answers quickly, then fires back with a question "Weirdest thing that's happened to you during sex?"

"Car Wash!? All that tells me is your dude was quick."

"Quick can be fun," she says confidently, licking the corner of her luscious lips with that tongue.

I swallow, wishing my dick could feel something quick.

"Go."

"Uh," I say, pausing to think. "The family dog licked my ass."

She breaks out into laughter and I feel that strange validation again, my smile matching hers.

"It wasn't planned, obviously. He came out of nowhere. I was on top smashing this chick and the dog snuck up, licked my ass. It was fucked up."

I think about my words for a minute, and hope I didn't sound like the ydouchebag that I am for saying I was smashing a chick. It doesn't appear to have slowed down her laughter at all. She's on her back now, her legs over mine as she holds her stomach while cackling.

"That's messed up," she says. "I like you, Kid. You're funny as fuck."

2    *Yep. Felt that everywhere.*

2    "And you are unequalled," I reply honestly.

She scrunches her nose playfully at me, but right as her face drops, I see sadness in her eyes. It's only a brief second before it changes. Most people never would have noticed, but most people aren't me. I can be perceptive when it matters, and when it comes to Han, I can't seem to not pay attention to detail.

About an hour later, I'm standing facing the wall, staring at the duck.

Why? Why did she do this? Norbert had no idea his body would be hung up in a room on display with fake eyeballs, a sombrero, and a harmonica. A daily reminder of death and lack of life, sort of like her plants. Imagine if we lived in a world when, after we died, the people who knew us stuffed and stood us up around the house, passing by our meat shells that hold nothing in them but lies of a life that once was. What kind of fake fucked up shit is this?

"Kid, stop staring at the duck," Han comments from the couch. "It won't bring him back."

I turn to face her, fully feeling every bit of this acid trip kicking in. The ferns surrounding the couch that are clinging to life are dancing happily, swaying to the song of their own album, almost tormenting the duck on the wall. "*We're still alive, motherfucker! Alive and holding on while you're c, DEAD DUCK CARCASS!*" they sing out happily in their sweet, Disney-like voices.



e “Commmme here, babe,” she says in her velvet voice. Only this time I can see it. I see her voice as it reaches me. It’s golden like the sun, and warm as it penetrates through my guts and chest. “Let’s chilllllllll.”

I blink wildly, trying to correct my vision, and sit back down on the couch next to her. She lays down in my lap; her face up to the ceiling, black shiny hair spread all over my lap, as I run my fingers through the softness. It’s so smooth.

e She smiles up at me before she hums. It’s then I notice her hum is in line with a sound being emitted from the apartment. I’m suddenly aware of the music that must’ve been playing in the background.

y “Is this alternative punk rock from the 2000s?”

“It’s calming, isn’t it?” she says softly, closing her eyes as SUM41 rage on about nonconformity.

g Not the word I would’ve used to describe the screaming. I sit and listen to the lyrics of the song. It’s like the first time I’ve heard it all over again. I’m awakened to it, listening to the meaning behind the sound.

l “It’s fucking genius!” I yell in approval, causing her to jump slightly. “The way he discusses the societal impact of conforming to remove us from our own individual identity. We can’t be mindless victims of our own demise by fitting into the indiscriminate mold given to us at a young age. The world is so much bigger than these expectations they have of us.”

e Han smiles at me. “Who knew there was a fucking philosopher underneath that great head of hair?” she says before playfully reaching up and ruffling my hair.

1 “And who is they? Who owns us? No one owns us. We are all one big moving cluster of particles. Plus, we wouldn’t be hearing or receiving this

message if he listened to those people telling him to conform, and then where would we all be?”

“Word.” She throws a fist into the air. “Fuck the establishment.”

How can a chick be so fucking hot and cool at the same time? She’s too dope. I don’t like it.

Twenty minutes or two hours later and we’re both on the floor on our stomachs. Han is coloring from these random coloring books she found with Norah Jones playing in the background. Her music is like a direct representation of her. Totally fucking random and all over the place.

She’s using every available color marker she has while I stare at the rotating image. It’s a visual fantasy like nothing I’ve ever experienced. Her creation becomes lifted from the paper before me, rotating slowly in the air as she softly adds color to it.

She sighs faintly while she strokes the color on the paper, and I wonder if I’ll ever be able to make her as happy as these colors seem to. *Will I ever make her feel?*

She turns to face me, her head now lying on the book as her eyes connect with mine.

“You already make me feel,” she responds with a frown. A frown like it makes her unhappy.

*She can read my fucking mind!*

Ten minutes or maybe ten years later, I can’t tell anymore, Han found the tiniest spider crawling on one of the dancing ferns.

“Oh my God, Kid, look,” her sweet voice sends gold heat waves to me.

We stare as the spider crawls to the tip of her finger, pausing to face us. It stares at us as we stare back at it, like it recognizes it’s not alone anymore.

We watch it silently as she lets the spider climb back on the fern. She’s so

incredibly gentle to this tiny little soul.

I remember how last week I stepped on a spider that was running across the floor in my room. Like the dickbag that I am, I was pissed that his guts were smeared on the bottom of my new vintage Nike Blazers. I think about that spider and how easy it was for me to end its life with no regard. What if he was me? A time traveling reincarnation where I face off with myself and see if I'm worth the new life waiting for me. But no, I'm mad because my guts are messy. I fucking suck as a human.

"Such a beautiful little part of life," Han hums beside me, bringing me back from my spider-killing, self-destructive mayhem.

"It's so small and unaware of the world around it," I comment.

"It can't understand the magnitude of it all, just takes in what it can," Han says softly, turning to face me. "Just like us."

It's a goddamn revelation.

I turn to look at her. Our faces are inches apart and I'm melting in her golden warmth. My eyes become heavy as I close them, falling forward onto her pillowy lips. The kiss is in color as "Black Dog" by Led Zeppelin plays in the background, yet another random song that seems fitting for the moment.

I'm bathing in greens, reds, yellows, and blues, as our tongues touch again and again. She moans and the sounds cross my synapses. I lean down over her on the couch as she lays back, opening her thighs to accommodate me.

"I want to fuck you," I whisper against her neck, trailing my mouth up to her ear, the softness against my lips feeling like heaven. "I want to paint this fucking room with your screams."

"Kid." She sighs softly, grabbing my face between her hands, turning me to her.

Her green eyes are swallowing me whole as I sink in towards her, licking

her sweet lips before she opens her mouth to me. We kiss, our bodies already smoving in sync as the music feels like gasoline to the fire she's ignited.

s "I want you to fuck me," she moans between kisses, clawing at my shirt tpulling me into her so she can lick the side of my neck.

f "It's not enough just to be inside you. I want to fuck your mind. Reacl levery corner of that black hole of wonder and live to tell about it." I groan in ydelight, pressing my erection into her as her lips suck the skin near my ear.

She falls still at the mention of her mind. Fucking her is fine, but the emention of getting deeper than that, and suddenly, it's all off.

"Han, what's wrong?" I ask gently, pulling back to face her.

She smiles at me, and it feels like a pity smile, or maybe I'm just crazy sperspective to this anxiety I've been feeling deep within me.

"Black holes and minds aren't meant for wandering," she says, before grabbing me by the back of my neck and pulling me close to her lips. "You'l rnever escape."

o At this rate, I don't think I'll want to.

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At this rate, I don't think I'll want to.







**H**er tattoo is slithering up and around her thigh.

The snake is alive; the tongue darting out at me, tempting me to touch it, begging me to eat the forbidden fruit, knowing I'll be bitten if I do. I move my hand closer, but just as I do, it flashes its fangs at me, causing me to suck in a breath and pull away at the last minute.

She's on top of me on the bed now. We've moved from the couch to the bedroom. After finally pushing me off her lips, I take a quick glance around at my crush's bedroom. Her real den of secrets. Surprisingly, the space is as bland as it comes. It's as if we are in someone else's room, a stranger's. The walls are white; the bedspread is white, the endless amount of pillows are white, even the simple desk in the corner is white. Everything is stark white. There is a total lack of her in this room, and it's extremely peculiar to me.

Everything that she embodies is color. She's vibrant, she beams, she's bright, bold, and fucking radiant.

*Radiant.*

*Some Pig. Charlotte's Web.*



I bet that spider we saw earlier is constructing a web dedicated to describing her beauty in the only way that he can. His life's purpose, to attempt to put Han into words. Words that could never truly encapsulate her. Words are meaningless when it comes to the complexities that encompass her. Useless, stupid words.

*Jesus, I'm all over the place. I'm tripping the fuck out.*

I'm laying back in her heap of pillows, her soft, beautiful form above me again. I rest my head back into the white fluff, but don't feel like I've stopped falling back yet.

It's because I haven't.

I keep falling down.

Down.

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N

I'm literally being swallowed whole into this cloud of angry pillows. They are everywhere, grabbing me by the shoulders and pulling me into them. *Why are there so many?! How can one live like this?!*

They are dragging me deep down into their suffocating hole. The space is getting tighter and tighter as they crowd my face, bound to smother me to death in a warm, white embrace.

I'm frantically looking around me, my chest heaving as my face shifts back

band forth from side to side. She peers down at me through her dark, short hair, watching me with her soft lips parted slightly as she evaluates me. Her soft lashes, fluttering like little butterflies, lifting and closing the magnificent reptile-green eyes beneath them.

“Are you alriiiiiight?” she asks in slow motion, the golden beams of her voice melting the pillow of anxiety right off my face like the sun to a winter snow.

I take a breath, realizing the pillows are retreating for the time being, when her question hits me again.

“I’m alright. No!” I shout dramatically, stopping myself from sounding bland. “I’m amazing.”

Her lip pulls up in the corner as her grin forms. My hands skim their way up her thighs and I close my eyes, feeling the softness beneath my fingertips without making eye contact with her tattoo. She hums out a sweet sounding moan, enjoying the feeling of my hands on her, and I immediately open my eyes again, trying not to miss the colors of her sounds radiating around the room.

I had no idea this would be such a visual experience.

“What do you wanna do, Kid?” she asks me softly, her fingers trailing from my chest down my abdomen. The feeling is sensational.

*Wait. When did my shirt come off?*

I take in her appearance. Her chest is rising and falling above me as she licks her lips, studying my body, softly tracing the outlines of my tattoos with her middle finger. It feels so good, her touch on me, just as it seems to feel good to her. She flutters her butterfly lashes up and connects eyes with me.

It’s powerful, this look. It reaches inside of my chest and grabs something deeper. I pull her down so her elbows are surrounding me and we’re only

tinches apart. We study each other with our matching dilated eyes, the look of two lost souls, somehow seeing their reflection in each other.

I feel as if we've met before. I feel as if we've known each other for centuries and have finally found our way back to one another. Lost lovers separated by years of war, or something of the like. The feeling raises the hair on my arms; the chills taking over my skin, working their way up my spine. It's some sort of reckoning.

"Fuck," I whisper to myself at the power of it all.

"You want to fuck?" she asks softly, and I forget she asked me a question.

I shake my head from side to side, still staring at her, unable to blink, not wanting this connection to stop. I could let my eyeballs dry up, crust away into nothing as long as it meant I could keep looking at her.

"I want so much more," I whisper with a pained expression, shocking myself with the admission.

Her butterflies retreat as the words leave my mouth. The snake slides up her hip again, gliding over her stomach, turning and glaring down at me, angry with my words. I feel my eyes growing large as the pillows begin their slow crawl towards my head again, sure to end me this time. It's all happening again now.

My eyes must be darting wildly around because she grabs for my face, holding my jaw lightly in her hands, her adorable and caring smile calming my racing heart again.

"Kid," she whispers.

"Hmm?" I ask, trying not to make eye contact with the pillows.

"Come here, baby. Let's get you a drink of water."

We make our way back to the kitchen again as she fills up a glass of water while I stand near the wall watching her.

f I hear someone trying to get my attention.

“Pssst!”

r *Someone else is in here?!*

, “Pssst! Kid!”

r *Oh fuck.*

. I nervously draw my eyes towards the sound, attempting to not move my head in the process.

*Who the fuck is behind me?!*

Turning my head slightly, I come face to face with him.

t Norbert. It’s fucking Norbert. His head is turned towards me now, his ybeady eyes and creepy smile tormenting me in the worst possible way.

“You’re so naïve, man,” his stoner voice fills my ear.

g “What?!” I whisper back at him.

“She’ll never let you in,” he laughs, his eyes never closing, his mouth ogaped open.

, It’s eerie, and yet I still feel bad for him. He didn’t ask to look like this rPoor dude.

l “Why not?!” I whisper while simultaneously yelling, turning to make sure Han didn’t hear me.

, She’s putting ice cubes in the glass, her back still facing me, unaware of my conversation with the dead duck carcass.

“She’s broken. Her soul is gone. Think you can fix her? Bring her back to me?”

The dead duck is asking if I can bring a living human back to life. The irony.

r “I wouldn’t even know where to begin,” I admit, sighing and accepting the fact that Norbert is in full-blown conversation mode.

Shit, I can barely fix myself.

“She’s your purpose.”

I scoff at his words.

“What do you know about purpose? You play the harmonica.” He stills facing me, so I make a face at him.

y “Complete the band and you’ll bring her back,” he croaks out.

“What?” He isn’t making any sense.

“Complete the band,” he says again in a disgusting hoarse whisper.

“What the fuck are you talking about?!” I yell out, getting angry at Norber sfor his word vomit.

“I don’t think I said anything,” Han answers, bringing me the water. “But who knows? Words tend to slip when time changes.”

She leans down to me. Why is she leaning down over me?

1 I must’ve slid down the wall onto the floor. Yep, I’m on the ground now. She sits next to me, not asking questions as to how I got here, just accepting .the fact that I’m tripping the fuck out.

We sit there next to each other on the linoleum floor of her kitchen, our backs against the wall, our legs splayed out before us. Pretty Ricky is playing in the background now and we’ve come full circle in her random taste in music. I’m shirtless and she’s wearing only my shirt. I don’t know how we got here, but here we are.

2 My hands are laying on the floor, face up next to me as my arms relax. She slides her hand over the top of my hand, her soft, warm little fingers making their way through mine. I look down at our connected hands, taking my other one and placing it on top of hers, then holding it on my lap as I tilt my head to the side to gaze at her.

She’s staring across the room at the opposing wall, deep in thought. I’m

not even sure how much time has passed, but looking at the glass of water she gave me, I see it's now all gone, the ice already melted.

"I asked you earlier if I'll ever make you feel," I say softly. "I was thinking about it, but didn't realize I said it out loud."

She swallows, still staring at the wall.

"You said I already make you feel."

She says nothing, just parts her lips while sucking in a breath.

"What do I make you feel, Han?" I ask, curious to know. "And why does it make you sad?"

Her brows lower as a look of sadness and frustration seeps its way over her previously blank face.

"It doesn't matter. There's not enough time for that," she says, finally rolling her head against the wall to face me.

I've realized her voice doesn't carry color anymore. I must be on the way down. Maybe that's what she means by there's not enough time. She's coming down too. Our timing is all off. How can we connect when we can't even seem to meet in the same dimension? The fact that I'm even thinking about these things shows just how fucked up I am.

1 "We're both so fucked up," I admit.

2 She chuckles lightly, giving me her wicked grin.

"And yet, it's so strange. I get this feeling that we've met before," she admits.

3 "I feel that too," I add. "It's kinda crazy."

4 "It is," she nods, turning back to face me, her look of reckoning melting through me. "There's a strange familiarity I feel when I look at you. Like I've known you."

5 "Maybe we have. Known each other, that is. Maybe we've met before. A

rdifferent time, a different dimension.” I shrug.

Her serious face takes in my words, then slowly shifts into a soft smile  
g“I’d like to think so.”

She’s being so open with me right now. Her earlier statement replaying  
itself to me, she said words tend to slip when time changes. She brought me  
into her world to communicate this with me the only way she can. I’m the  
hand reaching down the rabbit hole to save her from the nightmares. She  
tbrought me here to trip so I can reach her, but time has run out. The white  
rabbit is back with his pocket watch, edging her along.

r More time passes as we sit together, hand in hand. I feel myself start to  
finally come down a bit. I’m not seeing hallucinations anymore, but still fee  
ya crazy sense of awe and wonder, like I did in the beginning.

“Are you feeling better?” she asks, brushing some of the hair back off my  
eforehead.

s She continues softly stroking the side of my face with the backs of he  
tfingers. I love the feeling. I lean my head back against the wall, enjoying the  
gsensation.

She took care of me during my first trip. I wouldn’t have wanted to do i  
with anyone else, anywhere else. The thought of being on the beach near the  
ocean during this experience nearly gives me a heart attack. She was right to  
ebring me here.

“Yeah. I feel it coming down a bit,” I comment, letting out a chuckle  
shaking my head slightly.

g “It can be really wild your first time,” she says.

e “Tell me about it,” I scoff. “Norbert started talking to me.”

“He’s a great conversationalist,” she comments seriously, as if she does i  
\all the time.

*Does she talk to the duck?!*

My face must've dropped because she laughs hysterically.

"I don't talk to the duck, bruh. That's all you." She rolls her eyes playfully at me, then smiles.

I must've been acting like a total fool for a while there. I should care. I should be embarrassed, but all I can think about is the fact that she called me "bruh". Friend-zoned in a word.

I don't want it. A friendship with her. That's never going to be enough for me. The thought alone, driving me mad.

"Are you attracted to me?" I ask, needing to know.

It's a bold question, but I'm feeling bold.

She giggles. "Obviously. I wouldn't have been sucking face for the last three hours if I wasn't. It's those icy, glacial eyes that keep seeing through me the way they do. It's kinda trippy, but incredibly sexy."

*My eyes!? Sexy?! Han called me sexy.*

I love that we seem to mirror each other in that regard. I still can't get over the reptilian colors of hers.

Studying her face, her lips, her eyes, her chest that begins rising and falling as she peers from my eyes to my lips and back, I take in a deep breath, letting it out before I stand up, holding out my hand for her. She sits there, confused looking up at me suspiciously. I may have had a moment, but I'm back. She slowly places her hand in mine, her curious eyes studying me, watching my every move.

I pull her up almost as fast as I push her into the wall behind her.

She gasps as I press my hips into her, leaving no space between us, forcing her to look up at me.

"Kid," she says cautiously, almost unsure of my intentions.



“I’ve been wanting to do this since I met you in that shit club,” I say in a serious tone, grabbing her wrists in my hand and gripping them firmly against the wall above her head.

I dip my head to the side and lick up the length of her petite neck, my tongue dragging over the fern leaves tattooed there, tracing them before sucking the skin directly above it. The beautiful, soft, untouched skin beneath her ear.

She moans in approval as my teeth sink into her skin, dragging roughly along the smooth surface, sure to leave a dark mark, before gently soothing it with my tongue, licking the spot and leaving a kiss.

Giving me her sweet sounds as her breath becomes labored, she gives me full access to her neck. “Do it again.”

I repeat the motions, leaving another mark on her neck, branding her as mine before she even understands my intentions.

I don’t think she has any idea what she’s doing to me. I’m falling into her like I fell into those pillows. Deep into their warm embrace, with the knowledge I’ll be smothered once this is over. My breath, taken from me by the vixen surrounded in white.

But falling never felt so fucking good.

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e

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Just like that black hole that was promised, I've lost myself. Caved into my own demise. She warned me, I can't say that she didn't. All the signs were there. *I'll break your heart. You'll never escape.* Phrases I brushed off as her being defiant and cute, when in reality, they were truth bombs waiting to explode at a later time once stepped on.

And here I am, jumping all over them.

It's been two and a half weeks since I've seen or spoken to Han. Like Hawke said, she vibes in her own reality, disappearing for stints like this all the time. They know this about her and yet she's allowed to just keep doing it. So childish, so irresponsible. I'm bitter as fuck, clearly.

She once told me I deserved to have people waiting for me. Doesn't she know people are waiting for her?! I've never in my life been in a place where I cared what someone thought of me. I am who I am, take it or leave it to most, but when it comes to Han, I care more than I wish I did. As much as was starting to like her, I'm really starting to fucking hate her.

"Party at the beach tonight," Hawke says, looking up from his phone.

“Yep, Hollis from the beach shop just texted me too. Gonna be a big one  
It’s at Bran’s,” Cole adds in from his lap.

These two might as well just form into the same fucking person. Like  
what are they even doing? Cole is always on top of him when he sits and he’s  
always glued to her hip when she’s standing. Fucking cellular fusion over  
here.

“Ugh, you know I can’t stand him,” Cole mentions. “He hurt her.”

My brow cocks at her statement as I eye the two of them, confused.

“We don’t need to go,” Hawke says immediately.

“No, it’s fine. So many people will be there, I won’t even see the idiot  
Kid, call up Brynn! We can make it a double date.” Cole looks up from his  
phone with a hopeful smile.

*I don’t want to double with Brynn; I want to double with your fucking  
disappearing ghost of a sister!*

“Yeah, yeah sure.” I reply instead.

“She’s totally into you, Kid. C’mon, you can’t be a ho forever. Give the  
girl a chance.”

“Eh,” I reply. “Wait, did you just call me a ho?! I’m oddly flattered.”

“She’s got a point. You put your dick in anything.” Hawke adds in.

“This is just not true.” I blink quickly, shaking my head in disgust.

“Explain grandma,” Hawke retorts, resting his hands behind his head  
waiting with an arrogant smirk on his face.

*I hate this man.*

“Oh, we’re really going there, huh?” I purse my lips together, glaring at  
him as Cole sits up, looking back and forth between the two of us.

“Wait, what!? Kid, you fucked a grandma!? Say it isn’t so.” Cole wraps his  
hand over her lips as if the urge to vomit is upon her.

“Yeah, I fucked a grandma. But she was hot as fuck, so don’t even play me like that Hawke. She got pregnant young and her daughter followed suit. No, my problem!” I shrug, brushing it off.

“The older women do love him,” Hawke says to Cole.

“I get it. He’s got a mouth on him,” she adds, talking as if I’m not even there.

“Not to mention a skilled tongue. Take it for a test drive, baby.” I flap my tongue at her playfully.

“Ew, that rental’s been driven one too many times.”

“Hurt. You hurt me.” I clutch my chest in mocked pain.

“Either way...Brynn,” Cole continues, as if she didn’t just roast my ass. “Talk to her. She’s cute and super nice.”

These two and their fucking love story. It’s not real life. They think they can sprinkle their fairy dust on me. Shit’s useless over here!

Brynn is cool, though. She’s definitely more my speed than Tarah was. Brynn and I met through some mutual friends of Hawke and Cole’s that work at the beach shop nearby. They’re locals, so they don’t vibe well with the touristy type that like to trash the beach and party all night. Brynn made it a point to show me how to tell the difference between a trust fund baby and a new money tourist. She’s mildly funny and her quirkiness reminds me of a certain someone that I’m currently trying to forget.

How do you have the most amazing night with someone and wake up to see that nothing changed for them?

LSD night, which is what I’ve decided to call it, has become my worst fucking memory. I wish it was a dream, because living with the memory makes it feel like a constant nightmare.

We talked for hours that night, discussing politics, the Universe

econsciousness, all things that really pull you into who a person is and how they perceive the world around them. I saw Han for who she was, and with the LSD onboard, her frame of mind and concept of life were never more clear.

1 She was afraid. Scared of the things her beautiful mind couldn't understand, yet in awe of them at the very same time.

7 The duck, for example. After processing it, I began to see what she saw. Norbert's hanging carcass was a symbol to her. A symbol of consciousness or lack thereof, and how, in a fleeting moment, we can be gone while those continue to exist around us. Even with the plants. She bought dying plants for a reason. She had a fear of death and the unknown and wanted to stall time until the inescapable came knocking at her door. She showed me how she changed the speed of time, taking me with her. Keeping herself numb and stretching time by warping her mind with drugs while surrounding herself with death seemed to help.

κ The question was why. Why was she deflecting? Why did she feel the need to numb herself? What was the root of this mental awareness?

α High off hallucinogens, we found our numb together that night, constantly touching one another, kissing those passionate kisses, until the inevitable happened.

We had sex.

ο It wasn't ordinary.

I heard church bells ringing in my ears as we fucked for hours. She was wild. Insatiably wild. There wasn't a moment that I felt like this woman knew what the word insecurity meant. She owned her body, loved the skin she was in, and showed me how to love it, too.

, Our lips and tongues traced over each other's stories, memorizing the



newness, absorbing the knowledge of what drove a pulse to the point of explosion.

e She opened herself to me as I entered her, feeling a full sense of connection I'd never known. It was passionate, full of emotions, yet sexy and erotic as fuck. She's a vocal lover, crying out and grabbing onto me as if she wasn't ready for the ride I was taking her on. Her sounds, fuck, her breathy moans while she clawed at my skin, got me rolling my eyes to the back of my head just thinking about it.

e When we finally reached our orgasms, it felt like it lasted forever. The drugs may have assisted in that, but even so, I came harder than I ever have before and the sensation was so pronounced; I felt it lasted at least thirty minutes. We were breathless and smiling at each other like we'd discovered the Holy Grail of connection.

f It was the best night of my fucking life.

Followed up by the worst day.

d The next morning, after the drugs wore off, I woke up to her legs over mine, her head against my chest. She had wrapped herself around me while sleeping, and it surprised me how good it felt.

e I'd changed from our experience. Something within me felt different. Our connection enlightened me. But Han? She remained the same.

After waking up, she'd instantly retreated, becoming a meat shell of herself. It was as if the glimpse of the real her I'd seen through the drugs had been suffocated out of her carcass like Norbert on the wall.

v Peppy, fun, sweet, random, yet still totally disconnected as if it was just another day, another experience with, unfortunately, yet another man. I'd asked her for her number before I left, but she said she'd lost her phone and was in the process of getting a new one. Too bad I found it while she was in

the bathroom and got the number, anyway. Yeah, I'm a creep. But I'm a creep who busted a nut for a half hour. I wasn't about to let that shit go.

a And then, after I left, she vanished, not to be seen or heard from in weeks.

l I couldn't mentally process it. I knew she was deflecting emotions, pushing away feelings, but the why still remained. As intrigued as I was, did I really want to work on solving a puzzle that may never be solved?

y So here I am, planning another date because I'm not waiting around on a girl, nor am I going to call one who lied about having a phone.

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Hawke and I finally got to work for the day. Pulling up some old flooring and putting down hardwood. It's a dirty job, nasty as hell, but dammit if Hawke isn't skilled as fuck. This guy has learned how to do all of this shit on his own, studied reviews and watched endless YouTube videos on a variety of home maintenance.

“Ya know, I think you found your niche, bruh.”

r Hawke laughs at my statement, clearly copying his sentiments.

He wipes sweat from his forehead, putting the tape measure back into his tool belt.

l “I like being my own boss. I can tell ya that much,” he replies, grabbing a bottle of water from the cooler, tossing it to me.

t We sit down for a few minutes, taking a break to have a drink and chat.

l “So have you thought about what you might do after the summer?” he asks, taking a one-handed pull from the water bottle.

l

a “I don’t even know what I’m doing tomorrow, dude,” I reply, making a face.

“Figure it out, Kid. Life is gonna flash before your eyes before you know it and you’re gonna wish you had a plan.”

y “What’s your plan? What are the infamous Cam and Cole planning next? You’ve got your deserved freedom, you got the dream house, the dream job and the dream girl...what’s next?” I smirk.

He sighs, looking off into the corner with a face of total bliss.

“You’re right. I’ve got it all,” he smiles, then snaps his head up to me. “But it took going through the roughest and darkest times to get there.”

I nod, knowing what they’ve been through, seeing the shit firsthand. They definitely went through it, challenged in ways that would break most, but in the end, they always had each other. They held strong in what they knew to be true, what they knew to be right. They fought for their love, as unconventional as it was. I love Cole for sticking with him when her world was crumbling around her. She could’ve caved, but instead she gave up everything for this man, and he deserved every bit of that.

“But fuck if I don’t love that woman with everything that I am,” he states looking down at his hands. “She showed me I was worth loving, that I was worth the good things in life I thought were above me. She proved to me I could have it all. She sacrificed herself for me. For me.” He shakes his head in disbelief.

“That’s heavy man,” I nod. “And, it’s real.”

“Next step for us is marriage and kids, lots of fucking kids.” He grins raising his brows.

“Kids!? Aw fuck, I’m not ready to be an uncle yet. I’m Kid...a kid my damn self,” I chuckle.

a “Well, get ready, because I’m about to knock her pretty ass up.” He smirks  
as he looks down to the floor, biting down on the corner of his lip as he  
visualizes it.

“Now that I think about it, I probably have some kids running around  
somewhere,” I comment, finger to my lips, tapping while looking around the  
rental.

“I wouldn’t doubt that your spawn are out there somewhere, ya nasty  
fuck.”

t “I’m everybody’s daddy, if you know what I mean,” I raise my eyebrow  
suggestively, shrugging before catching the beer Hawke throws at me.

y “Get your life together,” he shakes his head as he stands, ready to get back  
at it.

o “That’s what I’m here for.” I grin, standing along with him.

s We work on the floors for a few more hours before packing it up and  
heading back to the house. Cole is inside making some lasagna for us  
and dancing around in the kitchen to Justin Bieber. She’s a gem.

“Oh, hey guys! How was work?” She runs over to Hawke immediately  
planting a kiss on his lips as he picks her up by the waist.

s These two.

I “It was good, got a lot done on the new property,” Hawke replies, finally  
putting her down. “Gonna shower up, then I’ll be right out.”

“Need some help?” she asks him, cocking her brow, her hands already  
trailing down his abdomen for his belt. “I can make sure you’re good and  
cleaned out.”

“Guys! I’m right fucking here!” I yell to the lovebirds about to have sex in  
front of the door.

“Oh shit, sorry Kid.” She blushes. “I just get so...” She trails her sentence

sblinking her eyes wildly while shaking her head, attempting to brush off her elust for him while reluctantly walking back towards the kitchen.

“Jesus,” I shake my head, looking at her while talking to Hawke. “You’re about to have a litter.”

His grin is as wide as the house as he eyes his woman. “I know man, know.”

We clean up, sitting down to eat some lasagna before we all head down to the party together.

Brynn is waiting for me by the driveway of the house in her cute little cut off shorts and white loose sweater, her brown curls bouncing everywhere as we approach the party.

“Look at you, handsome,” she grins, linking her arm through mine.

“Handsome, huh? You like my style? I’m kinda dark for the beach crowd.”

I’m as unconventional as they come. I wear black to the beach when everyone else is apparently wearing white. Their clothing is flowy and free and my black joggers have zippers every which way you look. I’m always fitted in some sort of worn out band shirt. Tonight it’s vintage Guns N Roses, my Converse Chuck Taylors completing the look.

“You always make it work,” she grins, leaning into me.

We walk around the house, following Hawke and Cole until they see some people they know. Brynn pulls me to the keg, getting us some beers. We settle into the spot as more people arrive. We hang for a few hours, chatting about random things while we people-watch those around us. I’m actually having a chill time.

“So tell me, do you like it here in Cali? Think you’ll stay for a while?” Brynn asks, sitting next to me on one of the benches near the fire.

I link my arm around her, holding my cup of beer by the rim in the other

rhand.

“If you’re here, then yeah, guess I’m gonna have to.” I wink, laying on the charm.

She giggles, leaning into me with her head.

I grab her chin, pulling her face to my lips and kiss her. Her lips are soft and she smiles as she kisses me. I slip my tongue between her lips, finding hers as our kiss intensifies. It feels good, and I like where this is going, don’t get me wrong, but it just doesn’t electrify. Not yet anyway.

- She pulls back a little, tucking her curls back behind her ear, letting out a shy chuckle.

“Wanna go somewhere?” I ask, taking a quick sip of my beer, eager to see if we have a spark between us or not.

’ “Yeah,” she grins mischievously. “Come with me.”

1 “Oh, I definitely plan to,” I blurt out, then mentally slap myself for the word vomit.

s She pauses, looking back at me with narrowed eyes and her lip pulling at the corner.

“You’re a wild one, Kid.”

I stand up, wrapping an arm around her neck, while feeling for my coke in my pants pocket, my weed in the other.

e “You don’t know the half of it.”

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“You don’t know the half of it.”









The house reeks of weed and sex.

Two things I very much enjoy. Walking into the ritzy house, Brynn leads me by the hand upstairs to one of the empty bedrooms, only to find that they're already taken.

This place has become a party haven this summer. I wonder what Bran's parents would think if they knew he was trashing the family home while they're casually sipping their mimosas on the family yacht. Oh, who am I kidding? They'd just buy another fucking house.

I look around the top floor, finding a pull-down door to a creepy-looking attic. Pulling her up the wooden, creaky stairs, we find a small angular room that will provide a space for us to do what we came to do. The room is dusty and filled to the brim with old belongings. One tiny bulb near the door is all we have to illuminate the space. There's an old desk with the globe perched on top of it giving me a dirty library feel, and there's a three foot long bottle sitting nearby with one of those pop up ships inside of it.

I was always fascinated by how the hell those were made when I was younger. I thought for sure it took a bit of sorcery, or some sort of unworldly

intervention to create such intricate replicas of large, detailed ships inside of those tight, glass bottles. But now, knowing how stupidly simple they are to create, it takes the magic right out of it. Now I kind of hate them. Fucking lying bottles of boats.

Brynn shuts the small door behind her before walking towards me, biting her bottom lip playfully as she grins. She locks her fingers through mine as I smile, pulling us back towards an old covered couch.

“You fascinate me, Kid,” she smirks, straddling my lap. “But you’re in trouble.”

“That I am,” I reply, pulling her down to taste more of that tongue.

We kiss again, her hands finding their way into my unruly hair. Our tongues massage each other’s, and she moans when I press my hips up into her. She pulls my head to the side by my hair, kissing the side of my neck as I roll her hips against my growing hard-on.

I open my eyes as she continues the welcomed assault on my neck and come face to face with my worst nightmare.

There, in the corner by the opposing wall on top of a tall collection of random old radios, is a tiny little face I can’t unsee. Hidden in the darkness is a dead, stuffed squirrel wearing, you guessed it, a black sombrero. Brynn lifts my shirt, removing it over my head, and continues kissing me as I stare at the uneven, beady eyes glaring at me from the corner.

Like the ship in the bottle, Han has now taken the magic out of the fucking room. I didn’t even realize it but I’m now glaring at the sombrero squirrel. Brynn leans back in my lap, eyeing my strange disposition, looking from me to the dark corner and back.

“Kinda creepy up here, isn’t it?” she asks, stalling on my lap.

“It’s straight demonic,” I comment, staring at the tiny broken arm that’s

been left at a horrific looking right angle while simultaneously holding what looks to be a maraca.

g There's a loud crash sound coming from outside, followed by a crowd cheering. My eyebrows raise in surprise.

g "Only at Bran's." She shakes her head, scoffing. "Come on, let's go get another drink." She pats my shoulders, clearly feeling the awkwardness of the disrupted moment.

e We head back down towards the rest of the party, which has grown by at least fifty people since we were last present.

Cole and Hawke are talking to a group of friends near the bonfire off the beach, laughing and casually drinking while a buddy of theirs does a beer bong. A blonde chick with short hair standing near Cole gives me the sex eyes as Brynn and I approach.

"Kid! You're up next!" Cole screeches animatedly, on her way to being drunk.

"Nah, I'm good, baby, that's all you," I comment, making blondie raise a suggestive brow.

s Girls love it when you say baby, even if it's not them, because they imagine it's them and they feel things. *Ugh, the things I know.*

e As we're sitting there watching this man guzzle some sort of cheap malt beverage directly into his stomach, my eyes wander over to the outdoor patio furniture near the house.

. Immediately, I notice a set of eyes locked on mine from a distance, sending a strange sensation up my spine.

Han is sitting there, staring at me with an expressionless face, her lips slightly parted. I stare back at her for a moment, my parted mouth mimicking

thers. She turns away after a brief staring exchange, leaning into the guy who has his arm draped around her shoulders on the couch.

d Her hair is up today with some sort of teal color on the ends. She's wearing the tiniest little black button-up shirt that ends at her ribs, being held together with one button just above her breasts, which are clearly not restrained by a bra again. Her entire toned abdomen, littered with tiny random tattoos, is showing, but it's the baggy, ripped, oversized shorts that get me. Her style is everywhere, but man, does it fucking work. There's a group of about five guys all circled around them while the one holding her tells some animated story as they all listen.

r It's suddenly somewhat awkward being in her presence with Brynn right up on me. She wraps her arm around my waist and instantly I get the itch to do a line of coke in the bathroom. So I part from her and do just that.

g I leave the bathroom by myself, feeling the numbness in my nose. I just needed to think clearly around Han, not like this weird, sad puppy who wants attention from his owner, so I took to the coke to bring my confidence back.

As I walk down the hallway, I get pushed into one of the now empty rooms.

"Fuck! What—"

t "Shhh..." she whispers, shutting the door behind her. "He can't know I'm in here. He'd kill me."

I don't know what she's talking about or what she's doing, but I'm here for it.

"Han, what are you doing?"

s "I need your help," she whispers, grinning mischievously. "We're going to break into Bran's safe, get back what's mine."

"What?! Han...what are you talking about?"

o She grabs me by my shirt, pulling me into her chest. My clumsiness has me falling forward, bumping into her with a thud as she lets out a giggle at the sudden forceful contact.

r “You’re like dead weight,” she says, our bodies pressed against each other

a “I’m more wheat grass,” I reply, looking down at her green speckled eyes.

s Before she can even try to understand me, she clutches my shirt into a tight fist, forcing me down until her lips are on mine. I’m shocked at the feeling of her soft kiss on me. She pulls away for a second, looking back and forth between my eyes, her breathing somewhat frantic, before wrapping her hand around the base of my neck to pull me down again.

t Her tongue touches mine and my dick twitches. I roughly grab her by the back of the neck, pushing her until her back hits the wall and I can seal my body against hers. My hand instinctively finds her breast, cupping it roughly over her shirt before she pulls her lips away from mine again.

s “Fuck,” she breathes, her eyes heavy with sudden lust.

I press my lips against hers as she tilts her head slightly, opening her mouth wider as she massages my tongue with hers. The tongue ring glides along the length of mine before she slightly tilts her head in the other direction, running the length of the other side of my tongue with a forceful yet slow lick, as if she’s tasting an ice cream cone.

*Fuck me, she knows how to kiss.*

r All I can think about is that tongue ring licking up the underside of my shaft when she pulls apart from me again, gasping for air as she does.

o “Sorry, just had to see something,” she breathes out, tucking her hair behind her ear then trailing her hand down her neck then slowly trailing her fingers across her pierced nipple that’s completely aroused and erect through her tiny button-up shirt.

s “See what?” I ask, still breathless, my dick ready regardless of the answer.  
t Shaking her head, not answering my question, she looks all around the room.

. “We gotta get to work.”

She drops to the floor, leaving me in a heaping pile of *holy fuck what just happened*, as she crawls towards a large safe that’s propped up in the corner of the closet.

1 “So you wanna use me as an accomplice to a crime? What does this Bratcat have of yours, anyway?”

“Too many questions,” she says, twisting the combination while looking at the inside of her forearm.

y I look over her shoulder, peering at her arm, which appears to be covered in numbers smeared with purple lipstick.

“Watch the door,” she whispers quickly.

I turn, walking towards the door that’s now opening. I quickly put my foot against the base, stopping it from opening.

s “Hey, what the fuck!? What are you doing in my room?!”

r It’s the guy she was sitting next to by the fire, the one that had his arm around her. The prick I’m assuming to be Bran. The guy who lives here. The guy hosting the party.

“Sorry man, room’s taken.” I smirk with an arrogance about me.

y Peering back into the room, Han shakes her head with a frown, telling me whatever she was looking for wasn’t there. Closing the safe, she twists the lock again before heading towards the window, quickly opening it. Dipping her head out before each of her legs, the legs that have me wishing they were wrapped around me again as she claws at my back, moaning for more of my

dick deep inside her, she disappears. She quickly reappears, popping her head back in the window to give me a little salute before crawling along the roof.

*She's crazy as fuck, and I love it.*

Bran pushes against me again, bringing me back from the distraction. This little punk couldn't open the door if he threw his whole body against it. As he throws his shoulder into it, I stand back, letting him fall through into the room, sprawling his Tommy Hilfiger ass all across the floor.

1 He scurries to get up, scanning the room as I stand against the door with a grin.

t “What the fuck were you doing in here, punk boy? Jerkin’ off by yourself!?”

d “One of your socks, bruh. You’ll want to wash it,” I give him a head nod before leaving the room.

Heading back to the beach, I wonder what the fuck Han was trying to get back from him. Was it money for drugs? Drugs themselves? Was she really over there canoodling with him to somehow get the lock combination, only to write it down with her own lipstick on her arm in order to break into his safe?

1 *A fucking badass bitch.*

e “Kid! C’mere! Brynn’s in need of some warmth!” Cole yells at me, seeing me nearing the fire.

I know what she’s doing. Trying to solidify the hookup. While she’s a great wing woman, I can’t help but realize Han is on the other side of the fire watching us as she talks to a group of surfer guys.

g Brynn is curled up on a tiny blanket in the sand, smiling all cute at me. I sit down behind her, leaning back on my elbows with her between my legs. She lays back, pulling my legs tightly around her to get warm.

“Where d’ya go?” She leans back, looking up at me with her head against



my chest and an easy smile.

“Bathroom,” I reply simply. It’s a lot easier than saying I was just snorting coke, making out with my crush across the fire, and breaking into the safe of the guy who’s hosting the party.

Everyone is wildly drunk or on their way there after another hour or so. Hawke’s got Cole pinned in a corner, doing the freaky shit they like to do while Brynn’s run off to the bathroom, feeling sick after doing yet another beer bong. I think that’s three for her now. I’m not sure if this is her style or if she’s trying to impress me, but her friends are keeping a close watch on her.

Sure enough, she returns after a few minutes with a couple of girls holding onto her arms.

“Think we’re gonna take her home,” a girl named Shay informs me.

I give her a head nod, saying goodbye as they lead her away towards the car, Brynn’s head seemingly hard to keep upright.

Poor girl can’t hang.

I hear laughter nearby, or should I say, a certain someone’s laughter. The kind that seems to make my heart want to beat irregularly in my chest. I pull my attention back towards them as I see a guy pick Han up from the sand, throwing her over his shoulder as they race out into the water.

I’m not jealous. I don’t get jealous. I’m just concerned about her wellbeing. The water, late at night? Irresponsible. There are sea urchins and shit.

A crew of about five guys, another girl, and Han go play around in the water, swimming in their clothes as I stare in their direction.

“Afraid of the water?” a voice says softly beside me.

I turn to see the blondie with the short hair who was giving me sex eye

earlier, now planting herself next to me in the sand. She swooped in real quick after Brynn's departure. Like a damn vulture. But it's cool, I don't mind having my meat ate.

"Why would you say that?" I question with a bit of a smirk.

"The way you were just looking at it. Like it terrifies the life right out of you." She knits her brows with a smile. "What's that about?"

I look back at Han, who's now perched on the shoulders of some guy playfully laughing and splashing about.

"Dark water is a scary, scary place. Things pull you under when you least expect it," I reply, not talking about the water at all.

One guy throws his shirt at her as she falls back from the position on the other dude's shoulders. She reappears, laughing and playfully splashing shirt guy before he runs towards Han in the water, tackling her and pulling her under with him. My jaw tightens for some strange reason. Probably because of stingrays. Reckless.

"Well, dry land is where you shall remain. It's safe, warm...void of the unknown. Here you know what you're getting into." She cocks her head towards me, lifting that brow of hers suggestively again.

"Oh yeah? And what am I getting into with you?" I question, dipping my head back over to her flirtatiously.

"Why don't we go find out?"

She stands, brushing the sand off her denim skirt, holding out a hand for me to grab. I glance back to the water, seeing Han in the arms of one guy then back at blondie's hand.

"Fuck it. Let's."

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I'm back in the bathroom, but instead of doing blow, someone is blowing me.

Immediately after following blondie into the room, she pushes me up against the door and begins unbuckling my pants, kneeling down to the floor.

I like where her head's at, literally and figuratively.

My chest is rising and falling at the quickness of it all, and before I know it, her mouth is on me. I groan, dropping my head back against the door as she licks up and down my shaft with her warm, wet tongue.

"Ah, fuck yeah."

She murmurs something about it being big into my groin before placing her lips around the head of my cock as she sucks. Picking up the speed, she uses one hand to stroke my length while mouthing the part she can. She sucks, her cheeks hollowing as her head bobs against me. I gently hold on to her head, near her ears, closing my eyes and enjoying the feeling as the slurping sounds continue. Her saliva is coating my entire length now and I'm rock hard, ready to fuck something.

"Stand up," I say to blondie.

She smirks and stands, wiping her mouth with one hand before resting her forearms against the bathroom sink, popping her ass up to me. I push up her little jean skirt, grabbing for her thong, pulling it down her thighs while taking in the view of her tight ass. It's nice, I'm not even gonna lie.

"Fuck...condom," I say, about to put it in without thinking.

She opens the little medicine cabinet behind the mirror in front of her, checking through a few things before she finds one. She holds it up behind her, smirking at me in the mirror.

*Well then.*

I tear it open, rolling it on my cock before lining myself with her. She's wet and ready for me to slide in. I roughly push into her and her head drops back, her eyes screwing closed. She moans loudly, clutching the sink handle with white knuckles as I pull out and slide back into her again, attempting to go deeper, until she can take all of me.

"Oh my God," she moans.

I reach around her, grasping at her breasts over her tank top as I continue the motions, quickening the pace. Our bodies slap together as the sex becomes aggressive and needy. I need to cum, to erase the memory of my last nut.

She puts her hand back against my hip, pushing back on me, stalling my movements.

"Too big," she comments.

I back off, pulling out of her as my dick bobs in the air between us. She spins around and hops on the counter instead. With her legs spread, I find my way back in, pressing myself into her at a new angle. She grips my shoulder with one hand, her other hand behind her, bracing herself against the mirror.

I pound into her again and again, her shoulder blades slamming against the

rmirrored cabinet behind her. I'm fucking out my frustrations with a stranger  
rWhat a life I'm living.

e She cries out, reaching her orgasm before me as her legs tighten around my  
back and her nails dig into my shoulders. With a few more thrusts, I empty  
myself into the condom, breathing heavily as I do. I fall forward, resting my  
head against the mirror as I catch my breath, feeling a strange emotion take  
lover me. I pause with my forehead against the mirror, kinda wishing I could  
send my face through it.

I imagine myself doing it. Smashing face first into the glass, the shard  
piercing through my skin, my blood coating me in a warm embrace of my  
sown self destruction. Physical pain can be numbing when psychological pain  
soverwhelms the mind.

o I swallow it away, standing upright to pull out of her and help her down.  
She giggles at the situation, quickly fixing her skirt, then checking her  
makeup in the mirror. Her hand on the door, she twists it open, smirking back  
at me before sneaking back out into the party.

x And that's that.

t After leaving the party with Cam and Cole, we head back to the house for  
the night. They were both surprised I came home with them. They assumed  
I'd do what I always do and stay out all night, finding my way back in the  
early hours of the morning, which was typical of me. But my vibe was all off.  
I wasn't feeling like my normal, happy-go-lucky self. I needed sleep or  
something. It felt like my energy was that of a sloth. A drug addicted sloth  
who had a thing for a girl he couldn't touch. Not because he couldn't touch  
her, but because she was unobtainable by her own personality.

I fucked another girl in order to erase the memory of Han. How messed up  
am I? Sleep. I needed sleep and maybe some soup. Soup helps.





The next morning, after a restless night of tossing and turning, I wake up early and hit the showers. I walk out of the bathroom, wearing nothing but my sweats, surprised to see both my roommates up and moving around already.

“Don’t you people sleep? What the fuck?” I groan, leaning against the wall of the hallway.

“Morning champ,” Cole grins from the island. “Heard about Toni.”

“Heard about huh?” I slur, still drying my damp hair with a towel.

“Toni. She’s going around telling everyone what a great fuck you are.”

I close my eyes tightly, inhaling a deep breath, then letting it out as I focus back on Cole again. She’s smiling mischievously at me.

“You fucked Toni too? Jesus, I thought I heard you and Brynn were in Bran’s room?” Hawke adds in, taking a sip from his coffee.

Yep, definitely not Brynn with me there. Jesus, three different girls in three different circumstances in one night? Cole was right, I’m a fucking ho.

“Brynn said she thought there was a whale in his pants,” Cole adds.

“Are you guys writers for the Kid Chronicles? What is with this interrogation, and at eight in the morning?! Leave me the fuck alone.”

“It’s always the tall skinny guys with the big dicks.” I hear a voice that cuts through into my chest, sending an odd wave of pain searing through me.

I walk a little further out of the hallway to see Han sitting at the end of the island with them, sipping on some coffee. Her hair is up in a messy bun on top of her head, with little pieces falling out all over. She’s wearing a huge

blue oversized sweatshirt with a wolf howling at the moon on it and what looks to be nothing underneath. Did she spend the night?

Now she thinks I fuck everyone. Great.

“And how would you know that?” Cole asks her condescendingly.

“Um, because I’ve fucked a lot of tall, skinny guys with big dicks.”

Hawke laughs, choking on his coffee while Cole shakes her head at her older sister.

Great. Han fucks everyone, too. I don’t even know how to process life anymore.

Did she spend the night here after the party? It would literally kill me to know she was under the same roof as me and not in my bed.

“And what about Bran? I saw you guys flirting last night. What’s that all about?” Cole questions.

“Yes, what is that all about, Han?” I ask, saddling up alongside Cole where she’s perched behind the counter, bending forward with her chin resting on her hands, mimicking her stance as we both stare at her.

I’d like some answers too, especially after that weird kiss/safe breaking moment. And because apparently I’m becoming a nosy weirdo.

“Bran’s a dick.” She scoffs like it was nothing. “I was just trying to get something out of him.”

“Jo, I’ve told you to stay away from them. They’re involved in some heavy shit. Those guys don’t even know what they’re doing. Plus, he still low-key hates you for Sera. You need to watch your back.”

“Oh, fuck him. You don’t need to worry about me, Nic. I’m fine,” she says, rolling her eyes at her little sister.

I want to ask her what she thought was going to be in the safe, but I don’t think she wants Cole to know any part of that, so I hold off. And Sera

tWho's Sera? And why does she need to watch out for Bran?

"Just because you used to date doesn't mean you can trust him anymore. He's crazy, Jo."

*They used to date?*

"Yeah, thanks for the after school special. Pretty sure I've made it through worse than Bran without your help." She brushes off Cole's concern finishing her coffee by chugging the rest of it.

e Chugging a full cup of hot coffee.

Cole and I stare at her in amazement as her throat rolls it down, the head clearly unable to touch someone of Han's temp.

"I'm gonna sit by the water," she comments, leaving her mug on the island.

She gets up out of her seat, walking out towards the stairs to head to the patio. I turn my attention to Cole and Hawke, waiting for their response.

1 "Don't let it get to you, baby. You can't change her," Hawke says from his position against the counter.

- Cole sighs, raking a hand through her long blonde hair. "I know. I just worry. She thinks she can just do anything she wants, but he's different."

t "You're too sweet for your own good, taking on everyone's problems."

Hawke pulls her into his chest, wrapping his arms around her. "But some people don't want to be saved."

y I think about his last sentence. I remember when she muttered those same words to me. She's definitely not the type to want to be saved. That much is given.

t

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I make my way out to the beach, seeing her sitting by herself at the edge of the water. I walk up along the cool sand, plopping myself down next to her in the morning sun, where she's hugging her knees, looking down at her toes. Black painted nails sit at the very edge of the sand where the water can just almost reach her, but not quite.

"It almost got me last time," she whispers, looking at her toes. "But I won't let it touch me."

Her words are so heavy. So heavy that I can't even respond to them. She doesn't want a response either. When she speaks, she wants you to listen, to absorb. If you understand it, you understand her. So, she waits, contemplating if you can pass the test or not.

"Do you like porn, Han?"

She breaks out into a chuckle that soon turns into a belly laugh, glancing from her toes up to me. A smile stretches across my face at the sound of her infectious laugh.

"I'm just wondering what you type in your searches," I continue, gazing at her smile, loving seeing those little nose freckles up close.

"And what the hell made you think of that?"

"Well, you make random statements and questions to figure people out and I feel like everything I need to know about a person is in what they search on Pornhub."

"Goddammit Kid." She laughs, running her hands down her makeup free and flawless face.

“You’re just what I needed.”

I felt that in places I shouldn’t.

“So, you still didn’t answer,” I say, nudging into her with my shoulder playfully.

f She rocks to the side then looks over at me with a smirk and I can see that the answer is in the front of her mind.

. “Alright, I’ll tell you mine so you feel more comfortable,” I interrupt her thoughts.

“I feel you would’ve told me regardless if I wanted to hear it or not,” she states with a narrowed eyed smirk.

“Probably true.”

e “Alright, hotshot, what do you search?” she asks, turning to face me by placing her total focus on me.

3 I wait for a few seconds, for the buildup, of course.

“Creampies. There, I said it.” I shrug with my hands in the air.

“Creampies?!” She drops her mouth open with a smile lingering.

3 “Yep, ready to psychoanalyze that?”

r She taps on the curve of her lip, thinking as she studies me. Her eyes sweep down the length of me and then back up to my face again.

t “You like to live on the edge with no regard to consequences, lack of condom symbolizing that,” she begins. “And you have zero filter, the lack of condom symbolizing that as well.”

d “Wow.” My eyebrows shoot up in surprise, nodding.

1 She tucks her chin against her shoulder, smiling adorably. “How’d I do?”

“Not bad. Your turn.”

e She bites her bottom lip, looking down at the sand and drawing a little spiral circle with her finger.

“Ugh, alright. Jesus, this is personal.” She tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear, facing me as I admire the tiny gold hoops and random piercings along the shell.

“See, it’s a great way to get to know someone,” I smirk, awaiting her answer.

“Threesomes,” she says quickly, then looks to see my reaction.

r I wrap my arms around my knees, nodding as I look out at the water with a straight face, not giving away anything.

e “Psychoanalyze away,” she adds in, gazing at me.

I lick my lips like I’m a professor about to give a profound speech, when I say, “I really don’t think there’s anything deeper to it. I just really wanted to know what you watch while you play with yourself.”

“Kid!” she gasps, making a shocked, yet grinning face, punching me in the arm, pushing me off balance into the sand. “You prick.”

I laugh along with her, wiping the sand off the palms of my hands. “And to be honest, I like creampiees because I just love wet and messy sex.”

“There’s nothing worse than dry sex,” she agrees.

s “But threesomes, huh?” I stop to think about it for a second.

She smiles, shaking her head, clearly not that embarrassed, as she gazes out at the waves while I put two years of a psychology major to use.

f “You like the idea of sex with different individuals without the commitments. You’re advanced enough psychologically to understand that humans are programmed to be non-monogamous by nature. You also love the freedom of a profound connection between both men and women. It intrigues your mind, as well as turning you on sexually.”

e She turns her head to stare at me for a second, her lips slightly parted as my words hit her brick by brick. I gaze back into her curious eyes as we study

rone another for a split second. A split second that feels longer and shorter than it should all in the same space.

Tilting her head to the side near her shoulder, she looks down at the wave approaching her. She doesn't move at all as it splashes over her toes dragging her little feet into the water with the falling sand around her.

"Would you look at that?" She shakes her head, licking her teeth while peering at her toes in disbelief. Her eyes flutter up to mine with a peculiar look about her. Like she's figured something out but can't let me in on it yet "I let it get me again."

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10



10





New days bring new dilemmas.

Hawke and I are back at one of the beachfront properties. Today we are demoing an old kitchen in order to remodel it with modern updates.

I've come to enjoy working with these tools and using my hands to get dirty, destroy, and create. Demoing is by far my favorite. Taking out my aggression on walls, cabinets, cupboards. It's a fantastic release and makes for some good exercise. I think I'm building a bicep.

Carrying the rest of the old materials out to the dumpster outside, we pause to grab a drink. I use my time wisely.

"So, what's the situation between Cole and Han? There seemed to be some drama in that kitchen yesterday," I begin, fishing.

"Eh, sister shit," Hawke sighs, taking a drink.

*Dammit, man, I need more.*

I'm sure Cole told him all about the relationship between her and her sister. I can't imagine those two have any secrets between them.

"They're so different for being sisters."

“Hell yeah. When we first moved here and I met Johanna, I thought it was a joke. Until I remembered what Cole told me about her. They’re polar opposites. Jo even got Cole to go to a Disturbed concert once.”

“Nice,” I say with raised brows. The old Cole at a Disturbed concert seems surreal.

“Right?”

“So Han is the wild child.”

He narrows his eyes, pursing his lips together. “Nah, I think I got the wild one.”

“Bruh...” I distort my face. “You guys need to keep it down. All that *spank me* shit got me damn near masturbating in the room over. Hearing little cries as you smash her. ‘Harder Hawke! Harder!’”

“Ha! You heard that? Damn...guess we need to reel it in.” Hawke laughs to himself, taking another drink.

“I love it how she only calls you Hawke when you’re fucking her now, like it’s your bad boy alter ego. Cam in the daylight, Hawke when the lights go out and you’re spanking the living life right outta her.”

He chuckles, rubbing his shoulder as I continue.

“Cole likes to be aggressively spanked during sex. The things you learn about your friends while living with them.” I grin. “I mean, it makes sense. She’s got daddy issues.”

Hawke narrows his eyes at me. It’s not his normal look of disgust, though. No, this look he’s giving me runs deeper. Did I overstep? Wouldn’t be the first time.

“I’m happy to give her what she needs. It could be worse,” Hawke finally says, popping back to normal.

“True. She could want me in there with y’all. Ya know, give her the ol

sone in the boot, one in the chute.”

r He glares at me again, sending daggers into me with his eyes, and I know I’m riding the fine line of our friendship. It’s been a fun ride.

s “Didn’t you ever want to smash Jo?” I ask, changing the subject. “I’m sure the thought crossed your mind. A little sister on sister action?” I wave my brows at him playfully.

“No,” he says firmly.

l “You’re a liar.” I smirk.

“I’m not lying.”

k “Please, they’re both hot as fuck. You’ve definitely thought about it. I’ve stthought about it. Many times. Last night, actually. Then again, this morning.”

“Dude, not even. When we first got here and I met Jo, she was in a bad place, like mentally. She’s struggled with some heavy shit privately. They both have. Just handled it in different ways. It was never like that.”

e My brows knit together as I ponder that.

o “She’s like the happiest, most perky, quirky person I’ve ever met. That doesn’t make sense.”

“Yeah, well, sometimes people are really good at hiding themselves in the midst of the norm.”

. Thinking back on her in social settings, she’s definitely not the type to seem depressed or withdrawn from crowds. She’s the life of the party. Everyone gravitates towards her in such a way that the idea of her in a love place just doesn’t even seem possible.

“What about that Bran, dude? He’s suspect as hell with his wanna be spiritual hippy shit. His name is Brandon, for Christ’s sake. Dudes like him think they can wipe their privilege off with a visit to a shaman and a quick name change.”

If there was one thing I hated more than a bullshitter, it was a bullshitter who pretended to be spiritual for the sake of a trend. This dude goes by the name Bran to sound cool when, in reality, he's a fucking rich prick who was reborn into money. Money he apparently toys around with in the drug world.

Another situation I need to look into.

"Yeah, he's a piece of shit. Apparently, he and Jo have some weird intertwined history."

"You don't know what happened between them?"

"No, that happened long before we moved—" He pauses, interrupting himself. "Wait, why the fuck are you being so nosy about Jo? C'mon Kid Cole asked you to leave her alone."

I raise my hands up, playing innocent. "I'm just curious, is all, nothing to worry about."

"Please, don't act like I don't know you. If Cole says don't touch my sister that alone gives you a mission to do just that."

"Well, we've already crossed that bridge," I murmur quickly before taking a drink of water and looking out the window at the beach.

He stares at me blankly. "Are you fucking kidding me? You fucked Jo?!"

My eyes dart all over the room, trying to find a safe place to land. I can't find one, so I close them tightly, making a pained face. Hawke throws a piece of drywall at my head, hitting me dead center on the forehead.

"Fuck!" I grab my face.

"You're an idiot, dude! I can't believe you. Actually, I can. Who am I kidding?" Hawke shakes his head in disappointment.

"I couldn't help it. We have a real connection, like it's deep."

Hawke scoffs.

"I'm serious!"

r “The day I believe Kid has an actual connection with someone that doesn’t involve his dick physically being inside of them...” A dry chuckle leaves his throat.

l. “Cam, I’m dead ass,” I say in a deeply serious tone, looking him dead in the eyes. “I can’t stop thinking about her.”

d He stares back at me for a second, looking hesitant to believe that it could be true.

“I mean, you’re both weird as fuck. I guess I shouldn’t be that surprised.”

g My grin stretches across my face. His eyes narrow.

, “You’ve got it bad for Jo?” he asks, looking almost appalled by the discovery. “Do you have any idea how bad that is for you?”

o I chuckle. “Why do you say that?”

“Because she’s like a feather floating around in the fucking wind. She doesn’t stick around for anything or anyone. Not even her own sister.”

“I can make people stick. I’m like a big wad of gum. I’m sweet, fun to blow, and people tend to get stuck to me whether they like it or not.”

“You just equated yourself to a wad of gum. Congratulations. You win.” Hawke says in the blandest voice.

t “What can I say? I’m charming.” I cheese.

e “Well, I’m gonna be forced to tell Cole if you don’t. I’m not keeping shit from her. Guy code or not, that’s her fucking sister.”

“I’ll break the news to her. She’ll be heartbroken, I’m sure. Jealous as all hell. Might even start a fight, pull some hair, rip a shirt, flash a titty...”

He contorts his face in disgust. “Jesus, you *have* thought about this.”

I sigh, looking dreamily to the ceiling while nodding. “A few times, yeah.”

“Hey, on a serious note. I signed up for this realtor/sales course at the home expo tomorrow morning. I was hoping you’d come with? Maybe see i

that's something you're interested in?" he asks, cocking a brow. "You've been killin' it with these demos, catching on quick, but I just know you'd kill it on the sales side."

1 Hawke giving compliments is something not to be taken lightly. If he sees something in someone, he's going to try his best to bring it out of you. I know this. I've seen him do it with our other friends. I've seen him do it with Cole. He's the friend you want in your corner because he's always going to push you to be great. This is the reason I stood by him so tough when he was locked up. You look after people like him. They don't come around often.

2 "You'd get a certificate and everything after completion. Get a little something under your belt."

"Yeah man," I reply with a genuine smile and heartfelt appreciation. "That sounds great."

He grins, giving me a head nod, telling me more about the details of the event before we pack up and head back to the house for the evening.

After showering up, I check my phone and see a text from a friend, one that's not necessarily the one you want in your corner. Silas is the kind of guy that you hang around, knowing you'll have a hell of a night but with a clause. He's the guy that knows people. He makes himself available, keeping a crew of women around him, bringing you to a party or new club with the expectation you'll give him something in return. In this case, it's the coke he seems interested in.

**Silas:** Tavern tonight. I'll bring the pussy, you bring the white girl.

e

f



<sup>e</sup>           **Kid:** Deal

l

Who am I kidding? I'm a piece of shit. Of course I'll go. It's not like  
<sup>s</sup>have plans tonight.

I

l

o

s



Later that evening, I leave Cam and Cole to make babies or choke each other  
<sup>e</sup>out, whatever the fuck they're into tonight, and take my car down to the  
Tavern.

<sup>t</sup> I snort a line on my dash before entering. Blowing a breath through my  
lips, I allow the numbing effect to run through me. I lick my finger, wiping  
<sup>e</sup>the rest of the potent powder off the dash, running the finger along my gum  
before rubbing my nose of the powder and sitting back against the seat of the  
<sup>e</sup>car.

<sup>y</sup> I see my bloodshot eyes in the rearview mirror and get that same shi  
-feeling I did when I was fucking blondie. There's this lingering presence o  
<sup>v</sup>knowing you're going down a path that ends in nothing but dirt, gravel, and  
<sup>e</sup>missteps. You know you shouldn't continue, but changing course often takes  
<sup>e</sup>more effort than reward. So I continue down the path, the one that leads me  
directly into this nightclub.

Walking in through the steel double doors, I pass the familiar blondie  
stopping me in my tracks.

"They'll let anyone in here, won't they?" she winks at me.

“Toni? Was it? Good to see you, as always.” I lay on the charm, giving her my best sexy half-grin.

I I didn’t even know her name, and my dick was firmly planted deep within her walls. She didn’t seem to care. I still don’t think she knows my name.

“Silas said you were coming,” she grins flirtatiously, running a hand down the back of her neck.

Maybe she does know my name. See? I’m gum. Blow me and you stick.

I I feel my high hit and I’m ready to fuck some shit up. The party is lit. The music is out of control, and half-naked women are dancing all around us. Silas is sitting back in a booth with some beautiful ladies around him when I approach.

y “Kid! My man. Take a seat,” he says, drawing attention to me.

g He definitely brought the women.

s I slide in next to a gorgeous woman with lips the color of amber, her skin rich in color. Her deep brown eyes glance my way as she plays with her luscious hair, toying with her curls. My heart races in my chest and I feel the coke seeping into my bloodstream, pumping directly into my heart.

f “What other tricks you got up your sleeve, Kid?” Silas asks.

d I know what he’s referring to, and lucky for him, I’m a magician.

s “Addys?” he asks quietly.

e “Of course,” I reply.

He nods approvingly. “Have you met Zuri?”

, The exchange.

“It’s a pleasure Zuri,” I give her a grin, leaning into her slightly, my bouncing knee rubbing against hers.

Drinks are flowing, music is bumping, the vibe is all set, and yet, I feel the lack of a certain excitement not even the coke can bring to life. I pull out my

phone, searching through the contacts until I see it.

Johanna.

1 I've had her number for weeks now, but haven't had the nerve to text her. She has no idea I have it, so I need to make this fun. I find the video on YouTube. It's the video of that picture of three deer stacked on top of each other, engaging in sex with the "Oh Yeah" song playing in the background. I click send, hoping she gets it, wondering if she'll remember.

2 I anxiously check my phone, again and again, seeing the message was opened but with no response. I'm jittery, futzing with my phone every three seconds, turning it on, turning it off, turning it on, entering the passcode and turning it off to refresh. It just needs a refresh.

A few minutes later, I get a text in return. It's an image. A picture of a banana cream pie.

1 I bite the corner of my lip, unable to hold back my smile as I sit here grinning like an idiot to my phone. It's hilarious what something as stupid as a picture of a cream pie can do to my insides. She knows it's me. I feel her everywhere.

"Sweet tooth, huh?" Zuri asks, looking over my shoulder.

I cock a brow, leaning my head back to look at her. "Something like that."

I send a quick text back.

**Kid:** Where are you?

y "That's too much cream. Maybe it's time to try something a little more rich, a little more bittersweet, something with a bite."  
e

y

I eye her curvy body next to me as she tilts her head to the side, licking her luscious lips suggestively.

: “Yeah? What you got in mind?”

1 Ten minutes later, and we’re in the back of my car. Zuri is riding my cock in the back seat, clutching onto my shoulders as she takes me deep. My hand I grab onto her thick ass, lifting her, then pulling her back down onto my lap as I thrust up into her faster and harder than ever.

s “I can’t take it!” she screams out, bracing her hands behind me against the seat, bouncing against my thighs. “It’s so good!”

1 She’s wet. Like dripping wet. I love some good sloppy, wet sex, but now it only reminds me of my conversation with Han. Zuri drops her head back as finding her release, screaming out as my eyes fall closed.

I really want to check my phone.

, Opening my eyes, I damn near slap myself for thinking something so stupid as I’m dick deep in another woman. I focus on the feelings, my surroundings, my primal need to cum inside this beautiful woman above me. A few more aggressively hard pumps later and I’m cumming into the condom, pulling Zuri’s thick hips tightly to me as I do.

I drop my head back against the seat, my mouth open as my chest rises and falls while I regulate my breathing.

“You got any blow?” she asks before my dick is even out of her.

This chick did not just have sex with me for some coke.

“Uh, yeah...sure, yeah.”

Unreal.

e After fixing ourselves, we head back inside the club after I hand off a few grams for the good time in my car. I feel cheap as fuck for that, but I didn’t ask for it. It was all her. Clearly, some people don’t care enough to hold some

things sacred. Oh, who the fuck am I kidding? I've had my share of emotionless sex. Just not for money or drugs.

Silas pats me on the back as I enter the club again, and it feels disgusting. "She's great, isn't she?" He wraps his arm around my neck, looking off at Zuri, who's glancing back at us with a smirk as she walks away. Everything about it feels wrong. "C'mon, let's take some shots."

Sure as shit, we take some shots. Lots and lots of shots. Every few seconds, someone is handing us another whisky neat. Silas talks my ear off about some opportunity he's trying to set up for himself, needing my help in the process. I'm pretty fucked up at this point, but so is everyone else around me. I remember I texted Han earlier, so I pull my phone out of my pants to see if she responded.

Two unopened texts.

**Han:** Come find me.

A picture of the cove.

Fuck me. She's been at the cove. The same cove where we talked before going back to her place. She must've been out there tripping by herself again waiting for me to come find her, maybe needing me to reach her down that rabbit hole again.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck.

I stand abruptly, getting hit with the wave of intoxication. Jesus, I'm more fucked up than I thought.

f I stumble my way to the car, opening the heavy door and slamming it closed harder than I intended once inside.

*I have to get to her.*

t I fumble with my keys in the ignition, dropping them into the darkness near my feet before finding them again.

*I can't leave her hanging.*

v I finally start it up as I pull away from the club, driving down the dimly lit road, when a car follows me.

1 *She's waiting. Waiting for me.*

l I see the red and blue of the lights flashing behind me in the rearview mirror, echoing the pace of my racing heart, and I know I'm fucked.

Royally fucked.

e

,

t

e

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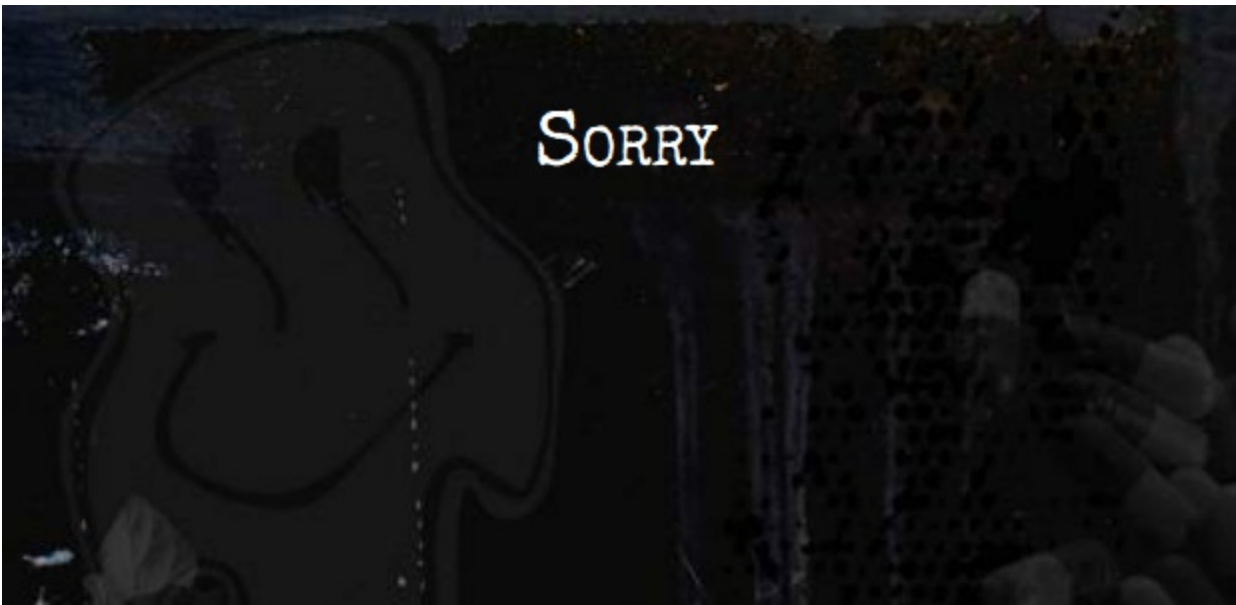
I see the red and blue of the lights flashing behind me in the rearview mirror, echoing the pace of my racing heart, and I know I'm fucked.

Royally fucked.









The clock on the wall is annoyingly loud. Every tick of every second feels like it's slapping me across the face, reminding me I'm a fuck-up. I sit and wait in my cage.

I get a chance to call someone but literally have no numbers memorized and after they confiscated my phone for the time being, I've realized I just don't know numbers anymore. My fried ass brain can't hold more than two digits, it seems. I can't remember Hawke's number. I have a cellphone for fuck's sake. His number is Hawke.

A DUI, a fucking DUI.

Not going to lie. I'm lucky as hell. Had they searched my car, they would've found a haven of drugs. But, assuming I was just another drunk leaving the pub and driving home, they gave me a breathalyzer and slapped me with a quick DUI charge. Must've been a busy night for crime. That, and I'm a smooth talker, of course.

Night passes and I wake up feeling like complete and utter shit. I don't have my pick-me-up morning fix, and my back is sore as hell from this bench I'm attempting to sleep on, all while listening to the loud scratching noise

coming from the guy in my corner who has scabies, or maybe fleas. Probably both.

I don't know what else to do but wait to be released.

No one is waiting for me.

It's a sickening realization to know that. Han's words ring out again in my head. *You deserve to have someone waiting for you.*

She's wrong. She's so fucking wrong.

I don't deserve anything. I slide through life just like her analysis proved. I live for today and not for tomorrow. No condom, no consequences. Figuratively, of course, this is a creampie reference. Who would've thought I'd teach myself a lesson? My search history proved right.

It's unfortunate that this behavior is normal for me. To be gone all night with no one hearing from me until the sun cracks over the horizon.

I'm so sick of being me. So here I shall rot. Next to flea-man, locked in the trash where I belong.

"Kai Immanuel Decker?"

My head snaps up. I never hear that name anymore. I almost forget it's mine.

As soon as I sit up, I turn around on the bench to see a face full of disappointment greet me behind the bars.

It's Hawke.

He's in grey dress pants and a black button-up shirt, sleeves rolled up to his elbows, paired with some Italian looking dress shoes.

My brows lower in confusion at his strange appearance before it clicks in my shit brain.

The conference.

The one he paid for me to go to.

γ The one he helped to get me into by signing me up, completing all the paperwork, and paying for us both so I could have some legit education under my belt.

The one I've missed, and now, by the looks of it, made him miss as well.

γ It's clear how seriously he takes this new life he and Cole have formed. I messed up. I was irresponsible. And now, my mistakes are bleeding into his life.

I Fuck.

. Me.

t I let out a deep breath, blowing it through loose lips as my eyes fall to the floor and I run my hands down my face. I've never felt like such shit. I'm literally the fucking worst.

"Let's go," he says abruptly, signing off on some paper at the desk before me.

He turns, not even looking to see if I follow as he pushes through the glass door with a force that speaks volumes.

s I'm the lowest of the lows. I feel like a child being bailed out by the father who's constantly rooting for him yet left with nothing but disappointment at this piece of shit failure of a son.

I'm a fuck-up.

I head out of the building, wincing my eyes as the bright sunlight pierces through my skull. It's as if a higher power wants to showcase to the world just how stupid I am by casting a stream of light directly on me, illuminating my mistakes to the world. It's a sickening feeling, knowing whatever God is out there hates me, too.

"I'm sorry, man," I say softly, turning towards Hawke in the car, knowing it's not enough, but needing to say it, anyway. "Thanks for getting my car

etoo.”

r He says nothing. He doesn't look at me. He's pissed, and I feel it throughout the interior of this car. It's a deafening silence. We drive down the road for a few minutes before finally reaching his house. He puts my car in Park and sits back against the seat, letting out a deep breath.

s I wait, hoping he says something. Anything. The tension between us is thick. The air, stifling.

“You know, I really wanted you to come out here, start fresh,” he begins staring straight ahead at the house while gripping the wheel, his jaw tight with tension. “But, this shit...” He shakes his head, narrowing his eyes, the disappointment radiating off of him. “After everything I've had to go through...I just don't get it, Kai. They stripped my life from me, but yours is being willingly poured down the goddamn drain. How the fuck can you be so careless?” He turns to face me, his eyes piercing through me, the anger of his words carrying venom, striking me with the pain of his past. “You could've killed someone.”

r The way he says I could've killed someone and not myself tears through me on a whole new level.

“I'm sorry Hawke, I—”

“Maybe you're just not who I thought you could be,” he says, interrupting me.

l I swallow down his words, the tension thick. He opens the car door slamming it shut before heading inside. I kick the dashboard with my foot dropping my head back against the passenger seat, sliding down as I grip the hair at the top of my head, pulling it hard. I want to ease the pain in my head with external pain, so I pull harder until it hurts.

; But, it's not enough. I punch my dashboard. Again and again and again

with all the force I can muster, until my skin finally cracks and my knuckles bleed from the pain that's manifested itself within the depths of my mind.

I don't want to feel these things I'm feeling. The heaviness, the seriousness of the situation. I live in a carefree world where everything is laughable and real shit gets brushed off.

The urge to pop some Percocets comes over me. Numbness. It's what I'm craving. Numbness is what I need to not destroy myself more than I want to.

I search through the console, popping open the latch where the drugs are hidden beneath. I grab a baggie, seeing the pills before me.

This is my moment to stop. My moment to take this situation as a lesson, listening to the disappointment, finding the strength to prove him wrong, and grow from it.

But I'm not strong.

I'm an addict.

So I pop the pills and carry on.

1



Later that afternoon, I hear a light knocking on my door.

"Kid?" Her soft, caring voice is on the other side of the door. "Kid, it's Cole. Are you up?"

"I'm up, come in."

She opens the door, peeking around it, probably making sure I'm not naked or jerking off before she steps in, closing the door behind her. She heads to the desk in the room, leaning back against it, her arms holding the edge of the wood in her grasp. Her face holds sympathy and I don't know

what's worse, that or Hawke's disappointment. Who am I kidding? Both faces suck when you're on the receiving end of them.

s "How are you?" she asks, wincing slightly.

l I look up at her with a face that says how I'm feeling.

"He's at one of the houses," she explains, telling me Hawke isn't home.

1 I nod, looking at my feet.

"He won't stay mad forever."

e I appreciate her attempt to reassure me, but it's not working.

"If he did, he'd be justified," I retort.

, She sighs, pushing up off of the desk to sit next to me on the edge of the bed.

"You know, he just cares about you so much. He never wants to see anything bad happen to you. He wants you to soar, Kid. You mean so much to him. To both of us." She gives me a light smile, leaning down until my eyes connect with hers. "It's why we wanted you to come here."

"Yeah, and I'm already fucking it all up."

She purses her lips, then bites the corner and shrugs. "Yeah, kinda."

Her honesty makes me chuckle. She joins in.

"I'll never be able to fully understand what it's like to be you," she says softly. "I haven't been down the same roads. I haven't had to do things just to survive like you have. You're so much stronger than me in that regard. But I also see things from a different perspective. At some point, the casual drug use and partying seem to have become more than just fun. It seems as if it's a lifestyle now, one that is slowly starting to take you away from us."

e She means well. I know she means well. But this isn't hitting right.

e "It's not that serious, Cole. It's still recreational."

v "Are you sure?" she questions. "I just worry that it's kind of taking over

who you are. That it's a cover for something deeper. Something really bad could've happened to you last night, Kid."

I appreciate her concern more than anything. She's totally looking out for me, and I know it. We've dug deep and had heartfelt conversations before, so I know she has my best interest at heart. She's got a heart of gold and will go above and beyond for the people she cares about. Loyal to a fault. But I'm not willing to admit this is a real problem, because I don't feel like it is. I'm still functioning. I just made a mistake.

"It's not a cover. And honestly, you don't need to worry about me. Johanna is more of your concern. It seems she's the one who needs lessons on recreational drug use."

I say the words and then regret them immediately. Her face tenses and I can see the tears forming in her eyes.

"Cole, I'm sorry, I—"

"No," she interrupts, lifting her hand to stop me. "You're right. I shouldn't have overstepped. It was naïve of me."

"Cole."

"No, Kid. It's fine. Really, I'm sorry. It's not my place." She shakes her head, closing her eyes tightly as she heads for the door.

She pauses there, holding the handle, tapping on it with her finger, taking a deep breath and letting it flow before her voice comes out, soft and breaking.

"I-It's her birthday. On Wednesday. It's a rough day, but I planned to make dinner. It'd be nice to have you."

Leaving quickly through the door, she closes it softly and I'm left feeling awful. I feel like shit for snapping at her when all she's doing is trying to be there for me and help me by inviting me to stay here. She truly cares. I feel

r



like an ass for bringing up her sister when it's obviously a sensitive subject for her, their relationship, something I know nothing about.

r I'm also bewildered. It's almost Han's birthday, but why is it a rough day?

o I pull out my phone to text Han, typing out "sorry" then quickly erasing it.  
o I'm sick of apologizing to everyone. And why would I apologize to her? For not meeting up with her? It's not like she's consistent in anything. She literally just up and vanishes without leaving a trace.

Me not showing when she may have been expecting me serves her right. Maybe now she'll get it. Or maybe she doesn't care at all. Maybe I don't matter to her like I wish I did. Like she does to me. The thought affects me more than I'd like.

I *What am I doing? Who am I?* Kid doesn't do this. He doesn't worry about what women think. He doesn't care if they're thinking about him. He wouldn't text a girl who didn't even want to give him her number.

t

**Kid:** Sorry Han.

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**Kid:** Sorry Han.

12



12





“So you take spoonfuls of the cheese mixture and tuck it into the shell like this.” She does exactly as she says and stuffs the shell before lining it into the large dish. “Okay, your turn.”

I take an unsteady hand, scooping the cheese mixture and tuck it into the shell with my large, shaky hands, dripping the concoction all over the shell as well as my fingers, in the process.

Fuck, this is hard,” I say, placing my messy ass, deflated shell next to the perfectly plump one.

She giggles, “It’s the hands. Your hands are too big.”

I attempt one more because I offered to help, but after the second disastrous shell, I’ve all but given up.

“I’ll make the garlic bread,” I nod, washing my hands of cheese.

Cole shakes her head with a simple smile, finishing up the rest of the stuffed shells and coating them in a delicious smelling sauce. She pops them into the oven as I clean the dishes. After we clean up the kitchen, I set the table.

“So just us four?” I ask, setting the plates out.

“Three.”

“Hawke isn’t coming?”

We haven’t talked much these past few days. Or should I say, he hasn’t talked much to me. He’s still going through his thing, the disappointment and I get it. Not only did my little DUI disappoint him, it brought back some old memories. Wounds that were only recently healed.

I came out with a hefty fine that will require me to sell the rest of my stash in order to cover the cost. I also have a first offender DUI class I need to take to learn how not to be an idiot and drive drunk. It could be so much worse, it really could. Luckily, my record is pretty clean. Smooth talker, remember? You wouldn’t believe what I’ve maneuvered out of.

Even so, I can’t blame Hawke for being upset. However, I also know there isn’t much I can do to change things. I can’t prove him wrong, not today anyway. Things like that take time. The kind of time a summer with them here in Cali doesn’t provide.

“No, he’ll be here,” she answers quickly, wiping the counter down with a wet rag.

She’s purposely not making eye contact.

“So...the person we are cooking for and celebrating isn’t coming? I’m confused, Cole.”

She pauses as she stands, facing the sink before throwing the towel she was using into it abruptly. I see her chest expand with air, then slowly deflate as her arms cross over her abdomen. I can tell she’s going through it. She’s clearly upset. I walk around the kitchen island, leaning back against the opposite counter, facing her.

“What’s up? Why does she hate her birthday?” I ask plainly.

That’s clearly what’s bothering her. So I ask her to just get it all out. Put i

all on the table.

She tightens her jaw, swallowing before finally looking up at me. The direct pain in her eyes surprises me. It's not what I was expecting. I lower my eyebrows, my lips parting, wanting to say something but finding the words caught in my throat.

A tear falls from her eye as the front door opens. She wipes it quickly, clearing her throat as she stands and brushes something off the bottom of her shirt.

"Co-Co!" Hawke's voice booms from the foyer, followed by the sound of boots being kicked off. "Baby girl? Where are you?"

He comes around the corner of the hallway, pausing once he sees us. He has a bouquet in his hand and two bottles of wine in the other. Cole smiles, taking the flowers from him as they greet each other, giving kisses while Hawke holds her face to his. He's acting oddly sweet to her, considering it's her sister's birthday.

"Has she called you back?" he asks in a low voice.

"No," she responds, sounding sad.

Hawke sighs, setting the stuff on the counter and pulling her into his chest, rubbing her back as she begins crying.

"It's alright baby. I'm here now." He comforts her, then connects eyes with me.

I look away, running my hand along my neck, trying to not interrupt their private moment yet feeling totally awkward being stuck in the kitchen for it.

"I'm just gonna go wash my face real quick." Cole sniffs before Hawke nods, kissing her forehead.

"Love you."

She heads towards the bathroom as I look up at Hawke again. He's rubbing

his forehead between his thumb and forefinger.

e “Everything alright?” I ask softly.

y “Yeah,” he sighs. “It’s just always a bad day.”

s He grabs a bottle of water from the fridge, walking over to lean against the counter opposite me, looking all mopey and shit.

, What the hell is going on? Why is her birthday a bad day? Like, what the fuck? Yeah, getting older sucks, I get it, but Jesus, let’s eat some fucking cake and chill or something. I’ve never seen such depressing shit.

f I must be making a crazy-looking face at him, because he pauses just before the bottle of water reaches his lips.

e “Their mother died three years ago today,” he says, sensing my confusion, before taking a sip.

e I blow a large puff of air through my lips while running a hand through my hair. I had no idea.

“Well, shit. That’ll ruin a birthday,” I respond, making a pained face for them without thinking.

Hawke shakes his head at me, then sighs again.

, “It’s hard. On all of them. Cole tries to make it better, tries to separate Jo’s birthday from the tragedy and attempts to celebrate, but it’s useless. Jo doesn’t deal with it well.”

I’m not letting the fact that he called it a tragedy slip past me.

r “I mean, not to sound harsh, but why do Han’s feelings matter more than Cole’s? They both lost her. Shouldn’t they be connecting more over this?”

e “Han found her.”

There it is.

When you hear that someone found someone, you can only assume the worst. I’ve known a fragment of their family life since hanging out with Cole



more. I know she hates her dad because he cheated on her mom with some bitch named Nicole, hence the need for the name change, but now this? I have no idea their mother had passed away. They don't talk about it. At all. And I find that oddly strange. By the sounds of the situation, it's worse than I can imagine, darker perhaps.

a "Fuck," I say, running my hands down my face.

g "Tell me about it," Hawke comments, pinching the bridge of his nose.

Cole comes out of the bathroom, looking from me to Hawke, then back to the oven.

"Well, let's eat some good food and get drunk off this wine, huh?"

, I grin lightly at her, loving that she can just pull herself out of her pain with ease, then look over at Hawke. He's gazing at her with such adoration. One look, and I can tell they're on the same wavelength. He knew what this day does to her, whether she's willing to open up about it or not. Cole's a strong girl. She internalizes a lot, but Hawke draws it out of her the way she needs. As weak as this makes me sound, I literally love the two of them together. They have such mutual respect and deep-rooted love for one another that seems to transcend. Fucking soulmates if I ever saw 'em.

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1

Han never showed.

She never showed, and it was expected.

I stared at her empty plate as we ate and chatted about topics totally unrelated to the circumstance at hand. I wondered to myself about Han, what she went through, what she saw. I wondered who she was before this, the

etype of person she was before her life became so intertwined with death and suffering. I wondered about the way that it changed her afterwards, and how it's deeply affecting her today.

1 I wonder where she is right now. Not even just physically, but mentally. Which dark rabbit hole did she descend into to avoid her reality? Today is the kind of day that requires you to bend time. I'm sure she's alone and I'm not sure that's such a good thing anymore. I want to reach her again. Be the hand she needs to hold on to. As strange as it sounds, I feel like I'm the only one who can understand her. I want to be there for her in a way no one else can. I need to get to her.

1 After dinner, I tell Cam and Cole I need to run an errand. So, I get in my car and make my way to an unfamiliar place.

y A flower shop.

g Like Hawke, I knew flowers could cheer a woman up when feeling down. Unlike Hawke, the prettiest, most alluring flowers were not on my agenda. Finding the lady behind the desk, she looks up from behind her magazine, eyeing me up and down suspiciously before asking if I needed something.

Her name on her conveniently placed name tag is Brenda. She looks like Brenda with her short, round, judgey self and her bowl cut that went out in the 80s. She's judging me already, eyes narrowed, lips pursed together, trying to look intimidating as if she thinks I'm here to rob the shop. I get it. I don't look like I'm supposed to be alive in the daylight, but damn Brenda, give a dude a break.

“Can I buy your most dead plant?”

y Her eyes narrow as she cocks her head to the side, completely confused by my request.

e “Most dead?”

d “Yeah, I’m looking for a plant that’s on its way out. Dried up. Brown  
vCrunchy.”

Her face contorts at each adjective I drop before she’s left with a  
.horribly wrinkled expression.

e “Uh, let me see what I have in the back.”

t After a few minutes of waiting by the counter, sniffing some of the  
dblooming flowers they offer, she finally reappears with a pot containing some  
etype of decaying, leafy plant.

I “It’s a fiddle leaf fig. Tried to bring it back, but it was too far gone.”

“I’d say,” I comment, wrinkling my nose while touching the yellowish  
ybrown leaves barely clinging to the dried out stalk. “How much?”

“You’re kidding right?”

I raise my brows, then lower them, looking from side to side.

l. “Just take it. I literally pulled it out of the dumpster,” she scoffs, shaking  
.her head.

;, “Thank you. Thank you so much.” I wiggle my brows at her, flashing her a  
wink with my signature drop-them-panties smile.

a Brenda needs to get some dick. This much is clear.

1 She nods while studying me. I understand she can’t figure me out and, to  
gmy surprise, I like it. Most people can figure me out at the drop of a hat. I’m  
tcloud and generally open with who I am and what I want, but maybe some o  
athat mysteriousness is seeping over into my life now. I feel like Han.

I take the fiddle fig thing and prop it under my arm, heading out to my car  
I buckle it into the front seat and admire it with a grin.

y “This’ll do just fine.”

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13







**D**o I knock? Of course I knock. How the fuck else would she know someone is here? Jesus, I can't think straight. I'm all jittery and shi like a feen who can taste his next hit. I'm standing outside her apartment doo feeling flustered and nervous as fuck, for some reason.

It's just Han.

Like, just another girl I've stuck my dick in.

That's all.

There's so many of them.

No big deal...

Oh, who the fuck am I kidding? It's fucking Han!

The only girl I can't seem to leave alone, or keep my mind off. The one end up seeing in everyone I attempt to connect with. The only chick who gives me a shot of adrenaline I can feel throughout my body with a look, a smile, a fucking text.

She's the only one who's ever strung me out like this, and I don't even know how to be normal anymore.

I'm pacing in front of the door now, with this confusing mess of feelings holding the plant in front of me, when her door opens.

I pause in place, eyes wide open, sucking in a breath with the plant held out before me.

"I thought I heard someone talking out here." She positions herself against the door frame, crossing her arms with a confused little smirk on her face.

"Fuck, was I talking?"

My hand immediately slaps my forehead, pausing in place as I make a pained expression. Jesus, what was caged in my mind and what was just violently released into the air?

"To your new friend, apparently." She nods towards the plant.

I chuckle at my stupidity, then walk towards her.

"Here. It's for you. Very Merry Unbirthday, to you." I offer the dead plant holding it up between us with a big cheesy grin.

She stares at it for a minute with an unreadable expression, and I want to know every word, every thought that just crossed her mind.

I'm the idiot who speaks my mind. She's the muse who holds the secrets.

Blinking suddenly, she sucks in a breath, seemingly distraught, before opening the door up for me.

It's amazing what an opened door can make you feel. Such instant relief and gratification.

I walk into her place, seeing the same dead plants slowly decaying even further. The pair of ferns are now brown in color, losing the tiniest bit of green they were holding onto the last time I was here. The duck is still sporting that fucked up looking face with the sombrero in place. All is right in the world.

Placing the plant down on the stump serving its purpose as her coffee table



,in the living room, I sit down on her couch as she heads to the kitchen. I rub my palm on the seat next to me, remembering the last time we were pressed against each other on this surface.

Hands all over each other, tongues intertwined, my dick harder than a—  
t “Thirsty?” she asks, pulling me from my thoughts.

She always offers me water, but never the plants. It’s entirely unfair.

“I’ll have whatever you’re having,” I grin, getting comfortable, stretching my arms out along the back of the couch. “Ah, home, sweet home. Love being back here.”

She snorts, her lip pulling up in the corner just a little.

“I’ve missed this place, the smells, the water, Norbert...”

Giggling her cute little giggle, she shakes her head at me while scrunching her button nose, walking towards the couch with two small glasses.

“You always know how to make me smile, even when I’m actively trying not to.”

“Why would you try not to?” I ask, taking the glass, filled a quarter of the way with a brown substance. I hold it up to my face, inspecting it. “Also, you might wanna check your pipes.”

She grins, shaking her head, trying to contain it, before clinking her glass to mine and downing the liquid in one large swallow. I do the same and realize it’s whisky we’re drinking tonight.

1 I set my glass down on the stump, stretching my legs back out and sinking into the couch again. She curls herself up in the space next to me, sitting on her feet, looking adorable as ever with her little septum bling, her silky black hair framing those beautiful emerald eyes, and those pouty pink lips that have yet to wrap around my cock.

2 “It feels wrong to be happy today,” she comments, running her middle

of finger along the circumference of her glass, staring off into the floor.

1 “Do you want to talk about it?” I ask, putting it out there.

She doesn’t seem like she’d be the type to willingly open up about something so deep and personal, but if I don’t let her know I’m here for her what kind of shit guy would I be?

“No.”

3 My assumptions were correct, but she doesn’t say “no” the normal way. She says no as if I asked her to watch a snuff film about dead puppies. In a pleading, depressingly sad sort of way. It makes me instantly hurt.

I get it. If she wanted to embrace the pain, she would’ve been at Cole’s having a kumbaya birthday dinner and discussing feelings. But she wants to avoid it, and maybe she hopes that I’d actually help her forget. That alone may have been my ticket in the door.

3 She grabs a little tray from the other side of the couch and sets it down on the stump next to the plant. Pulling out a razor blade, she dumps out a small baggie of coke, getting some lines together. Snorting a quick one, she rubs her little nose with her thumb, her eyes closing briefly as the effect hits.

I watch her closely, studying her movements, memorizing them. I know right when the cocaine reaches her bloodstream, I can almost feel it in my veins. She opens her eyes, finding mine as we connect for a moment, a moment without words.

3 It’s as if we can communicate without communicating. She’s in pain. She needs someone to share that with without sharing it. I understand it because I understand her.

2 She offers me the tray with a line waiting. I take it from her, quickly snort it, then use the razor to spread another. I look at her with my brows raised asking for permission to take another. One just doesn’t touch me the way i

used to. She nods, then lets out a deep sigh, sitting back on the couch, her fingers drumming along her exposed thigh that's resting close to mine.

I try not to focus on it. The soft, creamy skin I now know feels like nothing I've ever felt. Her plain white stretchy t-shirt leaves little to the imagination showcasing the fact that she hates wearing bras. It's hilarious to me she doesn't seem to notice what her body does to the people around her or even what it does to me. She never hides it. Her shredded black shorts barely clinging to her tiny waist leave me wondering when the last time she ate was.

I set the tray down on the other side of her again before stretching back out against the couch, letting the high hit while the emotions of the day linger in the air around us. If this is what she needs, someone to just sit with her, then I'll do just that, all day.

I look around her place, studying it for changes, looking for any signs of anyone else being here with her, but come up short. Just her and the same old collection of weird artifacts that represent her in more ways than she'd probably wish. I'm in the world of Han, the place that brings her back to life when the outside world can't.

"A while ago you asked me what my favorite sea animal was," I begin by saying, turning my body towards her on the couch. "I told you mine, but now I'm going to tell you yours."

She cocks a brow, her lip pulling in the corner.

"You are, huh?"

I "Yeah."

She clears her throat, angling her body to face me, resting her head against the hand that's now perched along the back of the couch. She stares at me, with curiosity. I'm the person who's going to take her away from her problems with my erratic and impulsive behavior. Oh, little does she know.

r “Shoot hot boy.”

I smirk at the nickname, brushing it off before licking my lips and finding her eyes again.

, “Turritopsis dohrnii.”

e “Bless you.” She smirks.

1 I shoot her an amusingly annoyed expression.

y “Alright, I’ll bite the bait. What’s that?!” she asks in an exaggerated and ditzy tone.

t “It’s a jellyfish.”

1 “You could’ve just said jellyfish, Steve Irwin.”

1 “Well, the Turritopsis dohrnii is different, kinda like you.”

She cocks her head to the side. “How so?”

f “You’ll need to figure that out.”

l “Kid!” she whines, smacking my hand that’s placed all too close to my thigh, making me feel the touch in my dick. “You’re really not going to tell me?”

“Nah, consider it homework.”

y “Homework.” She scoffs, rolling her eyes at me before turning her head

v “Thank you, professor.”

“You could come to my office for some extra credit if you like sucking dick.”

She shrieks, gently slapping my chest, making me grin. At first I think maybe I’ve gone a little too far before she exclaims, “It’s my fantasy!”

t “I know, we should play it out,” I smirk, licking my lips while looking at hers.

r She giggles, biting her bottom lip as she shyly looks away, as if already playing the role of the quiet student about to please her demanding and pussy

hungry professor to get that grade. Her eyes catch something and I watch as her smile fades off of her face into an entirely different expression in a matter of seconds.

I study her change in mood, drawing my eyes towards the point at which she's staring. She's looking at the plant in front of her again, the one I bought. Her eyes are completely fixated on it, as if it's about to come to life and stab us with shards of decaying stalk.

"What are you thinking about?" I ask, sensing this strange hostility towards the decaying plant I so graciously welcomed into her hospice home for the dying green.

A piece of her hair is blocking me from seeing the look in her eyes, so I reach over and gently tuck it behind her ear, careful to avoid the array of earrings. She bites the corner of her bottom lip at the touch, staring straight ahead while wincing slightly.

I "What I want to know is why you got me this plant." Her voice isn't peppy at all. It's almost angry.

"Well," I clear my throat, sitting up higher to inspect the leaves. "I went to the greenhouse and asked for the most dead plant they had."

"And why would you do that?" she asks, glaring at it now.

I "Because I know you like them."

"Why would you assume that? I've never told you that," she snaps, her little forehead wrinkle between her eyes making its appearance, telling me she's definitely upset.

I peer around her at the handful of decaying plants, then back to her eyes with a hint of humor on my face.

I "You didn't have to."

I "I could just be bad at watering. Maybe I like healthy plants."

s “You don’t.” I grin confidently.

r “You don’t know that,” she stresses, turning her head, her eyes narrowed in on me.

n I feel it now. Her anger. Like a wave of unexpected heat.

I “I do.”

e “No. You don’t,” she says firmly, seeming upset.

My smile slowly fades as I study her, looking through her eyes to really see the deepest part of her fears. She stares back at me, her chest rising and falling faster than mine. She’s definitely upset. She’s frustrated because I’m breaking in. I’m understanding her. I’m figuring her out and she hates that I’m leaving her vulnerable and exposed before me, and the feeling is quite literally painful for her.

t “You like to take in what others so willingly throw out and call trash. But they aren’t trash to you. You see these plants still clinging to life, teetering on the very edge of death. That line...that simple, yet impossibly heavy line of crossing over, it speaks to you. You’re fascinated by it, yet eternally frightened. You saw death firsthand. Now you want to surround yourself with it in order to not fear it anymore.”

She freezes in place, her eyes almost horrified as she gazes back at me. Swallowing, she scrunches her nose quickly, then narrows her eyes at me again, the anger penetrating me.

e Surprising me, she jumps into my lap, straddling me against the couch with her thighs. She slaps her hand up against my neck, wrapping her fingers firmly around it, her forefinger and thumb resting just beneath my jaw holding me against the couch like she’s really about to strangle me.

“Don’t do that,” she growls above me, squeezing her hold while her lips quivers.

“Do what?” I ask calmly, the rumbling of my voice clearly felt in her hand.  
This is turning me on and I can’t even help it. I’ve never really seen this side of her. I’ve seen the facade, the light that everyone sees in public, but never this. Never the raw, emotional Han who chokes people out. I’m into this way more than I should be, taunting it out of her to push her over the line she likes to rest behind.

“Don’t you psychoanalyze me,” she growls, venom at the tip of every word.

Even mad, she’s fucking beautiful, almost more so, because she’s raw. Her short, uneven black bangs are hanging just above those venomous, green eyes, telling me she wants to swallow me whole, ready to hunt the game that’s willingly crossed into her territory.

“Did I hit a nerve?” I continue taunting, knowing what I’m doing, feeling some sort of dark lust between us now. “Did I assume correctly?”

She tightens her hand around my neck, causing my mouth to part and my eyes to wince slightly. A low, breathy groan escapes me as I lick my lips, our eyes never parting. Her breath is coming out in shallow pants.

I’ve hit the nail on the head. I want to kiss her so badly. I want to fuck every feeling out of this girl, just to prove to her I can.

“Yeah.” She shakes her head, breathing roughly through her nose as she glares at me disappointingly. “Yeah, you fucking did.”

My eyebrows raise slightly at her admittance before she shocks me by leaning down and pressing her soft, sweet lips firmly against mine.

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14







I t's a hard kiss.

One filled with nothing but sweet, torturous pain.

Our teeth press together beneath our lips, the roughness to our connection present. Her breaths are frantic. I grab the back of her neck, opening her mouth with my tongue, plunging it in to find hers, needing the contact of our mouths deeply intertwined.

The kiss ignites the fire burning between us all over again. There's chemistry here. Real, substantial, physical chemistry that's deeper than anything palpable.

Her hands are both firmly around my neck now, clutching onto me holding on to the last bit of control she feels she still has. I grab for the hem of her shirt, attempting to lift it off of her. She releases her hold on my neck in order to lift her arms to allow it off, separating our kiss only for a second before finding my lips again.

I cup her breasts in my large hands, moaning into her mouth at their softness. Her skin beneath my touch feels too good. Finding her aroused and erect nipples, I gently pinch them between my fingers. She throws her head

back at the sensation, crying out in sweet little moans, so I pull them harder twisting them as I do it, seeing she enjoys the pain mixed in with the pleasure.

She kisses me like it pains her, but she loves the hurt, lives for the torture. Her fingers wrap around my neck again, softer this time, as our lips glide across each other's. Our tongues toy with one another's, exploring the depth of each other's mouths, the feeling arousing both of us.

I pull her hips into me, rubbing her along my erection that's pressing tightly against my jeans. Her breaths are frantic as I continue rolling her hips over me. My hands find their way down to her ass, guiding her along the length of my hard shaft.

“Han,” I whisper against her lips, dipping my head down and apart from her lips.

I don't even know why I say it, I'm not trying to stop this, but something about it feels entirely different to me. Something inside of me is begging to get some clarity. I think it's my heart, the one I didn't think I had anymore. It's coming to life in her presence, and I don't know what to do with that.

“Shut up, Kid,” she begs between kisses, almost knowing where I'm going. “Just please, shut up.”

I pull back, looking up at her with a longing gaze. Her black hair is framing her perfect little face, that little forehead wrinkle between her brows present. She's worried I'm going to stop this. Worried that whatever is happening between us is as complicated as it appears to be becoming. So worried that I can't stop it, I pull her back to my lips, giving her what she needs. At least for today.

She kisses me back, her tongue ring softly gliding against the underside of my tongue, making my dick twitch, before pulling back to catch her breath.

She pushes herself up and off of me, unbuttoning her denim shorts. I lean forward, grabbing for the edge of them and assisting her in pulling them down her soft legs as we stare at each other. She stands before me in only a tiny pair of lace underwear.

I can't help but take in all of her, my eyes tracing her every curve of her slight little stomach that tells me she gets her workout from the waves. And her beautifully tattooed and tanned skin that tells me the sun loves her just as much, if not more, than the ocean.

She hooks her thumbs under her underwear, slowly dragging them down her thighs, kicking them off, until she stands naked before me. I swallow at her beauty, my lips parting as I attempt to catch a breath, feeling entirely unworthy of it.

Typically, this circumstance would have women covering themselves, feeling shy, or embarrassed, but not her. Not Han. If anything, she becomes more confident stripped physically before me, as if she can finally breathe. I only wish I could get her to that same mentality when it comes to the depths of her mind, slowly pull down the material hiding her deepest, darkest secrets and desires, the stories that make up this wonder before me.

She places her foot on the edge of the couch, bending her knee, literally opening herself up before me. My jaw hits the floor as she gazes down at me like a queen to a henchman. Reaching out, she runs her fingers through the back of my white blonde hair, grabbing a handful of it firmly and pushing my head forward.

*Holy fuck, this chick has balls. Not literally, but shit.*

I take the opportunity to do what I want to anyway and curl my hand underneath her opened thighs, gripping onto the flesh of her delicious ass before kissing the soft skin on her inner thigh. I nip at it, dragging my teeth

before soothing the mark with my tongue. Trailing my tongue up even higher, I kiss just above the soon-to-be bruise and repeat the motion, leaving her marked.

I gaze back up at her. Her lips are parted, her chest rising and falling rapidly, and her eyelids are heavy with lust. She's totally into it.

Squeezing and pulling my hair tighter, she nudges my head forward more making me grin. Teasing her is now my new favorite hobby. Fuck, only making her smile, I want to make a life out of teasing her with my tongue.

I grip my fingers into her ass, pulling her forward towards where I'm sitting back against the couch, lifting her leg up and over my shoulder to bring her gorgeous pussy directly to my waiting tongue. She leans forward bracing her flexible self with her hands on the back of the couch as I lick up the length of her slit.

"Ah, God," she moans.

I'm gentle with her at first, massaging her clit with a flat wet tongue before kissing and gently sucking each of her sweet lips between mine. She's trembling above me as I taste her, lapping it up as she gives it. I bring my two fingers to her entrance, rubbing in small circles. Focusing on her clit again, I suck it gently before dragging my teeth, nipping the sensitive bud at the same time as I slip the two fingers deep inside her.

She cries out, grabbing a handful of hair at the back of my head again as she almost collapses above me.

"Fuck, that feels so good."

I groan at the tight grip she has on my hair, forcing my face to do the things she needs. I continue working my fingers inside of her, flicking my tongue against her sweet bundle of nerve endings, alternating between a forceful stroke and a soft, almost tickling, lick.

1 She rides my fingers in the air; her sounds becoming louder as her breath  
gchange into pants, before she lets go of my hair, pushing away from my  
tongue, removing my fingers from her warm center, leaving me heavy-eyed  
gwet-lipped, and feeling drunk off lust.

“I’m close, and I don’t want to be,” she explains. “I don’t want it to end  
yet.”

y I cock my brow at her, gripping her harder, not letting her back away.

“Fuck that,” I say before diving back in, my tongue immediately licking up  
between her sex, flicking that clit as fast as my tongue will allow before  
sliding those fingers back where they belong.

There’s nothing I love more than eating a woman out. I love tonguing her  
sweet, pink and swollen clit, aching with need, getting those delicious juices  
all over my lips, sucking on every part of her until she’s dripping down my  
chin. I’m a total freak with it. It turns me on like nothing else. My cock is as  
solid as a rock while I listen to her little whines and whimpers as I imagine  
fucking her wet little aching hole.

She cries out, gripping my shoulders, piercing into them with her long  
black nails as I continue the sweet torture she’s withholding, forcing her over  
the edge. She tightens around my fingers, her pussy pulsating around them in  
the sexiest fucking way as I continue massaging her sensitive, swollen clit  
until she comes hard against my mouth.

I lick until she’s literally quivering to get away, the area now too sensitive.

“Oh my God,” she gasps, then takes a deep breath, letting it out as she  
straddles my lap, leaning against me for support, her body now limp with  
pleasure.

a “I don’t like that shit,” I say, sitting her back, grabbing her chin forcefully  
to face me.

s Her drunken smile turns serious as she studies my eyes for some sort of understanding.

, “Don’t ever do that. Not around me,” I demand. “I want you cumming every fucking chance you get. Do you understand me?”

l Her smile comes back like it never left as she gazes at me with a new look I can’t explain it yet, and I wish I knew her well enough to understand it, but it feels like something deeper than what I’ve seen before. She nods, her chin still in my grasp as I gently release her, tucking some hair past her little flushed cheek, behind her ear.

I get the feeling she likes me a little more than she’s letting on. But that feeling, it’s a dangerous one. One that can easily be misperceived.

s Suddenly the guy that’s all action no talk, has the desire to push past action into something deeper. Han, however, is still clinging to surface level.

s I can only hope she slowly sinks into me.

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She slowly backs away from me, sinking down between my legs as her hands find the button to my jeans. Her eyes narrow in on me as she pops the button, pulling them open and unzipping them at a tantalizing pace.

I swallow, adjusting my hips some as she shrugs my pants down.

“You don’t have to do this,” I say, placing my hand on top of hers, stalling her movements.

I’m not even sure who I am anymore. Kid is declining head.

I just get the feeling that today is about her, it belongs to her, and by having her doing this, I’m somehow taking away from that. I don’t ever want her to feel like she has to do this, but by the look in her eyes, she’s not taking no for an answer.

“Don’t ever do that,” she begins with a scowl. “Not around me. I want you cumming every chance you get.” Her scowl slowly slides into a nasty little grin that makes my balls ache. “Do you understand me?” she asks, cocking her head slightly, repeating my entire mantra.

I lift my hands in the hair, nodding profusely. “Yes, ma’am.”

She reaches her little hand into my pants and wraps her fingers around my erection, pulling it out. Instantly, my mouth drops open.

She flutters her lashes before looking up at me, toying with me. I lick my lips, getting more comfortable as she brings the head of my cock to her mouth.

“I forgot how big you are.” She smirks.

I watch her as she drags her flat tongue along the underside of my shaft the tongue ring rolling up the length with the perfect force.

“Ho-shit,” I groan, dropping my head back against the couch, then popping it right back up to watch her.

She swirls her tongue along my tip, lapping up the precum that’s escaping me before taking me into her mouth. She slides her mouth halfway down my shaft, coating it with her saliva as I fall back further into the seat of the couch.

Her hands massage the base of me in achingly slow strokes while she works on taking me to the back of her throat.

“Goddammit Han,” I groan, grabbing onto her hair, then pulling away.

“No, do that...but wait.” She pauses, sitting back on her heels as she pulls her hairband off her wrist and starts pulling her hair up into a ponytail at the top of her head.

I watch her with curiosity.

“A handlebar.” She smiles.

*This woman here.*

I wince a little at the idea. I don’t want to degrade the woman I think more highly of than anyone else I’ve messed around with. With Tarah, sure, even with blondie in the bathroom, yeah. I would’ve grabbed hold of her handlebar and plowed her face into my pelvis again and again until I erupted deep down into her esophagus. But this—it feels different.

y Before I can overthink things more, she begins her descent down my shaft again. I watch her with my mouth open as her beautiful, sweet, pink lips wrap around me and have my cock pulsating and ready to blow.

r She takes me to her throat, gagging on me as she attempts to push the limits. Her hands slip their way to my thighs, her nails raking down slowly as she takes me with no hands. I thrust my hips up, unable to control the building sensation that has me on the edge of the best head of my life.

“Fuck, I’m about to drown you in cum,” I say, pulling her head back gently, not wanting to hurt her.

Her swollen lips making a pop noise as I pull her off my cock, and it’s the sexiest fucking thing I’ve ever heard. She looks up at me, confused.

y “I need to be inside you again,” I explain.

l. I need to do this again. I feel cheated of the memory of last time. Not that it wasn’t amazing, and the sensations didn’t pull me under, but everything that happened on LSD night was so overwhelming. I don’t remember the physical act of sex with Han as vividly as I’d like to. As I need to.

a She grins and nods, grabbing for my jeans. My pants come down and kick my remaining clothes off as she straddles me against the couch again, my hands slowly grazing up her silky soft thighs, running the length of her tattoo.

“What’s your real name, Kid?” She looks into my eyes, searching for me as she asks, almost needing to know before we do what we’re about to do.

e It doesn’t make sense to me. We’ve had sex before. But today, today it’s indifferent, and she’s feeling it too. I want her to finally sink.

r Today I want to drown in her. Sink down beneath her surface and fucking drown in everything that she is. I want her in my lungs, in my veins, in my

tsoul. I need her to end me in all the ways imaginable so I can live in her dark impenetrable hell.

“Kai,” I whisper my answer, looking back and forth between her eyes for a reaction.

She blinks, her pouty lips slightly parted as she kneels above me.

“Kai,” she whispers back, licking her lips as her eyes stare down into mine. My name has never sounded so good. I want to hear her raspy, sweet little voice moan it again and again until the end of time. “That’s so *fucking* hot.”

I can’t contain the grin that pulls at my lip.

“Condom?” she asks.

My brows lower and my grin slips.

“Do you mean do I want one? Do I have one? What are you asking me?” I ask frantically.

A smile breaks across her face as she sticks her tongue against the front of her teeth playfully.

“Because I’d love to just stick it in. Like just the tip. Just for a second,” My humorous face lights up with a huge cheesy grin. “C’mon, just the tip, Promise it’ll stop there.”

She laughs at my abashed behavior, knowing I’m just playing around with her. Safe sex is important, even to me.

“Hell no, cause it won’t,” she says chuckling, reaching around the couch and grabbing for something from the window sill.

I turn my head, following her hand, seeing a condom.

“Why do you have condoms on your windowsill?” I ask, the confusion seeping on my face.

“Cause I like to ride, and this is my sex couch,” she says with a straight face.

“I think I heard my heart just crunch like one of these dead plants is in my chest.”

“Chill, Kai.” Her face breaks into a mischievous grin as her tongue runs along her teeth playfully. “Everyone looks in the nightstand, no one checks the window sill. It was the perfect alternative.”

My eyebrows raise as I blink slowly, shaking my head. This girl is the strangest, most exhilarating, most random person I’ve ever met. She lives in a world of her own.

Ripping the condom open with her teeth, she takes it out, placing it on the tip of my dick between us.

I suck in a breath at the contact. She begins slowly rolling it down as we stare at each other, our dilated eyes matching in the sexiest, most fucked up way.

It feels so good, her hand on me. Something as simple as her rolling a condom down onto my erection has my mouth open and a breath slipping between my lips like a bitch.

“You’re here,” she whispers, hovering above me now. “You came.”

Her words pour out in disbelief. It’s such a random time to be having this conversation, considering the fact that she’s currently pushing the tip of my dick into her as she slides her way down my thickness, leaving me damn near unable to think about anything but the insurmountable pleasure.

“Of course I did,” I whisper before wincing. “I couldn’t—” I hiss as she sinks down, slowly taking all of me into her. “I couldn’t not.”

She feels amazing. So warm. So wet. Squeezing my dick so tightly in her sweet spot.

“I hate it,” she moans softly, lifting slightly, then sinking back down onto me again. “I hate that you couldn’t not.”



y She dips down, swallowing my thickness in her slick walls, the pleasure rippling through me.

s Shit, she's destroying me. Everything I thought I knew is gone. I don't know anything about the world. Things that used to matter don't seem to exist. The only thing is this moment. With her. It's fucking destroying me.

e "Oh, Kai," she moans loudly as she grinds down on me. "I love fucking you."

"Ah, fuck," I groan, gripping the meaty flesh near her hips roughly, holding her in place. "Stop. Stop moving."

The rate at which my heart is racing could either be from the coke or from the fact that I'm starting to seriously fall for this woman on top of me. I don't know what to do with it. She needs to stop talking while moving. I'm feeling too much, the drugs, the emotions, the connection, all at once.

a She pauses with me inside her. Cupping her hands around my neck, she lifts my chin with her fingers. Her eyes silently study mine, and I feel like she can read me, reading into this.

"It's sex, Kai." She moves again. "Enjoy how we feel together."

s Before I can get it through my thick skull that she's equating this to nothing but sex and sex alone, she pulls my bottom lip between her teeth, shutting off any thoughts I could possibly have. I groan as she slowly begins picking up speed.

e "You feel best, better than anything." I hiss, feeling her get wetter with each dip of her bottom to the top of my thighs. "I'm fucking addicted. I'm addicted to you, Han."

She's the gateway drug to a lifetime of addictions, not of this world. Her drug is the kind that you overdose on, knowing you'll never be the same again after her. She enlightens in the way that you can only hope to hold on

eto the ignorance of not knowing her, because life after her will crush the deepest part of the soul you deny owning.

t She lets out a breathy moan, her hands rubbing down my chest, feeling all the way down to the place we're connected and back up again as her bounce become more powerful. Her fingers wrap around my neck again, her breath becoming frantic as she holds on, riding me like a professional bull rider rides an unruly bull. She's owning the fuck out of me.

, Leaning forward, she kisses me again, tongue searching for mine between my lips. She's in control and I'm following her lead. She sucks on my bottom lip again before literally sinking her teeth into it. I taste the iron of the blood in my mouth as I feel her teeth pierce through my skin.

g "Ah, shi—"

I'm sick, I fucking love it. I want more. More pain. The pain mixed with the pleasure. It grounds me like nothing else. I grab a fistful of hair, pulling her head back away from me, exposing her neck and chest as I lift my hips to pound up into her, my lip curling up. I hiss through my teeth as the need to fuck her harder comes over me.

o My other hand grabs her breast, the one with the nipple ring. I pull on it, between my fingers as she cries out in pleasure. She likes the pain mixed with pleasure the same way I do, needing it to remind us which dimension we're in.

1 "Take it," she demands, her eyes screwed closed. "Take it all from me."

1 My eyes narrow at the comment, and I'm glad she can't see my face. What she's referring to is something I'm entirely too aware of. It pains me to know she needs me in this way, almost using me in a sense. Am I really just another one of these dried up plants to her? A distraction from the deep hurt within her? I want to be more than just a fucking distraction.

e It pisses me off.

I pick her up, standing as we're still connected, setting her down flat on her back against the seat of the couch. It's my turn to take control of this situation. I'm not one to be walked on or used. At least, not by her anyway.

s "Kai?" she asks against my lips.

r "Shut up Han." I repeat the phrase she used earlier. "Just please, shut up."

She stares up at me, a hint of a grin on her swollen and used lips.

1 I position myself above her, lifting one of her legs up onto my shoulder by my neck. *Fuck, she's flexible.*

l Sliding back into her, I drop my forehead against hers and we both moan at the sensation of fitting together again. It's so good. Too good. I'm so fucked. I'm drunk and high on Han. This feeling, these emotions. My world is spinning.

g I drop my head to the crook of her neck near her collarbone as she rakes her fingernails down my back; the feeling driving me insane. She's a wild animal, feminine in nature, fiercely independent, yet still needing a man in the most primal way. I slide deep into her, stilling as she gasps at the force. I find her shoulder, sinking my teeth into her soft skin. She cries out as I brand her with bruises. The spot is red from the sharp bite, so I lick it and soothe it with my kiss.

"Damn, Kai," she moans as we connect eyes again. "You're so wrong for me."

t I feel it. I don't like that I feel it. Her words drive me insane with the inability to awaken her to her own feelings. *I'm too right for you.*

t The pace increases as the thrusts become harder and faster. She screams out with every thrust, reaching her arm above her to brace herself as I fuck her up into the armrest. The couch moves along the floor, bumping into the

end table nearby, crashing into it as the tray of coke falls onto the floor. I look up for a split second and Han takes the opportunity to roll me off the edge of the couch and onto the floor.

“What the—”

She wastes no time, straddling my lap again, finding the head of my cock and pushing it back into her. My eyes roll back into my head as she slides herself back down my shaft again, swallowing my length. Her finger goes to her lips as her mouth opens, sucking the length of it. I’m watching her in amazement, not sure where she’s going to strike next, but what’s clear is she’s back in control.

l. She reaches above my head on the floor, her nipple directly above my lips so I suck it into my mouth, biting down on it firmly between my teeth. I’m angry with the switch in roles. She moans in approval as I bite her soft flesh scrolling her hips against me, gripping my cock deep inside her warm, wet walls.

1 Sitting back up on me again, she brings her white, coke coated finger to my lips, pushing it into my mouth and rubbing it slowly over my gums before placing it on my tongue. I suck on her finger while I fuck her, dragging my teeth as she slowly drags it out. The look on her face, fucking magnificent.

Sex and fucking drugs.

r She takes my hand, bringing it to her lips before she sucks on the two fingers that were previously inside her, staring at me while she does it, the sight sending me into overdrive. Removing the fingers, she guides my hand to the spilled coke above my head, coating them with the substance before scrubbing my fingers all over the insides of her mouth. She sucks my fingers as she fucks the shit out of me on the floor. I’ve never been so turned on in all of my life.

I We're so bad for each other, that much is certain. But it's so good. Deeper and deeper we go, down the rabbit hole, until we're both lost in our own demise. No one here can save anyone because no one here wants to be saved. We want to live in the danger and destruction around us because it's the only thing that makes us feel alive.

s "Kai," she moans, her lids heavy with lust. "I think I'm going to come."

o I bite down on my bottom lip at her words, wishing I could hear that phrase every day for the rest of my life.

s "Come for me. Fuck, come all over me, Han," I groan, thrusting into her heat, loving the way it's making her fall apart.

. I reach up, wrapping my hands firmly around her tattoo covered throat, using it as an anchor as I drive my hips up into her. My mouth drops open as I try to keep my eyes centered on her, the ability to keep them focused becoming a challenge as I near my own release.

"Ah! God!" she screams, her fingers clutching and clawing at my chest.  
o "Yes!"

e I feel her tighten around me as her legs lock up, her eyes sealing shut while she continues crying out, completely letting go around me, leaning into my hands as I tighten around her neck.

It's the most beautiful fucking thing I've ever witnessed. Her eyes open and lock onto mine as she continues convulsing around me.

e She's everything that a woman should be. Sensual, sexual, seductive, overtly beautiful in her own right, but dangerous as all hell. She's my destruction. She's going to tear me the fuck apart, and I've never been more unprepared.

f So caught up in the emotion, I realize I still haven't come. She melts onto me, falling on top of my chest. Our skin on fire for one another. Turning her

to face me, I kiss her sweet lips, grabbing a handful on her perfectly round ass, and drive incessantly into her.

A few strokes later and I'm losing it, releasing myself into the condom with a few throaty groans, breaking the kiss to try to breathe through it. She watches my face intently as I let go into her. I feel the sensation spread throughout my limbs.

"Oooohmygod," I groan, not even able to move my lips at the numbing pleasure.

I drop my head back against the carpeted floor, my chest heaving as I try to collect myself.

She leans up on my chest, a light chuckle escaping her lips.

"Holy fuck," she says in a breathy tone. "I can never masturbate again."

I laugh at the randomness of her statement.

"What?"

"Nothing will ever come close to getting me off like your hands wrapped tightly around my neck and your thick dick deep inside of me."

*Um, yeah. Okay, so I'm hard again.*

I swallow, hoping the next words that come out of my mouth aren't high pitched as I imagine they will be, all while my dick attempts to come back to life inside her.

"I just have to say one thing before the moment passes, and I lose my nerve," I say, my tone coming out as serious as I intended.

She stares at me, waiting for me to finish, the post-orgasm lustful look still in place as her breasts rise and fall while she tries to catch her breath, looking down at me with her eyes narrowed and her jaw lax. She wasn't expecting something real and raw and I like that I caught her off guard.

"Don't leave this time."

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I'm in too deep.  
*Fuck, that's a Sum 41 song.*

And Sum 41 now reminds me of Han and LSD night.

Everything reminds me of her. She's seeped her way into the forefront of my mind. I can't seem to stop thinking about her. I think the fact that I know nothing drives me to need answers. She's the unfinished story I've been craving to complete. The words, right there, yet I can't even open the fucking book.

Weeks roll by painfully, each day a sickening and silent reminder that I'm living in a future unknown. She's gone again and I'm left with nothing.

It was stupid of me to ask her to stay after our night together. Stay for what? For me? Who am I? It's clear she isn't into commitments of any kind. She floats freely through her life, never tied down by anything that will constrict her wings. But how lonely it must be to fly alone all the time, lost in deep thoughts that pull you down.

Will I see her again, or was that it? The thing is, I never know. Will I ever escape this disgusting torture?

I need my fix. Her giggle, my high; her moans, my come down. I'm itching for another hit and with every day I don't see or hear from her, the need to dull the ache in my heart and my mind becomes necessary.

I'm falling for this chick, someone I don't even know or understand.

I texted her the day after her birthday. I sent a picture of Casper the ghos with three words beneath it. "Don't do it."

But she did. She ghosted me. She opened the message, but never responded.

I get the urge to just show up at her place, break open the door, hold her up against the wall by her neck until she admits she has some sort of feelings for me. She'd fall apart in my hands the way she does, realizing and becoming fully aware of the shit that's consistently lingering between us.

The way our bodies seem to come to life when we're around each other the way her touch lights my fucking skin on fire and makes the world around me blurry—she'd fall right into it. Admit what's happening is more than just sex alone. Our eyes would connect, and I'd see it again. That look that tells me everything she's withholding. That she feels it, too. That in some fucked up world, we were supposed to find each other. For whatever reason, it may be. To heal? To learn? To save?

But that would be wrong. Right?

Jesus, I'm really thinking of choking out this chick until she says she likes me. I'm a fucking weirdo.

I've played all of my video games, I've surfed Instagram for what feels like hours, I've jerked off twice to porn. A girl who looked oddly familiar. The short black hair, and the choker did me in. Fucking creampies got me sad as hell now. Who cries while masturbating? Not me, not ever me. But I felt a

asliver of sadness pierce through my skin and I can't seem to get that bitch  
eout.

Aimlessly pacing back and forth in my room, I look out the window and  
see Cole outside on the patio.

t I make my way down the stairs, finding her in the back of the house  
planting some flowers into the new pots she bought. She's really done a grea  
rjob of making this place a home. She warms the space, filling it with love  
and it shows.

o "Whatcha working on?" I ask, sneaking up behind her.

r She gasps a little, then smiles, clearly not hearing me walk down the stairs.

g "Oh, hey Kid. Just bringing some color back here. What are you up to?"

She stands upright, wiping the tiny beads of sweat off her forehead, holding  
her gardening gloves in her hand while she does it.

d "Just wasting time," I sigh, taking a seat in one of the lounge chairs.

t It's Saturday afternoon so no work for Hawke and me today. Apparently  
she's out searching for some new furniture to furnish one of the newly  
lrenovated properties. He and Cole made plans to take a boat out for a sunse  
ydinner later. They invited me to come along, but let's be real, they aren'  
committed to this threesome, and I got money to be made.

"You should find a hobby," she says, almost surprising herself with the  
sidea. "Yeah, we need to find you a hobby."

"Joining the knitting club isn't going to keep me from popping opiates  
sCole."

. She glares at my attempted joke.

d "I just feel like there are so many opportunities for you to dive into here."  
aShe places her hand on her hip, tapping her lip with the other while deep in  
thought. "That's it. Diving!"

1 “What?”

“Diving! You should take the scuba course Jo teaches.”

1 *Woah. What?*

“Han teaches a scuba course? What the actual fuck?”

3, “Sorry, my mind has been all over the place lately. I totally forgot to mention it. It’s her primary source of income.”

3, I can picture it. Down she goes. To the bottom of the ocean, when life above ground consumes her. Seems fitting.

“When were you going to tell me this?”

3, “When you were bored enough for a new hobby, I guess. She only does it part time. Makes great money hustling stupid tourists and rich pricks.”

3, “Damn Cole.” I shoot her a surprised expression at her unfiltered statement. I love when she keeps it real.

3, She shrugs, her lip pulling into a grin. “But, seriously, that would be fun for you. I’ll get you her card if you’re interested.”

3, Her card? Really. I’m only worthy of a business card. Even Cole knows how tightly bound that book is.

3, Scurrying away from me suddenly, she disappears into the house as I’m left standing there, somewhat blown away by what just transpired.

3, Scuba diving, huh? I can barely breathe above ground. I don’t know how well I’ll fare beneath the surface of the ocean, but if Han’s teaching it, I’ll gladly find a way to drown in her presence.

Later, after Hawke and Cole leave for their date, I grab my phone answering messages left and right.

”

1

**James:** Hey bro, got a handful of grads looking to party, got any snow?

**Tarah:** Bonfire tonight at Bran's. Bring your tall ass for a drink, maybe more ;)

Tarah is still hot on my ass. Guess the rumors circling about what a great fuck I am have reached her. Yay.

**Silas:** Boss opportunity. Club at 10.

Boss opportunity?

Silas must've given a sample of my stash to his guy here, meaning I'm either in a world of fucking shit by bringing new supply into their market, or they want to bring me in.

Coming to Cali was supposed to be an end to my dealing, but unfortunately for me, being in a new place means new opportunities to sell. My guy back home wants me to keep pushing his product out here on the west coast, so depending on how this goes, I may be a very rich man or a very dead one.

But, hey, you only live once, right? Might as well live it up.

Later that night, I pull into the shady parking lot of some sort of run down strip club. The neon sign that says the club's name, "Lusty Lady", is partially burnt-out reading "Lust Lay." No one here seems to mind. It's clearly not slowing down the action inside. I can only hope that the interior—women included—is a bit better looking than the exterior. The crumbling, concrete

parking lot that has endless weeds growing through every available crack shows the lack of care, and yet, another group of bikers pulls up to enter the bustling facility. Guess business as usual here at the ol' Lust Lay.

The club is dark and filled with the musky smell of old velvety curtains and cigarettes. Three different stages beg for my attention near the front, the one in the middle with a pole. One dancer is currently swinging around it by her thigh alone, the other squatting down near the edge of the stage near a small crowd of people, twerking her voluptuous ass while a man slips some cash in her thong.

"Kid, you made it," Silas greets me, patting me on the back as he looks on at the dancers.

"What's up, man? Nice place," I say, cringing slightly, making conversation.

I eye his shifty appearance, noticing he's wearing some new chain tonight, some diamond knock off piece that's entirely overdone. He has some flashy, white Timberland boots that contrast with his dingy denim jeans. He's trying too hard, that much is obvious.

The place feels somewhat like a medieval theater filled with jesters about to rob you blind. I guess, in a sense, that's what strippers do. They dazzle you with fat asses and bouncing titties, just to squeeze that cash out of your wallet before you can even think about touching them.

"You should see the back," he grins. "They got private rooms here."

Jesus. Not what I needed to hear. I think Silas spends a lot of time here at the Lust Lay by his expansive knowledge alone.

He grabs a cocktail waitress that's passing by, one who looks elated to see him, and orders us some drinks. It's clear he's a regular just by the excitement on her face. At least he must tip well.

κ I turn back to face the stage, peeping the hottie working the pole. She  
e glides through the air, spinning around before effortlessly dropping to the  
floor. She does the splits, bouncing her ass for the crowd as a group of rowdy  
s guys stands and begins throwing dollars at her.

e I can't tell if I feel bad for the stripper or for the patrons. I mean, honestly  
y who's winning here? This chick shakes something for a nice chunk of change  
a while these guys lap it up, unable to touch, only look.

e Mind you, I'm a visual guy. I love seeing ass and titties just as much as the  
next freak, but feeling is where it's at. I wanna grab that shit and put my face  
n in it. If I wanted to watch a girl shake her shit in my face, I at least want to be  
able to fuck something, or be able to have my dick in my hand while I watch  
g it, in the privacy of my own home, with tissues on standby.

"C'mon man, Dario is ready," Silas announces, bringing me back to  
s reality.

e *Dario?*

s I follow him towards a curtain in the back, walking through it into some  
sort of makeshift dressing room for the dancers. A few women look up  
t shooting me a narrow-eyed expression as they're changing, not even  
a attempting to cover up, because why would they?

t We continue walking through their changing area until we're met with a  
solid metal door. Silas bangs on it four times as a tiny window opens up  
revealing a red-haired man with a huge, elongated, curled mustache.

t *What in the wizard of fucking Oz is this place?*

My eyes dart wildly to Silas, then back to the door.

e "Who rang that bell?" The ginger asks Silas with a unique peanut-buttery  
e sounding voice.

*See. Oz.*



e “Silas.”

e “One moment.”

y He disappears, closing the small latch as Silas looks around anxiously taking in a deep breath and blowing it out while rubbing his hands together in front of him. He bounces back on his heels, then rocks forward.

e It’s the first time I’ve realized he seems nervous. If he’s nervous, then definitely should be. Who the fuck are we meeting?

e The little paneled door opens again and Ed Sheeran wannabe pops his head back out at us, causing me to cock a brow at his strange demeanor. “Room 11 is ready.”

1 Room 11?

Silas lets out a quick breath, nodding as he turns, looking for me to follow. We walk down a dimly lit hallway, passing a woman with long black hair and a tiny two-piece sequined outfit.

I get the feeling I’m heading towards the sex rooms by the noises leaving the doors I’m passing. Lots of moans, groans, and body slapping sounds happening behind these closed little spaces.

1 Silas and I stop in front of a door with a steel eleven nailed to it. The door opens as two stunning women, both scantily dressed with heels almost as long as my dick, usher us in. It’s a tool of measurement, a good nine for quick reference.

We walk into the room that smells like a combination of cigars and sex. Deep electronic music plays in the background, the bass from the stripper stage rumbling against the back wall. We approach a large, metal wingback chair that’s on top of a small stage with three stairs leading to it. If the room were to be a theme room, it’d look as if it was some Game of Thrones knockoff. This is where you come to suck off the queen.

Atop the chair is a guy who looks anything but a queen. The way his shirt stretches to accommodate his extremely muscular build, paired with his dark, tanned skin and darker-than-black eyes, has me imagining how easily he could snap my tall ass in half.

He sits casually in the chair, one leg outstretched before him, the other bent up, while he leans back into it, an elbow propping his fist to his jaw. His face doesn't move as we walk before him, only those dark, dead eyes.

d Silas talks. "Dario, thank you for—"

l "Where did you get this?" Dario interrupts in a deep voice, the kind you feel reverberating within your chest.

He's directing the question to me while holding up what looks to be a few grams of cocaine—my cocaine.

d *Shit. This is bad.*

Silas swallows, looking at me nervously, waiting for me to answer his direct stare.

s "I don't know what that is," I answer, cocking a brow while shrugging. "Or whose it is."

r My mama didn't raise no fool. A fuck-up? Sure, but a fool? Hell nah.

s Dario stares at me in silence. What feels like a minute passes before he blows air through his nose. Then again. He chuckles.

"Taste it then." He tosses me the tiny baggie and I quickly catch it against my chest, staring straight at him the whole time.

r I know he's a dangerous man just by his gaze alone. His eyes are wide. The look, it's direct. Almost too direct. As if he sees your future before you do. He's the kind of guy who makes the rules wherever he goes.

s Dipping my pinkie in, I sample it. I know my shit and it's good shit. It's definitely mine.

t I look back up at his awaiting face.

- “I’ve got a guy.”

d “Don’t they all,” Dario responds, standing from his seat on the throne and walking down to approach me.

t I pique his interest. He can pick up on my vibes easily. He’s good at reading people. Fuck, he has to be in this line of work.

Silas shifts in his position as Dario approaches, but lucky for me, I’m naïve to who the hell this Dario cat is. My dumbass isn’t intimidated...yet.

l “You can go now,” he says, standing before me, staring into me with those cold, dead eyes.

v *Well, this was fun.*

I give a quick, tight-lipped smile. You know, one of those “opec, ‘scuse me,” grocery store moments, raising my eyebrows as I turn towards the door.

s “Not you, him.”

Silas and I look at each other in confusion before we both snap our heads back over to this Wesley Snipes, Blade-wannabe, our expressions mirroring one another’s.

“Bye!” He yells aggressively with a wide-eyed smile, shooing Silas away.

e His men come up from by the door, ushering Silas out. His shoulders drop in disappointment. Clearly, he thought he’d be a part of this, when in reality he was just the mailman delivering the package. Me, I’m the package.

I turn back to face Dario, arching a brow in confusion. I don’t know who he thinks I am, but I’m just a guy who happens to know a guy who happens to have some premium shit.

“Kid, was it?” He asks, turning his back to me and walking back up the stairs to his throne, having a seat while the women crowd him again. One o

them rubbing his shoulders, the other at his leg with her long, acrylic nail circling his thigh.

I “Kid.” I nod, tipping my head back, my eyes narrowing as I study him.

He sits back as the ladies continue rubbing him, smirking at me while he teases me up and down.

“I’ve got a bit of an opportunity for you, if you’re interested in playing a hand.”

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17



17





The look of jealousy awaits.

I leave the room after our brief meeting, getting met with a laser eyed beam of hatred.

I couldn't give two shits. Silas was dumb as fuck for thinking Dario was going to need him for anything other than an introduction. I'm the guy, not Silas. That much couldn't be more clear. Some people have it, some people don't.

But I'm not paying attention to him or his narrowed eyes focusing on the newly appointed man of the hour. I'm not bothered by the fact that I can literally swoop into town and, in less than three weeks, already replace him in the business of wheelin' and dealin'. No, I'm not focusing on that at all.

I'm focused entirely on a situation before me. One that has me shook in my high top Converse. A vision that has my knees feeling weak and my chest constricting.

A woman up near the main stage, slipping some cash into the thong of the stripper who's currently mid-split before her.



A woman who can appreciate the beauty of another woman while being sexually turned on by it.

A woman who ghosts people when feelings become involved.

A woman who made no promise to stay around for me.

A woman named Han.

I approach from the side and see she's with a group of guys and one other girl, so I sit at a table nearby. Silas leans up against the bar, making conversation with the cocktail waitress he apparently knows.

The guy knows people, I'll give him that. He weasels his way into situations with that big mouth of his, but it's that mouth that seems to get him in trouble. It's his mouth that cost him the deal. The deal that should hopefully bring quick cash and an out from the business altogether.

I turn my attention back to Han, watching as the stripper flirts with her grinning mischievously as she accepts Han's cash.

I can't for the life of me understand why they're in this shithole. She's too good to be around this type of reckless endangerment, not knowing the level of fuckery that goes on behind the closed sex doors. The kind of fuckery that keeps businesses like this open and running in order to clean the cash they bring through.

Han's wearing these black, see-through stockings littered with stars, the shortest black leather shorts on top, and overly large platform booties on her pretty little feet. It's the off the shoulder crop top that kills me though. Seeing all that exposed neck, the exposed slit of abdomen that I vividly remember running my tongue along. Her short, choppy hair ending near her jawline gave me nothing but visual access to those tattoos littering that little neck I'd had my hands so tightly wrapped around.

*Fuck, why did she ghost me?*

g She turns around, heading back to sit by the group, when her eyes snap up and find mine. It's like she can feel me when I'm in her vicinity. Something always draws her eyes to me, just like it did at Bran's beach house party. There's a distinct pull between us.

I'm expecting to be blown off, for her to look the other way, to pretend she never saw me, to escape the awkwardness of our history in the present. But of course, Han is Han.

"Kai! Oh my god!" she says in her cracked, sexy tone, running towards me with a smile.

1 I can feel my forehead wrinkle in confusion. *She's excited to see me?* Then I'll forget, this is outside Han. Her shell. Her happy public persona in the neon light of the night.

; She runs up to me as I stand from my table and catch her as she jumps into my arms.

o Yep, my heart is racing, and it's not from sampling varieties of coke with Dario.

t I try not to cop a feel, but can't help myself from gently squeezing her as I hold her in my hands. I breathe in her peachy scent, sniffing her hair. I'm sniffing her fucking hair, probably grinning blissfully like a psycho.

e She pulls back from our brief hug as I'm still holding her midair.

r "What are you doing here?!"

g "Working, you?"

r She cocks a brow at my statement, then drops it.

e "We just happened to be driving by. Looked like a dope place," she answers simply.

"Dope indeed," I say under my breath.

"Come, hang out with us," she says, resting her arms on my shoulders.

cleaning her head to the side adorably.

I reluctantly set her down, watching as she bounces back towards the table. I follow and sit on the edge of the booth next to where she slides in.

I met a few of her friends. A guy named Finn who has tattoos all over his bald skull and face, a guy named Sidney who has a solid tan, and blonde shoulder length hair, and a girl named Vaughn with long curly blonde hair who's wearing a short sunflower sundress.

This is the strangest calibration of people. A biker, a beach bum, a sweet christian girl, and Han.

I talk with Sidney while Han and Vaughn get more drinks from the bar. He's such a surfer dude, it's not even funny. From the curl in his sun bleached hair to the crow's feet in the corner of his eyes from years of squinting the bright sun away. The way he exaggerates everything he's talking about and his overuse of the word *awesome* and *like* is really hilarious. "A totally, like awesome wave came at me bro, and I just like, had an awesome ride."

Han's walking back towards the table, her eyes still on Vaughn as they giggle about something. I watch as Vaughn grabs her hand, pulling Han into her before whispering something in her ear and kissing her on the cheek. She eyes her body from behind as Han approaches me. I know that look. I know that look because I make that face. She's got the hots for her.

Vaughn and Han. I even hate how their names sound good together. It's clear Han has a thing for hot blondes, myself included.

After a few more drinks and a couple more dances, the group leaves good ol' Lust Lay and heads on over to the after bar party spot at Sid's beach house.

Han wraps her arms around my neck, leaning into my ear to whisper

“Come with us.”

r She leans her head back, finding my curious eyes, gauging for an answer. Of course I’m coming. Where the fuck else would I want to be than at an AsBar with my crush? But it’s an odd feeling, a confusing one. Knowing I’m setting myself up for a bit of intolerable pain.

; I nod slowly, trailing my eyes from hers to her lips and back. When he face is this close to mine, I feel that fist-sized muscle in my rib cage actively trying to start up again. It makes it hard to breathe, the pain almost constricting.

: She grabs for my hand, leading me out of the booth as we head towards the parking lot with the rest of the crew. I give the two-fingered salute to Silas at the bar as I push open the door with my back. Han watches me, peering towards Silas who’s eyeing me with that same jealous look that hasn’t left him. She bites the corner of her lip, trying to hold back the impending smile at the gesture I’ve picked up from my favorite quirky girl.

They all start walking towards this old ass station wagon with wood paneling that looks like something a grandmother from the 80s would drive. Vaughn and Han hold hands as they walk. Han looks at me subtly over her shoulder as she parts ways. I grab her hand, pulling her in my direction at the same time as Vaughn. She separates from her hand, looking from my eyes to hers with an empathetic smile.

s “She’s riding with me,” I say to Vaughn, smirking.

*That’s right. She’s mine.*

d Vaughn looks cautiously at Han as if wondering if I’m trustworthy. Han just smiles and nods at her. “I’ll see you there, babe.”

*Babe. She called her babe. Ugh.*

; We walk towards my car, and I get a bit of nervous excitement in my gut

at the idea of us having some alone time after wishing for this moment for weeks. Finally, a chance to connect with her again.

- One way or another, I'll get my answers.

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One way or another, I'll get my answers.

18









We get in my car and I light up a cigarette, handing it off to her.  
“My lips were on it first.”

She sits there still. Watching me with a glint of humor in her mischievous eyes as she bites down on the corner of her lip again. She loves that I said that, but doesn’t want to make it obvious that she’s smiling.

Finally taking the cigarette, I light up my own as I put the car in drive following the old lady mobile before us.

“So, what’s new in the land of Han?” I begin casual conversation, loving that we have this small amount of time alone together, yet feeling the weight of the tension between us lingering in the air. “Where have you been?”

“Not much,” she says simply, taking a quick puff, then blowing it out the side of her red-lipped mouth and out of the cracked window.

“Not much.” I reiterate blandly under my breath. “That’s all I get.”

“What’s new in the world of Kai?”

I roll my head over to face her, then peer back to the road through the windshield, somewhat annoyed by her inability to answer a simple question.

“You start those drunk classes yet?”

I turn to her, knowing she's teasing me as she smirks in my direction. What she doesn't realize is I know what she's doing. She's misdirecting. I'm onto her shit.

"Stop doing that," I say with a straight face. "I know what you're doing."

"What?" She chuckles, scratching the side of her head with her middle finger. Must be a nervous twitch. I like it. I like that I notice it. "What do you mean, you know what I'm doing? What am I doing?" she continues, smiling.

"Where did you go? You ghosted me after your birthday, after I begged you not to." I reply bluntly. "Where do you go when you feel the need to disappear?"

I'm over procrastinating the inevitable. I need to know. The cryptic shit is done. I've figured out what she's doing, how she's negating the emotion she's feeling, and I want to know the answer. Where does she go?

Her smile is gone. Sweet, fun, playful, perky Han is gone. The real, raw woman is before me now, scowling as she stares through the windshield.

"Why do you do this?" she asks softly.

"Do what?"

"Push. You push and you push."

"I'm a pushy guy."

"You're annoying." She smirks.

"You're lying. You love it."

"I truly don't."

I sigh. "You liked that I came over for your birthday. You liked that I brought you that dead plant. You like that I don't give up. You like that I'm getting under your skin even if you can't admit it yet."

She licks her lips while thinking. I want to lick that lip.

"You intrigue me. Unlike anyone else, that much is certain. And the

...sex...Lord, the sex.” She rolls her eyes to the back of her head, moaning, and I fucking love it. I want her thinking about us together more than she breathes. “I’ll let you under my skin if you keep fucking me like that.”

Dick twitch.

“See, so we should probably just be together already. Let’s date so we can fuck on the regular. Be my girlfriend Han. Love me forever,” I joke, kinda pushing the limits like I do. “Have my babies. I’ll make you a hot mom.”

I get her laughing again. Her adorable snorts filling the previous silence in the car. I love making her smile and I can’t believe the shot of adrenaline it gives me.

“Kids with Kid. Living the dream.” She laughs, not knowing what it does to me.

“Don’t joke about it sweetheart, I’mma give you that dream.”

“That or an STD, for sure.”

“Hey now! We don’t do venereal diseases over here. Besides, some are curable, or so I’ve heard.”

“Only if you stick the tip in, right?” She smirks.

I make a pained face before biting my bottom lip as I try to contain my grin. I don’t want to cheese like an idiot, but I fucking love bantering back and forth with her more than almost everything. Our little inside jokes make me feel like I actually matter to her, more than most. That’s all I seem to want.

“Truthfully, I just love your energy, Kai. You’re exciting to be around, you make me laugh.”

I suck in a breath, loving the use of my name rolling off her beautiful lips. She smiles at me, resting her head casually in her hand as her elbow braces against the door.

1 “I love spending time with you too,” I say, turning my eyes from the road to connect with hers. “Which is new for me.”

There’s a silent moment of connection and I feel another block of ice break free from the iceberg into the water.

1 “Oh shit, I almost forgot.” She pops up in her seat, turning to her side to pull her canvas backpack she’s always carrying onto her lap. “I got you something the other day.”

1 *What? She got me something? Han bought me something during the time she ran away? Meaning, what? I was on her mind?*

She opens the bag and pulls out a tin vintage lunch box that looks to be from the 70s. She hands it over to me and I take it from her, our fingers brushing together for a moment.

She sucks in a breath at the contact, then watches as I examine it. I like that our touch seems to affect her the way it affects me. Makes me feel less alone in this.

The vintage lunch box is sun bleached, yellow, donning rusted corners with none other than Big Bird from Sesame Street on the face.

y “Han. No, you didn’t,” I say, smiling at the awesome gift.

κ “I saw it at this old shop and knew I had to get it for ya. You can take it to work with Hawke, put your little sandwich in there, or fill it with whatever of your paraphernalia if you’d like.”

My smile drops some as I feel the weight of my appreciation towards her. She may have ghosted me, but I was still on her mind. That has got to mean something.

. “Thank you. I love it,” I say truthfully, holding it on my lap, my hands clutching around the metal edge. It’s clearly a collectible.

She waves her hand in front of her as if telling me it’s not a big deal. But

lit's a big deal to me.

"I did some research, professor," she adds, propping up, placing her hand before her face and admiring her dark purple nail polish as she talks.

"You did, huh? And what did my student find?"

I remember our previous conversation about sea creatures and the specific one I chose for her. It appears she actually looked it up. The fact that she was actively thinking about me sometime during our time apart gives me a glimmer of hope in this weak heart of mine.

Her eyes dart over to mine, her hand still in the air. She curls her hand up into a soft fist, almost appearing to drive her nails into her palm before sticking a few strands of stray hair behind her ear. "You're a real sneaky little fucker, you know that?" she says, pursing her lips together.

I laugh immediately, throwing my hands in the air in defense, knowing exactly what she's referring to.

The sea creature. The jellyfish. But not any jellyfish. A very unique one, that has the ability to live forever. The *Turritopsis dohrnii*. An organism that can regenerate into a polyp as it ages or experiences trauma, essentially living forever if given the perfect environment. No death.

She sits there in her seat, eyes all over me, almost contemplating if she's choosing to be upset by it or let it slide. Yes, I chose that sea creature for a reason. I want her to embrace life, not consistently live surrounded by death or her fear of it.

I turn my eyes towards her, giving her a half grin when I see that look in her eyes again. The one that wants to open up to me, the one that wants some relief, needs to be held, cared for, loved. But as soon as I see it, she blinks it away, changing the conversation again.

"Thanks for taking away the opportunity for me to choose my own sea

creature. I love having a man make my choices for me,” she says sarcastically.

I love playing the idiot, so I run with it.

“Yes. See? You get it. We fit. Let me take charge, baby. Make the decisions for you. Be the rock that you need. You sit on back and keep looking pretty, Han,” I exclaim in an exaggerated tone, clearly joking.

“I do like how you fit,” she says in a seductive tone, leaning across the shifting gear to run a finger down my arm, leaning closer so she can whisper the words into my ear with her warm breath. “I want you to fit again and again and again.”

I swallow suddenly, adjusting my hips and sitting lower in my seat as I clear my throat and focus on the road. Yep, I can’t handle flirting with Han.

“Um, also, what’s this I hear about you being a scuba instructor? Is that where you go? Diving deep down away from the surface where death is a distant thought? I’d love to go with you, but I’d probably drown.”

She pauses briefly as the words seem to hit her, then touches her finger to my lip, making it spring as the finger trails down my chin, down my neck.

“I’ll drown you in other ways,” she whispers, grabbing my hand from my lap and placing it between her thighs over her tight little shorts.

I continue driving as she presses my fingers against her sex, feeling the ridges of her lips as the warmth pools. My mouth drops open as I feel myself getting hard, imagining and remembering how good it feels to plunge myself deep into her wet walls, until I realize she did it again.

“You did it again!” I say abruptly, pulling my hand away to grab the steering wheel as I signal to pull the car over.

Her panicked eyes look from me to the road and back again, pointing at the road over the dash.

s “Kai, what are you doing? Follow Sid!”

“Nope.”

Her brows lower as I slow down, her eyes following the cars passing by us. It’s then that I can tell she’s piecing together what I’m doing.

o “Kai, drive the fucking car,” she growls.

“Nah,” I respond, all cool, pursing my lips as I scrunch my nose and shake my head.

r I love her anger, her attitude, her passion. This is the side of her I’m prepared to handle because I can relate to it. It’s real, it’s raw, it’s necessary.

I pull the car to the side of the road, putting it in park before turning to face her in the seat.

“Where do you go?”

t She adjusts in her seat, rolling her eyes before attempting to crack her neck, looking out of the passenger window. She sighs, the frown set on her face before her head snaps back at me.

o “Where do you go when you disappear? You keep doing this. You keep avoiding it. You’re avoiding all of my questions and redirecting the conversation away from it. Why?”

“It’s none of your fucking business, really.”

e I sigh, resting my head back against the seat, looking at her with sympathetic eyes. I want her to know she can trust me, even if I’m pushing her. I’m the one who can understand. She must know this.

“Jo,” I say softly, grabbing her hand. She flinches and pulls it away from me, setting her hand on her lap. “It’s just me. Me and you. I can handle this shit better than any of these other jokers out here. I know pain. I’ve been through lots. I understand what it feels like to want to shell up and pretend it all away, to feel like no one wants to fight for you. Trust me, I do.”

She narrows her eyes, her little forehead wrinkle making its appearance.

“I would never be able to explain it to you. Nor would I want to.”

“Why not?” I ask, grabbing for her hand again.

She winces, like my touch pains her now, but she doesn’t pull away.

I hear her mumble something under her breath as she looks away from me. Something that sounds like ‘I’m not even sure I understand it.’

Her words confuse me, but I keep trying. Does she teleport somewhere? Skip dimensions? Slide through wormholes? Visit her friends in hell? What’s really going on here?

“Okay.” I nod my head a few times, realizing I’m pushing my limits.

“Okay. You don’t need to explain it. But just tell me this,” I say, my brow furrowing while I look down at our connected hands, our hands that slide together with such ease. The warmth of mine, reaching her tiny cold bones. I assimilate into something deeper. “What’s making you leave?”

She sighs, turning her head to face the window again. She sits like that for what feels like an eternity before finally facing me again. She’s broken. Her eyes hold anger, loads of anger, pain, and something else I can’t quite pick up on yet. Longing maybe? She’s still such a mystery to me and every time I feel like I’ve got her figured out, she switches it all up, leaving me with the shattered pieces I thought fit like glue.

“Babe, I’m just trying to figure you out. I want to know you. Want you to know you can—”

Just as I’m trying to break through to her, she sits up in her seat. Her head tilts to the side as she looks at something or someone behind me. Hope resurfaces in her eyes and I turn to face whatever she’s looking at.

There’s that damn station wagon again.

Sid pops his head out of the driver’s side window, his long locks blowing



into his face as he brakes in the middle of the road in traffic.

“What’s up, bruh? You having, like, car problems?!”

“Nah—” I start, before getting interrupted again.

“Yes! Thank God you came back. Kid was just waiting for a tow. I’ll hitch a ride with you guys.” She yells over my lap before flicking her cigarette and jumping out of the car like a fish caught in a net, slipping through the holes of finding her freedom again.

The relief in her voice to get away from me sucks. It fucking sucks. It cuts me. Tears through my chest like a fiery blade and I fucking hate that I feel things. Her people who don’t question her, don’t push her to know herself, don’t care to know what truly makes her come alive, return and she jets. Her safety net is in the form of a wood-paneled station wagon.

“Alright man, we’ll do it again sometime?” Sid shrugs, giving me a weak smile that tells me he understands my night just got ruined.

I nod my head with a sigh, placing my elbow against the steering wheel. I wrap my palm around my forehead, weaving my fingers into my overgrown hair, holding my head up as I watch Han jump into the back seat of their car.

“Look at me. Just fucking look at me,” I beg, whispering to myself as I gaze at her, tightening my jaw.

When our eyes connect, I can reach her. I can feel her when our gazes penetrate each other’s souls.

But she doesn’t. Not once. She doesn’t look back at all. Just leaves me on the side of the road, alone with my new vintage lunch box in this new and uncomfortable space.

A territory entirely foreign to me.

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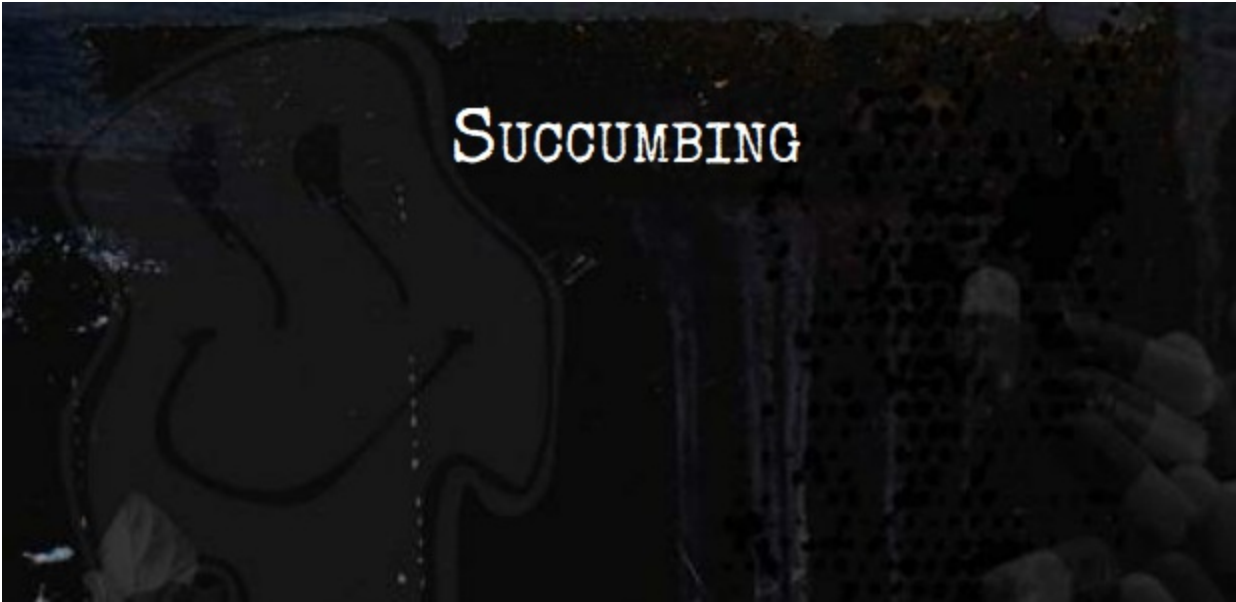
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The house is dark and quiet and feels like the inside of my chest. Empty. Hawke and Cole are clearly still on the boat, probably making love under the moonlight while I drove around for an hour feeling like I've got a hole in my heart from being kicked in the chest.

Why does she make it so hard for anyone to love her?

I get the pain; I get the need to hide from what hurts most, but if she'd only let me in, she'd see how much we can help each other. We are two lost souls that can bring one another back to life, aren't we?

But I can't be mad at her. I pushed, and I pushed. It's not like she didn't tell me this in all honesty. She said she'd break my heart. Cole even warned me against her, and now I realize it wasn't for Han's sake, it was for mine. Hawke told me she floats through life like a feather in the wind, never sticking around for anyone, not even her own sister. What made me think I could get her to fall from the sky for me?

I kick off my shoes by the door to my room, sighing out my frustration before falling backwards onto the bed. I fall back and I bump into a warm leg.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see a shadowy figure lying along the bed beside me. My instant reaction is to murder.

I quickly flip over, straddling the body while pulling out the switchblade in my pocket, flipping the six-inch blade with my thumb and holding it to the neck beneath me.

Green reptilian eyes, illuminated by the moonlight seeping in through the large window, make my mouth drop open in shock.

“Han?! What the fuck are you doing here?!” I swallow, breathing heavily, my steady hand still with the blade to her throat.

She’s panting beneath me with her hands held up, clearly terrified by my instant reaction to kill.

“I—she swallows, holding her chin up—I’m sorry.” Her words come out breathy as her chest continues to rise and fall between us.

“Jesus Christ,” I breathe out, folding the knife up with one hand and chucking it across the room, still facing her.

“I’m sorry,” she says again quickly, shaking her head, on the verge of tears.

I take in her terrified eyes and instantly feel awful for putting her in fear.

“I’m so sorry,” she repeats herself, the panic in her eyes not because I had a knife millimeters from killing her, but because her emotions are showing.  
“I’m sorry I left you. I shouldn’t have.”

I stare at her, inches away from her lips, feeling like the piece of that hole in my chest is lying beneath me here in my room.

*Jesus, I had a knife to her throat.*

She’s shaking. Physically shaking, almost hyperventilating, and I know it has nothing to do with the fact that she came face to face with a knife. Nah

that doesn't scare her. It's her insides spilling out of her that have her on the edge of falling apart.

1 "Shh...baby, calm down," I whisper softly, cupping her face gently between my palms.

"I'm sorry," she chokes out. "I...I..."

e My brows knit together as I study her, her breathing almost causing her to faint. I wait for her to push through the last remaining barrier to get to me.

, "I shouldn't have left the only person who makes me want to stay."

Her cracked tone and her broken words make my head feel heavy, my body weak, my heart aching with a longing for hers.

"I'm sorry I hurt you." Her words are hoarse, her tone uneasy as her eyes graze over my face, between my eyes, then falling upon my lips. "At least, think I hurt you?"

1 She's so timid and unlike the confident Han I know. This is Jo, the woman that's feeling things she doesn't know how to control. The woman who's finally breaking through to me, melting away the exterior to the only one who knows how to hold her together, cupped in my hands as she becomes a puddle of emotion before me.

1 "You did." I reply honestly.

. Her tongue skates across her bottom lip as a sorrowful look overtakes her eyes.

e "Han, tell me something real," I demand.

She came here. She's sorry. But what's next? I can't go back to her ghosting me again. If I learned anything after today, it's that maybe I need to protect this little heart I seem to have grown.

, "I don't want to hurt you again," she says in a whisper, the admission causing her eyes to squint closed painfully tight.

e I run my hand along her face, my thumb caressing gently along her cheekbone.

y “Then don’t,” I whisper, gazing from her eyes to her lips, to her beautiful gold septum ring and back, until she finally seems able to breathe.

“But I might,” she responds, her eyes darting wildly back and forth between mine.

“Well, a little hurt won’t kill me.” My lip pulls in the corner, prompting her to relax a little.

y She’s trying. Will she fuck this up? Possibly. But I can’t let her get away now, not when she’s finally opening up. We’ll ease into this, whatever this is. I won’t let her go. I can’t. She’s the only one who’s ever made me want to be something, anything other than what I seem to fall back on.

Before any more words can be spoken, I slowly inch my lips closer to hers. Our eyes gaze at each other for a moment, expressing everything we can’t seem to with our words alone. She blinks quickly, then takes a deep breath. Our closeness finally seeming to calm her. My lips move closer, waiting for her to give me the okay. She tilts her chin in a light nod before I capture her mouth in mine.

Like a bucket of gasoline to a fire, we ignite once finally together. With me still straddling her, I pull her into my lips as she grasps my shirt by the hem, clutching it tightly in her hands, pulling me into her. Our tongues run the length of each other’s in a quick, needy, deprived sort of way. She moans into my mouth as one of my hands runs up the back of her neck, fingers sliding along her scalp, clutching her hair in my hold as our kiss continues.

Electrical shocks wave through me like no drug could ever match. I’ve never wanted one person to the extent I want her. I want her in my blood, my bones. She controls me now. Her touch, the only way to revive the last bit of



dead I've held inside my guarded heart. I might overdo this, I might fuck around and tell her I'm off my face obsessed with her. Everything about her wet, beautiful lips against mine, her wicked tongue carving her need, her soft skin sending goosebumps over mine, feels too good to be true.

n I pull her head back slightly, breaking our used lips apart so I can absorb the fact that she's really here beneath me. Acknowledge that this isn't a dream or some sort of hallucination. She's really here.

“You came for me,” I whisper, sounding like she did when I visited her place on her birthday, a day of insurmountable pain for her.

.. “I couldn't not,” she whispers in return, her lip curling a bit as her hand reaches up and runs over my brow line, easing the tension I didn't know was there.

.. Her words are mine, so I change the meaning behind hers.

t “I love that you couldn't not.”

l, I don't hate it like she previously said. I love it. I love that I pushed and pushed, even though it made her uncomfortable, even though I chanced it. I knew she was under there, waiting with that hand held out, needing someone who understands and cares. Someone to ease that pain, even if it doesn't mean taking it away forever. I'm just happy she realized it before it was too late.

e Our lips crash together again, but this time she flips me on my back straddling my lap. Her hands find my hair, pulling at the roots as she lifts my head. Lips find my neck, sucking along the inked skin before her tongue trails along the dip of my throat, slowly dragging along the skin until finding my ear. Her sweet, soft lips wrap around the lobe, causing my hands to grip into the flesh of her hips, my hips flexing up, pushing my rock of dick into her.

f She does crazy things to my insides. I feel this sickening sense of holding

onto something so fragile that I could easily break into pieces in my hands  
yet all I want to do is squeeze the fuck out of it. I'm the kid who gets a pet  
hamster and smothers it to death with love and forced affection.

*I need to chill.*

o "Chill?" she asks suddenly.

a *Oh fuck, I said that out loud.*

"Ah, no I just meant—"

r She hops off of me, sitting back on her heels on the edge of the bed, her  
wide eyes unsure of what I'm doing, of what she's doing.

d *No, no, no...please don't pull back now.*

s I sigh, trying to calm the mind of the man who has thoughts floating  
endlessly through his skull like a game show contestant in one of those cages  
attempting to catch the dollar bills floating in a tornado around them. *Let me  
grab the right thought, please.*

d Grabbing her hand, I pull her back down on the bed so she's lying beside  
me now, our chests together, our eyes level.

e "I don't want to smother the hamster," I state, cocking a brow in confusion  
at how the words sounded out loud.

o She tilts her head. "Is this a dick reference?"

"If I ever refer to my dick as a hamster, we have real problems."

; She chuckles lightly.

y "No, I just mean, I don't want to...I'm afraid I'll..." I pinch the bridge of  
my nose, trying to find the words. "What I mean to say is I'm kind of..."

y *Does any of this make sense? What am I saying and why can't I say it?*

o "A handful?" She answers for me.

I nod with wide eyes. "I'm a lot to handle. When I find what I want,  
I'm fucking drown in it, taking everyone with me in my wake. Addictive

personality problems.” I shrug.

She eyes me silently; the moonlight leaving me in the spotlight, exposed her expression entirely in the dark.

“I think you’re a passionate person. Someone who gets their addiction confused with a true need to feel things. That energy, that passion, it’s yours to own, not the substances around you.”

I let her words marinate for a moment. Maybe she’s right. I always just accept the fact that my addictions are out of my control, but maybe it’s always been just a choice for me, or could be. My personality could take me in new directions, lead me to open new doors that Hawke generously helped me find. When I find something I like, I definitely dive in. Maybe she’s right. This energy is mine to own. What I do with that is up to me. Could I change that?

“Fuck, Han.” I run a hand down my face, quickly reevaluating my life in the blink of an eye.

The depth of the conversations we tend to have never get old. This connection between us is so much deeper than any other bullshit hookup I’ve had. We see each other with illuminating eyes that expose, mirror, and force the truth out of one another, even when it’s hard to face.

“And your thoughts, you want to find ways to calm them but can’t,” she continues.

I hold my hand out and away from my face, my wide eyes finding hers.

“Am I fucking see through?! Jesus, woman!”

She giggles. “I’ve just been studying you, I guess. I see them floating through your head and watch as you try to pick the right one.”

“Wow. Well, you’ve completely figured me out,” I smirk, shaking my head in disbelief. “But it’s you I’m still trying to make sense of.”

“Yeah?” she asks softly, almost sadly, like it hurts her that she’s been forced to be so withdrawn. “I don’t know. It seems like you understand me better than I do.”

I bring her hand to my mouth, rubbing her knuckles against my lips methodically as I gaze at the outline of her beautiful face.

“You’re still a mystery to me, Han. I don’t know much, but I do know what I feel. It’s something that can’t be expressed verbally, can’t be seen.”

She swallows at that, her lips parting slightly as a breath escapes her. There’s a slight pause in conversation, and I wonder if the hamster is getting choked out.

“Come with me,” she says suddenly, a hint of breathlessness about her.

My eyes dart around the room as I stiffen, then find her eyes again.

“Like sexually?” I nod aggressively.

“Wrong thought grab, Kai.”

I break into a laugh. She’s not wrong.

“Where? Where are we going, Han?” I ask with a shit-eating grin. “I’ll follow you anywhere.”

“Next time I feel the need to leave,” she whispers, looking down, her lashes fluttering until she finally looks up at me again. “Come with me.”

This is big. This is heavy. This doesn’t happen to just anyone. Han doesn’t let people into her private world. I feel her nervousness, her anxiety over letting someone in, but I’ve never been more ready for it.

“I’m already there,” I reply, kissing the back of her hand before leaning forward and closing the space between us, sealing my lips to hers.

I can only hope the need to leave again never comes.

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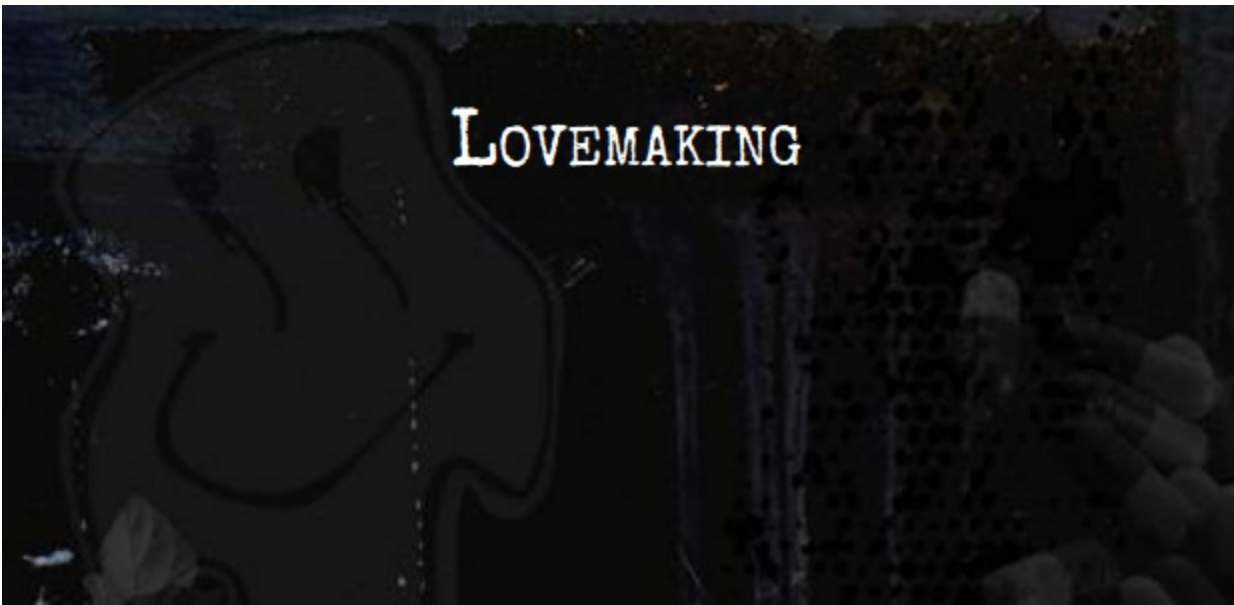
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I'd like to consider myself experienced in most things.

Substances, check. I've practically tried them all. Sexual encounters' Check, check, check. I've fucked my way around the varieties of beautiful women. Small, tall, skinny, thick, African American, White, large chested Asian, flat chested, Native American, young, old...you name it, the list goes on forever. I love all women. God's most beautiful creation. They are like decadent ice cream to me. Wet on a warm tongue, creamy when they need be and the variety of flavors will keep you endlessly satisfied.

However, what I've never experienced is making love to a woman.

Until last night, that is.

Han and I made sweet, perfect, beautiful fucking love.

It was slow, as I kissed her pain away. It was gentle, as I became a part of her, and her, a part of me. It was a connection between our bodies, hearts, and our minds, all mingling together in a perfect tornado of pleasurable feeling and insurmountable trust, the significance of it so incredibly loud.

The way our eyes stayed connected throughout still sends chills down my spine. We saw one another, just as we had on LSD night, but we didn't need



the drugs to feel the complete transparency between us. We were open books  
our words blending together to form our own beautifully tragic kind of tale  
One that can only be written with our tongues, read with our fingertips to  
flesh, understood only with our souls.

She's right. There's a depth to me that she alone brings out. She finds  
those rare pieces of me and shines them like a dull pair of leather shoes  
somehow scuffing out all of my flaws.

She's everything I didn't know I wanted or needed. She caught me entirely  
by surprise and my brain is still trying to catch up to my heart. I know she's  
bad for me. I know when she says she's afraid she'll hurt me, those words are  
nothing but the truth. She seems like the type that would be impossible to  
keep satisfied. I mean, she can't even decide on one gender that would  
suffice. How could I ever be enough? I'm the one with all the hope. But will  
it be enough for the both of us?

My brain is overloaded with an obsession like never before. It's practically  
unhealthy at this point as I stare at her sleeping form, memorizing every tiny  
freckle on her perfect little button nose to how her thick eyelashes curl. Her  
bangs sit just far enough away to keep from touching her eyebrows, and her  
bottom lip sticks out just a tad further than the top, leaving a perfect little  
pout that will stay imprinted on my mind forever.

I've been watching her for about two hours now, and I can't look away  
Any time she sucks in a breath, or lets out an adorable tiny moan, or when  
her lip curled up into a little smile while she was dreaming, I sink into my  
infatuation a little further. She controls my complete attention, and I'm  
captivated and reeled entirely into her world.

*Fuck. I think I love her.*

Is this love? Or obsession? The line seems blurred to me.

Her eyelids flutter before opening and I instantly feel my stomach drop. How will she be in the light of day? The exposure...will it change her? Will she have regrets? Will last night have been too much for her to handle? It was almost more than I could handle.

She makes me melt when I'm near her. The world around us becomes a smear of distant memories. A past I no longer care for. The only thing I want is to always be present in her space, in her time, in her vision.

The first thing she does is adjust herself onto her side, her eyes finding mine before her little smile returns.

*She woke up and smiled at me. I'm a fucking goner.*

Her hand finds my face, and she holds the side of my cheek, leaning her head forward to touch noses. She grins as she gives me an Eskimo kiss before laying on her back and facing the ceiling with that same smile pinned to her face like a new tattoo.

"How long were you looking at me?" she asks, turning her head to face me with a mischievous smirk.

"Two hours, and eleven minutes," I answer quickly, checking the clock near the bed.

"Two hours and eleven minutes," she repeats softly, looking back at the ceiling. She sighs, then rolls back towards me, the greens of her eyes penetrating me. "That's a really long time."

"Not even a little bit."

We stare at one another, thoughts of last night circulating through my mind. So much seems to have changed between us, but then again, what really changed? She said she was sorry for leaving me, the only person who makes her want to stay. The words etched themselves into my heart like a

.fiery knife, searing the flesh beneath its heat. But did it change who she is or who she can be?

s “Would you rather be deaf or blind?” she asks randomly.

Never a dull moment with her. I’m lost in thoughts about the future of our potential relationship and she’s considering whether losing your eyes or hearing would provide more discomfort to her daily life.

“Hmm...Jesus, that’s hard as fuck,” I say, scrunching my face at the thought. “I need to see your beautiful body, but to not be able to hear you moans? Unacceptable.”

She giggles lightly, tracing a finger down my arm, following the chain of randomly placed tattoos. “Always about the sex.”

, “Fuck it, I’d go blind. I can still feel your tits with my hands. The need to hear you scream is what gets me. I’ll gouge my eyes out right now if you don’t like.”

e “For me?” she asks with a hint of sarcasm.

“I’m fucking crazy,” I spit out with the most serious face. “Crazy as fuck for you.”

“But the question remains, are you crazy *enough* for me?”

e “Is this a game? Truth or dare? Dare me, Han. Tell me what to do to prove my loyalty to you and I’ll do it. Anything.”

I must be making a weird face because she breaks into nervous laughter at my intensity.

y “Chill, Kai. Smoke some weed or something,” she says with a grin in that beautiful, cracked tone.

o I shrug and reach over her body, intentionally pressing myself against her in order to reach for the nightstand opposite her. I hear a small moan escape her throat and I’m instantly ready for round four.

r Grabbing my favorite glass pipe from the drawer, I quickly pack a bowl on the edge of the bed, light it up, and sit back against the headboard. She joins me with excitement, crawling up to straddle my lap, wearing nothing but my old, oversized Linkin Park t-shirt and her black lace panties beneath.

r I light it up, inhale deeply, holding it in my lungs before Han gives me the head nod to exhale into her. I blow into her perfect pouty lips, shotgunning my hit. It's sexy as hell watching her inhale what my lungs just held, my insides touching hers.

Weaving a hand around the back of her neck, I stare at her as she stares back at me. The intensity and power of our attraction to one another could light cities. I tug her to my lips for a soft kiss. She kisses me back before pulling away shyly, grabbing the bowl from my hand and taking a few hits on her own.

We sit back, side by side now, our backs against the headboard as the high hits, and the warm, fuzzy feeling takes over.

κ “Better?” she asks.

Truthfully, I feel better. The weed calms my mind, slows things down a bit, gives me a sense of clarity with an overall sense of wellbeing.

e “Better.” I grasp for her hand in mine.

I weave my large fingers through hers, holding her hand against my lap. We sit in silence for a while as my mind races through what comes next.

I have to constantly remind myself not to smother her. Everything has to be so new to her, especially the idea of an actual relationship. Hamster.

“Aren't I a tad strange to you?” she asks, turning to face me, cocking her head to the side.

e “Strange?”

I can think of a lot of words to describe Han, but strange isn't the first

1Intriguing, mysterious, magnificent, stunning, sensual, one of a kind...

s “I mean, you know things about me most people don’t.” She looks down, a  
yfrown forming.

“My place, for instance. No one’s been there.”

e “No one?”

g “No. No one but you.”

y “And yet, I’m still here,” I say, staring back into her slightly confused  
eyes.

s “That’s the part I can’t seem to understand.”

d I get it. Her place would seem weird as fuck to anyone who wasn’t me  
eThe obsession with death and the afterlife practically painted across the walls  
1I can’t imagine a person like Bran taking a walk through her wonderland  
leaving with anything but a bus ticket outta town. But I’m not a fucking Bran  
1I’m Kid and she’s Jo.

“I like the dark parts of you, Han, almost more so than the light happy  
parts. Your darkness is the real, raw, unfiltered Han. And she sets me on  
afucking fire.”

She blinks quickly, looking down at our clasped hands. A sigh escapes her  
and it sounds like her heaviness is back, as if she’s determining if I can truly  
.handle her and her secrets. Some sort of cloud is hanging over her still. She  
Ihasn’t let the pain of her past go just yet. That much is clear. But why does  
oshe still feel the weight of death the way she does? There’s more to her story  
and I know she’s hesitant to let anyone read that chapter.

r There’s a knock at my door.

My eyes quickly capture Han’s, then peer back to the door. A bit of panic  
rises in me, making my heart pound through my chest. Surprisingly, she’s  
.cool as a cucumber.

“You gonna let them in?” she asks.

a The knocking continues.

“Yo, Kid.” Hawke’s voice booms through the wood. “You up?”

I turn to face Han again where she’s relaxed in my t-shirt, her legs crossed at the ankles, one hand casually behind her head.

“You wanna get your clothes first?”

l She wrinkles her nose while shrugging. “Nah.”

The pounding gets louder.

“Come in!” I call from my position on the bed.

. Hawke opens the door and sees me. As the door widens, his eyes catch  
. Han half naked next to me and his back hits the door with a thud.

l, “Oh fuck! Oh...my God,” he says, gasping while clutching the doorknob.

l. “What’s wrong, baby?” Cole’s concerned voice echoes from the kitchen.

By the panicked look in Hawke’s eyes, I can tell he hasn’t told her yet  
y This is about to get interesting. Cole approaches from behind him to see what  
the commotion is all about.

“OH HELL NO!” she screams, peering at us from around Hawke before  
recovering her mouth with her free hand. “Did you fuck him?!”

y The question is obviously directed towards Han. She looks over at me  
then back at her sister.

s “A few times.” Nodding casually, she toys with her bangs, straightening  
; them out before looking back at Cole.

“What is this?! What’s happening?! Oh my God. Hawke, can you believe  
this shit?!”

c Hawke swallows, his eyes wide as saucers.

s Cole takes in his nervous demeanor before her mouth drops open  
smacking him in the chest.

“You knew?!”

Oh shit. He definitely didn’t tell her.

“It’s not his fault,” I intercept this ball for him. “I told him I’d castrate him if he told you. And he really wants kids.”

“Wait, so you’re like...together?” she asks, her forehead wrinkling in confusion.

I wrap my arm around the back of Han and pull her into me. She looks up at me with her eyes narrowed, as if trying to configure in her head how to appropriately answer this question. It’s awkward. We haven’t discussed this. It’s too early for this conversation. It’s going to hamster her.

“Uh, well, we’re fucking on the regular, I guess. So whatever that is,” Han answers, shrugging.

“I’ll take it.” I let out a breath as my lip pulls up in the corner.

I turn back to face Hawke and Cole, giving them a huge cheesy grin, and don’t miss the warning glare that’s shooting toward Han. Cole is protective of me. I hate that I notice it. I hate that it makes my stomach twist into a small pretzel. I hate that even if it’s non-intentional, she’s so sure Han is going to fuck me over.

I hate that I know she will.

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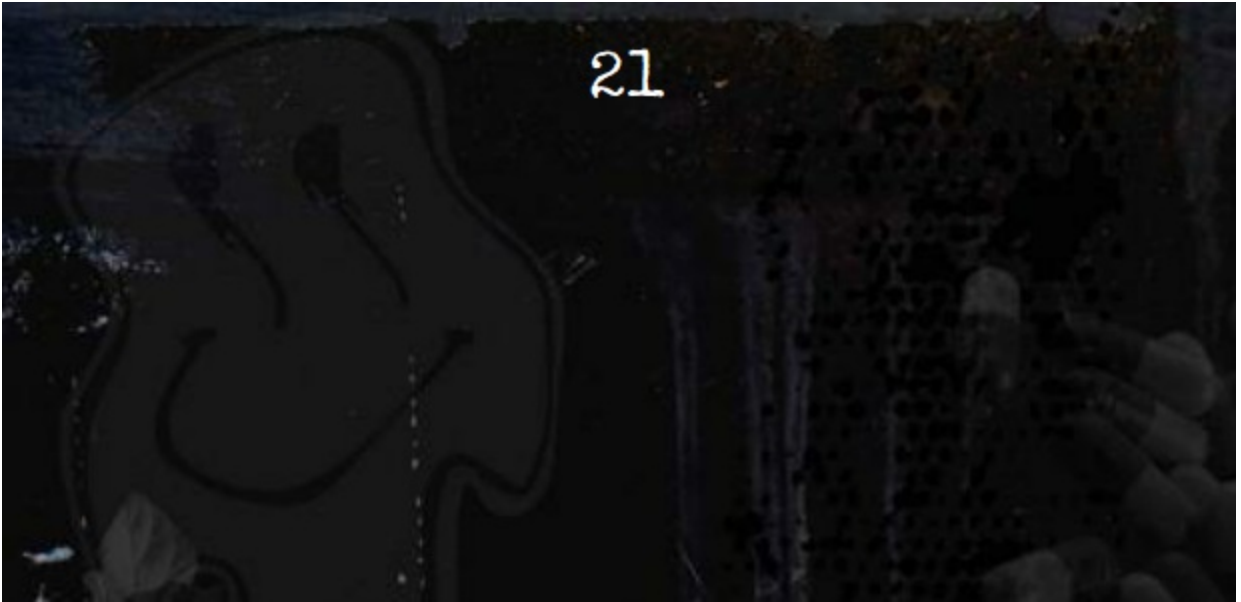
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“Kai.”  
*I feel so good.*

“Kai.”

*I’m like a cloud of fucking sensations.*

“Kai, baby, you good?”

Her sweet voice parts through my hazy cloud until I feel her sweet little ass resting on my lap, her back against my chest.

“I’m good, babygirl,” I groan, pinning her hips to me as I drive mine up into her.

*Babygirl? Fuck, was that corny? I don’t care. It felt right.*

The alcohol, the weed, it’s all in my system now and I feel great. My girl is on my lap and we’re about to have a wild ass night. *I can’t believe I have a girl.*

She responds with a soft moan, wrapping an arm up behind my neck and pulling my face to meet hers. Her lips find mine and it’s ecstasy. Literally ecstasy on her tongue into my mouth.

I take the pill from her, swallowing it down as I take one from the bowl near the couch, yeah it's that kind of party, placing one on her tongue with my index finger. She sucks on my finger, her tongue ring massaging it as if she was sucking something else.

We're both already high as fuck. Mine must be hitting harder because she seems to always be taking care of me, looking out for me, checking on me giving me what I need.

We got to the beach house party at Sidney's a few hours ago after a long week of work. Hawke and I had finished the construction on their newest property and the only thing left was to furnish it before renters could slide through. We were finally ready to celebrate the weekend at Sidney's beach house—at least everyone around me is celebrating the weekend. I'm celebrating the fact that it's been seven consecutive days on the Han-hasn't ghosted-me calendar.

She didn't leave me. She's here, and she stuck around for me. Like a feather to a wad of gum.

We've been clicked up all week, almost as if we'd been doing this forever. Grabbing food together, going for nature hike and bakes, playing video games in my room, to which she proceeded to hand me my ass in Call of Duty. I've stayed overnight at her place a few times. She stayed at Hawke and Cole's on a different night. Snuck in like teenagers late at night after a party, drunk as all hell. I had to keep a hand over her mouth that night as she screamed out against it while I hammered into her. Fuck, we're wild.

It's the craziest shit. She's more of a homie to me than most of my homies—Hawke excluded, of course. We seem to have a solid friendship outside of our mutual attraction to one another, and I genuinely enjoy kicking it with her the way we so naturally do. We just click on so many different levels.

l We both love sex. Rough, boundary-pushing sex. That much is clear. The  
ndrugs, yeah, we both overindulge. She understands my needs almost as much  
as I do hers. We love exploring different realms, different levels of  
consciousness while submitting to the feelings and each other.

e But it's more than that. Our conversations are real, authentic, and deep  
,She's letting me in while slowly trusting me. I see it. I feel it. As much as it  
scares her, she's trying. Why is she trying? It's because I allow her to be  
gherself with me. I love her darkness. It's something I don't think anyone has  
tsubjected themselves to. Maybe I am crazy enough for her because of it, like  
ashe says. Maybe she's realizing if she doesn't jump, she might miss out on  
something extraordinary. This, between us, is extraordinary.

1 I've also enjoyed seeing this new side to her I had mildly picked up on  
-during LSD night. It's been more than apparent lately. She cares about me.  
She's always looking out for me, even when I'm not, or when I'm oblivious  
to my surroundings. She's got a nurturing soul, and it's showing its face the  
more we're together.

: She eyes me from the other side of the room when we're separated  
owatching to make sure I don't overdo it, even though I know my limits. Her  
fconcern is adorable. I catch her eyeing other women or even men when they  
ecome around. She doesn't act jealous by any means, but she looks out for me  
athe way friends would naturally. Giving visual evaluations, making sure  
people are being authentic, trustworthy, and that they aren't fucking with me.  
The feeling I get knowing she's got my back is enough to have me bowing  
sdown to her at the throne, surrendering my sword. Yep, I'm fucking  
fdrowning.

r "Here, drink some water," she says, handing me a bottle of water. "Gotta  
keep you hydrated."

e “Fuck, Han,” I say, taking the water and helping her onto my lap on the loveseat I’ve settled into. “You always do me right.”

f “What are friends for?” she says, wiggling her eyebrows at me, knowing what that sentence does to me.

. I set the bottled water down, grabbing the back of her neck roughly as she smirks in delight. She loves toying with me, watching me come undone.

e “I’m not your fucking friend, Han.”

s “Is that right?” She grins playfully, situating her body in my lap, her legs finding their place around mine. “Then what are we?”

n She straddles me on the couch, pressing herself against my chest, our foreheads now connected as she rubs her little nose against mine in the way I’ve come to love.

. “Am I the Snuffleupagus to your Big Bird?” she whispers against my lips.

s “Oh, most definitely. But more than that, you’re my girl, and I’m your guy,” I say confidently, holding her face between my palms.

She bites her bottom lip, looking down at my mouth, then back into my eyes with a flirtatious flutter of her lashes before pushing back.

r “You don’t own me,” she remarks with her sexy little sass.

y I tighten my grip on the back of her neck again, bringing her ear near my lips.

e “I’ll show everybody at this party how I can fucking own you.”

. She smiles, wrapping her arms around my neck, turning to face me, and leans forward to lick her bottom lip.

g Fuck, she tastes good. Like brown sugar and sweet, delicious honey.

We enjoy tasting each other, feeling the electrifying sparks of our tongues intertwined, kissing until our lips are used. I claw at her skin, grabbing for her perfect perky breast that’s loose beneath her little Ol’ Dirty Bastard crop top

eshirt, and massage it in the palm of my hand, twisting the nipple ring between my forefinger and thumb. She throws her head back, pulling away from my kiss as her body begins its beautiful roll against mine.

We both seek the ultimate release, the kind we can only seem to get through each other. I'm obsessed with making this girl cum. My favorite is when she stares into my eyes, coming undone as I flick her clit at the speed of a hummingbird's wings with my tongue the way she loves, until she screams out, spasming around my fingers, curled deep inside her. I will never get enough of the taste of her. I want to live between her legs, worshiping the woman, who I now realize at any moment could break me in two.

The door to the house swings open as a couple of girls enter the kitchen nearby to grab some drinks out of the fridge. Han turns her head and connects eyes with the brunette. They share an odd exchange before Han turns back to me with a smile, like nothing happened. The girl, however, looks at us curiously as she takes in the visual of Han straddling my lap.

"Who was that?" I ask as the girls leave out of the door they came in.

"Who, the girl with the big tits in green?" she asks against my neck placing a kiss.

I didn't even catch what she looked like or what was wearing. The awkward exchange between them was loud enough.

"Yeah, what was that look she gave you? What'd you do? Steal her boyfriend?"

"Nah, I stole her. From her boyfriend," she says casually as she continues dragging her lips over the shell of my ear.

"Wait, what?" I chuckle in confusion.

"Bran."

She says the name, and it unintentionally triggers me.

1 “Bran?”

7 “You really want to do this? Right now?” She sits back on my lap, letting out a little huff of air.

t “I mean...yeah.” I shrug with a curious grin. “I don’t know anything about your dating history.”

f “There’s not much to it,” she says simply.

s I raise my eyebrows, wanting her to explain.

t “I don’t date—” She stops herself, taking in a breath. “I’d dated this girl, Sasha, but only for a few months, and haven’t dated since Bran. Bran and I were together for two and a half years, on and off. I told him I loved him. He told me he was fucking another girl. So, I did what anyone would do. I stole his girl.”

o This story has to be the craziest shit I’ve ever heard. In what world would anyone cheat on Han? No one could ever come close to comparing. And Bran? Why the fuck would she date a guy like him for two and a half years? The intensity with which I hate Bran is unparalleled.

; “Wait, so he started dating her directly after you?”

“Well, basically while he was with me, but yeah.”

e *My poor girl.* I think of a younger, more innocent Han getting her little heartbroken, and it crushes me.

r “And then you got her to cheat on him...with you?”

“Yeah. I think she’s still kinda obsessed with me. We only hooked up twice, but she’s always finding me at parties and getting flirty and shit.”

I break out into a laugh. “That’s fucking badass.”

I can only imagine the look on Bran’s face knowing a woman stole his woman. I’m fucking deceased. This girl is a savage, and I love it.

“He’s another level of asshole. A shit for brains, small-dicked, popularity



hungry prick. He deserves so much worse for all the shit he put me through after...” She stalls, and I can feel the pain in her pause. “After everything was dealing with in that moment,” she scowls, just thinking about it.

t There must be a connection in the timeline between the Bran incident and whatever happened to her mother. I can see that cloud of hers lingering waiting to drop that rain on her already broken heart.

“Then why were you talking to him at his house? How could you possibly be so cool around him after all of that shit popped off? His fucking arm was around you,” I say, remembering the scenario and getting defensive for her.

e “I leave him with the idea that he’s in control of the situation around him when, in reality, he’s just a chess piece in my game.”

I blow out air. “Jesus, Han.”

l She shrugs.

l “I need to know more about this detailed game of yours. You’re like a little assassin,” I smirk, pulling her closer to me, nuzzling my face into her neck before whispering into her ear, “This is getting me hard.”

Her throat vibrates as she giggles against me. “You’re always hard.”

“That’s a fucking fact.” I point at her, then my dick. “Now come sit on this cock.”

“I can’t get enough of your crazy ass,” she moans, grinding her hips into me before pressing her lips against mine again.

o We’re enjoying our little moment to ourselves on the couch inside Sidney’s beach shack. A few people are inside somewhere, hooking up, while most people are out on the beach surrounding the fire.

s “Han, tell me I’m more than a friend to you,” I demand, grabbing her chin to face me, stalling her grind on me.

- She said she doesn’t date. She stopped herself, but it still sent me into my

own form of madness. Staring into me with those dilated pupils from her  
Molly, I can tell she feels good all over.

“You’re more than a friend, Kai,” she whispers against my lips. “You’re in  
the blurred space beyond it. Whatever that space holds.”

My heart feels as if it’s bouncing around the inside of my rib cage, trying  
to break free.

I groan at her words. “Show me. I need you to show me I’m not your  
friend.”

I’m so hard for her, as always. I could get hard sniffing her hair. But  
hearing her say I’m more than a friend makes me want to do nasty things to  
her, needing her to prove that the blurred space she talks about actually exists  
for me.

She grinds her hips into me again, clearly feeling my erection and rubbing  
herself against me in her little cutup shorts, massaging her clit where she  
needs the friction most.

“Fucking you is my favorite, Kai,” she whispers as she sucks on my  
earlobe. “You have the most amazing, thick cock.”

The Molly is kicking in now as we touch every available part of one  
another beneath our velvety hands. Han rolls her head back, closing her eyes  
facing the ceiling in pure bliss as she succumbs to the sensations.

“But it’s more than that,” she whispers to the ceiling. “It’s our connection  
It’s metagalactic.”

“I’m just gonna assume that’s a good adjective,” I groan while her hips  
roll.

She drops her head down to face me again, her eyes burning into mine.

“Meaning...everything,” she finishes, sensing my confusion.

I stare into her wild eyes. I feel my lips part before I attempt to swallow

Every time I get the sense that this is actually real and happening, I have to pause to take it in. I'm in fucking love with her. I know I am.

1 She can read my mind. I know she can. I can tell by the way her eyes light up with a certain dangerous twinkle to them. She's got me right where she needs me to be in order for her to release her hold, needing someone to fall first to brace the impact of hers.

r Han wraps her hand around the back of my head, gripping the top of my hair between her fingers. She presses her soft lips against mine again and moans into my mouth as our tongues find each other's. Her lips are so warm and soft, and her tongue so strong and steady. Our kiss sends my stomach into a cartwheel of fucking bliss.

One girl returns in through the front door again, sneaking a peek at us on the couch as she walks over to sit in the chair at the table. Han kisses and sucks the skin along my neck as I eye the curious onlooker. The one in green with the big tits, as Han described, is watching with a certain look in her eyes. A naughty little smirk. I know that look.

"Mmm," I groan as she nips at my skin with her teeth, leaving a mark. e I smack her ass, grabbing it in a firm grip as she leans back, biting her bottom lip.

The girl gets up from her chair, making it screech against the wood floor, prompting Han to run and look at her.

"You two are so sexy together," she says, sauntering her way over to us. s She sits down next to me on the couch, clearly trying to get a better view.

Han smirks and pulls my hair again, bending my neck back, exposing my Adam's apple, almost making a show out of licking the length of my neck.

She sits back in my lap and eyes the woman again, gauging for a response. Han leans across me, holding her hands on my shoulders as she bends

otowards an awaiting kiss.

The woman presses up against Han's lips as I watch their tongues touch directly over my lap. I rub myself against Han, rolling her hips so her friction reaches the heat in my jeans from the display.

l She's insatiable and seeing her kiss a woman with that tongue that so graciously gives me pleasure has my jaw on the floor, on the brink of losing control.

l The girl grabs for the hem of Han's crop top as they kiss each other. I assist Han in pulling her top up and over her breasts. I watch the intensity between these two and know for a fact this is about to be a good ass time.

Han's top comes up as the girl and I connect eyes, almost daring each other to do it, before our mouths and hands find her breasts. She moans softly dropping her head back when I come to my senses. We can't do this here.

1 "Back room." I nod my head once in its direction. "Let's go."

r We all silently smirk at one another with curious eyes and a knowledge of the pleasure to come.

We get into a room—a bedroom with a full-sized bed and tropical island decor. I'm talking a palm tree border in the middle of the wall, bedspread with an island sunset, and collections of various shapes of glass bottles of sand and seashells on the shelves.

I must make a strange face at the setup before Han snaps me out of it dragging me to the bed until the backs of my legs hit the mattress, before throwing me back on it and straddling my lap.

y She crawls up my body as I hear the door lock behind us. The woman is approaching us with a grin, licking her lips as she sits in a chair facing us. watching the two of us interact naturally. She leans back into the blue velvet

chair, her left leg propped on the armrest as her hands explore herself beneath that little green dress.

Her lips are dragging all over me. My neck, my chest after removing my t-shirt, my nipple, along my abdomen and finally at the edge of my black ripped jeans. She opens the button to my pants, eyeing my face while her eyebrow arches, almost silently communicating with me.

*Is this okay?*

*I Are you ready for this?*

*Think you can handle the intensity of what's about to happen?*

*Are you ready for the most amazing experience of your life?*

A dangerous grin pulls at my lip, answering all of those questions in one look.

*I've never been more ready.*

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22









*Stay calm. Keep cool. Focus.*

Fuck it. I can't help the unabashed grin that's slapped across my stupid, naïve face.

*I'm about to have a threesome.*

The room is dimly lit by this simple mosaic lamp that's sending an array of colors across the ceiling, painting the walls with a strange, chaotic beauty. The beat from the music is blasting against the wall of the room, leaving a humming beat of mysterious tunes creating the soundtrack to the event ahead.

Han is slowly opening my pants, keeping her eyes steady on mine. She's got a curious look about her. One that is constantly checking on me, almost reassuring me I can back out if it's not what I want. No judgments. It's as if she's truly wondering if I'm going to be okay with this.

I love her concern. I love that she's moving slow with me, as to not push me into anything I'm not willing to dive into. I love how much she just simply cares.

I place my hands behind my head, bracing myself for her magical tongue. The girl, whose name I've discovered is indeed Sera, the girl she stole from Bran, watches as Han dips her hand in my pants and cups me over my underwear. I swallow as she massages me, running the length of cock, getting me primed and ready.

"Wait, I have an idea," Sera says, getting up and pulling something out of her bra.

Cocaine.

I look from her to Han, who's looking at me with that same cautious look then back at her. She kneels against the bed where I'm lying back, forming two lines along my abdomen. I try to control my breathing as I watch two beautiful women snort their lines off of my skin. They lick the area clear with their warm wet tongues and my eyes roll to the back of my head.

"Mmm, yes." I groan at the sensation, running my hands along both of their backs.

Han dips her finger in the baggy, filling one of her long black acrylic nails with the substance. She straddles me again, allowing me to snort it along with them.

I take it. It's different. There's something unusual about it. It's cut with something, but I can't put my finger on it because there are currently two women in the vicinity of my dick.

Han kisses along my hip, trailing her tongue to the waistband of my boxers. She pulls them all the way down, exposing my erection, before grabbing the base in her hand, making me hiss through my teeth at the initial contact.

Sera's lips part, her eyes widening before she gives Han the are you kidding me look.

“Holy shit,” she whispers under her breath.

Han’s lips pull into a grin at her reaction to my size before her eyes find mine, flashing me the sexiest look of admiration.

Before I realize how we even got here, both women are licking and sucking me off. Han takes the lead, showing her exactly what I like.

“Wrap your lips around the head,” she demands. “And circle your tongue. He loves that.”

*Holy fuck.*

She knows me well. Sera circles her tongue around the ridge of the tip while Han trails her tongue down my shaft, softly kissing and tonguing my balls, her tongue ring creating an exotic sensation. I curl my toes and straighten my legs at the immense pleasure. They pause every so often to kiss and lick each other’s tongues with my cock between them, as I watch with my head propped, mouth dropped open in pure ecstasy. I have to force my mouth shut, grinding my teeth so hard just to keep it together.

I can’t figure out what turns me on more. Having two women literally worshipping my dick, soft hands exploring me and each other, Han telling me how to please me, or simply watching Han interact with another woman. *Fuck.*

The high of the coke hits me like a large wave washing over me in a steady pulse of numbing pleasure. My heart beats out of my chest, my limbs tingle and cloud-like, my face like a plush, numb cushion. It’s potent, whatever it was, because it didn’t take much for me to feel this already. Mind you, my tolerance is high.

The girls keep sucking, Han taking me deep down her throat while Sera cups and massages my balls in her soft, supple hands.

“You’re so sexy,” Sera murmurs into me as she places open-mouthed

kisses along my neck.

1 Everything feels so phenomenal and effortlessly mind blowing.

“Shittt,” I groan, grabbing Han’s hair in my hand as she continues to deepthroat me while Sera’s hands trail my chest and abdomen. “Fuck, baby, it’s so good.”

2 Sera takes my other hand, cupping her breast, kneading it as she leans forward, kissing my lips, her tongue slipping between them as it runs the length of mine. Han pops her mouth off my cock at the sound of her kissing me.

3 “Sit on his face,” she instructs, pulling Sera away from my lips.

4 A little possessive of my kisses, perhaps? I love how that is too intimate for her, yet the act of sex itself isn’t.

5 “Can’t wait.” Sera smirks.

6 Han grabs a condom from my pants, coming back to roll it down my shaft. I drop my head back as Sera slips her dress over her head, proceeding to step out of her underwear.

7 She’s hot as fuck, don’t get me wrong, and those tits are so full and heavy. .and would most definitely have any man drooling all over himself. But one thing is obvious to me—she’s not Han. Never could be.

8 Han slides up my abdomen, diving her tongue into my mouth. She kisses me with everything she has, and I feel it. She’s staking her claim. Her moans reverberate through me and I grip the back of her hair, my other hand running over her curves while exploring every inch of her mouth as the drugs course through our pleasure-seeking bodies. I love how we both feel together. We feel everything and so deeply.

I could care less about this other chick at the moment. Han is enough of a woman for me.

She pulls back from the kiss, looking down at me with her eyes narrowed and her breaths shallow.

“Sit on his cock,” she says to Sera, staring dangerously at me. “His mouth is mine.”

My lip pulls into a grin at her possessiveness. It’s so fucking attractive watching her run the show, telling Sera what she can have of me and what she can’t.

I stick my tongue out, waving it at her, awaiting her sweet, delicious pussy. Sera straddles my lap as Han swings her leg over my head, facing her. Han grabs the base of my cock, holding it steady while Sera makes her descent. She’s guiding me into another woman, getting her own pleasure by watching this, and I’ve literally never felt so turned on.

“Ahhh, fuck,” I hiss, feeling myself slide into her warm, wet heat.

Sera rides me as Han talks dirty to her, damn near sending me into premature release. “You like fucking his cock, don’t you?”

She cries out, and I hear the girls kiss again. The sensual sounds I’m hearing, the lips clashing, the soft moans, the hands trailing my chest and abdomen, as I feel her move are all overwhelming.

I grab Han’s hips, my fingers gripping roughly into the flesh as I pull her down onto my tongue, needing to taste her sweet arousal. She cries out at the contact, bucking her hips into me. With long, wet licks of my tongue to her sensitive clit, I increase the speed while inserting one of my fingers into her eaching hole at the rate that Sera is riding me.

Feeling a warm pussy wrapped around my cock while the most beautiful one I’ve ever seen is riding my face has me on sensory overload. I’m losing myself to the euphoria as the world around me blurs into the most incredible haze of lust, desire, and straight up erotic passion.

l “Fuck, Kai, that tongue,” Han moans, backing herself onto my finger as clutch her ass in my palms, forcing her to take the pleasure.

n I want nothing more than to make her cum. Like it’s the reason I’ve been put here on this earth, to give this woman indescribable pleasure.

, Sera’s ass is bouncing on my lap now as I recklessly thrust my hips up into her, rough and powerful, getting more and more excited by the second. Her cries become louder as I feel her tighten up around me.

. “Slow...slow down,” she whines, bracing her hands on my abdomen. “It’s too hard.”

. “Get off,” Han instructs, sensing her discomfort.

g She slides herself up and off my cock, letting it fall on my abdomen with a heavy slap, and crawls up the bed to watch us.

Han helps me up off the bed and repositions herself on all fours on the edge in front of me. Sera slides beneath her and starts toying with her tits sucking on her tight, erect nipples before they kiss again.

n I take the opportunity to swap out a new condom. I’m not sure how this goes, so I’m just making it up on the fly.

Approaching her from behind, I admire the beauty of the tattooed flesh on her perfectly toned thighs, with another set of legs open beneath her. Running my hands up along them, she wiggles her ass at me, needing to feel full, as she breaks her kiss with Sera.

r “As fast and hard as you want,” she says to me with her cheek to her shoulder, an arrogance in her exotic eyes I adore.

l I bite my lip, loving this side of her, as I shake my head at her sexy comment. “You’re so bad.”

e She’s right to be arrogant. She’s the only one who can handle me at my best. She loves to be fucked hard, and trust me when I say it’s what I need

The pain that seems to accompany being fucked by someone of my size is what gets her off. She lives for the pleasurable pain that only comes when you fully submit yourself to the experience. I grin mischievously at her saucy attitude, noting the little side diss to Sera before lining myself with her entrance.

My hands run down the length of her curved back, touching the beautiful array of ink along her spine. She opens herself to me, popping her ass as Sera sucks and kisses her neck and chest sensually.

“Oh, fuck yeah,” I groan, watching them, stroking myself a few times.

I run the head of myself along her wet folds before pressing into her hard. She moans, arching her back as I stretch her. I sink my way in deeper and deeper until I’m buried in her warm walls.

“So good,” I hiss through my teeth, gripping her ass between my hands. “So fucking good.”

The feeling of being deep inside her surpasses anything else I’ve ever experienced. Maybe it’s because I’m actually invested in this chick. My heart is in it, along with my dick. But the truth is, our connection cannot be matched, even if there’s another person present. The sensation of her wrapped so tightly around me, dripping wet, as I pull her hips back into mine has my eyes rolling to the back of my head again.

“Oh, God Kai,” she moans as the pace increases.

Sera spreads her thighs in front of Han, her dripping center propped just before her face.

“Lick me, babe,” she moans. “You’re so good at it.”

I forget that they’ve done this before. They’ve messed around a few times if I remember correctly. Han must be good at it because this woman is hooked. *Why does that turn me on so much?*

s Han dips her head and begins licking her clit, massaging it softly and slowly, her arms wrapping up and around Sera's thighs. The sight is enough to make any man blow his load ten times over.

r I'm fucking her hard now, thrusting deep and fast, just as she instructed her moans being captured into the sex of Sera who's massaging her full tits in her hands at the pleasure. This is the wildest shit I've ever done, and I'm completely giving myself over to the experience.

Han repositions, bracing herself on the bed as I really get into it, my dick harder than ever. She screams again and again before Sera gets up, making her way around to me. She takes one of my hands off Han, placing it on her tongue, sucking my middle finger before lining herself up alongside Han on all fours. Two women, side by side, seeking pleasure from me. I take the hint and begin finger fucking her from behind as I continue driving in Han.

Both women are moaning as they turn to kiss each other again. The bass of the music pounds through my chest, echoing the increased rate of my heart. t I'm falling. Deep into the sexual darkness. Everything about this moment is so erotic, so sensual, so sexual, so fucking chaotic, yet totally liberating in the same sense. It's freeing, being able to explore yourself sexually like this, seeking and giving out pleasure so openly.

I pause, pulling out of Han before grabbing her hips and gently rolling her over onto her back. She spreads her perfectly toned thighs again, looking at me through those beautiful half-lidded, lust-filled eyes. I push back into her, lifting one of her legs up and over my shoulder, our eyes searing through one another.

, Sera's hand slides down Han's tight abdomen, before reaching her sex where we are connected, gently playing with her clit while I slide in and out of her in a tortuous, slow tease.



l “Come baby,” Sera whispers, staring up at me. “Come all over her.”

1 Han’s perfectly plump lips part with her sweet moans escaping them. grab her breast that’s bouncing before me, rolling her pebbled nipple between my fingers as I continue the delicious torture. Sera places her lips around another nipple, sucking the sensitive tissue as Han’s head falls against the bed. Her sweet, beautiful cries becoming louder as she tightens around me.

I close my eyes tightly, dropping my head back and facing the ceiling, feeling the tingling sensation in the base of my spine, the tightening of my balls, telling me I’m close to cumming.

r I open my eyes, needing to face her again, only to be met with a terrifying visual.

t “Oh, shit!” I pull out of her quickly, panic in my tone. “Han, you’re bleeding.”

f She flutters her lashes in confusion before touching a hand to her face. She peers at her blood-soaked fingers with a puzzled look. Her nose is bleeding down onto the top of her lip before she sits up on her elbows and the blood pours out of her.

, Sera continues touching me, attempting to kiss my chest, clearly oblivious to the situation at hand.

r “Stop,” I say, pushing her off me. She doesn’t stop, she keeps trying to kiss me. “I said stop! Get the fuck off me!”

; “It’s just a bloody nose, she’s fine,” she groans, brushing me off. “Keep going.”

I push off her advances and quickly grab Han, sitting her up on the edge of the bed.

t “Fuck, tell me you’re alright,” I say nervously, grabbing for my t-shirt.

I remove her hand and tilt her head back slightly, holding the back of her

head with one hand, my t-shirt to her nose with the other. I'm breathing harder now than I was during the duration of the sex. I'm freaking out.

1 "I-I'm fine," she says in a soft, disoriented voice. "I'm sorry."

r "Don't," I snap quickly and harshly.

l, I won't have her apologizing for this. All the sex, the pleasure, the haze of the drugs, the erotic element to what we were involved in, has flown out the window. I've sobered up in every way possible in a matter of seconds. All I care about is her. Fuck the rest of this.

"You can go." I wave off Sera, who's rolling her eyes at us.

g *Stupid bitch.* I don't call women bitches ever, or even think it to be honest but Jesus, the lack of concern for Han is sending me into a rage.

e Han holds my shirt to her nose while I grab our clothes. I help her back into hers as I pull my jeans back up.

e "Are you okay? Are you hurt?" I ask, kneeling down on the floor between her legs, my hand taking the shirt and gently wiping the remaining blood of her lips and chest.

"I'm fine, Kai, really," she says in her sexy, cracked tone, giving me a lazy grin. "I feel amazing."

I don't like it. I don't like it at all. Seeing the drugs affect her this way shaming her first hand—this isn't fun anymore. It's serious.

And for the first time, it's terrifying the fuck out of me.

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I'm standing barefoot on the cool concrete floor of a dirty basement.

Liquor bottles are lying empty all around me and the place reeks of piss and old metal. There's a steady, dripping sound from a pipe that more than likely is rusted into complete disrepair. Various bodies lie scattered across the room, some on an old, ripped up couch in the corner, some directly on the filthy floor next to her.

*Why is she on the floor?*

I can't see her face, only the back of her head, but I know it's her. My heart feels it.

"Han!" I yell out, touching her shoulder to turn her to face me.

She rolls onto her back at the touch, her head falling against the concrete with a thud. Tightly wrapped around her arm is a tourniquet with a needle sticking out of the vein near the crook of her elbow. Her eyes are glazed over with a blue sheen to them, her lips purple and her nose decaying off of her face, leaving a blood encrusted hole where it used to be.

I shake her limp body, attempting to revive her, to no avail.

The sound of horrified screams leave my body before I wake up from this nightmare into another frightening situation.

There is a knife at my neck.

My knife.

It takes me a minute to reorient myself after the horrific nightmare I just had. I blink numerous times, making sure I didn't slip into another dream.

"Han," I say cautiously, with my arms raised up in surrender beneath her. "What are you doing?"

She's straddling me in her bed, wearing only a t-shirt and lace panties holding my pocket knife to my throat and staring down at me with a heated expression.

"Don't play dumb with me," she growls. "I saw the way you were looking at her last night."

*Hold up. Is Han a crazy bitch? Ah, shit. Han's a crazy bitch.*

"I don't—" I begin before she presses the sharpened blade roughly against the skin of my neck, making me swallow hard. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I saw it. I saw it in your eyes. You loved fucking her, didn't you?" she asks with venom on her tongue.

"Woah, woah, woah..." I say with wide eyes and a nervous expression.

"Baby, no—"

"Don't you fucking call me that!" She yells, and I shut my mouth, rolling my lips inward and biting on them nervously as the knife presses dangerously close to my jugular vein.

I sit there, my head pressed into the pillows with the woman I'm in love with on top of me, accusing me of enjoying the threesome she wanted us to partake in. I'm lost, I'm confused, and frankly, I'm kind of scared.

s “I didn’t...I don’t like...I’m not...”

I stutter the words while shaking my head back and forth, my eyes wide as hell, trying to plead my case as I stare at her face above me. Her lip pulls into a grin, that grin growing into a smile, that smile busting open into a laugh.

t She’s fucking with me.

My eyes narrow as I release a frustrated sigh.

: She continues giggling with a humorous expression above me, still holding me hostage.

, “Oh, so you wanna play crazy bitch, huh?” I ask, my tone teasing. .

d She raises her eyebrows, almost taunting me, pushing me over the edge.

I flip her over abruptly, making her gasp as I take the knife from her hand and putting it up to her neck now. She bites her bottom lip, enjoying the exchange of power.

“You know I’m just fuckin’ with you,” she grins, and it melts me.

t Of course, she was fucking with me. Han is too damn chill when it comes to sex and pleasure for her to get upset at me over fucking another girl, not only in front of her, but with her. If anything, she got off on it almost more than I did.

As fast as the memory of our wild, adventurous night comes to mind, the memory of her nosebleed comes to the forefront again and my smile drops.

“What’s wrong?” she asks suddenly, her eyes filled with immediate concern.

y After the incident, we took an Uber to her place and came down from our high together. Now I know that extended use of coke can cause permanent damage to the lining of your nose. I’ve seen plenty of addicts in my day. Shit I’ve supplied them. I know what comes next. But it’s never hit me the way it did, seeing her painted with the blood of the trauma. It made me pause. Fuck



it gave me that nightmare of seeing her spiral into deeper drugs like heroin when the coke just doesn't cut it anymore, when chasing that initial high becomes too hard and she needs to switch to something more potent. These things happen and they happen quickly, before anyone even realizes it's an issue.

Would her ever impending black cloud cause her to sink into that darkness? It's not like she doesn't have her reasons for wanting to feel numb. Is this what the natural progression of a recreational drug user's life will look like? For the first time, I'm truly worried about her.

I should voice this. I should tell her my concerns now that she's asked.

“Nothing.” I give her a weak smile.

Who am I? I'm Kid. I'm the dude that speaks his mind even when he doesn't want to. Yet, here I am, holding back. Why?

I know why.

It's because if I'm honest with her, it'll push her away, and I can't push her away. I need her. I love her. It's the reason she opens up to me, because she knows I don't judge her or her decisions like her sister has.

“You know I wasn't being serious, right? I'm totally cool with what happened yesterday.”

I literally forgot what we were talking about because I'm so in my head about this. I finally remember in time to make light of the situation.

“Were you? I don't know...you seemed pretty stingy with my lips,” I tease her, cocking a brow. “And this tongue”—I stick it out and wave it at her sexually—“I could've sworn you were trying to keep that for yourself.”

She purses her lips together, narrowing her eyes, attempting to ignore the fact that I'm right.

“Well, maybe there are some things I wouldn't mind lockin' down.”

1   Yep. My heart is squeezing so tightly in my chest. She sends those feelings  
1 down into the pit of my stomach with two words. *Lockin' down.*

e   “It’s all yours, baby girl,” I smirk at her before licking my lips and looking  
1 at her through lowered lids. “Everything.”

She grins, but as the smile fades, I see her eyes go dark. I want to know the  
1 thought that crossed her mind; I want it all out between us, but...hamster.

.   “But if you ever wake me up with my knife to my neck again,” I begin  
1 pressing that same knife into her petite, adorable little neck, grinning  
1 mischievously. “I swear to God, I’ll teach you a fucking lesson.”

Her naughty little grin returns like it never left. “Teach me, professor.  
1 I wanna learn.”

e   “You’re a naughty little student,” I say, trailing the knife down her neck  
1 “You know that?”

I take the point of the knife, dragging it effortlessly down her soft, tattered  
1 skin, tracing the curve of her breast, down her taut, toned abdomen, until I get  
1 to her lace panties. Her tongue darts out of her mouth, licking her bottom lip  
1 as her chest rises and falls. The joking is aside now. Our desire is back, and  
1 the need to be together lingers.

I scratch the surface of her skin, pushing down hard enough to form a  
1 white line on the inside of her hip. She’s turned on by the pain, bucking her  
1 hips in response, craving some friction between her thighs.

e   “Don’t,” I say sharply, warning her. “Don’t move.”

r   Her large doe eyes flutter as a breath escapes her. I trail the knife back up  
1 her body, slowly edging over her ribs, then over her breasts, running the  
1 blade over her nipple as her mouth opens, watching intently. I move near her  
1 neck, trailing across her collarbone, before finally making my way down her

sarm. She's breathless now, swallowing as she watches the knife find its way to her palm.

I push into it, slowly at first, gauging the expression in her captivating eyes. She gives me a head nod, urging me on. I press enough to make her suck in air at the slight sting of the small cut. She moans once the drop of blood escapes her flesh and I have the urge to fuck her senseless.

It's who we are. We're freaks. We're sick. We get off on the pain, get high from the dark energy, get lost in the disturbing madness.

I take the knife to my palm, pressing the sharp blade into my skin, piercing it while I stare into her. Her eyes search back and forth in mine as her breath become shallow, coming to the understanding of what this is. I grab her hand, slowly sliding my fingers through her soft ones until they are interlocked, finally pressing our palms together and sealing our wounds.

Her pupils dilate as the feelings intensify between us. I feel that numbness take me again; one that no drug could ever match. She makes me feel awakened, reviving me entirely.

I raise our clasped hands above her head as our blood meshes together, settling myself between her thighs and trailing the knife back down to her underwear. Sliding it beneath the lace, I run the blade against her skin as we continue staring into each other, before I quickly and abruptly tear through the material.

"Kai," she moans breathlessly, the sweet sound making me rock hard.

I capture her lips in mine, folding the knife and throwing it across the room with one hand while our tongues touch and she moans in approval. I peel the thong over to the side, leaving it clinging to her one thigh, opening her up to me.

Using my free hand, I pull my boxers down enough to free myself

Without a second thought, I slide myself into her with a forceful thrust.

“Ugh,” I groaned immediately at the unbelievable sensation, dropping my head into the crook of her neck.

I’ve never felt anything better. Just us, every part connected, no barrier between us. I’m lit internally with a pulsating energy that consumes me. It’s more than sex. Way more than just sex. This is the ultimate connection. We are becoming one. Every part of me wants to flow through every part of her.

I want us breathing the same air, today and every day. The fire that makes up who she is; the only thing running through me, igniting my cold heart into a fury of flames, uncontrollable and forever unable to be tamed. I can’t live without this woman. I wouldn’t want to.

Sliding myself slowly, yet firmly, in and out of her tight, aching center, I pause at her sudden gasp of air.

I pull my head back to face her again and see her mouth parted, her eyes looking at the ceiling, filled with tears. I swallow, licking my lips before her eyes find mine. She blinks, and the tears spill over down her cheeks. She looks like she wants to say something but can’t. She’s terrified of what’s happening to her, of what she’s feeling. Her own emotions are drowning her like a wave ascending her deep into the unknown. She doesn’t need to use words. I feel everything her heart is saying against my own.

“It’s okay to be scared,” I whisper, gazing at her between soft kisses to her nose, cheeks, and lips. “I’m scared too.”

It’s undeniably terrifying, this thing we have between us. It’s so new and indescribable, and I get the feeling she feels the intensity of that, too. No one wants to subject themselves to the possibility of the pain from a broken heart but if we don’t admit it to ourselves, this raw and organic connection, then what the fuck are we even doing?

I look back at her. The little forehead wrinkle that makes its presence known in her confusion slowly fades away as the tears fall to the sides of her cheeks. She uses her free hand to grab the back of my neck, sliding her fingers through my hair, pulling me tightly to her lips.

We move together slowly, my body gliding along hers as we build up the fire together, seeking the unimaginable pleasure of being intimate with you. She is my person. My purpose.

A soft moan escapes from deep within her throat, prompting me to grab her other hand, holding it above her head against the soft comforter beneath us. Pinning her down, I continue driving my hips into her, our eyes never parting as our foreheads seal together, our breaths meeting between us.

She opens her mouth as if to say something, but the thrusts take her voice from her. She wants to tell me, but she can't. She can't fall on her own. She's still holding herself back.

"Johanna," I say breathlessly, telling her to let go.

Her bottom lip quivers, the tears returning as she closes her eyes tightly, wincing as her unrelenting orgasm explodes through her. I feel her tighten around me, pulsating as she trembles beneath me. It's enough to have me right there with her. I release one of her hands, quickly pulling out of her as my cum shoots out onto her stomach in hot waves.

I groan again and again, stroking with my hand until I've emptied myself onto her beautiful skin, painting her with my desire.

We kiss intimately, holding our lips together as our breathing slows and we come back down to the realities of the surrounding world.

After showering, Han dresses me in her clothes. Sounds crazy, but she legitimately wears men's clothing. I put on an old Nirvana t-shirt as I grab the pair of boxers she laid out for me.

e She finishes in the shower as I walk around her place, checking for changes.

r Yes, I'm crazy.

It's the same old song and dance at the ol' death villa—crunchy plants, new fallen leaves, Norbert, and...

r *The fuck?*

I approach the wall where Norbert's carcass is hanging, only to see he's made a new friend since my last visit.

n To my disbelief, there beside him is a stuffed toad.

r In a sombrero.

Playing a goddamn banjo.

e This one even has a poncho draped over him, with bright yellow, red, and green patterns throughout the tiny fabric. His eyes are totally blacked out and his skin is super shiny, almost acrylic looking. His creepiest feature has to be the wrinkled curve to his lip, set to look like a grin. In reality, he kind of resembles a shriveled-up Clint Eastwood.

n "It's all coming together now," I shake my head, looking at the two of them hanging so awkward and stiff.

s I hear the door to her bathroom open and scurry my way back into her room.

f "Please tell me these haven't touched another dude's dick," I comment showing off the black skull boxers of hers I've put on.

e She laughs as she combs through her hair with her fingers, her plain nude sports bra matching the large sweats beneath, showcasing her tattoos like a painting on canvas. "No, I went through a phase where that's literally all I'd wear at night. I swear, only pussy in those."

I love that her style is so unique. She wears what feels comfortable, yet

somehow makes it effortlessly hot as fuck. She's swaggered out.

"Perfect," I grin, pulling the waistband out and snapping them to me.

"Sexy," she comments as her eyes peer from my head to my dick and back to me. I feel where this is going.

"Flattered," I reply with a cheesy grin, continuing our quirky little one-worded conversation like we do.

"Satisfied?" she asks, tilting her head to the side, trailing her fingers down her neck, clearly referring to our sex.

I walk towards her, pulling her into me. Wrapping her arms around my waist, I take my fingers and weave them through the hair near her face pushing it back and tucking it behind her ears before holding her perfect little jaw in my hands.

"Obsessed," I say with a serious face, looking down at her, gazing from her plump lips to her eyes.

Her eyes light up, and I can feel her heart racing.

"Happy?" she asks with a hint of uncertainty.

I hate that I spot that bit of doubt. I think about that. I stand there for a moment, unable to think of one word that could possibly describe an answer to that question. There isn't one. No single word in the English dictionary could ever sum up the entirety of how I feel. So I spill my heart like a bucket of warm water, coating every surface around me in a messy flow of complicated words.

"I'm in love with you, Johanna."

Her eyes widen slightly as she sucks in a breath. She looks over my shoulder, then to the other side, before realizing I have her in a position where she can't look anywhere but at me. Her nervous eyes find mine again and for the first time, I've realized my emotions are bubbling over. I don't

care if I'm smothering that damn hamster. I can't hold this in anymore.  
want her to know. I want the world to know. Hell, I even want Norbert and  
.his new fucked-up looking band-mate to know.

I'm in love with this girl, and apparently I'm willing to risk it all just to  
-enlighten her.

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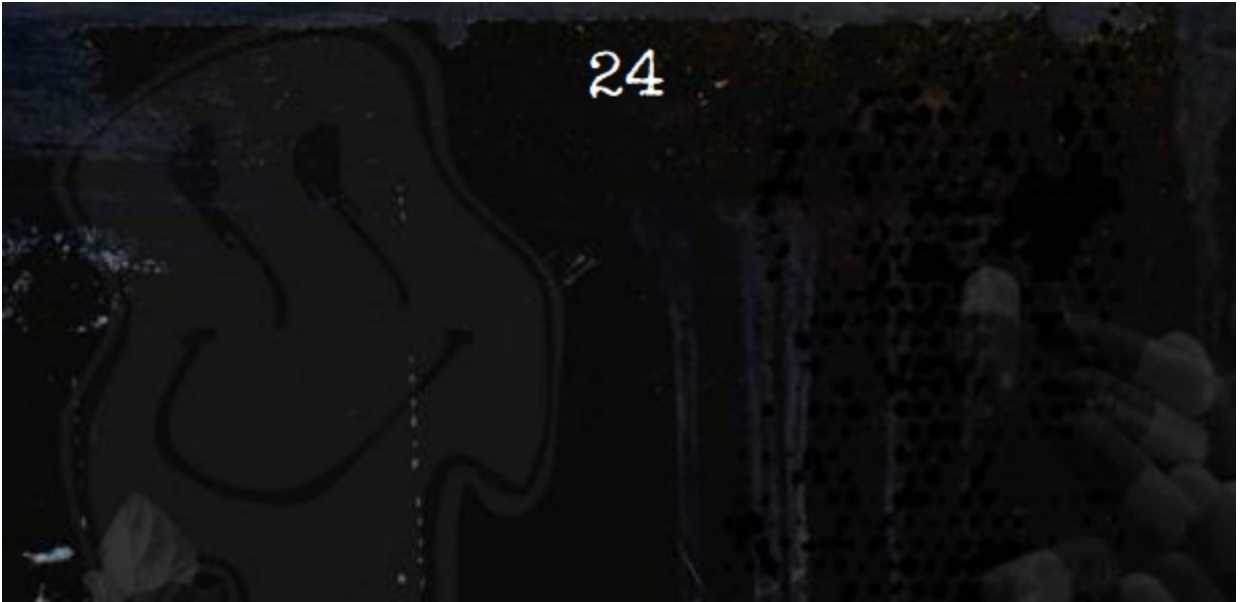
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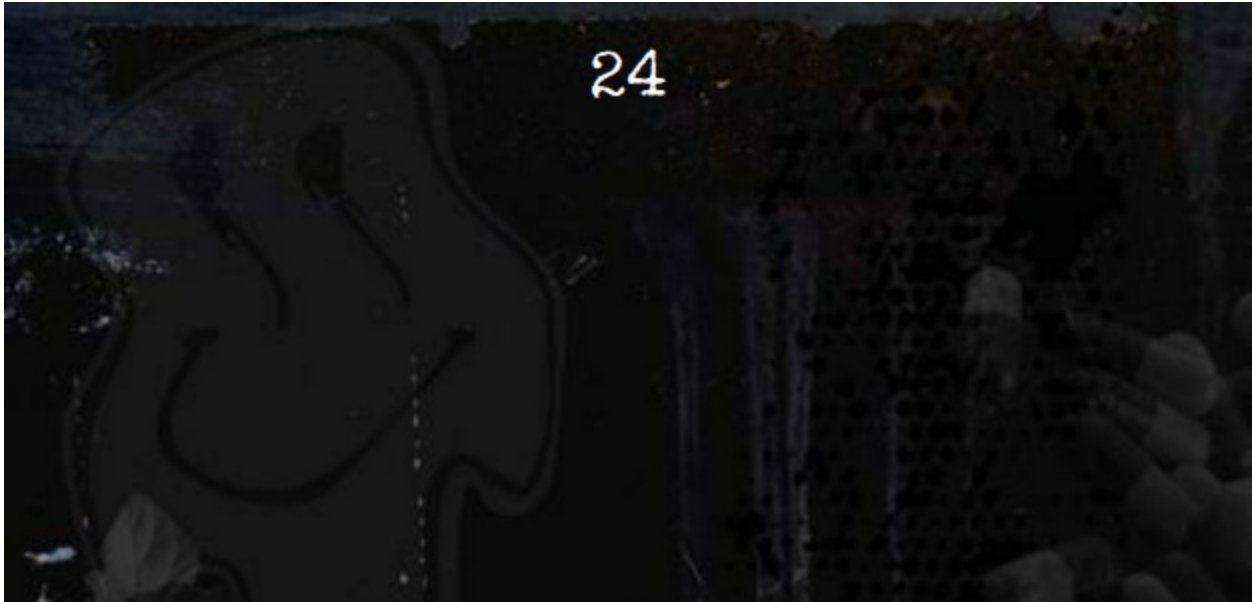
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I'm in love with this girl, and apparently I'm willing to risk it all just to enlighten her.







She stares nervously at me before her brows arch into an empathetic almost sorrowful, face.

“Kai,” she sighs, her mouth open like she doesn’t know how to respond as she pulls away from me.

“I’m in love with you, Johanna. You don’t need to respond. You don’t need to say anything back, I just...I just needed to get it out,” I say attempting to pull her back into me.

Her hands find my wrists and she softly pushes them down, away from her. The small movement feels like a knife to the chest.

“I’ve never said it before. I don’t just...do this. I’ve never even come close to feeling this way about anyone...but you...” I pause, trying to find the word to match the feelings I can’t seem to express. “You make me feel these...things.”

She bites her lip, looking worried, before running a hand through her hair and sitting down on the edge of the bed.

“I don’t...I don’t think you understand,” she says calmly.

“Understand what?” I ask, sitting down next to her, looking at her as she stares at the floor.

She gazes at the tiny cut on her hand, rubbing a finger over it, and I can almost hear the internal battle going on inside of her head.

“I can’t do this.”

Like a timid mouse caught in a trap, she blinks her eyes as she looks up at me before rubbing her forehead with her forefinger and thumb.

“Do what?”

“I can’t be that person for you. I shouldn’t have—” She sighs. “I can’t keep hurting you like this.”

“Hurting me? How are you hurting me?” I ask, leaning down to capture her eyes again.

She stares at me for a moment, almost attempting to get her thoughts together so I’d understand.

“I’m sorry, Kai. You should be with someone who can make you happy. Someone who isn’t so complicated. You deserve that.”

“What?! Are you...are you fucking kidding me?! You! You make me happy, Han.”

She’s infuriating me with her calmness and her incessant need to tell me what she thinks I want.

“Sure, it’s easy to say that now. We just fucked like crazy and you’re buzzing off that high. But I am who I am, and I’ll keep disappointing you. You deserve more. A Brynn. Someone who makes sense.”

“That’s shit. That’s a fucking cop-out.” I glower at her.

“It’s the truth, Kai. I’m not right for you. I’ll never be who you need me to be.”

“Well, why don’t we just set the bar low, Han, see the glass as half empty”

Is this what we're doing now? Jesus..." I scoff again, rolling my eyes as my hands find my face.

1 "I'm not someone you want to love. I'm the girl you can hang out with, fuck around with, have a good night with, get high, and get off with...not the one you fall in love with. It's just not me."

t "I'm not going into this with expectations of who I want you to be, Han. I love you, that means all of you. I love that you are obsessed with death, I love that you bend time to avoid it. I love your crunchy plants, your obsession with gummy worms, the way you stare off into the night, searching for the deeper meaning to life. The things I love about you have nothing to do with what you can do for me or who I want you to be, I'm obsessed with who you are as a person, how your past has formed this mysterious, alluring, phenomenally captivating woman through the experiences you've unfortunately endured."

. "Well, I don't feel the same way," she blurts out coldly, staring directly into my eyes.

e It's as if another person replaced her. The fake Han is back. She's hiding behind her because the real one, who was just crying during our intimate lovemaking, is too much for her to handle. It's frustrating the fuck out of me, he remaining so calm and robotic. I want to shake the living fuck out of her and wake her up.

. So, like the psycho I am, I grab her, roughly pulling her up off the bed and squeeze her upper arms into a firm hold. She sucks in a breath as my frustrations take over.

o "A minute ago, you were...you were crying!" I stutter, trying to get her to understand what I know. "I thought...I mean, I knew what you were feeling!

?

ysaw it in your fucking eyes Han, I felt it in your kiss! Quit doing this to yourself! The self-destructive bullshit is pathetic!”

l, I shake her in my grasp as I talk, before cursing to myself, dropping my forehead as I pace the room, folding my hands on top of my head.

“Kid, I know you’re only saying that because you’re hurt, and I’m sorry,” she responds calmly.

e “Kid, oh, now it’s Kid,” I scoff, dropping my hands to my thighs with a slap.

e “This is who I am.” She shrugs, shaking her head like she can’t help it.

1 I stare at her with a look of disbelief. The lies she tells herself just to keep things easy. It’s disgusting. Especially when it results in losing someone who genuinely loves the fuck out of you for all the reasons you could ever want them to.

“You know...it’s funny,” I begin, actually chuckling to myself. “The person you’ve attempted to become in order to deflect your trauma is not who you actually are. Can’t you see that?”

g “You should go.” She walks around the bed, finding my pants, holding them out to me.

r She’s kicking me out for telling her I’m in love with her. This is awesome. I feel myself losing control as I stare at her through lowered lids.

I grab her again, pushing her up against the wall behind her, forcing her to look at me so I can change her mind, attempting to revert her back to the Han that was falling for me. She gasps, her mouth parting as I stare dangerously into her. Her eyes fall to my lips and back into my glare again as her pulse rises, pounding through her delicate little neck I feel the incessant need to wrap my hand around.

“You love me!” I growl, my face inches from hers.

o Her sudden look of shock and half-lidded, lust-filled eyes disappears in a blink, the hazy, glossed over expression back again like it never left.

y “I don’t,” she says calmly, her quick blinking, and the rise and fall of her chest, the only thing telling me she isn’t the soulless robot she’s portraying  
”“I can’t.”

I ignore my head and listen to the horrible instinct that tells me to kiss her and forcefully place my lips on her, praying she wakes up from our connection.

She allows the kiss, but as I attempt to push my tongue into her mouth, she pushes me off of her lips, panting. “Stop.”

o I wince my eyes at her words before opening them and seeing her turned  
o face, her eyes closed tightly, blocking me from her vision.

t “No, tell me. What fucking happened to you? Why are you constantly pushing away the possibility of anything positive and real in your life?!”

e I can’t stand this. This barricade, holding her from me. Whatever was in  
o her past needs to be confronted. This is her darkness, but she’s embracing it like she loves it. She’s gotten so comfortable seeing in the dark that the crack of light I’m bringing into her life feels foreign and unfamiliar. She’d rather submit herself to her shadows, staying complacent where everything’s easier for her to control.

“It’s time for you to leave.” She holds my pants, pushing them into my crotch as she brushes past me, walking towards the door.

1 I crossed the line, but I’m struggling to understand. She doesn’t talk about  
y her past, her mother, or her passing. Never addresses it, just lives surrounded by it in this apartment of death in hopes it’ll blend its way out. But it never does.

“Tell me. Open up to me. Let me into your dark. I want to see what you see. I just want to understand,” I beg, reaching out for her, pushing my luck



knowing that I'm already losing her to herself.

She says nothing. Just stands with her hand at the door, brushing off my attempts, opening it wider as she nods her head, dismissing me.

"Don't do this," I whisper, shaking my head as I plead with my eyes. "I won't come back."

The words are a threat. A threat that I know I don't really mean. But I can only imagine that maybe the possibility of losing me forever will spark something in her, make her realize she's being ridiculous.

"It's probably best for you if you didn't," she whispers, an empathetic look in her eyes.

I scoff in disbelief, shaking my head at the floor as I flex my jaw that's become ridiculously tight. I go to walk out of her place into the hallway, only to stop myself, turning to face her one last time.

"You told me I was the only person who made you want to stay..."

She looks down at the floor, biting the inside of her cheek while I feel the emotions flood behind her eyes at the memory.

"But I don't want you to stay. I want you to go. Go and do what you need to do to set yourself free from the pain and eternal torment you subject yourself to. Disappear again, like you always do. Maybe when you come back, you'll see that I've finally listened to the lies you've told and realized I am too good for this."

"Goodbye Kai," she says abruptly, closing her eyes tightly as she closes the door.

I stand there for a minute with my pants in hand, fully embracing the feeling of my newly revived heart tearing in two, one half left behind the door of this apartment.

It hurts. It hurts so fucking bad.

How do you love someone who doesn't even love themselves? She doesn't feel worthy of love. She thinks she's too complicated for it. She is. She complicates it herself. She thinks she doesn't deserve it. She does. But, she's already for love to leave her, because it has.

"Fuck!" I scream, punching my fist into the wall outside of her apartment not giving a damn who hears me.

"Hey! What are you doing?!" A large woman with a wrap around her head wearing an old dingy bathrobe, peeks her head around her door at the noise. "Get out of here before I call the police!"

I flip her off before shrugging into my pants and making my way to the stairwell. I trot down the cement stairs, falling back onto my ass on the last step. My elbows find my knees and my head hangs between them, feeling deprived of an escape from this newfound prison.

The flickering fluorescent light above me goes out, leaving me in the dark, echoic hole of my own emotions, a hilariously timed metaphor symbolizing Han shutting the only visible light left out of her darkness like a dull bulb. *Thank you, Universe.*

I hold my head in my hands, feeling the weight of the closure she's thrown at me as I rip into my hair, my chest heaving with anger as the rage of not being in control takes over. I love someone I can't have.

I can't breathe. I'm having a panic attack. I need pills.

I stumble up, walking my way out of the apartment complex to a sight that has me scratching my head. There, pulled up next to the curb, sits Sidney.

He's looking at his phone in his wooden station wagon before he glances in my direction.

"Ah! Hey man! I'm like, here to pick you up and shit!" He laughs shooting off fake cowboy guns with his fingers at me.

t I stare at him with my hands dropping loosely against my pants.

e *What the fuck?*

s She called Sidney to give me a ride back to my car. I don't even know how to feel anymore. I want to fucking hate her. I want to hate her. *Fuck!* I want to hate her.

I reluctantly get into the car with Sidney, huffing in frustration as he begins the trek back to his place.

. "Got plans today?" I ask, staring at my sad looking reflection in the side mirror, the reds of my eyes a stark contrast to the ice blue that Han once told me she loved.

t "Ah man, you know I'm about to be out on those waves, letting Mother Earth have her way with me again."

"Wanna get fucked up before she fucks you?"

, My plan for the day is to numb this new hurt with drugs and alcohol. Classic Kid move, right? Fuck it all. Fuck work, fuck Han, fuck everyone but Sidney at the moment.

"My man..." His grin tells me he's in.

1 I check my phone as we drive, hoping to see a message from her, telling me she made a mistake and to come back. That she's sorry she closed up on me and to be patient with her as she tries to navigate this new territory full of emotions she's never felt for someone. That she loves me, but doesn't quite know how to love yet. I'd message her back, telling her I'd always be patient with her because I understand her. Reminding her that my love for her won't go away and I'll do whatever it takes to keep her in my life. Make sure she's protected. Make sure she never has to worry about being herself again, that I'm here to let her be free and wild, just as the world intended.

But, of course, like everything else in my life, reality hits and the fictiona

mirage I've created in my head needs to be snuffed out against the rough  
concrete like the burnt end of a fucking roach.

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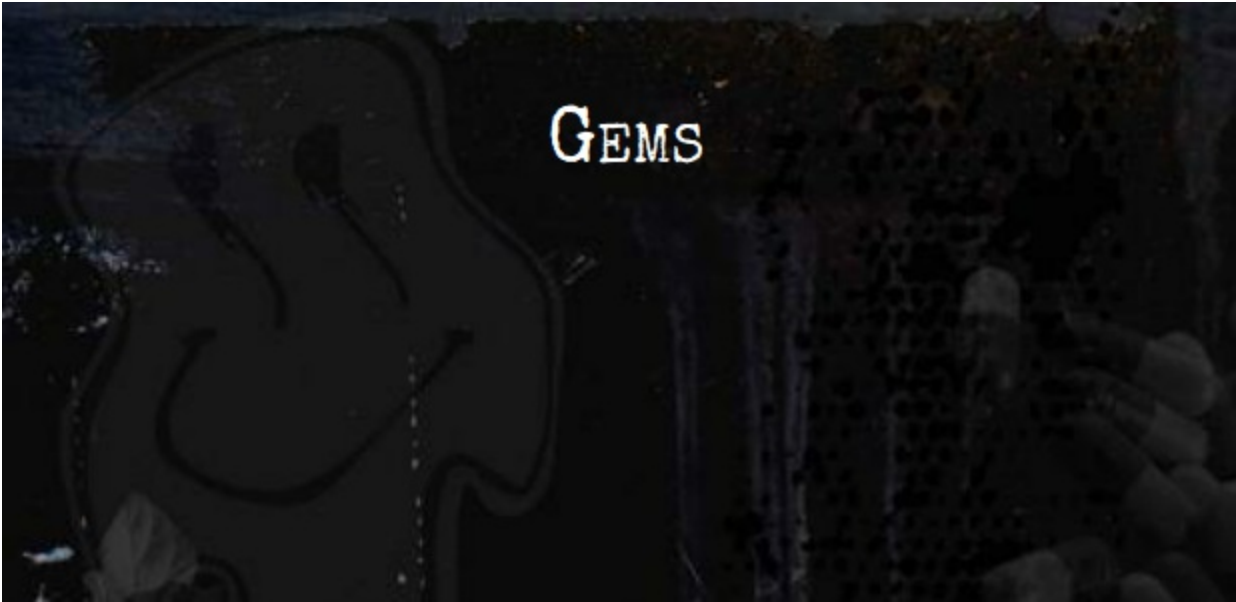
mirage I've created in my head needs to be snuffed out against the rough concrete like the burnt end of a fucking roach.

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**T**hank God for scientists.

Scientists discovered how to manipulate the brain by figuring out which chemicals work, specifically opiates, and how they attach to receptors found in the brain and spinal cord. They found which chemicals reduce the pain message that is reverberating through the raw and open wound in my heart, and I couldn't be more thankful.

I feel fucking great.

My limbs and muscles feel numb to the world—jello in the flesh.

Han who?

Feeling proud of myself for attempting not to care, I take another swig of my beer as Sidney interrupts my thoughts with his one of a kind, surfer slang

“Hey man, if you wanna hit the surf, I'll be glad to be your guide. Some killer waves comin' in.”

He chugs the rest of his Corona, tossing the bottle in the recycling bin nearby.

“Nah, you go ahead. I think I'm just going to wander for a bit.”\



I check my phone, seeing missed call after missed call. Hawke, Silas, even fucking Tarah apparently called me, but none from *her*, so what does it matter?

*Fuck, I did it again. I can't stop myself.*

"Maybe you should just tell her you'll see her this weekend? She'll be at Bran's ya know."

*Bran's?! Why the fuck will she be at Bran's?!*

I must be glaring at him because he puts his hands up, backing away slowly.

"Chill, man. I get you dig the chick, but don't kill the messenger."

"Is there a party there this weekend?" I ask, cocking a brow.

"Uh, yeah. I guess," he says while shrugging.

"Are you going?"

"I might make an appearance."

"Bring Han with you," I demand.

"Woah, man, I'm not trying to get in the middle of—"

"Just give her a fuckin' ride, Sid. Make it happen," I snap.

He shrugs, muttering what sounds like 'whatever man', shaking the hair out of his face like a wet golden retriever, before reaching around the shitty screen door and grabbing for his board that's leaning outside of the small beach shack.

I leave his place after an afternoon of drinking, meandering my way around the block, absorbing my numbness paired with my buzz. I decide to take a walk before I drive back to Cam and Cole's. Another DUI is not in my future. Getting another one of those before even starting my class this week wouldn't be a good look, even for me.

I don't know where I am or where I'm going, but I head towards a torn up

road with a few small shops lining it.

A homeless man sits on the corner of the block, playing with the long thin strands of his beard. He tips from side to side like a metronome to the tune of “Helter Skelter” by The Beatles, pouring from a tiny old radio on the ground behind him.

I walk closer, feeling my pockets for change, when I hear him murmuring a phrase again and again.

“The duck can talk. THE DUCK CAN TALK. The duck can talk.”

I pause at the phrase that hits me in the gut, staring straight at this crazed madman when I catch his eye.

“You know it too,” he whispers in shock while he points at me. His bushy eyebrows shoot up as his eyes widen, exposing the yellow discoloration there. “THE DUCK CAN TALK!”

“Larry! Knock it off. I told you I’d make you leave if you did it again. You’re scaring away my customers.” An older gentleman interrupts the crazed man, turning to face me. “Come on in, son.”

I look around me, noting the tiny shop with rusted toys and bicycle parts pouring out of the entrance. Dressers, tables, random wooden chairs all line the sidewalk into the business that’s called *Gerald’s Gems*.

I look at the burly man wearing a stretched out t-shirt, yellowing in the armpits. His pants are held up by suspenders, the suspenders donning a patch that has the name Gerald on it. I give him a side-eyed glance, questioning if this is truly the type of place I should enter.

“Have a look around. Tell me whatcha think.” His southern accent is thick as molasses, and his whitish-grey hair is in a tangled mess behind him wrapped into some sort of low ponytail to keep it out of his foot long beard. “I’m Gerald, by the way.”

He extends his hand, shaking mine as he about snaps all the bones in my hand with his handshake. A light cry leaves my throat at the pain that no even the opiates can mask.

1 “Have at it,” he says, nodding to dismiss me.

The place is straight out of fucking nightmares. It’s hoarding hell. Vintage signs, old farm equipment, creepy ass dolls, old paintings, classic radios...you name it, it’s in here.

I weasel my tall ass through the tight aisles, the smell of musk and metal filling my nose. I do a lap, touching a few things here and there to take a closer look before I see a handwritten sign taped to the wall that says, ‘You Break it You Buy it’. *Not today, Gerald.*

1 Walking towards another section, I take notice of an entire wall of taxidermy mounts. I stand before it, eyeing each of them. Six deer heads, two raccoons, four ducks of varying species, a fox, and four fish mounted together in some sort of disgusting death collage.

My heart immediately aches for Han. She’s all I can ever think about. Drugs and alcohol don’t come close to touching the deep-rooted discomfort that comes from her shutting down on me. Nothing will. Only her. She’s my cure, she’s my remedy, she’s my only rehabilitation away from the colorless life I knew.

1 I wince in pain, swallowing down what feels like tears attempting to spring free from the torture of losing her to herself.

“They aren’t in pain anymore, son,” Gerald’s rough voice interrupts my thoughts.

, I clear my throat, realizing I must’ve been looking at these dead animals all sad and crazy.

“No, I was actually thinking of adding to my collection,” I lie, scratching

ythe side of my head.

t “You collect Taxidermy?”

“Sure do,” I lie again.

“What is it with kids these days? Into weird shit because of that TakTak, o  
ewhatever it’s called.”

1 “I’m sorry?”

“There’s another young lady always calling here, asking for some animals  
lCrazy as hell, you kids and your trends.”

a My heart literally stops beating inside of my chest.

1 “Really? Who is she?” I ask, needing more.

“I don’t know her real well or nothin’, she just popped on by one day  
faskin’ for ‘em, then calls every week or so to see if any passed my way. You  
otwo should meet up, share your love of dead animals. I could be a real cupic  
lhere, wouldn’t ya know it?” He laughs to himself.

“You should give me her number,” I suggest. “Or put in a good word fo  
me.”

t “I would, but I reckon she’s got some stuff going on, ya know”—he point  
yto his head—“up there.”

s I arch my brow in question. What does he know that I don’t?

“Word on the street is her mother was the one who died near here a fev  
gyears ago. Killed herself in front of her daughter and everything.”

My stomach hits the floor.

y “W-word on the street?” I clear my throat, feeling the need to vomit  
wondering how he could possibly know such detailed information.

l “Just small talk that passes through towns.” He explains, as if I have no  
idea what the phrase means. “Yeah, that’ll mess ya up, seeing your mom kil  
gherself like that.”

I can't feel my limbs, and it has nothing to do with drugs.

Han saw her mother kill herself? In front of her. Her husband was cheating on her with another woman, and Han's mother killed herself. She didn't just find her; she did it in front of her. *Holy shit.*

How could Han ever believe that love is worth it when her only example showed her just how disgusting and horrifically heartbreaking the world can be? She shuts off love to keep herself alive in a world filled with deception, disloyalty, and death.

"She seems to handle it well, I guess. She's always smiling. Great smile, that one," Gerald continues. "And I like them piercings, too. Little work of art, that one."

1 Ignoring his strange comment, I think about how she's actually handling it. She's not handling it well. She's not handling it at all. That's her roadblock. It's the reason she bends time, the reason she fears death and connection the way she does. She's seen the worst side of it and it's quite literally haunted her ever since.

5 I vaguely remember our conversation at the cove about how uncontrolled and intractable life was. She made it a point to voice that because everything around us felt so unconstrained that having the ability to change your path and alter your own reality was the only way towards some sense of freedom. The thought of that unrelenting torture makes me sick to my stomach.

"Do you ever see any little animals that look like they could be a part of a gothic mariachi band?" I ask, bringing myself back to the present.

"Excuse me?"

10 "Taxidermy, where the animals are dressed up in a band?"

1 "That's extremely weird." He narrows his eyes, looking me up and down.  
*Says the man who owns a hoarding business.*

“But anything like that coming through already has claim to it.”

g “Han,” I say out loud.

t He cocks his head at the mention of her name, his brows lowering.

“Who are you?” he asks suddenly, seeming suspicious.

e I sigh, feeling the weight of that question for an entirely different reason.  
nIt’s the whole reason I’m here, right? In California, away from my shit life  
,back home, to figure out who I truly am.

I rest my hands on top of my head, looking back over at those dead  
,animals, wondering what kind of lives they lived before they became  
fpermanent wall decor in a hoarding shop from hell.

Shaking my head, I answered his question in all honesty, “I’m just a  
.shattered fool in love with a broken girl.”

. He scratches his beard. “Sounds like you both have some mending to do.”

e I nod, trying to figure out how to even begin that.

l “It all starts with that reflection in the mirror,” he continues.

I look back at him, understanding his statement entirely.

l “The problem is finding the motivation to better myself.”

g “If love and a good woman ain’t motivation enough, I don’t know what  
his.”

l. My lip pulls into a grin as my eyes find him leaning casually against the  
glass counter.

a “Thank you, Gerald.”

“Sure thing, son. But you sure I can’t convince you to buy anything today?  
We have a sale on cassette tapes. All the classics,” he says in his best sales  
voice, showing off a box of cassettes on top of the display counter.

I grab five different cassette tapes, tossing them on the glass, before seeing  
a few boxes of various treats and snacks lined along the checkout. Grabbing a

bag of gummy worms, I throw it alongside my newly acquired music and finish checking out.

I walk towards Larry on my way out of the shop. He's still facing the street, shaking side to side and humming to himself as he does it.

l. "Larry?" I ask, interrupting the conversation he's having with himself.

e He turns slightly, as if hearing something, before fully turning around to face me. He looks at me questionably.

d "How do you know my name?"

e "I was just out here a minute ago. Gerald mentioned it."

He tips his chin back, still looking suspicious. He doesn't remember me at all.

"Here," I say, holding out the bag of cassettes. "For you."

He quickly grabs the bag from me, peering inside and smiling as he goes through them. He immediately grabs his little radio, switching out the one inside for Aerosmith's Greatest Hits, and begins his rock to a new beat.

Smiling to myself, I turn towards the street again with my gummy worm in hand, heading back towards Sidney's.

t "You belong together, you know!" Larry calls out, making me stop in place in the middle of the street.

e I turn back to face him, my expression ghost-like. His face melts itself into a huge knowing grin, almost resembling the Cheshire Cat, as he sits on the curb with his new music.

? "You fix each other," he calls out. "But only after all the pieces have been broken, all the cracks in place."

I chuckle at the irony of this moment, this place.

g Some may call him crazy. Most may think he's mad. But I know deep in my soul, the most valuable gem is not even in the shop.

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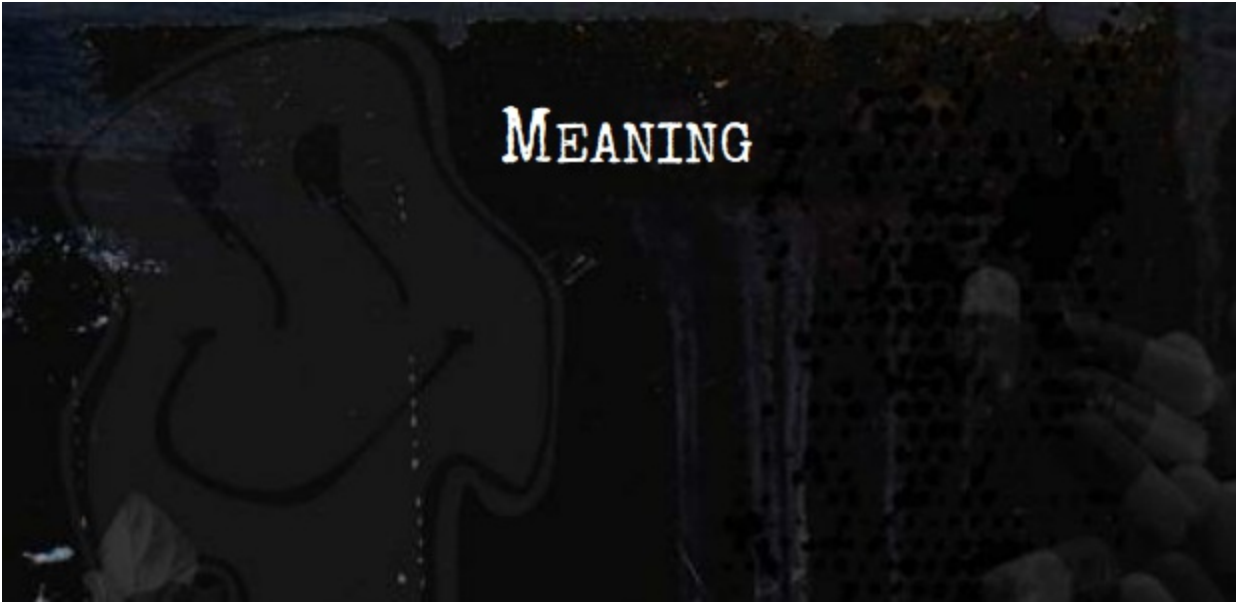
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**I**t's strange to be so close to her and not see her.

She's here at her apartment, and I'm outside, sitting on the floor opposite her door. Angry robe lady with the hair curlers let me in as she was leaving. She must be drunk today because I know she knows I'm crazy. So now I'm sitting on Han's floor, staring at my worn out Converse with her door as the backdrop. If she were to walk out right now, I'd look like the psychopath that I am. But I don't want her to know I'm here. I just need to be near her.

It's been two days since my visit to Gerald's Gems and she's all that's been on my mind ever since. I couldn't stop myself from coming here. I'm the compass and she's the magnet, driving me north. What this poor girl has been through can't escape me. What's haunted her now haunts me.

I wonder just how draining everyday life can be when you've seen death before you. Everyone around you continues on with their petty little drama acting as though their problems are real and legitimate when the person you loved the most took themselves from this earth directly in front of you. How does that change who you become?

Suicide is such a question to me. I don't understand it. Is it possible for your life to lose its meaning so much that the only option is to end it? Maybe for some minds, it is. But how, as a mother, do you off yourself in front of the child you leave behind? What I also can't seem to understand is why Hannah and Cole haven't bonded over this? How has this experience not brought them closer? Han fell into a dark and dreadful place over it, while Cole is seemingly handling it better. It leads me to wonder what Han saw when she found her.

I feel for her. I want to comfort her, protect her from this pain, be her person. But she doesn't want that. She doesn't want her complications to bleed onto others. She chooses to take this burden and let it weigh down her and her alone.

I think about how we used to hang out before I pushed her over the edge. There was something about me that always made her smile, made her light up in ways she hopefully didn't before. I'd like to believe I'm the only one who can bring that out of her, and maybe she knew that, too.

Han isn't like anyone I've ever known. She's random, she's unpredictable, she's witty, she's smart, she's fiercely independent, and sexy as fuck in her own unique way. No one could ever come close to comparing with her, even with her demons.

I messed it all up with the sexiest, dopest, most fucking down-to-earth chick I've ever met by pushing her. But if I didn't push her, where would she remain? Stuck. Right where she is.

Her doorknob twists open.

*Oh shit.*

Someone is holding the door while talking.

"Right, that's why I told her to get a new job."

r It's a man's voice. I spring to my feet, brushing my sweaty palms down my pants. *Why is there a guy here?*

e "Maybe she should..."

a I can't hear what she's saying, but that's definitely Han's voice I hear as she continues talking in a murmured tone.

s "I will," the guy says before opening the door.

e He turns, smiling, and comes face to face with me standing with my back against the wall.

r It's fucking Slate.

o The tattoo piercing guy who was trying to be all over her at the beach party. The one who told her how good they could be together. Yep, that dickwad.

. His smile instantly drops and his eyes narrow upon realizing who I am. It's clear he recognizes me as the threat. I like that I'm his threat.

o He opens his mouth as if to say something, but doesn't. He just scoffs and walks out and down the hall. I glare at his departure, hoping to God he wasn't just here fucking my girl. The thought makes me sick to my stomach. I turn back to face the door and get met with an interesting expression.

1 Han is holding onto her door, her head tipped to the side with a smirk on her face. She's smirking at me. That's a good sign, I think.

1 I can't look away from her. She's fucking beautiful. Her eyes seem greener today. She's wearing a spiked horseshoe septum ring in her nose and her hair is up in messy pigtail buns with her bangs and little hairs sticking out all over. She looks like a fucking adorable little sex doll.

"Kai?" she asks, cocking a brow. "What's up?"

"Do you have a new tattoo?" I ask immediately, my eyes narrowing.

She looks down at her body that's donning nothing but a nude sports bra.

that showcases her nipple ring, paired with large oversized sweatpants in the same color. “Uh, no.”

“A new piercing?” I ask again, leaning forward closer to her, bracing myself with my forearm on her door frame.

Her lips part as her eyes quickly trail my tall frame before looking back into my eyes. She just checked me out.

“No?” she answers, confused.

“Then why the fuck was Slate here?”

“Kai.” She sighs, shaking her head, not wanting to answer that. I don’t want to know why she doesn’t want to answer that.

“Are you fucking him?” I ask simply, just needing to know so I can torture myself with the thought.

“Why are you doing this?” she asks, legitimately looking concerned for me.

“I just need to know.”

She sighs, her little forehead wrinkle making its presence in her stress

“No. I’m not.”

I breathe a sigh of relief.

“Thank God.”

“Kai, why are you here? Are you stalking me now?”

“I’m not stalking,” I say, scratching the side of my head, looking to the side. “I don’t think I’m stalking?”

“You might be stalking,” she says, her lip pulling the tiniest bit in the corner.

She’s not mad that I’m here, that much I know.

“For real, why was Slate here?”

I’m not forgetting the fact that she literally told me no one has seen her

replace but me. But now Slate has? What the fuck? I can't get the picture of them fucking on her couch, on her bed, everywhere I've been inside her, out of my head. Even if she denies it, I can't not go there. I'm so fucking heated.

"You told me no one's seen your place but me, Han," I comment through my clenched jaw.

"And you told me you weren't coming back," she retorts, looking up at me.

It's clear that stuck with her. It affected her, even if she won't admit it. We're close now. I'm directly above where she's leaning against the frame. I sigh, licking my lips as I look down at hers. They're so plump and pouty. I just want to press mine against them, sealing us together again, but refrain.

"You know I can't stay away from you," I whisper hoarsely, tipping my head to the side as I gaze at her tattooed neck, the pulse beating through her vein.

"You should," she says honestly, tipping her chin up with false confidence. It's adorable really, because I see right through it. And because she's just so small.

"I can't," I reply. "I won't"

"You love things that are bad for you, don't you?" she asks, tipping her head against the frame.

"I do love my toxicities." I bite my bottom lip while eyeing her beautiful lips. My eyes quickly find hers again. "But you're not bad for me. You just haven't realized that yet."

She scoffs, rolling her eyes. "That's what they all say."

I lean forward, my face near her little earring covered ear, "We're metagalactic," I whisper, seeing goosebumps rise on her skin. "Meaning

feverything. And that's not what they all say."

t I lean back again, taking in her expression. She's flustered because he secret is out. It's been out. I know she cares for me. Her eyes are darting back and forth between mine, almost in terror. I can tell I have this effect on her that no one else ever has. She always looks shocked by it before she pushes it away.

I'm fully aware the way I'm studying her might seem intense to most, but she doesn't pull away. If anything, by the way her cheeks fill with color, I'd like to think she's enjoying this. Me being near her again. Her tongue sweeps across her bottom lip, making it glisten, and the sight literally makes me hard. I "Kai," she says my name again, her tone pleading.

Is she pleading with me to kiss her? Is she pleading with me to go away? Pleading me to stop pushing her to the point of discomfort in the way that I do? I wish I could tell by her tone alone, but her body language always tells me differently. Her body wants me to stay and do all the nasty things it was used to me doing. I would love to go down that road again with her, but I know once I do, there's no coming back. I slip simply into friends with benefits, nothing more.

Before I make a fool out of myself, I remember why I was sitting outside her door. I was going to leave her something. I pull the bag of gummy worms from behind my back, holding it up in front of her face.

I "I think about you," I say, holding them out to her. "I see you everywhere."

She bites the corner of her lip, looking at them before her eyes look up at me again. Our gazes remain locked as we both just stare at one another. That's one thing I love about her, among many things, her direct eye contact



It's striking and makes me feel powerless before her. I enjoy feeling rdethroned by her beauty. It's humbling in every sense of the word.

“That was really nice of you, considering...everything,” she says while rshrugging her little shoulders slightly.

“But that's the thing,” I say, moving in closer again, my forehead near hers. We're so close, but still I keep the distance. “I'm not giving up on you tyet.”

I refrain from touching her, but lean so far into her, our bodies are mere sinches apart. Her chest rises and falls between us as her erect nipples just barely graze my chest. A soft sigh leaves her lips before I push away entirely backing myself down the hallway.

Her lashes flutter as she clears her throat, and I love that I've left her a little frazzled.

“Thanks,” she comments, straightening herself, holding up the bag with a sbrief grin. “For these. It was sweet.”

I give her a quick smirk and a head nod before backing out of the hallway and into the stairwell.

I play the cool, confident dude to a T until I make it behind the door, where my heart rate pounds through my chest as I shake out my jittery hands. I rest my head back against the concrete wall, letting out a huge breath of air.

It's painful knowing you need someone to the extent that I need Han.

I

t

.

.I'm already late.



g Walking into the makeshift classroom, all eyes are on me as the large metal door slams shut, echoing my tardiness.

a “Welcome! Come on in!” A tiny man in a short-sleeved dress shirt addresses me, his brown hair swept back off his face.

r He looks like some sort of geeky used car salesman.

l “What’s your name?” he asks, his smile never faltering.

I take a quick scan of the room of people in the class with me. It’s a vast range in age. An old man near the back, a man about my age or younger near the front, a rough-looking bald man who looks like he may still be in jail but is here with a bodyguard, a hottie to my left who might possibly be a milf, and many more in between.

a “Kid,” I say simply, finding a seat.

“Kid?” he asks, his smile still in place. “Well, I’ve never heard that one before. Nice to meet you, Kid. I’m Dave.”

I give him my best tight-lipped smile as I sit down in one of the blue plastic chairs, peeking over at the milf hottie who now has her pen between her lips, eyeing me up and down.

e “Welcome everyone,” Dave begins. “Let’s go around and introduce ourselves to the group and tell everyone why you’re here.”

*Is he serious? He can’t be serious.*

Dave gives the man in front of him a head nod to begin.

“I’m Victor. I’m here because I got drunk and drove into a pole.”

*Jesus.*

My face must’ve distorted because a different girl is glaring at me now.

“Oooh, ouch!” Dave replies like a shitty game show host. “I bet that left a nasty little mark, eh?”

*This has to be some sort of joke. These people can’t be real.*

l “Shoulda seen the pole,” Vic jokes back with Dave and they share an awkward laugh together.

t A few more people go around until the baldy from jail talks.

“Mike,” he announces his name in a deep, rough tone.

“And Mike, why are you here?” Dave, the talk show host, asks.

Mike’s brows lower. “Because I have to be,” he grumbles.

t The kid at the front of the class starts laughing, causing Dave to shoot him a glare.

t “Alright Kid, we know your name but not your story. Tell us why you’re here,” he says to me.

I sigh, my hand massaging the back of my neck as I gaze at everyone’s eyes, who are now planted firmly on me.

e “I’m here to better myself. I’m here to learn about the consequences of my choices. I’m just here to learn.” I say everything I think they want from me. Dave’s face radiates admiration.

n “Fantastic,” he whispers to himself as he shakes his head with a grin. “Truly fantastic.”

e Hottie to my left chuckles lightly, running a hand along her neck, clearly picking up on my unintended sarcasm. *Oh yeah, she definitely wants to fuck.*

We go around the group, finishing introductions as my cell phone vibrates in my pocket.

I see a message from an unknown number.

*Contact Dario.*

I swallow, staring at the message. I thought I was done with them. I gave them the connect, hoping they’d start working together, and I’d be out like Silas. Some people are just good for tying the proverbial knot. I didn’t expect more.

1 I go to tuck it into my pocket, assuming this DUI class isn't the best place  
to make drug deals when it vibrates again. Rolling my eyes, I go to open the  
message. It opens, and it's not at all what I imagined.

It's from Han.

She sent me a picture of her lips. With a gummy worm between them  
Sucking on it.

1

**Han:** My lips were on it first.

e

I chuckle to myself in disbelief. Is she fucking crazy? Does she know  
s have a boner in the near proximity of fucking Dave, the used car talk show  
host?!

y

I read it and reread it again and again. Was this her flirting with me? I hate  
. text messages for this exact reason. I can barely decipher her and her  
thoughts when she's in front of me, but this sexualized text message? I have  
l. no idea where she's at with it, but I need to know now.

y

**Kid:** Are you flirting with me?

s

I send the message, proud of myself, when a few seconds later, it vibrates  
again.

e

**Han:** I don't know, am I?

e

t

e       **Kid:** See, is that flirting? I feel like you're being witty. Flirt  
e       with me through text, Han. I need to feel your vibe through  
the digital world.

·       **Han:** That's what he said.

I smile like a kid in a world where Han flirts with me.

I       **Kid:** Oh yeah, I feel it.

v       **Han:** That's what she said.

e       **Kid:** I want you to feel it. It gets pretty hard, ya know,  
r       especially around you.  
e

*Jesus Christ, I'm sexting at drunk class.*

**Han:** Trust me, I know how hard it gets.

s

I'm on the verge of literally whipping my dick out in front of Dave just to show Han what she fucking does to me, but...that would be wrong. Even this sexting thing we have going on is wrong. It's so easy because I'm naturally a flirty type of guy, and she's witty as fuck. But I don't want it to be just that with us. It's so easy to fall into that because my body literally screams for

Han, just as hers does for mine. But I want her mind to scream for me. I want her to need me in ways that sex alone can't touch.

**Kid:** Answer me one question...and be honest.

**Han:** No, I'm not wearing a bra.

I bite my knuckle at that text, looking up to find milf smirking at me. I need to calm down. This whole flirting thing is harder than I thought it would be.

**Kid:** I'm being serious. I just want to know something, and I want you to be truly honest in your answer, whatever your opinion may be.

**Han:** What do you need to know, Kai?

I can literally hear her rolling her eyes at me. But it's alright. It's worth it. I want to see inside her mind, and this question will allow me to do just that.

o  
s  
a

**Kid:** What gives life meaning?

t I wait with my hand wrapped firmly around my phone. There's no response. I wait as Dave talks about the effects of drugs and alcohol on the body over an extended period of time. I peek at my phone again...nothing.

t I shouldn't have sent her such a personal, philosophical question. I'm stupid to assume she'd actually answer it. I was working my way back in with the light flirting and fun, then I drop this emotional bombshell on her and expect her to respond? How fucking dumb am I?

The phone vibrates in my hand. The sensation shoots from my palm to my arm, directly to my heart that's wildly beating for her.

**Han:** The same thing that ends it. Love.

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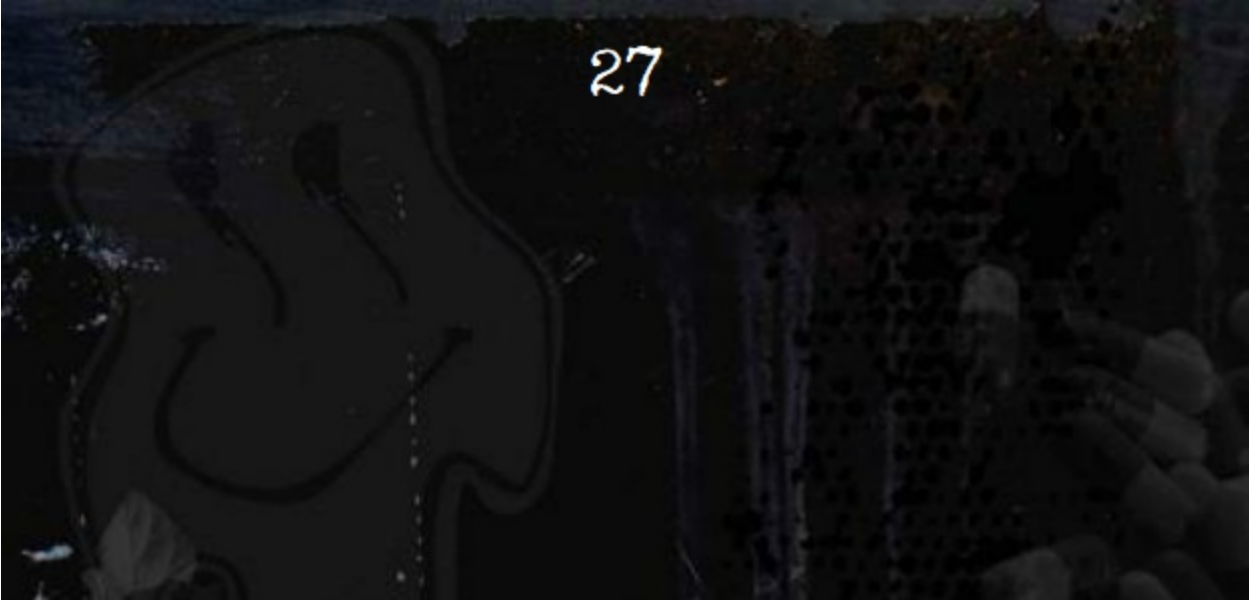
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The phone vibrates in my hand. The sensation shoots from my palm to my arm, directly to my heart that's wildly beating for her.

**Han:** The same thing that ends it. Love.









The best part of living here is this amazing, comfortable, expensive bed that Hawke and Cole furnished the spare room with. The worst part of living here is the personal privacy I seemed to have given up in order to stay here.

“Get up,” Hawke says, pulling the covers completely off my body, making me shiver instantly.

My shirtless body is exposed, the tattooed sleeves doing nothing to keep the heat in as he rips the comforter onto the floor in my room.

“Fuck off, man,” I groan, clutching my chest.

“Are you wearing bacon covered sweatpants?” Hawke asks, his tone totally demeaning.

I peek an eye open, keeping the other firmly squinted as I look down at the pajama pants covered in dancing slices of bacon hand in hand with grinning pigs I’ve named Kevin. They are really quite morbid if you think about it long enough.

“These are my Kevin Bacon pants,” I reply, scoffing at his tone.

He shakes his head. “Get up. I need your muscles.”

I pop up, ruffling my hair. “I’d like to say I’m surprised by this desire for my newly acquired man meat, but truly, it’s expected.”

“I need extra hands is all, don’t give yourself too much credit, stickman.”

I scoff yet again at his rude statement before getting up and hitting the showers.

It turns out he did need a hand. Thirty hands would’ve been better. We left in a large U-Haul truck Hawke rented to go shop at some expensive furniture shops along the coast, attempting to furnish one of the new properties.

I wait, kicking back on some ridiculously expensive couch with my feet propped up on the coffee table, placed solely for looks before me. A woman in her forties wearing a pencil skirt and suit coat walks past, giving me a scowl, eyeing my feet on the furniture or possibly my whole grungy look before clearing her throat suggestively.

“God bless you.” I smile my big cheesy grin, sure to piss her off.

She huffs and scurries away to the next customer to judge on the showroom floor.

Twatty Tammy can’t ruin my day.

Hawke finishes signing some paperwork at the desk as he rejoins me on the fancy couch, kicking back alongside me.

“Can I ask you one question?” I say, watching Twatty Tammy make her rounds.

“Shoot.”

“Why didn’t you just pay extra for them to deliver?”

He laughs, clearly not expecting the question.

“Because I can do it by myself. Why would I pay extra for something I can do?”

It’s always about being a man with Hawke, and being fiscally responsible

rwhile saving money.

“You’re not doing it by yourself. You need me,” I grumble. “Ever heard of working smarter, not harder?”

e “Bro, quit being a bitch,” he says in his deep, moody tone. “Light exercise would do you some good.”

t “Says the bodybuilding Bob the Builder,” I groan.

e “Your classes start this week?” he asks, changing the subject.

I nod, rolling my head against the back of the couch to face him.

t “That’s good.” He nods reassuringly. “It’ll be good for you.”

n “Really?” I groan again, rolling my eyes.

a “Yeah, really,” he says with a hint of attitude. “Listen, I just genuinely care about you,” he starts, his tone softening. “I want to see you succeed, but I’m by no means trying to be a father figure to you or whatever it may seem.”

“Good, we don’t need another one of those. Mine is shit enough.”

e “Yeah, he is,” he agrees, making a pained face.

Hawke witnessed it all. My dad was trash. An alcoholic who literally lived off of the money the government gave him to support me. He was a liar, a cheater, a drunk, a piece of shit who didn’t mind teaching his son lessons in life when the whiskey hit just right.

r “Worthless piece of shit,” I comment beneath my breath, picking at the hole in my jeans.

Hawke sits in silence next to me, probably remembering the time I came to stay at his dad’s with him for a week when mine left me with a nice shine that paired well with the bruises along my back and chest. I always felt safe at their place. His dad was so much like him. Smaller than Hawke turned out to be, but he had a tough exterior with a heart of gold. Hawke was lucky to have him in his life as long as he did, even if that time was cut short. The lesson

he learned from that man would bleed into his life when he needed it most. I was always a little jealous, if I'm being completely honest.

"You're not your dad," he says, finally breaking the silence.

e I scoff at the statement before a smile stretches across my lips. "I know."

He turns to face me, the seriousness in his eyes hitting me in the gut.

"Kai," he breathes, that same look breaking through me. "You're nothing like him," he reiterates.

"Thank God for that, right?" I laugh.

He doesn't laugh with me. I roll my eyes and look at him again, where he's silently waiting for me to look.

e "You aren't him," he says again, the look in his eyes finally breaking me down. My smile vanishes as I tighten my jaw. It hurts. "You'll never be him."

I swallow down what feels like a lump in my throat. Hawke's the best friend I've ever had, and he's proving it every day I'm here by killing the thoughts he knows I'm thinking. He knows I compare myself to that awful man, even if I hate him. It's hard not to, knowing you have the same genes. I'd like to think I'm nothing like him, but I see his disgusting traits materialize in my worst moments.

e "You have a real chance to do amazing things," he finally says. "I just hope you stay on the right track."

o He knows I haven't been around much, both with work and around the house. He knows I've been dabbling in extracurriculars like I normally do. He doesn't know my dealings with Silas and Dario, and he doesn't know the secrets between me and Han. He does, however, know who I am better than anyone. This is his warning to me. His plea for his friend.

s "Is this really why you brought me here? For emotional bro talks?"

I “Did you really think I needed your arms?”

“Ha,” I scoff. “You dick.”

“You’ve come a long way since Kiddie the Titty,” he says bluntly, shaking his head.

“Dude...” I groan at the audacity.

g “I’m just saying.” He throws his hands up, laughing. “If I hadn’t stepped in and saved you from your school bus beat down, who knows where Kiddie the Titty would be today? Probably still curled up beneath the seat.”

s “I saved myself with my wit and my charming ways. Don’t you dare take credit for that,” I scold him, pushing him until he tips over, laughing into the couch. “Besides, Kiddie the Titty is the one sucking ‘em these days.”

e He shakes his head at me. “You still hanging with Johanna?”

The name does something to me. Sends a rock right into the glass balloon inside of my chest. I knew the topic would come up. It’s not like he hasn’t heard us in my room, or around the house, for that matter. But since our little text situation yesterday, I haven’t heard from her, nor did I know the next time I would.

s I went deep with the conversation and her answer proved more than I thought it would. Love gives life meaning, while simultaneously ending it. I didn’t take a psychology professor to figure out the depth behind that. She was trapped between needing something and being terrified of it ruining her.

e “Ah, a little bit.”

o. He cocks his head, arching a brow.

e “Yeah, I don’t know...she’s been busy...lately.” I try to answer almost nonchalantly.

“So she left you again,” he says bluntly.

I stare at him, blinking slowly.

He shrugs, looking at me with empathy as if to kindly say, I warned you bro. But the thing is, it's just not like that for me anymore. I'm not disappointed in what happened because I understand it now, better than ever.

"Does Cole still try to talk to Han about what happened?" I wince while asking, knowing this is a sensitive topic. "Like, the situation with their mother?"

"Nah. Cole tried to get Johanna to go to counseling with her for months after she found her, but not everyone can process unexpected death the same way."

"Unexpected death?"

"Yeah, like a freak accident."

Freak accident? Suicide isn't a freak accident. Whatever his story is can't be accurate.

"Yeah, I mean, didn't you hear what happened?"

I hide the information I know and play stupid in order to hear what he has to say.

"Uh, no. I mean, how would I know?"

"Guess I thought maybe for some strange reason she'd actually confide in you." He shakes his head, sighing. "She slipped while she was cleaning the bathroom, got hung up by the towel hangers. She was all alone."

My face distorts in confusion, which luckily for me, also looks like concern. None of this sounds right. Is he joking? This would be a sick fucking joke. No chance in hell this was a freak accident. No chance in hell they actually believe that.

"It's fucking awful. She was clawing at her throat, attempting to free herself and everything, couldn't get the traction beneath her feet because of the floors. By the time Johanna found her, it was too late."



, The conflicting story has me wondering about the validity of Gerald's small town gossip. I mean, I would assume that Hawke and Cole know better than the old owner from a washed-up antique store. Besides, there's no possible way Han would've watched her mother hang herself without helping, right?

“Cole seems to process it better than Jo. Jo kind of went crazy afterwards, got heavy into drugs, started fucking around a lot. This was the same time she caught Bran cheating, among other terrible things. So much happened in such a short amount of time, she just went into a tailspin.”

My brain is trying to understand, but all the conflicting stories have me questioning everything.

t “She hasn't been the same since, according to Cole. I tell Cole to go easy on her, that everyone deals with death in different ways, but she was so concerned with losing Johanna to her addictions that she ended up taking her sanger out on her, which of course, only pushed Jo further away. They've been slowly working on mending their relationship, but it's not easy.”

I let out a deep sigh, blowing the air through my puffed cheeks. “I had no idea.”

e “I shouldn't be telling you this. It's their story, but maybe it'll help you understand why Han is pushing you away, give you the ability to move on.”

e That's where he's wrong. I don't want to move on. I want to move forward. With her. He has no idea of the real reason for her pushing away love and connection. The real reason has to be a secret hidden so deep, not even her own flesh and blood is aware. Han is holding onto something so heavy, so dark, and so twisted. It's literally eating her from the inside out.

f “But anyway, what are you up to this weekend?” Hawke asks, totally pulling me from my thoughts.

s “Uh, I don’t know. Probably going to a party. You?” I shrug.

r He looks somewhat disappointed by my answer.

o “Truthfully, I was gonna ask if you wanted to have a guy’s night. Maybe  
tget some drinks somewhere else instead.”

I get he doesn’t want me partying until I’m blacked out, popping crazy  
, pills or snorting coke like my life depends on it while attempting to drive  
e home again, but it’s not even about that to me. Han is going to be there.

1 “So Cole’s letting you off leash this weekend, eh?”

“Ha, c’mon man.” He shoves into me with his shoulder. “You know damn  
e well she’s the one that likes to be leashed.”

“Don’t tempt me with anymore erotic thoughts of Cole. I don’t think my  
y dick can handle it,” I say, keeping my face straight, raising my hands before  
o him. “My hands are calloused.”

r His face distorts, understand my meat beating joke. His glare eats through  
e me, and I know he’s imagining suffocating me with one of these fancy throw  
pillows until I’m blue in the face.

o “But this weekend,” he says, totally changing his tone and attitude. “Me  
and you. Let’s do it.”

1 The only thing I can think about is how I’m going to get Hawke to join me  
in meeting up with Han at Bran’s. Eventually, I can talk him into going there  
e or get him drunk enough to do it. I’m sure of it.

y “Fuck it. I’m in.”

t

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y

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“Fuck it. I’m in.”







If a woman is upset with you, you're going to know.

I awkwardly sit in the living room, watching Cole march around the place, aggressively cleaning. She's throwing dishes into the sink, making a god-awful loud sound, scrubbing the counters until she's sweating, and kicking the trash can that seems to have bent itself closed.

Hawke walks out from the bedroom in his fitted jeans and stylish sweatshirt, hair slightly damp from his shower as he approaches me on the couch.

I raise my brows at him, silently communicating, "You see this, bro?"

He sighs, running a hand through his hair, looking at her with a worried glance.

"Gimme a minute, I'm gonna talk to her quick," he says softly, handing me the keys.

I take one look back at her, and she's already glaring at him. I can't imagine Hawke actually did anything wrong? The dude literally obsessed over her like a lost puppy in need of a good owner. Oh, how I can relate.

It's been twenty minutes, and I'm starting to think their little fight is going to derail boys' night, when suddenly I see his shadowy figure leaving the house. He approaches the car, hopping into the driver's seat, and turns to me with a shit-eating grin.

My eyes narrow as I study his face.

"You guys good, or what?"

"Fuck yeah." He smirks, looking back at the house before he backs the car out.

I cock my brow, silently waiting for more of an explanation.

He finally looks over at me and chuckles.

"What the fuck was that?"

"Cole was upset because she walked in on me fucking another girl."

"What?" I growl.

Okay, I know he's my bro and all, but what the fuck? How fucking dare he! I'm about to kick his ass for her.

"No, no, no...the first time she met me." He chuckles. "I was dick deep in this chick, fresh outta the joint. Cole was rehashing shit. Remembering how she walked in on me fucking her when we lived in my dad's house."

"So, she got jealous. Over past shit? Like shit that happened before you were together?"

"Yeah, she's a feisty little thing."

"That sounds crazy as fuck," I say, contorting my face.

"Yeah, she gets a little jealous from time to time. I fucking love it though." He smiles to himself as I continue twisting my face while watching him. He finally turns to look at me and says, "Basically, she just wanted a reason to make you wait in the car so she could fuck the shit outta me."

I cough on phlegm. "Excuse me?!"

g “She wanted me used up so I wouldn’t think of anyone but her tonight.”

e “Jesus, Cole,” I whisper to myself, thinking how insane she is for looking  
eso sane. “She’s fucking amazing.”

“I know, right?” he smiles to himself as we drive.

“You need to wife that.”

He glances over at me while toying with his lip ring, his eyes suddenly  
rsoftening.

“Wait,” I say, studying him. “Is that what tonight’s about?”

“Yeah, I guess now is as good as ever.” He licks his lips and smiles at me  
his grin stretching across his face, his eyes lighting up with excitement. “I’n  
gonna ask her to marry me. Got the ring and everything.”

“Aww fuck,” I say, cheesing. “Congrats, man. That’s amazing.”

“Thanks, Kid.” He gives me a genuine grin. “You know you’re my bes  
eman, right?”

A pinch in my nose travels to the corner of my eyes. I swallow it away  
n“I’m honored.”

v We get drinks at the pub down the road from Bran’s beach house. I’m  
little too aware of how close we are to the party. Celebrating the big new  
nwith a few shots, we play a few rounds of pool, laughing about old times unti  
we are both bent over, grabbing our stomachs.

This guy is my best friend. There’s no doubt about it. He took a chance on  
me, bringing me out here because he believes in me, always has. Since  
;Kiddie the Titty was alone and in need of saving. Yeah, I won’t admit it to  
ghim, but he saved me. If you thought I was wheat grass now, you should  
aseen me then. Toothpick towhead. I sit there watching as he racks up anothe  
round and I smile to myself. I’m just truly lucky to have a guy like him in my  
corner.



Not everyone does.

I think back to Han and her lack of support. She's all she's got. She made it that way. But it doesn't make me feel for her any less. My heart aches to be near her again. I told Sid to make sure he brought her there, needing a reliable friend to take her. One that I know doesn't want to fuck her so I can meet up with her later.

Hawke and I have done enough shots. He's probably drunk enough to make bad decisions, right?

“Wanna hit up a party?” I ask, wiggling my brows as I put my pool stick down.

He looks at his watch and shrugs. “Fuck it, why not?”

The Uber driver drops us off outside Bran's beach house as Hawke gives me the stink eye.

“Really?” he says, staring at me with a blank face.

I shrug as we head towards the crowd of people on the beach.

“Kid! Hawke! What's up guys?!” I hear a familiar girl call out to us from the other side of the fire.

It's Brynn. She looks hot. Wearing a cute little crop top that accentuates her curves with a ripped jean skirt, she runs towards us, giving me a big hug then slapping up with Hawke. She's a cutie, there's no doubt about it, and she's like one of the guys, easy going.

“I didn't think I'd see you two make it out here. C'mon, let's get you guys some drinks!”

She grabs my hand, pulling me along behind her toward their crew of friends with a sexy little smirk. I look back and give Hawke the look. He reciprocates by raising his brows before throwing a little knowing smile in my direction. It's clear she's still interested.

Pouring up a few beers, she hands one off to me before giving one to Hawke. A few guys from the surf shop circle around us, greeting Hawke and Brynn and I converse.

“Kid,” she says before hesitating. “I just wanted to apologize for...well how drunk I was last time we were hanging out.”

“Pshh, girl, please.” I scoff. “Don’t even. You’re good.”

I smile, pulling her into my side for a hug, relieving the anxiety she must’ve been holding onto about it. Poor girl really thought I’d think less of her for a drunken night? Hell nah. We all lose our shit from time to time. I understand that more than anyone. I never judge. I might laugh along with you, but I’ll never judge.

“You’re so dope.” She grins up at me, her hand still holding onto my waist.

“You’re not so bad yourself,” I reply, taking a sip of beer with my arm casually draped around her shoulders.

“Maybe we can go explore some more attics sometime, find some relics,” she suggests, biting her bottom lip.

I laugh at the memory of our attic exploration the last time we were here. We barely made it past first base because, yet again, thoughts of Haley interrupted me.

“I mean...if you’re into dust and stuff,” she adds nervously.

I realize I was thinking of her again, just staring off into space, wondering where she might be. I shake my head of the thoughts, snapping back into Kid mode.

“I’ve got a relic.” I reply, hoping she catches on. “It’s priceless too. Truly one of a kind.”

She giggles, playing with her long curls as she presses the side of her face against my chest.

o “You kill me with the endless dick jokes,” she says, turning to look up at me. “I’m starting to wonder if this Ark of the Covenant even exists.”

I squeeze her tighter into me at the Indiana Jones joke. “You don’t need an archaeologist to find this bone.”

“Stop,” she laughs.

She stares up at me, smiling, and there’s a moment of silence between us. She wants me to kiss her. I can tell by the way her eyes keep looking toward my lips and back, almost pulling me down to her. I look at her pink, glossy lips and imagine kissing them.

1 She’s a cute girl. A real sweetheart, too. I just wish I could feel for her even a fraction of what I feel for Han. But, I can’t. It must be true what they say. I love my toxicities.

1 “Brynn, come do a shot with me.”

The voice stops my heart. My stomach immediately twists itself into a knot, the sweet sound putting me in a trance. I’d recognize that voice in any era, any galaxy, any fucking dimension.

1 Han.

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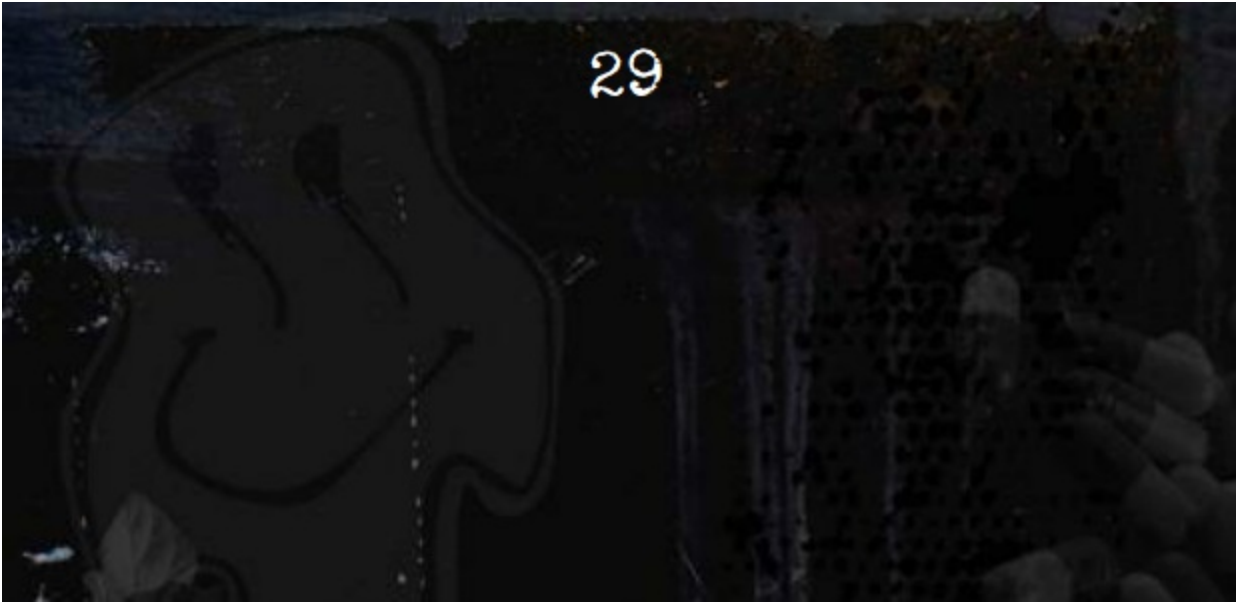
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Han.







Turning my head back, I see Han behind us, the sight of her sending my heart into my stomach as an electrifying energy pulsates through my limbs.

Brynn still has her hands around my waist, my arm draped around her shoulders.

“Yeah?” Brynn asks, almost confused by the offer.

We’re both looking at her now, but she’s only focused on Brynn. I raise my brows as my eyes drift between the two of them.

“Now,” Han reiterates, nodding her head in the direction of the kitchen.

She giggles, agreeing, naïve to the tension between Han and myself before she drops her hand from around me, grabbing onto hers as they walk toward the house.

I narrow my eyes as I study the sight of their turned backs. Did she really just do that? Did she really just pull Brynn off of me? Did she actually spoil us about to kiss? Did I actually sense some jealousy from the chick that never gets jealous?

Sure as shit, Han turns her head back to me, giving me a devilish smir that tells me everything I was just wondering was correct before walking into the sliding glass door with Brynn. I bite down on my bottom lip, shaking my head in disbelief.

“Did you see Jo’s here?” Hawke asks, approaching my side. We both follow them into the house.

“I see that chick everywhere,” I comment, feeling every bit of that sentence in its entirety.

We get inside, and I immediately spot Han and Brynn near the kitchen taking shots. What I wasn’t expecting was to see Silas huddled up with Bran in the corner.

He’s talking animatedly to him by the kitchen table, waving his hand around as Bran stares at the floor, listening. He turns to face him before they both turn their gaze on me.

I cross my arms, cocking my head at their glance. I don’t like the feeling I get from that look. Why the fuck are they talking to each other and looking at me?

Which reminds me, I need to contact Dario.

I prop myself against the wall as Hawke has a conversation with a buddy of his. That dude knows everyone, I swear. I tip my head back, finding Han in the kitchen. My eyes are stuck on her, watching her every move.

She moves around people in her little black and purple flower dress that ends just below her ass. Her black stockings that rest just above her knees brings my focus to that snake tattoo wrapped around that toned little thigh. Those black platform booties giving her the edge and height that make her everything I fucking dream about.

*Fuck, I need to get between those legs again.*



κ I'm literally daydreaming about the feeling of her wet, velvety pussy wrapped tightly around my cock, pulsating around me as she moans. I play with her clit as she comes undone, bouncing until this dick is emptied inside of her. I immediately lose the daydream at the sight of Bran's eyes on mine. He trails my gaze, locking in on Han, furrowing his brows before making his route to her.

e My eyes follow Bran as he approaches her near the counter she's leaning back on. Her eyes flutter up at him, giving a blank expression. He leans up, against her, and my head snaps up off the wall. His hand comes up as he trails two fingers down the side of her face, dragging them to her neck. I take a few quick pulls from my freshly lit cigarette, inhaling deeply as I attempt to calm my nerves. I blow the smoke out of the window to my right, never peeling my eyes off them.

I'm watching Bran's fingers closer than I've ever studied anything in my life. I feel my lip curl up and my breathing increase. If they drop any farther I'm going to fucking lose it. I might go over there and tear them off with my fucking teeth and spit them back into his ugly, preppy face. Lucky for him they stop just beneath her collarbone as he leans inward to whisper something in her ear.

1 She looks to the ceiling, sighing before dropping her head again as her eyes find mine. I get the feeling she knew where I was this entire time just by how fast her eyes locked onto mine. Her expression isn't what I'd expect. She looks angry as he talks to her. He pulls back, and a fake smile stretches across her face. She's totally playing with him. But for what? How is he useful to her?

He gives her a head nod and slowly backs away from her, holding onto her hand until their fingers finally part. I don't understand it, and truth be told,

yfucking hate it.

y She looks to the floor, and her face drops for a moment. It's a quick moment, but one that I can easily pick up on. Probably because I'm obsessed with her and know the second her expressions change.

s Her eyes snap up to mine again. We stare at one another from across the room for what feels like forever. Music bumps in the background, people are laughing, talking, drinking. So much is happening all around us and yet there's so much in our gaze. Longing, understanding, sadness, need...

e I think back to the morning she kicked me out, the terror in her eyes at the mention of love. I think of her answer to my question of what gives life meaning. "The same thing that ends it, love." She's so close, close to opening up, but she's still in denial. And one thing she can't do is attempt to completely block me when she's the one who won't let me in.

y I push up off the wall, dropping my cigarette in a nearby glass before slowly heading towards her. Our eyes never disconnect as I cross the room. Seeing my approach, she walks backwards, edging herself along the cabinets, until she makes her way around them. Clinging to the wall of the hallway like it's the rope holding her to earth and the gravity around her has lifted, she backs her way into the darkness, finally turning to run into the first abandoned room she can find.

y I run after her, sticking my foot in the door as she's about to close it, stalling the process. I force my way in, backing her up against the door of the laundry room we've stumbled upon. Her back hits at the same time her lip parts. Her eyes fully dilate as she waits for me to make my move.

I lean over her, looking down into those gorgeous reptilian eyes, reflected by the moonlight off of the ocean outside. I breathe in her scent, loving that I

can smell the honey she emits, even amidst the Bleach, Lysol, and laundry detergent.

I skim my fingers up the hand that's hanging down by her side, trailing my fingertips seeing the goosebumps steadily form until I reach the middle of her arm. Slowly wrapping my fingers around her little toned bicep, I firmly grasp her. Her breathing has changed. Her chest is rising and falling faster than before, even though her face isn't giving away any expression, just keeping that same stare, holding my gaze.

We aren't even talking. We don't need to talk. She knows I need her, and she's made it clear she doesn't want anyone else to have me. So where does that leave us?

I place my forearm against the door, leaning over her, caging her in, our lips close enough that I can almost taste her.

"You ran from me." I state the obvious.

"You chased me," she retorts, her voice soothing me instantly.

"I caught you." I cock a confident brow.

"Fish in a bucket aren't hard to catch," she comments, her eyes narrowing in on mine.

I sneer at that.

"Are you alright?" I ask in a hoarse tone, thinking about the anger in her eyes while Bran had her cornered.

The question seems to confuse her. She blinks quickly, then licks her lips.

"What a loaded question," she says softly before a smile pulls at her full lips.

"Han," I whisper, my hand unable to resist touching the soft skin of her neck.

I drag my thumb across her bottom lip, gazing at it before I stare into her

eyes again. Something's bothering her. She's here for a reason. She made it clear she was at this party by obligation, not by choice, the fish in the bucket reference. But why?

I stare into those troubled eyes, trying to piece it together. "Did you think I'd be here tonight? Is that why you came?"

"I don't like her hands on you," she admits. "It bothers me like nothing I've ever experienced."

There it is. She's jealous. Maybe she thought Brynn and I would hook up after she ever so kindly suggested it. The thought had her searching for me before I even entered the party.

"I don't like his hands on you," I retort, remembering Bran's finger brushing against her face in the kitchen.

She sighs, looking around me. "That's different. You know how I feel about Bran."

I arch a brow.

"It's complicated," she explains.

"Well, Brynn likes me. She's made it clear. It's not complicated with her."

She scowls at me. But fuck it, she's the one pushing me away. The thought angers me. If she's not going to claim me, then she needs to back off. She can't have her cake and eat it too.

"I could fuck her anytime I want," I say with a bite to my tone. Leaning forward, I whisper in her ear. "And what's more, it could be so much more than just sex with her."

Her jaw shifts slightly from side to side as she glares through me.

"Why don't you just make it official? Fuck Bran. You know he's just waiting for the chance to get back in it. Give him the pussy so you can get

r

whatever it is you need from him in return,” I say before getting hit in the face.

She slaps me. Hard. My mouth drops open as my hand traces over the sting of the burning flesh. She’s raging like a bull, breathing hard through her flared nostrils. I’ve pushed her too far.

g But, I’m sadistic. I fucking love it.

A devilish grin grows, stretching across my face as I gaze down at my little psycho.

e “You just don’t quit, do you?” she asks with venom on her tongue, her eyes drifting to my lips. “You’re a dick. Everyone saw the way you were staring at me out there.”

I scoff, looking up at the ceiling before facing her again. “How was I looking?”

“Like a stalker,” she admits with a straight face. “Some people would find that really odd. Fucking creepy even.”

“Good thing you aren’t some people,” I whisper, leaning down to trail my nose along her cheek and jaw. “You love that shit. The intensity. It turns you on.”

e “It doesn’t,” she rushes.

Denial. She still wants to play games? Well, I can play fucking games.

g “No?” I ask, moving my hand to the space between her legs. “You’re telling me you didn’t wear this little dress knowing my hand would slide up here tonight?” She swallows as I trace the inside of her thigh with my fingers.

“I definitely didn’t wear it for you.”

t She plays the tough girl act, but I can hear the change in her tone already. It’s softer, less harsh.

“Ah, I see. Bran then,” I nod, feeling jealous. “Maybe I should fuck you

and return you back to Bran, all used and wet. Give him my leftovers, since sex is all you want out of this.”

g She quickly grips my dick in her hand, roughly clawing into it with her long nails through my jeans, making me suck in a breath at the slight sting of pain against my growing cock.

I lean into her hold, pressing her tightly against the door. I find her earlicking the shell before I whisper, “Then when I’m done with you, I’ll take Brynn home. Make a girlfriend outta her.”

r “You don’t know when to shut that loose mouth of yours, do you?” She seethes, still gripping my cock.

The sexual tension is so fucking thick, we can both barely breathe.

I “Put it to use then,” I taunt her, inching my fingers up between her thighs.

I run my fingers along her panties, feeling the wetness pooling. I cock an eyebrow at the discovery, a mischievous grin following. *Bullshit, you don’t like it.*

y She can lie to me all she wants with her words and lack of expression, but this body knows nothing but truths.

And I’m about to uncover all of them.

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We stand there, staring dangerously into one another, daring, tempting waiting. Knowing that we'll both get burnt from whatever slips through our fiery little mouths next.

"Let me ask you a question, Han," I begin, our lips close enough for me to feel the quickness of her breath against mine. "Is it worth losing me over?"

Before she can answer, with my hand still palming her aching center, I pull her underwear to the side, running my finger along her wet slit, pushing it deep inside of her before she can answer. She gasps, throwing her head back against the door. I stare into her as I add another one finger into her warmth. She's so slick and soft against my long fingers. I slide them in, then out rubbing her clit with my thumb before slowly filling her with them again.

"Because if you don't start talking"—I remove my fingers from her panties, bringing the fingers to her mouth, rubbing her arousal all across her full, parted lips—"I promise you I'll fucking walk."

She glares at me; her wet lips glistening with the truth of her need for me. I lean forward, licking her bottom lip before sucking it into my mouth and biting down on it. Moaning, she grips the back of my neck, her fingers

clawing into the hair there, pulling me deep into her. Our tongues touch and the sweet taste of her lingers between us.

I could never fucking walk. Not with the way she makes me weak at the knees. I'm beyond needing her. I need a new word for need. I require her presence just to breathe. She's imperative for my existence. It's as simple and simultaneously as complicated as that.

She pulls back from my lips, taking a breath. She blinks as if an overwhelming dizziness is hitting her, and she needs a clear mind to deny me properly.

"Don't talk about her to me ever again," she says, her angry eyes glaring through me. "I don't even want to think about it. I'll fucking cut a bitch."

I love this jealous side of her. Her need to pull Brynn off of me, not knowing I'd never let things escalate between us. It was hot as fuck watching her tell her to move away from me, to remove her hands, just to go get a shot

"Here I thought you wanted me to be with someone else," I say, trailing kissing along her neck, pausing every so often to suck roughly on the soft surface.

"You forget, no one else can handle you," she hisses as I bite down. "Ah fuck. Do that again."

My dick is pressing so hard against the tough fabric of my jeans. I might cum just from the friction from her thigh alone, hearing her beg me for more like that.

"I just gotta try them all out, find the ones that can," I taunt.

She pushes me back by her hands to my chest, but I shrug off her attempts grabbing her wrists and gripping them between us with one hand. I bite her shoulder, my fingers finding their way back into her, rewarding her for talking.

s “That’s a good girl,” I whisper against her skin, slowly working her clit. “  
like when you admit that you’re jealous.”

e “That’s demeaning,” she says through her moan, rolling her hips to mee  
rmy fingers as she fucks them in the air. “Besides, I’m not a good girl.”

d “Nah?” I ask, lifting my head from the crook of her neck to face her, my  
locks spilling onto my forehead in a messy disarray of bleach blonde hair.

1 “Never been. Not with Bran, not with Matt, not with Trey—”

e She’s doing this on purpose. That little shit. I withdraw my fingers, making  
her whine at the loss of them.

g “You think that’s fucking cute?” I growl.

She smirks in response, cocking her head to the side, her eyebrows raising  
tchallenging me. She knows exactly what she’s doing. She’s getting under my  
gskin because she knows I’m under hers.

. “Get on your knees,” I demand, dropping her hands.

g She looks at me cautiously, unsure of my recent demand.

t “Wrap those lips around me,” I say, making a show out of grabbing my  
cock through my jeans. “Show me how much shit you can talk with my dick  
,in your mouth.”

She scoffs with a grin, pulling at her lip as she shakes her head. “You’re so  
tbad for me.”

e I place both hands on the door behind her, leaning in. “Yeah, you’ve said i  
before, and look where you are.”

“Cornered?” she says flatly, looking at my arms, my chest, then my eyes.

, She slips out from under my arms, a coy smile donning her face as she  
rbacks herself into the dimly lit room.

r I lick my teeth, smiling as I shake my head at this little firecracker. She  
loves to push my buttons, just like I’m enjoying pushing hers.

I “You feel cornered?” I ask, lowering my brows as I stalk towards her backing her into the dryer behind her. Her ass hits it as I tower over her, my hands firmly planted on both sides of her on the smooth, cool surface. She still lifts her chin in defiance, trying to stand toe to toe with me. “What about now?”

“You corner me when you’re not even in my presence. What makes you think your physicality has anything to do with it?”

My brows lower further at her statement. I expected the sass, but the honesty hit me in the gut. I’ve infiltrated her closed off little mind.

“You think about me,” I say in surprise, more like a statement rather than a question.

She rolls her eyes as a grin stretches across my goofy face.

“You can be bad with whoever the hell you want, but it’s me you think about,” I gloat, feeling like I’ve won the goddamn Olympic medal of Han’s heart. “I bet you’re thinking about me when you’re fucking that little prick fuck out there, aren’t you?”

“You wish, Kid.” she scoffs.

I pull my chin into my chest. “So are you are still fucking him?”

I can’t even let myself believe this. I’ll fucking murder him if he even tries to touch her again.

“Maybe I am, maybe I’m not,” she snaps. “Maybe I came to this party for the sole purpose of finding a stranger to take me home and fuck me so good I couldn’t walk,” she taunts.

My fist curls at my side at the thought. She might not have officially claimed me, but I’m not about to let her fuck a stranger. I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t take it. I’m in too deep. I’d have to kill her.

She’s panting now, her breath coming in short, hot waves. Our chests press

,against one another in some form of defiance, and yet all I can focus on is how hard her nipples have become and how amazing they feel against me. She studies my eyes, back and forth, like a wild animal caught again thinking of her next move. But I don't want her thinking anymore. I only want her feeling.

1 “You're wrong, by the way,” I whisper, dialing down my angry tone dipping my head down, and running my nose along her cheek.

e “I think physicality has everything to do with it. Look at how your body is just begging to be touched by me and me alone.” I nod my head against her as an instruction for her to drop her head back.

She tips her head slightly; her parted lips releasing that warm air and the smell of whatever cherry alcohol was just on her tongue. Her eyes scout through mine into something deeper. She knows it too. She needs me. Only me.

k I gaze down into those beautiful eyes, those perfectly rose-tinted lips that are cushioned to perfection, just calling out for me to kiss them. She's so fucking attractive to me.

“Fuck it,” I say under my breath, unable to keep up the charade any longer. I capture her plump, soft lips in mine. Our tongues touch again as her gently slides into my mouth, and something stirs like a tornado within my chest, dropping all the way to my stomach. A little whimper leaves her throat and it's all it takes for me to lose it.

I grab her face, pulling back away from the kiss abruptly to curl my hand around her toned little arms. Her eyes are half lidded with lust as I roughly flip her around, facing the dryer. I push her down against it by the back of her neck, trailing my hand down her curved spine before parting her thighs with

my knee. We're both breathing heavily now as her fingers lay flat on the surface alongside her cheek.

“You came here to fuck a stranger, huh?” I ask with a little bite to my tone. Reaching for the hem of her little dress, I roll it up over her hips, biting my lip at the view of her bare ass before me. She wiggles those hips, clearly craving some friction against her needy little clit.

“I was gonna fuck him crazy,” she continues taunting.

I gaze at her bright green thong, loving that she didn't even care to match it with her outfit, and drag it down to the middle of her thighs, not having the time to remove it completely. I just need to get inside her again. I need to come, and I need it to be with her. Only her.

I unbutton my pants with quick hands, releasing myself just enough to slip a condom on. I hold the base of my cock, gliding it along her wet slit. She moans, arching back as if trying to angle herself for me to enter. I push into her slowly at first as she steadies herself on her tiptoes. My chest is heaving with this crazy need to fuck her harder than before, teach her a lesson about talking shit.

“Show me how you'd fuck him,” I growl in her ear. “Your little party stranger. Show me how you'd be his little slut for the night.”

I'm trying to control myself, but I can't. I grip the back of her adorable little messy bun, lifting her head from the smooth surface of the dryer and thrust myself into her hard and fast. She screams out loudly before I cover her smouth with my hand.

“Shut up,” I snarl into her neck, stilling myself deep inside her. “They're gonna hear us.”

She nods into my hand, silently moaning as I pull out and thrust back into her.

e “Go on, fuck me,” I demand, holding onto a fistful of hair as I stand still.

She pushes her sweet, heart-shaped ass back into me, rolling her hips to meet mine in these sexy little circles that are driving me crazy. Her pussy swallows the length of my cock and the sound of our bodies colliding send all the blood to the engorged rock between her folds. Her cries become louder as she bucks back into me faster and harder.

“I’d fuck him so good, he’d never forget me.” Her breathy voice makes me break.

e I grip the machine beneath us, driving into her, making her cry out in that pleasurable pain at the thought of anyone else taking her.

“Yeah?” I groan.

o “I’d make him cum so hard,” she cries out. “So much, so fast...”

e As I continue, I feel her sweet, tight hole dripping around me and it’s the hottest fucking thing I’ve ever felt. She loves the dirty slut talk almost as much as I do. I drop my hand to the back of her neck, the place I know she loves, and I wrap my long fingers around it, gripping tightly as I continue fucking her from behind.

y “Kai!” she screams as our pace quickens, the slapping of my thighs on her ass intensifying before I wrap my hand over her mouth again.

e “No fucking stranger can hit your deep spots the way I can. Touch the places you need touched,” I breathe through the thrusts. “Choke you that way you need in order to cum.”

She bites down on my hand, her teeth piercing through my skin, and I almost bust immediately. I growl at the pain and take it out on her through the force of my thrust.

o We’re insane together, toxic even. We enjoy pushing each other to the point of madness in order to feel something. But you find yourself by getting



lost in the darkness, and losing ourselves in one another seems to be our own form of chaotic reckoning.

My hand slides down her chin, against the front of her neck. I feel the vibrations from her moan in her throat before she whispers in a breathy tone “Only you, Kai.”

My eyes roll to the back of my head as she presses herself firmly against the dryer and I know her clit is just aching to be touched. I know exactly what she likes, but I’ll do her one better. I reach in front of us and turn on the cycle.

I do laundry, believe it or not, but today, I could give a shit if there’s anything in this goddamn dryer. I set it high, and it vibrates beneath her.

“Oh fuck,” she moans as I push her up against the moving object.

I pull out of her, bending down between her shaking thighs and spread her wide open with my hands. I take a long lick of her wet and used slit and her whole body bucks against me, quivering in pleasure. Playing for a bit, I tease her with the tongue she loves so much, before standing up, smacking her ass firmly with my hand, grabbing those slim hips, and driving back into her with a deep, aggressive stroke.

Words can’t form as she lays against the dryer with her eyes sealed tightly and her mouth dropped open. I feel her shudder uncontrollably, sensing her closeness.

“You gonna cum on me?” I ask in a hoarse tone.

She moans loudly between thrusts. “Kai, please!”

With the vibrations against her clit, making her whole body shake around me, I pull her front half up again, turning her to kiss me. I need her lips while I lose myself inside of her. The sweet torture of her skilled tongue against mine making me lose all rational thought.

1 “Fuck, I love you,” I pant between her lips.

Our kiss becomes sloppy as our tongues absentmindedly tangle together while we both fall into our sweet release. Her body trembles against mine and she cries out while my fingers grasp onto her breast beneath her flimsy dress. I fill the condom with what feels like the biggest load of my life, hissing through my teeth at the pleasure coursing through my body before cursing out loud.

2 We’re both still panting as I hold myself deep inside her. The heat of the moment is fizzling out and already I sense a weird change in the vibe already *as I let it slip again.*

I pull out of her and dispose of the condom, fixing myself before helping to fix her underwear and rolling her dress back down. She’s facing away from me still, her nails clawing into the dryer, her knuckles tense with something on her mind.

3 “Han,” I say softly, hoping she’ll turn to face me.

4 I worry that she’s crying again, maybe losing that internal battle with herself like last time. I should’ve never said it. Or maybe it was all the bullshit I was saying beforehand? Did I offend her? I thought we were just being coy and crazy. Fuck me for being a fucking idiot.

5 “Han,” I say again, trailing the side of her arm with my fingers to get her attention. I can’t have her upset with me. “Are you alright?”

I can see from the side that she’s got her eyes closed tightly, her face twisted with some sort of stress that’s building. Her jaw is tighter than tight and I know she wants to say something. She’s totally engrossed in her thoughts. Something is eating her up inside and I’m waiting for it to spill.

6 “I should’ve never—”

“They’re setting you up,” she says quickly, interrupting me.

She turns to face me with a seriousness in her eyes, the kind that sends chills down your spine, or wakes you up like a punch to the gut. She holds my open-mouthed stare for a moment before brushing past me, leaving me through the door faster than the words out of her mouth.

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She turns to face me with a seriousness in her eyes, the kind that sends chills down your spine, or wakes you up like a punch to the gut. She holds my open-mouthed stare for a moment before brushing past me, leaving through the door faster than the words out of her mouth.







They're setting me up?

Who's setting me up, and why the fuck did she just leave like that?

I stand here post nut, feeling an odd combination of both satisfaction and terror. Is my heart pounding in my chest from just having insatiable sex with the girl I'm obsessed with, or are my hands now shaking because I've got an awful feeling she's doing what she's doing with Bran because of me. For me.

Maybe that's why she's keeping that fucker close? I know her hatred for him. It's all she talks about with me, with her sister. I can't imagine she'd be deceiving me, would she? No, she would've never told me I was being set up then. Right? Either way, she knows something I don't, and that makes me really fucking uncomfortable.

"Shit!" I yell, slamming my fist against the smooth surface of the dryer leaving a nasty little indentation.

I look back at the damage to the dryer, making a little pained face, but then shrug it off. Serves the fucker right, I guess. I hope his mom loves this machine.

I need to focus and get to the bottom of this.

I grab my cell phone, dialing the number for the ol' Lust Lay to contact Dario. The way Silas and Bran were eerily talking to each other while looking in my direction comes to mind again as I wait for the rings to stop to get some sort of clarity behind her little bomb drop. No one answers and the answering machine picks up. *Of course.*

It'd be a whole hell of a lot easier to contact this dude directly, but guys that far up don't communicate with phones or anything traceable. They have people who can do that for them. Minions who would risk it all to help, just for the chance at a nice warm layer of street cred. Dropping it for the moment, I decide to leave the room in search of Hawke.

Upon opening the door, I wince my eyes at the bright lights of the kitchen. The party is still in full swing, with bodies lining the interior, mingling in conversation, scattered across the place. The aroma of beer and weed hits my nose again as I walk down the hall towards the action with suspicious eyes, scouring the scene before me.

As soon as I enter the kitchen, Brynn turns and spots me from a distance.

"Kid! There you are. Dude, I was looking for you." She runs over to me with a big smile, wrapping her hands around my neck. "Wanna smoke this?"

She holds up a joint, pinching it together with her pointer finger and thumb, smiling all innocently as her little tipsy ass leans into me, not knowing I was just dick deep a different girl a room over. I grin back at her, but feel a new weight on my shoulders.

"Uh, maybe in just a sec. I'm actually looking for Hawke." I glance around her. "Have you seen him?"

"Umm"—she turns and peers around the room, her hands on my stomach as she leans back somewhat unsteady on her little cork wedges—"last I saw he was smoking outside."



t I look towards the door and see a sight that makes my stomach drop. My fists curl into themselves as the ability to breathe becomes a new task I've yet to master.

e Han is now sitting at the table with Bran and Silas and a few other guys conveniently perched under Bran's wing. His arm is draped around her casually, looking a little too comfortable, like they're coupled up on something. He's talking to someone while her eyes are on mine.

t She looks upset, like a storm is brewing beneath her gaze. Probably because of Brynn's hold on me, but fuck her. She's in the arms of a tool.

I shoot her a quick glare, not understanding this ridiculous shit, before rolling my eyes and releasing a scoff in disbelief. Shaking my head, I depart from Brynn with a forced smile and make my way outside.

y I get to the patio near one of the fire pits and walk through groups of people linked up in various sections. There are so many people I don't recognize here, and yet they all seem to know who I am. Random head nod to me from preppy looking dudes, a cute chick in a red mini-skirt eyes me up and down before shooting me a wink as I pass. Another guy actually yells out, "Kid!" and raises his plastic cup. The looks practically scream, "all hail the local drug dealer!"

t If I'm being honest, the whole thing is a little unnerving. It might be nothing. It could just be that more people know about me and who I am than I think. But the situation feels different now. I'm on high alert, doing double takes, making narrowed glances.

I search everywhere near the house for Hawke, heading away from the lights and commotion of the patio to the beach, when I hear my name being called out. My real name.

"Kai!" The name calls from a distance. "Kai, wait!"

y I don't need to turn and face her to know who it is. The second I heard it,  
t could feel it in the marrow of my bones.

She makes it to where I'm staring off into the ocean, my hands on my  
, head, chucks firmly planted in the sand. She's panting now and there are little  
r beads of sweat forming on her tanned forehead, little strings of her black hair  
strew across it.

"Kai, please listen to me—"

y "What the fuck are you meddling in, Han?" I interrupt her with a stern  
tone.

e "I'm not—"

t "Is this why you ran away from me in there? You don't wanna be seen  
talking to me. Is that it? Might cue dickwad off to the fact that you're fucking  
f me, huh? Not a good look?" I say, feeling exacerbated, angry, a little  
t deceived.

s "You need to be careful—"

o She reaches for me, grabbing onto my forearms before I drop them. I don't  
s know who the fuck I can trust. The girl who doesn't even attempt to open up  
l to me isn't looking real reliable at the moment.

"You think I don't know his type of people? This might be your first ride  
e sweetheart, but this ain't my first rodeo. I don't need to get my feet wet to  
I know the water's cold. But kudos to you for playing both sides...very two  
e faced of you."

"Kai, if you seriously think I'd do anything malicious towards you, you're  
e fucking crazier than I thought. I just can't let him know we're as close as we  
g are until I know—."

"You don't think he's heard about us yet? Do you know how people talk  
around here? Everyone knows everything, Han! Everything!"

I She stares at me for a minute, processing my words as a thought crosses her mind. It's a dark thought. The deep, destructive kind. I can tell by the way her eyes wince a little as she bites the inside of her cheek.

e "Not everything," she says sharply, whipping her head around and walking back towards the house.

I pull at the roots of my unruly hair, feeling frustrated as fuck. I rest my hands on my hips, taking a second to think.

1 *Not everything.*

What is she referring to? The first thing that comes to mind is her mother. Either way, I've totally pissed her off now, too, potentially offending her on top of it. Awesome. Everything is fucked.

g My body is aching for a quick release from this manifested pain. It's begging me for my normal daily doses that I now realize I haven't indulged in. I didn't need anything in the presence of Han. She's better than any other form of drug. She likes to pretend she's my toxicity, my self-indulgence that destroys the good in me. But in reality, she's the antidote to it all.

p My answer. My reason. My purpose.

It's all held within that caged little heart. The lock, my enigma. The solid bars behind which I'd kill to be imprisoned.

o But without her, they call to me all over again. Like a demon in the dark-dragging me back into the realm of lies. It wants me to calm this ache with the pop of a pill to feel numb again, a quick line of coke to push through it, or the deep inhale of a potent plant to make me forget everything, even if only for a moment.

What people like Cole, and anyone else who doesn't understand the power of drugs, fail to realize, is that I don't take these things for a high anymore. And most times, it's not even fucking fun, really. It's surviving. She sees me

staking these recreationally, like I have a choice to stop. But it's not even like that anymore.

I take them to feel normal again. I need to be normal. I need to be myself, especially in these situations where everything feels out of control. Kid without drugs isn't good enough. I've evolved into needing these substances just to function at a normal level. I can't just undo that now because I should or because it's the right thing to do. I'm too far in.

All I can wonder is if Han's actually playing me? What if what we have is a fucking joke? To her. To everyone. I'm fucking lost in my own head, the push and pull driving me to madness. Right now, the only person I can trust, can't seem to find at this party anymore. I crave clarity like my next fucking shit.

I pat my pants pockets, feeling my phone, my bag of essentials, and a few more condoms. High hopes, I guess. I grab the baggie and look at the candy tin in my hand. *Percs? Nah, I can't be numb. I need to be aware. Addys? Yes please.*

I head over to the keg, pouring up a beer and pop the pills. Swallowing them down, I spot Tarah with her girlfriends on a bench by the patio. She turns to look at me just as I turn away, pretending I didn't see her. Shit.

“Kid!” she yells, raising her hands in the air.

*Jesus, really? Now? Why?*

She runs over to me in her teal bikini, a black see-through cover over it looking beach ready. She approaches me, gripping the bottom of my shirt in her hands and pulling me into her.

“Baby! Come have some fun with us,” she says, looking back towards the girls, then at me again with pleading eyes.

She appears to already be pretty inebriated, as do her three smiling friends

ewho are all currently looking in our direction. In another day, another life  
would I love to get shit faced and lose myself in them? Yes. Yes. YES!

t But not today.

d “Sorry, I gotta—”

s “Come, do a line with us!” she interrupts,grabbing my hand and ignoring  
l,my attempt to brush her off as she pulls me towards the table again.

*Say less.*

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But not today.

“Sorry, I gotta—”

“Come, do a line with us!” she interrupts, grabbing my hand and ignoring my attempt to brush her off as she pulls me towards the table again.

*Say less.*









I greet the ladies with a small head nod. They are all looking me up and down, fluttering their glued-on lashes at me as they adjust their tits sitting them real high for the new bird in town.

“I’m sure it’s not as good as yours, but...” She shrugs with a cute little grin as she spills the contents of a baggie on the glass coffee table before the outdoor patio furniture we’re planted on.

I get to it, taking in a few lines off of the glass table immediately for myself. Whatever shit she has is probably weaker than I’m used to anyway. Sitting back, I finally let out a breath, knowing the combination of this shit is about to rock me the way I need.

“Well, if it isn’t punk boy, looking for a new sock to fuck.”

My eyes snap up to see Bran standing above me. The muscles in my neck tighten immediately but then relax. I sometimes forget his name is Brandon and he’s nothing but a dick-sucking fucktard, looking for acceptance from a tougher crowd whose definition of struggle isn’t being forced to drive a 2015 G-Wagon.

“Wait, hold still!” I say, holding up my hands, centering him between them. “I’m trying to picture you with a personality.”

He scowls, and it’s very reminiscent of Squidward.

“Nah, nevermind. Can’t see it.” I smile, flipping him off.

“Ah, we got ourselves a real jokester here, boys.” he says, looking back at his posse of twats behind him. “Aren’t you supposed to be at some sort of Emo Fest this weekend? Leave the men to handle the ladies while you and your boyfriend go paint your nails black.”

“That’s cute. Real cute. But I got a thing for the ladies,” I sigh, getting comfortable on the couch, grinning at the girls around me who are all looking flirtatiously back. Facing Bran again, I give him a light shrug. “And it seems they got a thing for me, too.”

“Please, if they want a real man, they know where to find one.” He scoffs puffing his chest like an adorable little pigeon.

“Aw, Brandon,” I say, giving my best fake pity voice. “Don’t be ashamed of who you are...that’s your parent’s job.”

The girls stifle their laughs. I casually kick my feet up on the table before me, wrapping my arms around Tarah and the one sitting to my left as I cock my head back and to the side, donning my infamous shit-eating grin.

“I’ll fuck you up, just wait,” he growls just loud enough for me to hear him.

“Helps if you have a big enough cock to get the job done, I suppose.” I shrug.

Tarah slaps her hand over her mouth, laughing uncontrollably. Bran narrows his eyes at me and I’m living for the fact that the grapevine, in this case, hasn’t failed me. Little prick has a little prick, and apparently I’m not the only one in on this secret.

1 He brushes past us, glowering as his crew of sheep follow him to find someone weaker to dominate.

The party continues as Tarah and the girls talk and take shots, giggling about the fact that Bran does in fact have a Little Smokie in his pants. I start feeling relaxed, the anxiety from before lifted off of me while my inside electrify, pulsating with a euphoria I'd been missing. Music blares from inside the house, louder than before, and I hear a few people whistling and screaming. I lean forward, looking through the window, and see a crowd forming.

3 Girls are dancing on the table to the music. *How original.*

5 A thought comes to mind. What if it's Han? Would she be one of those girls that gets fucked up after a fight and lets loose, looking for that strange ,to screw? What if she's up there dancing sexually to the music with guys cupping her ass, rolling their hands down her soft thighs? I'll fuck somebody stupid.

I stand up, feeling unsteady, and suddenly forget what I'm doing. *Why am I standing? What was I doing?* I look back at the girls on the couch. They are slumped back into their seats, chilling with their heads resting back against the outdoor furniture. I look back into the window where the dancing was. No one is on the table anymore. That's why I got up. The table dancing. It's like time skipped a beat and I missed something. But how?

1 I see the scattered remnants of our lines on the glass end table looking like dispersed stars in the reflection of the night sky above. *That's how I got here.* We snorted coke. Why are they chilling? We just snorted coke. They should be lit. We should all be lit as fuck.

3 I stumble my way into the house and find a bathroom. I push my way in and a girl washing her hands screams, pushing around me, running out. I slam the

ldoor behind her, needing a moment to myself.

Gripping the counter, I swallow, breathing through my opened mouth and glooking deeply at my reflection. My eyes are red as fuck, pupils dilated. This isn't new, but the sensations flowing through my body are. Nothing about what I'm experiencing is my normal high.

1 I feel vibrations reverberating through my chest, and warmth in my skull  
dMy brain could be melting or bleeding. Probably bleeding, but at this point, i  
dfeels so good.

So good.

So good, I don't even care.

2 There's a throbbing sensation on the right side of my head, behind my  
reyeball. My eyeball might be mechanical. There could be metal parts that are  
srusted and just feel like they're old, when in reality my robot is breaking  
ydown. Is that what it feels like to die as a robot? I wouldn't know. It's not like  
I've been one before. Or have I?

7 I'm in the hallway now, only the hallway is slanted. Lights are stretched  
eand elongated with hints of rainbow in the tails. Everything looks tipped on  
tits axis. *How did I get here?* I was just looking in the mirror and now I'm  
ohere. I tip my head up, realizing it's only slanted because my head was  
etipped, leaning against the wall.

There she is. It's Han. My Han.

2 She's in front of me now. I never even saw her coming. Fuck, she's  
?beautiful. She makes me numb with her soothing presence.

1 "Kai?" She grabs the sides of my face with her hands. "Kai, baby, what's  
wrong? Why do you look like that?"

s She's worried. Like really worried, but she called me baby, so it's cool  
eShe's making me tired with all her concerns. I close my eyes and sigh, loving

the feeling of her hands on my cheeks. So soft and gooey, like warmer caramel. I want to lick her scent off her like a Han flavored lollipop.

“Kai?! What did you take?!” she asks again, shaking my dry head.

I’m dry everywhere. My cornea feels like it could just drop out of my eye like a flake of skin with my next blink. My throat feels like concrete, cracked from the heat of a sweltering L.A. day, but that’s cool. It’s manageable. If I need to feel a tiny bit of pain to feel this high coming through, it’s fucking worth it.

Worth it.

Sex.

Sex is worth it. Even the consequences. So what if Han gets pregnant? I might actually love that idea.

Han pregnant.

Han.

I open my eyes back up and see her. Her face holds that adorable little wrinkle between her brows. I love her so much, I could just fall into her.

“You’re not a girl who gets mad and dances on tables,” I say, with relief realizing she’s not that kind of girl. “It’s such a white girl thing to do. I’m so proud of you.”

“Fuck, we need to get you out of here,” she says quickly, her eyes darting around wildly as she grabs my hands in hers.

Said eyeball is now oozing. Not crusty but melty and gooey, feeling heated now. Maybe the eye has burst on the mechanical machine and it’s dripping down my numbed, warm face. Does anyone know I’m alive in here? I’m alive in this robot shell of mine. I have a soul.

I scream from my soul.

They can’t hear my soul scream! It’s trapped by this synthetic meat and

bone robot! How naïve I am. There's so much in here and it's all so disorganized.

I pull Han into my chest, placing my chin on top of her head. I take a breath in, smelling her delicious hair, letting it out with a sigh. There's no chance she could deceive me. She actually cares about me, even if she struggles with admitting it. I can feel it the deepest part of me.

I will never stop pursuing her. Even if this robot melts down into a pool of molten steel, I'll haunt her ass until she falls for me. Fucking ghost robot style.

"I fucking love you. Even if you don't love me. I'll always love you. You're my little hamster. I just wanna squeeze the life outta you."

"Babe?" she asks softly, backing up a bit to look up into my eyes. Her hands rest on my neck, her thumbs stroking my jaw, before speaking slowly and carefully. "What did you take?"

"This might be your first ride, sweetheart, but this ain't my first rodeo."

I say the phrase, then lower my brows, chuckling to myself. "Déjà vu! Or did I really say that tonight already? Addys and coke, baby. Addys and coke."

"Kai, open your eyes," her shaky voice says abruptly.

I'm staring right at her. What is she talking about? Her robot is malfunctioning.

"They're open."

"Baby, please, just open them. You're really scaring me," she pleads.

I peek through a layer I didn't know was there. It takes a tremendous force of energy to do it, but once I do, I see the threat lurking behind us.

"Ah, couldn't sell yourself to the easy ones," Bran says, coming up behind Han.

Han drops her hands, turning to face him. Her eyes are still worried and

owonder if maybe they've always been that way and I just never noticed.

straighten my form, turning to Bran as he steps up to me, forcing Han to take a step back.

o “Decided to try for more of a challenge, I see.” He grins, nodding over at Han.

Her lips part as her eyes narrow at him.

f “Let me let you in on a little secret.” He leans forward, his mouth next to my ear. “Little miss morbid, obsessed with death over here? Acts like a slut but don't let her fool you. She's a real dick tease.”

l. No. No, he fucking didn't.

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wonder if maybe they've always been that way and I just never noticed. I straighten my form, turning to Bran as he steps up to me, forcing Han to take a step back.

“Decided to try for more of a challenge, I see.” He grins, nodding over at Han.

Her lips part as her eyes narrow at him.

“Let me let you in on a little secret.” He leans forward, his mouth next to my ear. “Little miss morbid, obsessed with death over here? Acts like a slut, but don't let her fool you. She's a real dick tease.”

No. No, he fucking didn't.









**H**e leans back, a grin spreading across his shit face as the words sink into a place that activates the worst parts of me.

I throw a fist, catching his jaw as his head flips to the side, and he falls to the ground. I climb on top of him, a rage I've never known pulsing out of me as his words repeat themselves over and over again in my tortured mind.

*Miss morbid.*

*Obsessed with death.*

*Slut.*

How dare he talk about her like that to me or anyone for that matter. No one should know her secrets like I do. No one should ever use her own darkness against her. Her name should never cross his lips, ever again. Over and over, I lay fists into his body, until one catches me on the chin.

"FIGHT!" someone screams behind us.

We flip around in the hallway; he pushes me against the wall as I grab his shirt in my bloody fists, spinning him until I'm slamming him into the wall. He kicks my legs out from under me, pushing me onto my back on the floor with a thud.

“You don’t know who you’re fucking with, punk boy!” He hits me with his fist across my jaw.

“No! Kai!” Han screams out, attempting to pull me off him. “Hawke!”

“Your little fucking boyfriend can’t save you now,” he grumbles.

“Says the guy who sucks dicks for a living,” I spit out at him, earning another punch to the face.

I laugh as he hits me again. This fucker doesn’t realize I can’t feel shit right now. I’m numb, but I don’t know why. I literally took Adderall to not be numb.

“Why the fuck are you laughing?” he asks, hitting me again, sending my face whipping to the right.

I see my blood spray across the wall next to me, splattering like some sort of messed up inkblot test. I wonder about the validity of this test, when all I can visualize is nothing but a frumpy-looking heart that appears broken in the middle. It’s so fitting. It makes me laugh even harder.

“Quit laughing!” he screams, getting upset by my reaction. “You fucking clown!”

I quickly clutch his shirt in my fists, pulling the stretched out material towards me, making him fall into me. “Let me let you in on a little secret,” I say, still smiling as I bring him closer to my blood-filled mouth. “There’s only one person who can hurt me, and it’s not you, you little bitch.”

I spit blood in his face before my limbs become jello and the intensity in which I was fighting seems to have faded. The adrenaline that was once a part of me, has dissipated, now leaving my body to fend for itself. Everything is becoming blurry. I’m slipping away. More hits, more yelling, more muffled screaming from Han behind me. It’s chaos, really, but I can’t seem to do anything about it.

1 She's trying to pull him off me or punch him, but his stupid jock form is preventing that. Seconds later, I see a blurry robot break through the wild group of people, sending bodies flying. He rips Bran off me, throwing him into a wall before sending some nasty throws at him.

3 I wouldn't want to be on the other side of that robot's fist. He's terrifying when he's happy. How do I know this about him?

t I open my eyes, which have apparently closed, and see Han in the back of the vehicle. She's reaching out for me, her hands extended as if I'm miles away. Someone is carrying me beneath my armpits and my legs are dragging. I fall in, laying my heavy head on her soft lap. Her hands hold my skull which feels like the weight of a bowling ball.

t All I can focus on are the black flowers on her dress that I swear were purple at the beginning of the evening. They were purple. Purple flowers that have now turned black because of the blood dripping down from my mouth onto her dress.

3 She holds my head in her hands as she moves animatedly above me. She's talking, but I can't hear her. Why can't I hear her? I move my eyes to see who she's conversing with. It's Hawke, sitting in the passenger seat. I can't really make out their words, but I read their body language better than a five hundred pound man reads a menu. He's yelling at her and she's yelling back.

Sid has joined in on the fun. Apparently, he's driving us right now. I didn't even know we were moving until I saw a light pass us like a rocket ship. He looks like Morgan Freeman from *Driving Miss Daisy*. His hands, firmly set on ten and two, and his white knuckled grip on the wheel, speak volumes. This car is full of tension.

o "His head looks like an egg, man," Sid says, peering in the rearview mirror.

s “I am the eggman,” I sing from my position on Han’s lap, hoping the comedic relief removes some tension. “I am the Blobfish, goo goo, a’joob!”

1 I don’t know what they’re fighting about, but I feel like my little melody will solve all of our problems.

g Hawke turns back to face me with a softer look in his eyes and different bright lights behind him now. “I don’t think it’s a good idea. You sure you’re alright, man?”

s He looks anxious, worried, and mostly stressed. I look around and see the car has stopped now, and I’m sitting with my head back against the seat. Han is gripping both of my hands tightly in hers. We are somewhere else entirely. Time just keeps slipping away from me. I don’t remember telling him I was alright, but I nod anyway. He leaves and we’re pulling away.

t There’s a balloon attached to my face.

1 I sit up, touching the balloon that is my bottom lip. Something dry and crusty on it. Blood. I’m surrounded by darkness and blankets. I sit up and try to look around, but wherever I am is pitch black. Am I dead? No, I wouldn’t feel pain.

t As soon as I realize my lip is indeed swollen, there’s a sharp ache in my left cheekbone. Like sprinkles of rain before a downpour, all these random parts of my body ignite with pain, my head being the worst of it.

t “Kai,” her sweet voice floats to me in the darkness.

e I feel whatever I’m sitting on move beneath me before a single light flicker. I have to shield my eyes from the sun exploding in front of me. Everything is so white in here.

“Why though? Why was a black comforter not an option?”

v “Semen,” she answers simply. “It shows.”

I laugh at her little attempt to joke, then groan as every part of me hurts.

e “Shit, I’m sorry,” she whispers.

She walks around to the other side of the bed in her breakfast briefs and a tiny white tank top. She’s wearing breakfast briefs. Little dancing eggs and smiling toasts, hand in hand. My first thought is Kevin Bacon and Egg Ryan starring in the new rom-com, “Meant to Fucking Be.”

e “This.” She hands me a cluster of pills. “Take it now.”

I remember a time that feels like many chapters ago, where I popped a handful of pills and somehow ended up here, bloodied, confused, and in so much pain. Should I really take these? I don’t even know what they are.

r. “Fuck it,” I say to myself, grabbing the stack and throwing them back.

s She gives me a glass of water sitting next to the nightstand, a setup that was clearly waiting for me. She was anticipating I’d wake up and need them waiting for this. Waiting to take care of me. She took care of me.

l “You care about me.” I groan, stating the fact before falling back into the white cloud that is her bed.

t She lays down beside me, propped on an elbow as her face finds mine. She blinks before shaking the hair out of her eyes, her hair that’s fluffed into the cutest little pile of mess on top of her head.

1 “I do,” she whispers, gazing at me nervously.

She slowly leans forward, eyes following a trail from my lips to my eye again. She places her lips softly against mine, and the feeling stirs that needs me again. Pulling back, she quickly replaces the good feeling with a freezing cold ice pack against my lip.

“Shit!” I curse at the pain.

She did that on purpose.

“You scared me, Kai,” she whispers in a cracked tone. “I was so worried about you.”

“I’m fine,” I reassure her. “I’m always fine.”

l “What did you take?” she asks desperately.

l “Just addys, coke, and beer. Must’ve just been tired or something. The mi  
,got me? I don’t know.”

I groan again as she adjusts the pack.

“Kai, I’d never do anything to hurt you, you know that, right?” she ask  
awith such need in her eyes.

o She needs me to know. She needs me to feel it. But also, why go through  
with it? Why did she put herself in the position to get involved? I need more  
than this watered down bullshit. I need legitimate answers.

t “I know,” I whisper, reaching up to touch her. “I know you wouldn’t. I jus  
,don’t understand.”

My hand cups her face as she leans into it, unease in her expression as  
estudy her.

“I’ve been hanging out with Bran. Getting close to him,” she admits.

e My injured jaw flexes at the name alone.

e “Why would you do that, Han?”

She grabs my hand that was holding her face, dropping it down on my  
stomach. She stares at the back of it as her eyes see the damage I feel on my  
sknuckles. Swallowing, she whispers, “Because I have to.”

l I narrow my eyes at her, disliking that answer, but I sigh it off because I’n  
aliterally in too much pain to fight it. We sit in silence for a moment, my eye  
on the ceiling, her eyes on me. Our minds must both be racing with questions

“What’s the lamest superhero power you can think of?”

An eyebrow raises at her as I snort at the random question. Totally no  
lwhat I thought she was thinking, but here we are. Old random Han i  
returning.



“Avocado detection radar.”

“Yessss.” She smiles, rolling onto her back beside me, our heads side by side, both of our faces looking towards the stark white ceiling.

“Bulletproof toenails.” I add.

“Epic.” She shakes her head in delight.

“How about the ability to jump into the future but only by one second once a day?”

“LAME!!!” she shouts out, laughing again as I roll my head to the side to face her.

I study the profile of her face with the light shining behind her. Her little button nose that’s ever so slightly pointed up at the tip. The full, plump lips that sit on her face, almost crying to be kissed. Her long, dark eyelashes that flutter twice when she realizes she’s being watched.

“If I had one lame superhero power,” she says, biting the corner of her lip before turning to face me. “It’d be to have an invisible pancreas.”

My serious face cracks into a huge, laughing smile. I grab my stomach in pain as I attempt to stop laughing.

“Fuck, you’re killing me,” I groan. “That’s the most useless one ever.”

Her head turns to me now, her smile radiating through me, making me forget where I am. Did I, in fact, get my ass beat tonight? No clue. But Han is smiling at me, so whatever it took to get here, I’d do it all over again in a heartbeat.

We’re inches apart as she studies my face. I see her eyes trace over my busted lip, then beneath my left eye, where a bruise must be forming. The expression quickly fades into sadness as my appearance becomes nothing but an ugly reminder of whatever we went through tonight, the details still so vague.

“Why do you do that?” I ask softly.

y I reach out with my hand, rubbing the little stress wrinkle that always appears between her eyebrows with my thumb, attempting to alleviate her worry.

Her eyebrows furrow, clearly not understanding my question.

, “Why do you ask such random questions? To study people? To change the subject when the conversation becomes difficult?”

o She purses her lips, thinking to herself, almost contemplating it like never before. Her eyes flutter up to find mine again as a tiny smirk pulls at her lip.

e “Guess it’s my lame superhero power,” she says softly, licking her thumb before wiping it across my eyebrow.

t She shows me her thumb, covered in dried blood.

“Be honest with me,” I say, grabbing her hand before me and gaining her indirect eye contact. She sucks in a nervous breath. “Do you still love him?”

It’s a question of mine I’ve been sitting on for a while now. She claims she hates the guy and is only using him in her game, but the sole purpose of putting herself through that kind of torment can’t be for me alone. Maybe there is this unrequited love that’s been festering since he cheated on her and destroyed her entire little world after her mother passed? I can’t bear the thought, but need to know.

a Her face twists in disgust as she shakes her head.

“No,” she says, just over a whisper. Her face tells me I was crazy for even asking. “Not at all.”

e “Then why, Han? Why do you put yourself in his arms? What’s the game you’re playing?”

o She sits up, resting back on her hands as she looks at the wall.

“You hear things when you keep bad company close.”

“Like about the setup?” I question, narrowing my eyes as I push to sit up next to her. “You knew he was gonna jump me at the party? Is that what this was about?”

“No.” She shakes her head adamantly, turning to face me. “No, I had no idea that would happen.”

“Then why the cryptic message before leaving me?” I ask, feeling exacerbad.

“Bad people come in all shapes and sizes. Even though Bran likes to play the roles, he’s still evil beneath whatever hat he wears,” she declares. “Trust me, I’ve toyed with him for my own benefit long enough. He stole something of mine. But this is about you now, I won’t—”

“That night...” I begin, interrupting her. “That night at the party, you were trying to open his safe.” My eyes trace their way from the spot on the floor I’m studying up to her eyes. “What the fuck are you involved in?”

“I just need you to be aware of his intentions. He’s orchestrating something. I overheard him tonight. He’s upset that you’ve come into town and fucked up his business. They’re cooking up something bad, and I need to keep him close.”

She’s right. Evil comes in all forms. Hawke taught me that. But this shit is too much. Even if Bran and Silas are co-conspiring to fuck me over, she doesn’t need to intervene in the drug war going on between us. This is my shit I’ve gotten myself into and solely need to get out of. I scoff at the ridiculousness.

“I’m trying to protect you, don’t you see that? You gotta get out of this.”

“That’s just it. I don’t want you to have to have to do that, Han. It’s not that important to me.”

“See, that’s the problem,” she snaps at me, her little attitude flaring up at

she stands, pacing the room.

I secretly love it when she fires up. It makes my dick twitch. *Wrong time wrong place, buddy.*

“What? That I don’t give a fuck about Bran and his bullshit?” I scoff as I stand up off the bed. “I’m not scared of him.”

“It’s not just that, it’s everything you’re doing to yourself.”

“Wait.” I chuckle, looking away from her before understanding her intentions. “Are you giving me a D.A.R.E. talk? Get off the coke, junkie?” I shake my head. “Jesus, I already have Hawke and Cole barking in my ear. Do you know you? Fuck, I thought you were different. Like, dude, you take more shit than me.”

Her eyes narrow as her scowl sets, telling me that last little jab hit her somewhere it hurts. She marches up to where I’m standing, looking up at me with fire in her eyes.

“Fuck you, Kid.”

I hate that I like it when she’s angry. I shouldn’t push her like this, but something about her energy when she’s upset draws me towards her. I think it’s just real, raw passion that I love.

“Fuck me? Please do.” I cock my head, looking down at her. “But only secretly, in dark closets.”

“See.” She scoffs, her chest rising and falling with anger. “Everything is just a joke to you.”

“Not everything needs to be so dramatic, either. This shit isn’t that important.”

“Nothing is Kai!”

She’s mad. She’s yelling. When has she ever yelled at me? She walks to the other side of the room, raking her hands through her hair, pushing the

bangs off her forehead as she blows out air between her lips. I wasn't expecting this reaction from her. Where is this coming from? The anger? The rage?

I "Nothing about yourself is important to you. Everything can't always be a joke. At some point, you have to take this shit seriously. Take your life seriously! You're so quick to tell me and everyone else around you how to better themselves, how to open up and be real, but when it comes to yourself, you never look in that fucking mirror!" she spits out, pointing her finger at me as she yells.

"I don't do that," I argue.

She marches back up to me, pointing her finger into my chest as she continues, "If you put half the effort into yourself that you put into pursuing me, you'd never end up in situations like the shit storm tonight."

"It's not—"

"You never talk to yourself the way you talk to me. You don't even take your own advice? Why?! Why can't you do that?!"

"I don't know, guess I never felt the need—"

"You are worth more than how you treat yourself. What you did tonight was ridiculous. You're all over Brynn, doing shit and saying things just to get under my skin, then you see me with Bran, knowing how I feel about the sprick, just to pop a shit ton of pills and almost overdose?! Now Hawke thinks I had something to do with it." She sighs, running her hand down her face.

"What? That's bullshit. No, he doesn't."

I say the words but then get hit with a wave of worry. I'd hate to cause more of a rift between their family, especially when Han literally had nothing to do with that fact that I was fucking drugged outta my mind. And besides, I took the first swing at Bran. Clearly, that wasn't planned.

t “I don’t know why any of this is that big of a deal, to be honest.”

e “It’s a big fucking deal, Kai!” she screams out.

I open my mouth in rebuttal, but am left speechless. Why is she so upset?

a “It’s time you wake the fuck up and stop being so goddamn selfish  
eRealize you have people who need you too!” she screams, out of breath from  
oher little rant.

1 I wait for her to continue, but she ends up getting upset by her thoughts  
rShe finally sits on the edge of the bed, tears brimming her eyes as she holds  
her fists to her lips. Her jaw remains tight as if to hold herself together with  
it.

e Sitting up, I place a hand on her shoulder before she nudges it off.

g “Just go,” she says softly, breathing hard through her nose.

“Han—”

“Just fucking leave!” she screams.

e This is not the intensity that I crave. She’s fracturing into tiny pieces  
before me. Her cracks are revealing themselves as her pain is exuding. I don’t  
like this part. I don’t like it at all. This isn’t us being playful and sassy, this is  
treal torture. Real hurt. Something I never thought I was even capable of  
tbringing out of her cold, detached heart.

e Getting up, I drop the ice pack on the nightstand and head towards the  
sdoor. I’m going to give her space. It’s me who’s clearly making her react like  
this. I’ve done enough damage tonight, if my face wasn’t evidence enough.

I linger by the door frame, peering back at her while nervously drumming  
emy fingers against the white wood. I don’t want to leave her. I want to hold  
gher. I want to take away everything that’s weighing her down and lift it, even  
Iif only for a minute. But I failed her by failing myself.

Her head is resting in her palm, her fingers gripping her bangs straight up

causing the little sprouts of hair to stick through her little stress grip. I drop my gaze to the floor, feeling defeated, feeling well...like shit. I swallow down the pain, turning to leave.

. “The thought actually crossed my mind twice tonight.”

1 Her voice stops me in my tracks. I turn back around.

“What thought?” I ask, my eyes immediately tracing her.

. She stares off into the corner of the room, thoughts racing through her complicated little mind like a cyclone of emotions.

1 “Twice,” she says softly, her voice cracking through her emotion.

Her eyes find mine and tears are running down the length of her rosy little cheeks, racing to meet her quivering chin.

“Twice tonight I felt the weight of losing you.”

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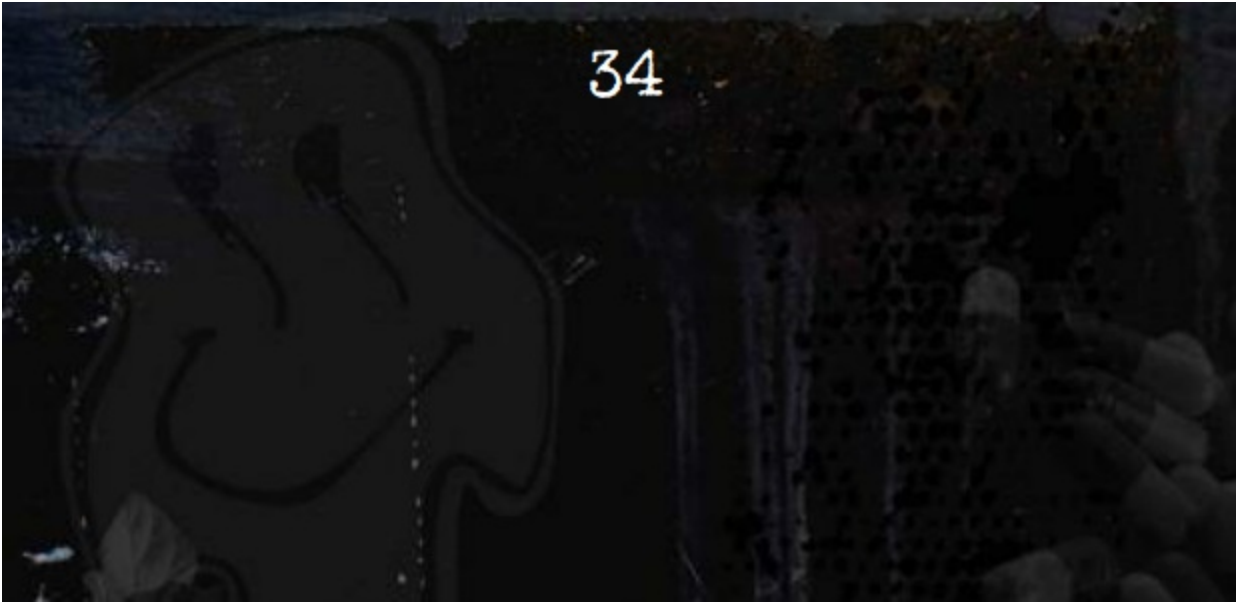
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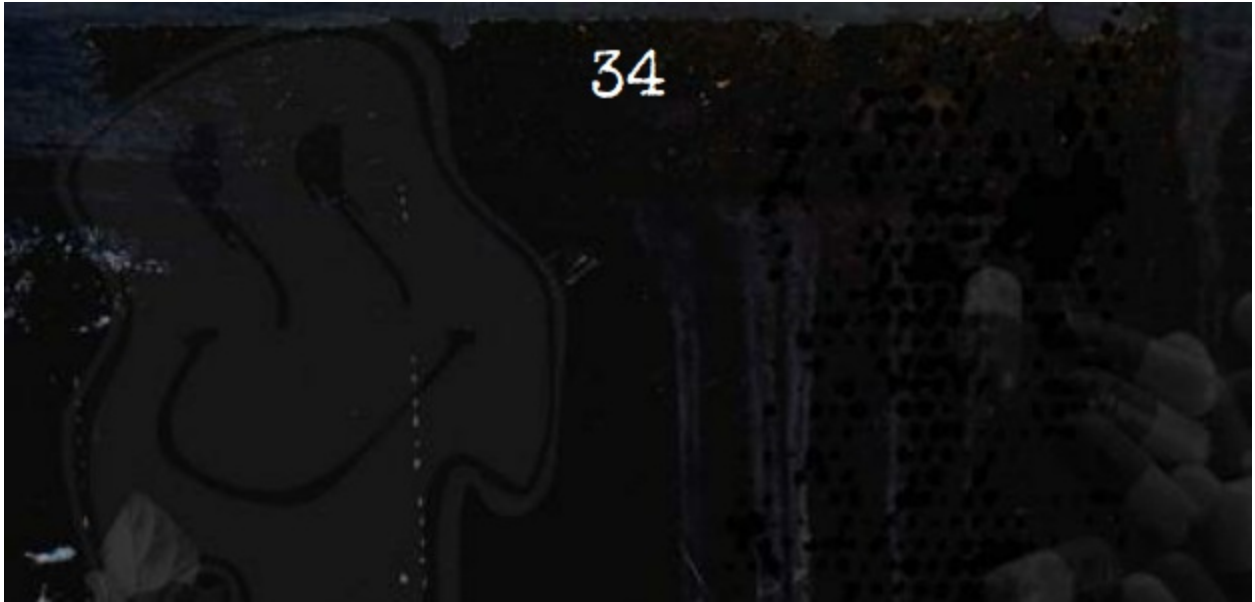
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“Twice tonight I felt the weight of losing you.”









**M**y heart aches at her words. It squeezes itself into a tiny, tight fist almost denying my body the right to live if I don't make her need my first priority.

To think she actually cares enough to fear the loss of me in her life. None of this is easy for her. She's literally set herself up to fight these feelings. She's being pushed and pulled, wanting love, being terrified of it, and yet craving it, knowing it has the capacity to end her.

Everything with us is so complex. So complicated. None of it's as easy as "hey, I love you," and "that's awesome, I love you back." Nah. With us, you have to pull the weeds out before you plant the pot. The weeds left behind in the soil we've rooted, slowly attempt to strangle out the growth we have formed between us. But despite that, we fight. We fight and we fight to continue growing, because we just can't give up on each other.

I could never leave. I could never walk out of this door with her so torn. The look of torture in her eyes, the pain from watching me destroy myself, it affects me more than anything else. I've never felt it the way I feel it from her. Not when Hawke's tried, even Cole...it doesn't hit the same. But

watching her break down because of me? Well, it only reminds me of how I felt when I saw her bleeding.

It broke me. Terrified me. I couldn't stand the sight of her being hurt by something that was, at one point, meant for fun. It made me pause; made me think. But clearly, not enough. She's watching me self-destruct, and the pain of that is a reminder of the demons of her past.

I sigh, licking my lips before walking back over to her position on the edge of the bed. I drop between her legs, resting on my knees before her. Her eyes are sealed shut, her lips slightly parted as the breaths fall from this sweet tortured soul.

My hand finds the leg she's hanging off the bed. Slowly touching her little ankle, I trail my fingers up her smooth skin in a steady line. The fingers reach her knee as she sucks in a quick breath, releasing it along with some of her anger as well. The tension in her eyes relaxes some as my palm fits over her kneecap. I run my thumb over it, seeing a deep scar across it. Running circles over the scar, I lean my head down, pressing my lips softly against it, kissing the wound from a previous time. A past I'd do anything to know about. A time I wish I could've known her, just so I could have cared for her like she's cared for me.

I've never wanted to know so much about another person like I do Han. My need to know weird intricate facts about her that no one else could ever know has me wondering about the line between love and obsession. I want to know what songs she listens to when she's sad, what tastes make her hum and sigh with pleasure, what memories from her childhood she cherishes most. I want to drown myself in every aspect of her, every detail, every situation that's made her the curious creature before me. The one I can't ever get off my mind. The woman who quite literally owns me entirely.

I I gaze up from my position below her, a soft, emphatic, sorrowful look emitting from my core. My heart is racing with an anxiousness I've never known. She finally blinks her gorgeous green eyes open. The dark brown swirling into her forest greens, with the hints of amber that light my soul on fire, are nearly sponged out by the reddened veins of agony surrounding them. Her suffering radiates around me as she stares at me.

And I wince, sitting on the floor between her legs, resting my head against her splayed thigh. Keeping our eye contact, my hand traces little circles along the inside of her leg in a gentle, soothing touch. Everything I'm doing is an attempt to physically communicate that I'm here. I'm not going anywhere. I know it hurts. Everything is going to be fine. I've got you. You are mine, and I am yours.

She sighs again, and I feel another chip of the iceberg slowly slide into the ocean around her, melting away the exterior she's had years to form. Her hand finds my hair, fingers slowly raking through the white blonde mess atop my head as she combs through it. Her eyes study me, memorizing color, counting strands, maybe internalizing how she's feeling with me right here.

Massaging my scalp with her long nails, I close my eyes, loving the soft and intimate sensation. I take a deep breath, feeling so much better than I did a minute ago, just with her hand on me. I instantly feel the comfort of being where I'm supposed to be. Her thumb rubs ever so slightly on my forehead, gently brushing back and forth until she runs across my eyebrow again. I wince when she touches the cut there, propping my head up. She licks her thumb again to wipe away more dried blood.

Our silence is so loud. Our hearts both pounding through the cages in our chests, attempting to touch, needing to align. It's surreal, really, being able to say so much without saying anything at all. Making promises with nothing

but our soft and gentle movements, subtle cues that express what words could never.

I bring myself to my knees again, sliding my hands around her little waist. Wrapping my long, gangly arms around her, I pull her into me. One of her arms wraps around my back, and the other hand finds my hair again, her fingers threading through it and gripping onto me. I can hear her heart pounding in her chest from here, see the war raging on inside of her little frame.

A minute goes by of us holding on to each other, and then another, before I pull my head back to find her eyes. I see her heart fighting against her mind as it calms down with my arms around her.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper. “For ever making you feel like you’d lost me.”

She swallows before sucking on the corner of her bottom lip, looking down into her lap.

“I wondered if you’d be there when Sid begged me to come yesterday. I didn’t expect to see you,” she breathes. “And then when I saw you with her...I assumed you came together.”

Her eyes dart wildly back and forth between mine now. Her tough exterior shatters before me like a broken mirror of false reflections.

“It fucking ripped me apart,” she admits, her voice breaking.

Her words are filled with an achingly desperate tone that catches me off guard. This wasn’t just a cute little game to her. The idea of me with Brynn, someone she believes deserves me, destroyed her. Every joke, every shitty tease that I said while we were fucking tore into her. I had no idea. My brows furrow as I attempt to really understand her. She’s never been so honest, so upfront.

“It wrecked me. The idea you’d believed the truth of my words, that you

ldeserved her. That you'd finally came to your senses and realized that maybe I wasn't worth all the trouble, the complications." Her lips part open as the memory rips through her again, her chest rising and falling quicker than before. "That you would be happier...without me."

r She's never felt worthy of what she so often fights off. She pushed me away, thinking I'd leave for good, not realizing just how fucking crazy I am about her, how I'd literally do anything just to have a piece of her.

I sit in silence, just listening to her pour herself out to me. The woman who holds it all in.

, "I was about to leave. I told Sid I was out when I saw you cuddled up with Tarah and them outside. I couldn't take any more," she whispers, the pain etched across her face as she looks to the ground. "But once I'd finally told myself to go, I saw you in the hallway." She looks up at me.

I catch her gaze, instantly feeling like an asshole.

I "I knew something was wrong, and I couldn't leave you." Her hands cup the sides of my face, the memory destroying her. "I couldn't leave."

I swallow down her pain.

r "Then I drew the attention of Bran and I knew..." She sighs, her eyes screwing shut again, pulling back.

"That wasn't your fault," I whisper.

f "And he just—" She chokes on a sob that breaks free from her chest. "He just kept hitting you, and you weren't even moving."

y She cries into her hands, traumatized by witnessing it all right in front of her, feeling the heaviness of the guilt that came with that entire shit show. She snuffles, attempting to pull it together before searching my eyes for something. Her past is there again, behind those broken eyes.

1 "You can't leave me too, Kai."

I stare up at her in disbelief at the words coming out of her mouth. I lightly shake my head with my mouth parted, witnessing her pain while I study her. I'm just in shock, but I didn't miss the fact that she said "too".

"Your words, your questions...the way you don't pull back, the intensity in which you love...you're so intense," she continues, her jaw growing tight with emotion.

"I told you, I wouldn't stop. I won't give up," I say, rising to my knees to meet her, resting my forehead against hers. She takes another breath attempting to control her emotions.

"Remember when I told you in the water after we first met that you were insane?" I grin a little at the memory, holding her face to mine. "You asked me, what is sanity?"

She finds my eyes, nodding her little head against mine.

"If sanity is the ability to act in a normal, rational manner, exhibiting reasonable behavior, then it's more than obvious," I say, before kissing the tip of her delicate nose. "I'm insane for you," I whisper. "Completely and unavoidably insane."

Her large doe-like eyes blink as she swallows, taking it all in. Just as the overwhelming feeling of love washes over her like a warm wave, I see her past cross over her vision like a veil that never retreats. I can literally feel when she's thinking about it, wondering how it will change things, and unsure of where it will leave us once exposed. There's so much fear in something she can't control.

"Nothing from your past is going to push me away. I've said it before and I'll say it again. It's your darkness that pulls me in, Han."

I think about how Bran used it against her, knowing it's such a deep part of what makes her the person she is, and then fucking throwing it in her face



like a toy used to tease. A heart like hers doesn't deserve that. It's weak, yet trying.

"There's so much you won't understand," she says, her eyes filled with a new form of sadness, the depleted kind.

"Give me the chance," I whisper against her lips.

"You can't fix me," she says immediately.

"I don't want to," I say, wincing as I place both hands on the sides of her face, my thumbs tracing her chin. I lick my lips, peering at hers, then back into her troubled eyes, the ones that scream out for me and me alone. "I want to break with you."

She closes her eyes tightly, turning to look away from me as her bottom lip trembles, but I have her chin. I guide her face back to mine, forcing her to look at me.

"We fix each other, but only after all the pieces have broken, all the cracks are in place." I mutter the words of a wise old man, feeling their weight now more than ever.

Her face drains of color and looks as though she's seen a ghost.

"Where did you hear that?"

"It doesn't matter," I answer, moving closer until our lips are grazing on each other's again. "The truth is, I just need you, Han. Whatever way I can get you, it'll be enough."

She sucks in a breath as our foreheads seal together again.

"Please don't fall away. Please don't fight this. Just please," I beg, searching her for any lingering doubts. "Let me in. It's all I need."

"Kai," she whispers between breaths, and I'm waiting for the hit, waiting for the crushing statement to ruin me all over again.

I continue to set myself up for this rejection and failure with her because

I'm hopelessly in love. Am I a masochist for her sweet torture? Possibly. But in some shape or form, I need to be in her life just as she needs to be in mine.

a We both have our issues that we see reflected in each other. We bring them forward in a way no one else ever could. Exposing our truths and ripping ourselves raw of the shields we've spent so much time creating, finally allowing the facts to pierce through us.

r A tear falls from her eye, rolling down her cheek as her eyes pierce through mine. Her hands find my face and she holds me to her. "I've never wanted to not need someone more."

The truth in her eyes electrifies the deepest, darkest part of me. We aren't perfect. We're totally fucked up in our own right. We've never got it right and nor will we, and yet we can't stop. I'll forever push her until she breaks and she'll forever bend me until I fold. We're so wrong for one another and yet we never have two people ever fit together so miserably well.

v She's the darkness, and I'm the light. We aren't meant to exist together in the same space, and yet we find all the ways in which we can bleed together in order to be one and the same.

But not even the brightest lights can stay lit forever.

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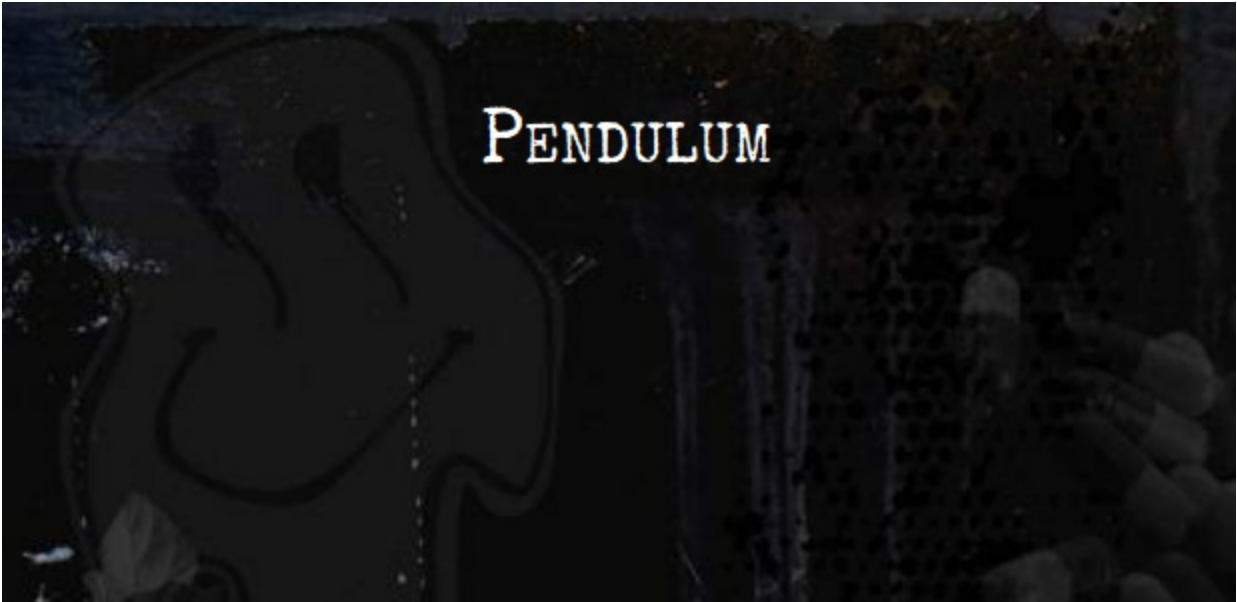
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But not even the brightest lights can stay lit forever.







“**R**epeat after me: Grow through what you go through.”

Everyone in the circle slowly looks side to side, making awkward glances at each other, with milf lady holding my glance a tad longer than everyone else's. *Yep, still wants to smash.*

“Grow through what you go through.” The collective group groans together.

Dave is shining like the goddamn sunshine with his ear to ear grin, looking directly at me from the opposite side of the circle of addicts and offenders.

I feel my phone vibrate in my jeans. Slouching down in my plastic school chair, I pull it out and instantly feel a wave of excited energy course through me.

**Han:** Hey

One word. Three letters. Millions of emotions behind it. Thank God I'm naturally always smiling. No one here has any idea the girl who rocks my world just texted me.

**Kid:** Hey you. Missing your boy already?

*Yeah, I'm cheeky. Whatcha gonna do?*

After our little fight the other night, when emotions spilled over, one thing led to another. We spent the evening connecting on another level. I held her as she cried into me, softly kissing away her pain. The way she was holding onto me was still in the forefront of my mind. I can't forget it. She was gripping her fingers into my flesh, like the idea of me disappearing was an actual possibility, crying out for me as if I were the last name to ever leave her lips. Like needing me was now her new purpose as well.

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**Han:** Your presence is literally still all over me.

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My brows drop as I try to process what she's referring to before a picture comes through. Clicking it open, I see a row of hickeys along her collarbone just beneath her neck tattoo. I bite down on the corner of my lip, trying to conceal the joy my marking gives me. Turning the front facing camera on, I snap a silent picture of the spot just below my ear.

**Kid:** I told Dave I tried curling my hair this morning when he asked what happened. Think he bought it?

**Han:** Jesus, we're animals.

1

y

**Kid:** The Snuffleupagus to my Big Bird, the Turritopsis dohrnii to my Blobfish. Animals.

**Han:** You've got to be the weirdest person I've ever met.  
And I'm weird AF. Coming back over?

I smile at the question at the end of her text. Look at her, needing me.

**Kid:** Now? As in, you need me to bail on drunk class to climb back into bed?

Fingers crossed I can ditch this shit for her.

**Han:** Lol. No, Kai. Dave loves you. If you leave, he has no one to look at while he talks. I meant later.

Truth. We've talked about how I'm the only one who routinely answers his questions, raising my hand in order to be a good little student and smile my way outta this shit. Dave looks around at everyone while he's talking, but sadly for him, all the other classmates make it a mission to avoid his direct eye contact. Everyone but me. I'm there, smiling right back at his ass. He loves it.

**Kid:** It's true. You're not the only one who loves looking at me. And duh, of course babygirl. No place I'd rather be.



I grin to myself, satisfied thinking about how funny I am. My phone vibrates in my hand again.

**Han:** I'm so stuck, Kai.

The message confuses me. I get a little worried again, wondering if she's too in her own head, ready to backtrack on our progress. These are the first thoughts that plague my tortured mind. I text her back again.

**Kid:** How are you stuck, baby?

I truly have no idea what she's referring to. As I wait for her reply, other thoughts cross my mind that include her top half being stuck in the washing machine at her apartment with her ass out, thong in place, just waiting for me to ram into her. The other thought is she's accidentally handcuffed herself to her bed, trapped with her arms raised above her head, her shirt over her eyes, bra lost, waiting for me to "save" her. *Jesus, I'm fucking horny again.*

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**Han:** I got stuck in your gum, Kai. Stuck on you.

Nothing can really describe the feeling I get in my stomach reading those words. I just feel amazing all over, and she's solely the reason for it. She makes me so fucking happy and she has no idea what those little words mean to me. It's like validation for all the shit she's put me through by fighting this off. It's real now, and she's finally accepting it.

e I start typing out that I'm gonna knock her up when I come back over tonight, but I delete the words before sending. *Fucking Hamster. I need to chill.*

I'd told her again and again how much I loved her as we connected. I lost track of how many times I said it. I didn't want it to lose its meaning, but couldn't hold it in. She needed to know, again and again, especially while  
s lost myself deep inside of her.

t She hasn't said it back yet, and that's okay. I'd never want to force her to feel she had to. I'm completely fine letting it happen organically, if that's even how she feels. But nothing will keep me from expressing myself around her. I'll say that shit every chance I get because I know I'm crazy about her and you just never know what tomorrow could bring.

r Everything about these last few days has felt monumental. Even our quiet moments after the insatiable sex. Like last night, when she literally fell asleep on my stomach with me still deep inside her. Our connection is metagalactic as she said. There's just so much beneath the surface with the two of us.

, I'll never get enough of the woman she is. I wasn't lying when I said I was insane for her. I'd do anything, if only given the chance to prove myself. I feel another wave of obsession wash over me, the feeling almost too painful in my chest. I have to bite down on my lip again to regain control.

e **Kid:** Love you JoJo, my lil stuckie.

e

1 "As a person who's struggled with addiction myself, I learned that having a Naloxone kit at home is a very safe idea." Dave's voice interrupts my thoughts as I put my phone back into my pocket.

r New guy, Simon, raises his hand.

o “Yes, Simon,” Dave calls out.

“Isn’t that setting yourself up for failure? Having the antidote there to save you, knowing you can fall back on it?”

I “I don’t look at it like that. For me, it’s being realistic. Having an addiction is the same as having a disease, and sometimes that disease has flare-ups

Would a diabetic not have the proper medications on hand in case of a blood sugar spike? Addictions are the same way.”

s I mindlessly daydream about Han again, zoning out of the conversation a hand until it’s time to go.

; About twenty minutes later, I’m back on the road, my destination well...not where I should be going directly after drunk class. But when the call comes through that Dario needs to meet with you, you do it or face the unfortunate and unknown consequences.

; I knock on the strange steel door inside the Lust Lay again, awaiting the red-haired man with the strange curled mustache, eager to take me to Oz. Sure enough, he takes me back down the dark hallway past numerous rooms of moaning women.

l I get to a new door. It’s wood, painted in a refreshing blood-red color. Super easy on the eyes. Great choice for a calming interior.

It opens, and darkness awaits. I look back at Mr. Mustache, giving him a nervous glance. He simply nods his head, edging me forward. I shake my head, realizing how stupid it is for me to be nervous when there’s truly no reason for it. I haven’t done anything that could’ve pissed this man off, have I?

y I walk forward into the dark as the door closes behind me. Pitch black. Why? Hard times at the ol’ Lust Lay? Are we not making electric payments?

Not enough ass shaking to keep the lights on this time of year? What the fuck is happening?

With the flip of a switch, a bright fluorescent light illuminates, hanging about five feet from the ceiling by a rusted chain. Beneath the light is a man tied to a chair, with a bag over his head. My lips part as my heart simultaneously stops in my chest. A wave of anxiety washes over me from head to toe. *What the fuck did I walk into?*

The man must have heard the door because now he's twisting his head back and forth frantically, looking, listening, waiting for whatever comes next.

, "You made it."

The voice spikes my heart rate, reviving the stillness of it in my chest. It's Dario, coming from out of the darkness to approach the man in the chair.

"Yeah," I reply, cautiously attempting to find his eyes through the dark shadows of the overcast light.

He stands with his hands on the shoulders of the man before him. The man flinches and tries to talk, but his words are muffled by what I can only assume is tape over his mouth beneath the burlap bag.

: "Sorry." He looks down at the man before his dark, soulless eyes finally find mine. "Business never ends."

a He leans down, whispering something to the man in what sounds like Italian as his eyes stay trained to mine, almost ensuring I don't miss what's to come. It doesn't matter if the man is gagged. I can literally hear him pleading for his life as his body shakes in the chair, his arms pulling against the restraints holding him to it.

: In one swift motion, Dario wraps his arm around the man's head, his elbow by his chin, his hand on top of his head.

“I used to use knives,” he says casually. “And guns, of course.” He quickly twists the man’s neck, cracking it between his massive, bulging bicep with narrowed eyes and a tightened jaw, killing him instantly. I haven’t taken a breath since I entered this room, and now, I feel like every molecule of oxygen has seeped its way out of my depleted lungs. “But what a waste of a cleaning solution.”

The man lays slumped to the side, completely deprived of life. I feel the slow roll of my throat as I attempt to swallow. Three men instantly come from the darkness to untie the man and carry him away. Dario removes his gloves, tossing them into the lap of the deceased as they take him out the back door.

“Bleach prices have been on the up since their new advertising campaign. Name brand shit always comes at a price.”

I’m staring at him, my throat dryer than dry as I try to determine why in the fuck we’re talking about bleach prices. I attempt to wrap my head around the fact that I just saw a man murdered. My eyes widen slightly as he approaches.

“Which is why you’re here,” he says, coming to a stop before me.

He’s about my height, but dammit if he doesn’t have at least a hundred pounds on me. The guy is stacked. Like a brick house. Bulging pecs, rippling biceps that lead to roped forearms. One of his thighs is the circumference of my entire being. You already know my grass hut blows in the wind.

I cock my brow, awaiting the reason for this meeting. Intimidation? I guess guys like Dario need to prove dominance in order to keep their house in check, but I’m not entirely in. Nor am I entirely out. I’m somewhere stuck in the middle. So where does that leave me to a man like him?

“I’m name brand. My brand is exquisite. People know what to expect

ycoming from me.”

n “The best of the best?” I answer for him.

a He cocks a brow with a half grin inching across his intimidatingly  
fpowerful jaw.

f “Better.”

I try to breathe normally, but already have a strange feeling about what  
he’s insinuating. Apparently there’s a new product being brought to the  
emarket. It’s better than the one from my sources. I’m out, but not in the clean  
s“oh you sold me drugs and now you’re set free”. No, he doesn’t need me  
eanymore, yet I can’t be his liability either. Smart men cut loose ends.

“Hope you can understand,” he says simply.

. The look in his eyes tells me everything his words don’t. This is the end of  
the road for us. He turns to leave the room, back into the darkness where his  
kind resides. Pausing in place, he slowly looks over his shoulder to face me  
lagain.

e “I really liked you too,” he says, staring at me before twisting his lips. “No  
often you meet people that remind you of yourself at a young age.”

He clicks his tongue and I can almost hear himself say, *what a shame*  
before he finally turns away. He passes the hanging light, pushing it out of  
his way before he disappears into the darkness.

f I stand there, still in my boots, as the ray of light from the hanging  
fluorescent bulb swings its powerful stroke back and forth across the  
tdarkness, highlighting every corner of the room like a pendulum under the  
influence of the gravity around it. But like the second hand of a clock  
neventually gravity gives out. Eventually, that force comes to an abrupt end  
like a man who’s no longer needed.

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After leaving the awkward meeting with Dario with nothing but more questions than when I arrived, my mind races with more thoughts than I can handle.

I walked out of there, no one showing me the way, and yet holding the weight of invisible eyes all over me as I left. I'm free to go, but the freedom I think I have is limited. Dario won't just let me walk away, not now. A guy like me knows too much.

If there is indeed a new drug on the market that's surpassed the quality of cocaine I've connected him with—which I find hard to believe—then it must already be out in the streets. Word gets around fast, but only by people buying and sampling said products.

I drive along the dimly lit roads, finding my way to a fast food spot to pick up some tacos for dinner. Dinner. The fact that I can eat dinner while a man, who's probably halfway to being buried six feet deep, never will, makes me sick to my stomach. I get the food, more for Han than me, and make the rest of the drive to her apartment. My mind is fucked up, craving the numbness again, where everything is just...simpler.

If Bran and Silas are co-conspiring, as Han says, then it only makes sense that they're the ones who found a way to get around me and my supply. I couldn't be more clear to me that Silas is insanely jealous. His need to feel worthy is unparalleled. To top it off, Han mentioned Bran was pissed about me stepping into his lane, removing his weak business that clearly wasn't shit compared to my quality. But what makes me question everything is the realization that strikes into me like a bolt of electrical pain.

There were two times I'd sampled coke that I'd known for a fact wasn't my own. With Sera, when she gave Han and me some at Sidney's during the threesome, and then with Tarah, when we were at Bran's with the other girls. Both experiences weren't normal, neither hitting me with the same type of high I'm used to.

This coke is cut with something. Something bad. Something uncontrolled.

I immediately get nervous, thinking of the ramifications of two nobodies dying to be somebodies. All the college kids, people from out-of-town trying to have a good time, or just regular coke heads that are taking substances they think are the same drugs they're used to, with no idea of what they're walking into. These idiots are about to seriously harm someone, if not kill them.

Pulling out my phone on the way over to Han's apartment, I text a person I didn't think I'd be forced to contact ever again. Tarah.

**Kid:** Hey, it's Kid. Any chance you got more of that shit we took at Bran's?

I throw the phone into the passenger seat of the car, frustrated that I even  
needed to do this. I turn up the radio, lighting up a cigarette as I slouch back  
into the seat. The phone vibrates, the face lighting up into the seat. I take  
another long drag of my cigarette, blowing it out to calm myself before  
checking it.

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**Tarah:** Of course. Didn't think you'd be ready for more.

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Meet me?

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*Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*

**Kid:** Text me time and place.

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I pull into Han's parking lot, find an empty stall, and put the car in park.  
Sighing, I drag my hands down my face. I hate feeling like I'm doing  
something wrong. Like I'm cheating on her just by texting this chick, but it's  
how I feel. Grabbing my phone, I look over the messages again, feeling  
uneasy about the idea of her ever finding them. It's not that I think she would.  
She's not the type to go through a guy's phone. Even so, I quickly click to  
delete them, just in case.

Opening her door, which for some odd reason is unlocked, I peek my head  
around it, seeing her tucked into her couch, lighting up a joint. She's fucking  
adorable. Wearing a huge black My Chemical Romance t-shirt that dwarfs  
her little body with what looks to be just briefs or nothing underneath. It's the  
thigh high socks covered in little marijuana leaves that gets me though.

After locking the door and placing the bag of tacos on her kitchen

countertop, I walk straight over to Han. Leaning over her on the couch, I bring my lips inches from hers just as she's about to exhale.

Placing both of my palms on the back of the couch behind her, I encase her head as she tilts her head up, blowing the remnants of her inhale into my parted lips before I press mine against hers. She moans as she breathes the rest out through her little nose. The one now decorated with a nose ring that looks like an upside down crown. It's gorgeous on her, like everything else.

She pulls back from my kiss with a grin, tightening her messy pigtail bun and scruffing up her bangs over her forehead before tapping her tongue ring playfully against her teeth.

"You're like the girl of my dreams, but real. I can't even believe you want me around you," I whisper, staring straight into her eyes with mine wide like a psychopath.

She giggles, shaking her head at my nonsense.

"Want a hit?" she asks, her green eyes twinkling as she offers me the joint between her long black cat-like nails.

"Fuck yeah," I say, settling into the seat next to her. Nothing sounds better than some bomb-ass weed after the shit I experienced an hour ago. I need that numbness.

I kick off my boots, settling back into the couch with my long legs spread out before me. She puts the joint between my lips, leaning over me as I inhale. Her lips find my ear. With her tongue tracing the shell, the ball of her tongue ring rolling along softly, she whispers my favorite phrase into my ear with her sweet, warm breath. "My lips were on it first."

My dick is on high alert.

We smoke until it's cashed, just chilling on the couch with *Iron Man* by Black Sabbath playing in the background. It reminds me of my days as a

Irobot. Just a short time ago, I was convinced I wasn't a human at all, before I sunk into a deep, drugged-out slumber. The strange realization is just one more reason to get to the bottom of whatever the fuck it was that I took that night.

With Han now perched between my legs, I embrace the warm, calming feel of the weed hitting my system, reveling in the feel of her sweet ass planted firmly against my cock. She lays her head on my chest, one of my knees bent while I stretch my other leg out onto the floor before us. Her soft thigh rests over mine, my fingers lightly tracing the snake wrapped around it.

Curling her hand behind my head, Han softly plays with my hair, turning her head to look up at my face. "I missed you today."

My lip pulls into a grin as I focus in on her beauty. Those little freckles on her nose are more present with the absence of makeup. I love that she feels this comfortable around me, but truthfully, I think she's just comfortable in general. I've never felt like she was self-conscious about anything other than the complexities of her heart.

"I know. You're practically obsessed with me," I say with a straight face before her hand comes around to smack me.

"You dick," she giggles, wiggling against me as I catch her wrist in my hand before she can.

"I'll show you a dick," I reply, locking her arm behind her back between us, holding her against me while wrapping my other hand up and around her neck.

"Kai," she moans instantly when my fingers tighten just above the chain-link choker necklace she's wearing, the sound reaching the tip of my dick.

"What do you want, babygirl?" I purr into her ear, and she presses her ass back into me. "Tell me what you need."

I I feel the roll of her throat as she swallows.

e “Play with me,” she breathes. “Toy with me. Tease me. Mark me a  
tyours.”

My eyes roll to the back of my head at her words. I press my hips up into  
her as my hand tightens around the sides of her neck. I find her earlobe  
sucking on the tip, holding the little black stud in her ear between my teeth.

t “Don’t tempt me.” I say the words with a dangerous edge, nipping the  
searlobe. “I’ll carve my fucking name into your flesh if given the chance.”

She moans when I bite the skin beneath her ear, her free hand suddenly  
holding up a knife next to our heads. My knife. The same knife we played  
with before. I forgot I left it here. Probably a bad thing, considering the  
situation I was just in.

s “Get on with it then,” she whispers, flipping the five-inch blade up.

1 *Jesus Christ.*

1 “Don’t tease me, Han. You don’t know how crazy I am. What destruction  
might actually be capable of.”

e She turns her head to face me again, pinned with her back against my  
chest, the sweet smell of her shampooed hair just beneath my nose. She oozes  
sex even when she’s not trying.

“I think I know,” she says in a sexy, cracked tone.

1 Her eyes leave mine, looking at the blade.

r “How long you been holding on to this?” I ask, nodding my head at the  
knife.

1 “Since you left,” she answers quickly, rubbing her thumb along the handle  
almost admiring it with her touch as if they’d shared something together.

s “And what have you done with it?” I question, my tone dark and serious.

Her breaths increase along with her heart rate beating profusely against my

forearm. Her breasts rise and fall, encasing my pinned arm that's resting over her t-shirt, her evident lack of a bra a welcomed discovery. I feel something beneath her shirt, like a chain hanging from the choker. She looks from the hilt of the blade, turning up to face me again. The devilish smirk in her snake-like eyes does something strange to me. She pulls me down into her dark, dangerous realm.

"You wanna see what I did?" she whispers, the words seductively falling from her plump, wet lips. "I'll show you everything, Kai."

She presses forward until I release her. Standing before me, she pulls her shirt up and over her head. I'm still sitting back against the couch, watching in amazement as she reveals herself. A black lace thong covers her perfectly toned ass, paired with nothing but those thigh-high weed socks. I want to take a bite out of that ass. Tear into her flesh.

It's not until she turns around do I see the mystery behind what was under her shirt. The silver choker necklace has a chain from the center, dragging along her tanned breast to the place where it connects to her nipple ring. *Holy. Fuck.*

"This has to be the sexiest piece of jewelry I've ever seen." I groan, staring at it through pained eyes.

I sit up and immediately cup her freed breast, making the chain dip against her chest as I lift the soft, perky flesh in my palm. She tilts her head to the side, blinking her eyes closed before shooting me a hooded gaze.

Holding the knife in her right hand, she puts her foot on the outside of my thigh on the couch, opening herself to me again. The knife starts at her shin, slowly dragging up the sock until it finally reaches the skin of her exposed thigh. It's then that I see the little marks on the inside of her thigh. Tiny cuts like three beautiful lines of coke, all lined up near her center.



My eyes blink up at hers with a dangerous glare, my lips parting at the sight. She's darker than dark. More twisted than I ever could've hoped or imagined.

She had been cathartically cutting herself while masturbating with my knife.

Her gaze finds mine as the realization sinks in. Physically showing me just what I do to her.

This isn't normal behavior. The fact that I fucking love it the way I do signifies that. No one else can ever satisfy her needs like I can. They wouldn't understand the emotional release that comes with the sting of that sharp, beautiful pain we need to get off.

Brynn wouldn't fuck the end of my knife, thinking about me. The thought almost makes me laugh out loud. Nah, not a chance in hell. But Han...fuck Han. Han lives in a world all her own. The world that holds no constraints, no insecurities, only the utmost sexual freedom. She does what she wants and she flaunts it, owning those demons like a master of her trade.

Does she know I'm mentally unstable? Does she understand all the ways in which I'd do anything to tie her up and leave her in my sick and twisted web of pain and pleasure forever? Will she understand me when she sees just how far I'd be willing to take things? Is she aware of how out of my fucking mind I am for her? It's a dangerous little concoction we got cooking over here.

I'm fucked up. Obsessive and wild. She's insane. Savage and dangerous. She's my weakness. My soul breaking weakness that takes hold of me, making me powerless to the temptations of my mind. The addictive tendencies I have are nothing compared to the fixation I have with this woman.

We push each other to the ultimate undoing, finding freedom in our release.

efrom the chains of societal standards. Our venom, poisoning the bloodstream  
rof one another, until we find the perfect mix of toxic that keeps us inevitably  
mortal.

y One thing is clear, our sex is the most passionate, primal kind. Littered  
with the symbolic demand for one another that will never submit.

t And we're just getting started.

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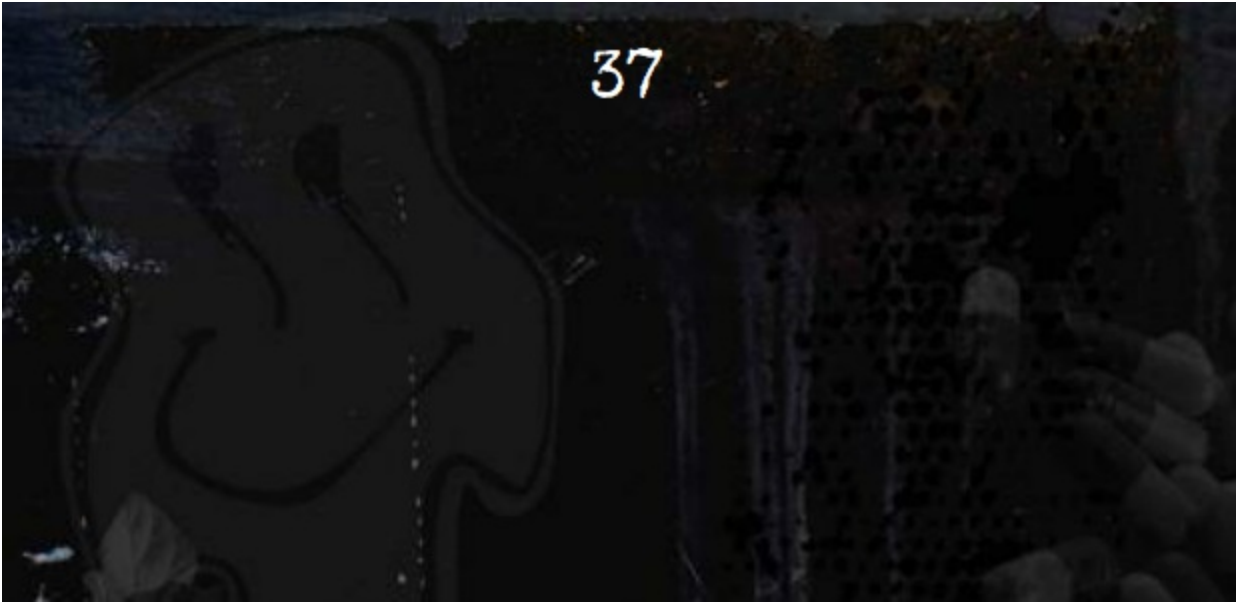
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And we're just getting started.



37





Inside the white cloud of Han's sterile room, we stare at each other with hard eyes. Like animals, we circle one another, trying to determine dominance. If I lunge, will she run? Or will she fight back?

My lips curl as I gaze at her almost entirely naked body on all fours, those reptilian eyes zeroing in on me like I'm her prey. She's definitely a fighter.

"Try to get me," she taunts, the playfully dangerous look in her eye edging me on.

Holding the knife in the palm that's propping her up, I drop my eyes to it and back at her again.

"You gonna cut me?" I question, walking slowly around the other side of the bed. Her eyes follow my every move. "It's easy to tear into your own flesh, knowing the feeling. You control the pressure. You know the force needed to break that layer just enough to release that pain."

I walk towards the edge of the bed where she's turned to face me, her brows knit together in confusion.

"But do you have what it takes to cut someone you love?" I tilt my head. "The guilt you'll feel afterwards. The confusion of lust and emotion." I press

forward until her face is angled up at me, her eyes cautious. “I don’t think you’re ready for all that.”

I slide my hand down her shoulder, meeting her forearm and gliding down until my hand reaches the blunt end of the knife. I slowly unwrap her little fingers, pulling it from her grasp.

“I, on the other hand...I’m ready.”

She smirks, and in a matter of seconds, she submits to me entirely.

I wrap my hand around the back of her head, grasping onto one of her little messy buns, cranking her neck back to face the ceiling. The knife is in my right hand as I trail the sharp end of it up the outside of her arm; the sensation causing her hair to stand on end, the goosebumps present.

“Word?” I ask simply, needing a safe word before we start.

“No need,” she answers, tilting her chin up in defiance.

“Word.” I demand, pulling her hair tighter, her neck bent all the way back.

She hisses, the corners of her eyes wincing before swallowing. The roll of her throat causes my cock to swell even more than it already is.

“Smrtka,” she whispers.

“Come again?” I cock my head.

“Smrtka.” She says the word again, and it rolls off her tongue beautifully.

Looking down at her wrist, I see the letters that make up the word imprinted on her. She follows my gaze, running her middle finger along the tattooed flesh.

“It means death personified,” she admits bluntly.

*Naturally.*

I arch my brow, and she smirks back, but I feel the weight of that word permanently etched into her skin. She lives with it. Day and night. It never leaves her, even in the midst of passion and lust. Her cloud forever surround

her. I can only hope to give her some reprieve from the darkness she's accustomed to.

1 "Smrtka," I whisper, acknowledging the word.

e She bites down on her bottom lip, peering from my eyes to my mouth, to my hand holding the blade, curious as to what comes next.

Lay on your back," I demand. "Spread those legs."

She rolls onto her back in the middle of the bed, spreading her thighs wide as her legs remain bent at the knee, her erect nipples pointing to the ceiling as her chest rises and falls, causing the sparkling silver chain from her tit to her neck to roll into the dip in her throat. Her green eyes follow me as I slowly lurk around the bed. I lick my lips, knowing what I need to see next.

I light one of her candles on the nightstand near the bed with the lighter in my pocket. Removing the belt from my jeans, I quickly grabbed her left hand lying near me. I place it near the wooden post of her headboard, wrapping my fleather belt around her little wrist, roughly tightening it until I'm sure she's unable to move. Her fingers ball into a fist, then stretch out again as she attempts to free herself from the restraint. I tilt my head at her, raising my brows, and she swallows.

I stalk around the bed, enjoying the view of her partially restrained before me. Positioning myself at the base, I chew at the corner of my lip, cocking my head at the beautiful sight before me. Her pussy is visible through the black mesh material covering it. What's also visible is the pool forming between her legs.

When she reaches her hand down to touch the area, I slap the back of her hand. She pulls back, shooting me a glare.

r "Do it again, and I'll tie it up too."

s Her lips curl as if she's contemplating pushing my buttons, but she halts



swaiting to see what I'm about to do.

I settle on my knees between her thighs on the edge of the bed, leaning down to kiss her over the damp material when a hand smacks me across the face, sending my head to the side, my blonde locks falling into my eyes. A burning sting radiates across my cheek as I turn to face her again with my eyes narrowed and my lip curling in anger. She's smirking at me with a devilish look in her eyes, and fuck if I didn't just fall in love with her crazy sass all over again.

"Slap me across the face one more time and I'll return the favor," I growl on the verge of losing my cool. "I promise you that, sweetheart."

"So many useless threats." She scoffs. "Little do you know, I like that shit," she retorts with that feisty little attitude of hers.

I don't think I could ever hit a woman. But, if one is begging me to slap her around a bit in order to get off, I may just need to change my approach on that topic. Man, this girl is really pushing me past the point of crazy. I thought I was wild, but Han...boy, does she take the cake.

Flipping the blade in my palm, I slowly drag the tip at such an angle that it won't cut her. I draw the blade up from her ankle to her knee, from her knee to her thigh as the goosebumps form beneath. Tracing over the three previous cuts that have already formed scabs, I make my way to the crease where her thigh meets her pelvis. Sticking the blade under the black material of her underwear, I find her eyes as her gaze locks onto mine.

Her lips part and a breath escapes her when I pull up quickly, easily tearing it through the flimsy material. Ripping it down one of her thighs, I leave it hanging just above her knee, then turn the sharpened edge of the knife towards myself, presenting her with the handle. She stares at it with furrowed brows, then looks up questionably.

“I’m gonna sit here and watch you fuck yourself with this.”

g Han chuckles lightly, like she thinks I’m joking. I lean over the top of her, wrapping my hand around her throat with the knife still pointed at me between us.

y “Fuck yourself with my knife again,” I repeat, slow and steady, tightening my hand.

y She brings her palm up and grips the end while never breaking eye contact. I release my hold, leaning back until I’m off the bed. She watches me as I find her wooden chair in the corner, grabbing the back of it with one hand and setting it directly at the edge of the bed. I sit back with my legs wide, looking at her through hooded eyes, giving a head nod to begin.

She takes the edge of it and slowly begins tracing circles over her clit, the blade of the knife pointing towards the ceiling. Her chest is moving, causing those perky breasts to sway as she angles the knife until it’s pointing to me in the chair. I open my jeans, find my aching hard-on, and release it to the room. I need some friction or I’ll literally combust in my jeans.

I Running the handle up and down her folds, she coats the end with her arousal before slowly pushing it inside of her. I watch closely as the tip of it disappears and her hips tilt to swallow it. My mouth drops open and I run my palm along my cock, squeezing it tightly as I become completely enthralled by the voyeuristic moment. A drop of cum drips from the tip as I watch her free hand toy with herself, her eyes still on mine as she uses the knife on herself like she did in the privacy of her place before.

t My jaw feels locked tight in pain. The things she can do to me with her eyes alone are overwhelming, but this? I’m stroking myself harder and harder while she continues the sweet assault on herself at my command. She moans.

as three inches of the handle disappears inside her, careful not to cut herself; with the blade that's becoming closer to her hand.

"Let go of it," I demand, standing up with my jeans open and my cock raised stiff against my stomach.

Her hand comes off the knife and falls back near her breast, palm up watching me with laser focus. I stalk around the bed, flexing my jaw, loving the view of my fucking blade lodged up in her and her hand tied to the bed with my belt. Taking as many mental images as I can, I circle back toward the candle, grabbing it before joining her on the bed again.

"Ready for some pain?" I ask as I kneel back between her thighs, my knees up against her legs as the blade rests between us, bouncing slightly with every quick breath she takes.

My mouth salivates with a disgusting desire, seeing her half-tied up with this inanimate object of mine still inside her. I'm sick and twisted for getting off on this. I know I am. She's dangerous, daring, and about to feel things she's never felt with anyone else before. I just hope I can control myself. I reach up, needing to touch her face.

"Yes," she whispers, as I trail my thumb over her bottom lip.

I want to kiss her, but she has to wait.

"It's gonna burn, sweetheart."

"I'm ready, Kai," she moans, nodding while chewing the corner of her lip.

I hold the candle up, gently tipping it until the wax slowly drips out. She gasps as the liquid heat hits the middle of her chest, gripping the bedspread into a tight fist with one hand while pulling on the restraint with the other. I slowly drip it across her bare nipple, and she releases a throaty groan as she screws her eyes tightly to adjust to the pained sensation.

I pause, giving her a minute to use the safe word if it's too much, but she

It doesn't. If anything, the tightened jaw she's sporting and the way she keeps bucking her hips, tells me she's way too into this.

↳ The candle tips again, and more wax pours across her tight little abdomen.

"Oh, fuck!" she cries out, her body writhing beneath me, her fist clutching the sheets.

↳ Once more, I pour a few drops right above her smooth mound, a few drops reaching the lips of her bare sex. Her eyes roll to the back of her head while she cries out, hips thrusting upwards as the knife starts to expel itself.

Quickly setting the candle down on the floor beneath the bed, I lean down and blow on the wax, letting it harden on her beautifully tattooed skin.

↳ Grabbing the base of the blade with two fingers, I gently remove it, watching as her body craves the loss of it. Reaching down to touch herself, I yet again smack her hand away.

↳ "I'm tying you up after this," I say calmly, leaning forward over her, holding the blade up to her neck again. "Don't you fucking move an inch, do you hear me?"

This is serious. If she wants to throw her cards into the dark world, she needs to know how to play.

She nods her head, her eyes darting between mine wildly.

I angle the blade against the area near her collarbone. Slowly and carefully I scrape off the melted wax.

↳ "You're so fucking beautiful," I whisper, then consider turning the knife on myself and ending it all for sounding like a corny bitch.

↳ But she doesn't seem to mind it. Her chest is heaving now, her mouth open, as she breathes, watching the knife that has the capacity to end her slide over the pounding pulse near her neck. I drag the sharpened edge across her silky skin, peeling each and every piece of dried wax off of her, careful not to

sbreak through the flesh. Her nipple is red from the burn. I scrape around i  
gently, then across her abdomen, cleaning the area but leaving reddish skin  
beneath from the slight scratch of the blade.

g “Touch me. I need you to touch me, Kai,” she begs me, reaching the hair a  
the top of my head and threading her fingers through it.

s She’s glistening wet from all the build-up, needing to feel something  
eagainst the sweet spot that’s aching for the ultimate pained pleasure. The  
.tease, her torture.

n “Patience,” I reply, skimming the knife over the area above her smooth  
mound.

; She attempts to lift her hips as I quickly pull the blade away, sucking in a  
Ibreath.

“Shit Han!” I yell. “Don’t fucking move!”

; “I’m sorry,” she moans just above a whisper while panting uncontrollably  
o “I’m sorry, it just feels so good. The pain.”

“I know, baby,” I say in a softer tone, finally cleaning the last bit of wax  
eoff of her. “The best kind of pain. The sick, twisted kind you hate to admit  
you love. But you know I got you.”

And I do. I’ll give her whatever she needs to survive, as unconventional as  
;it may be. This is that sickness. The love that is terrifyingly raw. I’d end my  
life if I knew tomorrow didn’t contain her. Suicide love.

e I fold up the knife, tossing it on the bed next to us and scale up her naked  
body, immediately finding her lips. I dive my tongue into her mouth, finding  
n hers and exploring every inch of the woman that I’m in love with. She fist  
rmy hair in her free hand, matching my need, melting her mouth to mine.  
y press my bare chest to hers as she moans into my mouth, my dick resting  
o against the soft skin of her lower abdomen.

t “Fuck Han,” I groan against her lips, licking her tongue ring before biting  
ndown on her lower lip. She cups my ass with her free hand, my pants sagging  
off of me as I grind into her. “I hope you’re ready.”

t If she thought that was pain, she has no idea what she’s in for next.

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I'm losing myself again.  
She's the cause.

She makes the world around me blurry every time I'm with her, almost drawing every conceivable ounce of attention solely to her alone. This lust mixed with love? It's a new form of torture I've introduced to myself. I feel it building within me, starting deep in the pit of my stomach, rising to my chest needing an escape—an outlet for the pressure about to cause me to implode. So many fucking feelings and I'm not sure I'm handling them the right way.

Off my face, obsessed.

After kissing her with everything I have, she bites down. I hiss as her teeth sink into my bottom lip, that familiar taste of iron filling my mouth. I pull back, touching the puncture as the blood slowly drips inside my lip, the wild look in her eyes making my cock grow longer.

"I'm sick too, Kai," she whispers beneath me. "I love when you hurt me just like I know you love when I hurt you."

She's not wrong, unfortunately. Doesn't take two unused years of psychology to figure out why that happens. We both come from traumatic

backgrounds, and yet, the pain centers us while letting us exploit our demons. The demons that seem to speak the same sick language when we're together.

"You're right," I say as her free hand comes up to my mouth. "I wasn't lying when I said there is only one person who can hurt me."

Her thumb brushes over my lip, smearing the blood across my face before bringing the thumb to her mouth and sucking on the end, staring dangerously at me as she consumes me.

"You own that part of me."

She's psychotic—nearly mad. But so am I. No one could understand her the way that I do, the way that I continuously need to. I want to give her everything she needs, and be the only one who knows her inside out. She consumes me, but I've yet to consume the entirety of her.

We're close though, and maybe through this experience she'll open another door of the dark castle that makes her, trusting me further and allowing me deeper into the hallway that leads to that little closed off heart of hers.

I don't want to hurt her, but I want her to feel the pain of being alive. It's the only thing keeping her here in the present with me, away from the shadow of death that lingers. Pain is that reminder she consistently seeks to ground herself.

"I want everything." The words are heavy as they fall from her lips, pulling me back down to earth with their weight. "All parts."

"I want to give you everything." I say each word slow and precise, my gaze burning through her. "Everything."

She remains quiet as she stares back at me, understanding the line we are about to cross. The seriousness in her gaze sends my heart racing. She knows.

my intensity, claims she loves it. But, I vividly remember her telling me I'm a lot to handle at times. I am, but I'm giving her a chance to embrace that.

"You're going to need to do what I say," I breathe.

Her eyes narrow slightly in confusion.

"You're going to listen to me, and do exactly what I say," I reiterate. "Go ythat?"

Her throat rolls again as she takes in a breath, nodding once.

I ease myself off of her on the bed, heading towards her closet to find another belt. It's not hard. She has tons of them. I grab a black leather one with spikes coming out of it, purely for my pleasure, and walk towards her free arm, leaning over her to tie that one up too.

Grabbing for the wrist, she pulls it away from me. I blink up at her grabbing for it again. Yet again, she pulls it away from me.

"You thought I was just going to make it easy?" she asks with a frown that slowly slides into a nasty little grin.

She forgets she's already half tied up. How hard could this really be?

But, I entertain it. Grabbing for her hand again, she curls it under her raising a playful brow. That little shit.

I grab for her upper arm when she sends a knee into my side. I grunt looking at her in disbelief for a moment before all hell breaks loose.

I immediately hop on top of her legs, straddling her hips against the bed as she attempts to kick me off of her. Her arm comes back around, and just as I'm about to grab for the belt, she grabs the knife I left on the edge of the bed.

She flips it up with her thumb, pointing it at me with a wild glare as her chest heaves beneath me.

The best part about it is she thinks she's got the upper hand now, not knowing I don't give two fucks about being cut by her. It doesn't scare me in

at the least. She throws out a quick jab with it and I grab her forearm with one firm hand, the other quickly bending her wrist into itself until the pain forces her to release a cry, simultaneously dropping the blade. Her face drops in disappointment before I can literally see the wheels spinning in her head, planning her next move.

Grabbing the knife again, I lean down to fold it up while still holding her wrist in the other hand. I bend forward to lay it on the floor when her head comes up and headbutts me, causing the knife to drop beside the bed as her wrist becomes free again.

“Jesus, shit!” I curse, rubbing my forehead.

*What in the crazy fuck?*

Now I’m just getting pissed and by the looks of it, she is, too. Her face is set in a scowl, attempting to free her legs that I’m sitting on, trapping her thighs. I grab for her wrist again and she smacks me across the face with a backhand, making my dick harder than hard. I’m a twisted fuck.

Breathing heavily now, my molars grind together as I glare down at her feisty little ass through my disheveled blonde locks. I really want to just smack her back. Man, do I want to. The corner of her lip draws up into a little knowing grin. She nods her head, edging me on. Taunting me. She wants it. She wants it so bad. *What a little fucking brat.*

I want to give her everything she wants. I promised her I would.

I raise my hand and slap her across the face. Fuck, it feels oddly good, giving her what she’s begging for. I feel it stem from the palm of my hand down to the pit of my stomach, the blood rushing to my dick as I lean forward, straddling her. But that good feeling is immediately replaced with fear.

My palm stings, so I know her cheek must be burning. Her head lay

eturned towards her shoulder, her hair splayed across her forehead and eyes that are cinched shut. Her lips are parted open as the breath escaping her causes the loose hair over her mouth to rise and fall against her nose.

, “Han,” I say quickly, my eyes wide as hell as I cup her face in my hands.

She pushed me to do it and now I’m terrified I’ve seriously crossed the line. *I hit her. Oh my God, I hit her.*

d She slowly rolls her head back to face me. A lazy grin on her face.

r “Yes,” she moans as she sighs, like she can finally breathe or something “Again.”

I release a breath, knowing she’s alright, that this was consensual, and that fear is lifted. Placing soft kisses over the pink cheek, I heal what I’ve harmed before resting my forehead against hers. She smiles lightly as I place sweet kisses on her lips.

a “I love you,” I whisper against her mouth, needing her to know before I do it again. “I love you. I love you.”

r I run my hand down her smooth stomach, arching up on my knees above her, finding her folds, sopping wet on my fingers. I glide my fingers along her slit before pushing two of them deep within her as my other hand quickly slaps her swaying breast hard, tossing the chain from her nipple ring to her neck to roll to her throat again.

She moans loudly, smiling, and I swear I hear the slap echo throughout the room. Her hips thrust up, grinding against my hand, riding my finger and tightening around it as she pulls on the restraint. She’s in love with the pain. In her own world of hazy bliss. I turn her on her stomach, careful to allow the belt to twist along with us to protect her wrist. I grab the other belt again tightening it on her loose wrist, finally tying both of her arms to the bed.

s “Finally slapped the brat outta you, huh?” I gloat in her ear.

s I back off, eyeing the curve of her spine, the spot on her lower back where those delicious dimples dip before her perfectly toned ass curves out.

*Fuck.*

Stripping myself of my jeans, my heavy cock bobs in the air as I grab the knife again before settling between her legs on the bed.

“I love it, Kai. All of it,” she says in her sexy cracked tone as she wiggles her ass at me, enjoying the sensation of her clit against the bed.

I lift her hips with both hands until she’s on her knees. A small whimper leaves her lips when her wrists pull back against the belts, unable to rest her arms against the bed.

l “You don’t get to please yourself,” I growl in her ear. “Only this tongue, my fingers, and my cock get to claim that.”

She spreads her legs further, jutting her hips back, opening herself to me, hungry for more. I spread her thighs from beneath with my large, splayed hands, opening her sex to me. I bend down and stick my tongue in her sweet fucking hole from behind. She cries out, her thighs shaking already. Toying with her sex, I suck on her pussy lips, flicking my tongue in fast flutter against her swollen clit before biting down on the sensitive nub.

r “Oh, yes...yes,” she cries out.

I pull back immediately, losing my mind over the taste and smell of her surrounding me. I’m salivating like a wild fucking animal, and the pressure I feel in the tip of my dick is unparalleled. I need to come.

I plant myself behind her, gripping her hips in my hands as my cock sways against her ass.

, “You’re so fucking bad for me,” I spit out at her before bringing my palm down on her ass.

She cries out at the pain as I spank her.

e “You make me want to do the nastiest shit,” I say, bringing my hand down again, stinging pain in the same spot.

“Yeah,” she moans, her head dropping forward. “Give me nasty, Kai.”

e She lets me play, slapping her two more times as she takes each one in stride. But it’s too much for me. I’m about to combust. I can’t just sit here swatching her dripping in front of me, just begging for something to fill her aching center.

e “I need to fuck you,” I say, finally lining the swollen head of my cock against her tight hole.

She nods, grasping onto the belts above where her wrists are restrained for leverage.

I press into her, watching her slowly stretch and swallow the head of my angry cock. My eyes roll to the back of my head at the intense sensation of her warm, wet center clinging to me tightly. With a quick thrust, I drive myself deep into her from behind. She arches her back and takes me willingly, a light whimper escaping her lips.

s “Tell me you’re mine,” I demand, needing to hear the words.

“Yours,” she answers with a breathy moan, adjusting around me.

“Tell me you need me,” I say, pumping back into her with another deep stroke, the sensation electrifying me from the inside out.

I She whimpers at the same time she says, “Only you.”

I’m in over my head with this girl. Those words set me off and I can’t control myself. I grip into the flesh of her hips, pulling her back, sliding her on my cock again and again as her ass meets my pelvis, taking it all.

1 “It’s so good,” she cries out, turning her cheek to her shoulder.

“Jesus, look at that,” I say beneath my breath, eyeing the base of my cock that’s throbbing inside of her. “You’ve made a fucking mess of me.”



1 My grip gets tighter on her hips while her ass slaps roughly against my skin, the sound of us connecting, filling the sterile room with nothing but electricity and pure, colorful energy.

1 “Fuck!” she curses out, hanging onto the belts for leverage.

3 Her head drops, and I feel her begin to spasm and tighten around me.

r “Tell me when you’re close,” I grunt, thrusting again.

She gasps as I fill her as deep as I can, her wet heat gripping the tip of my dick like a fist. The pleasurable sensation of being in her with nothing separating us again is coursing through me. My spine is tingling at the immense and overwhelming feeling, my release on the brink.

“I’m close, but I need more,” she says through shallow breaths. “Mark me, Kai. I need you deep in me, my head, my skin, my veins. I need to feel you everywhere.”

e I pause inside her, stilling for a moment as I blow air through my lips. I grind my teeth to hold off my cum after hearing her say those words. I don’t want this feeling to end, but I sense it building. That tingly feeling in my fucking balls that tells me this is about to be a really intense orgasm.

*Mark me, Kai.* Those words. She has no idea what they mean to me. I’ve always wanted to mark her, claim her as mine forever since the moment I met her in that dark, dirty basement. The mysterious green-eyed goddess that was always unobtainable. I wanted to drown myself in her, and hearing she wanted to do the same is music to my ears. I’ve never been so focused on anything in all of my life until her.

Grabbing the knife again, I kneel behind her, sliding myself back into her tight heat, closing my eyes at the overall feeling of ecstasy. Angling the blade against the upper part of her hip, she turns her head back to look at me, her

little button nose to her shoulder. I catch her gaze and stare into her exotic eyes as I carve my presence into her flesh.

She bites down on her shoulder, wincing through the pain as the blade gently punctures her skin, a red bead of blood instantly forming. I cut a small letter “K”, about the size of a dime into her soft skin, permanently etching myself into her story. A new tattoo, representing the reawakening of herself to a life that’s not simply surrounded by death, but to a new existence. One in which she could still be herself in the light of day without the veil of disguise. One she’d never envisioned until me.

I feel her spasm around me again as the blood seeps from the slight wound. My eyes find hers and there’s a darkness to the exchange.

“Mine.” I declare.

She studies me, her chest heaving as the weight of it registers. Nodding. She drops her head again, submitting to me entirely. Surrendering the complexities of her mind, the release of her body, and, most importantly, the opening of a broken heart.

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**A**fter finishing one of the most intense sexual experiences I've ever had I help to untie her wilted body. She's so spent from being pushed through orgasm after orgasm. Her beautiful lips never dropped the safe word. She didn't want it to stop, but I knew her little body could only take so much. The adrenaline, the endorphins, the rush and flood of emotions that occurred during what we did are settling, and I'm prepared for the drop that happens afterwards.

It's late now, and my baby can barely keep her eyes open. But I can't let her sleep just yet. I need to care for her first. I scoop her up from the bed and she wraps her arms around my neck. Carrying her towards the bathroom, I gently sit her on the counter and attempt to turn and prepare a bath in the little tub, but her hold prevents it. She whines, shaking her head against my neck, and a grin creeps across my face.

"Don't let me go," she whispers against my skin.

She doesn't want me to put her down. She's so fucking adorable.

"I'd never," I reply, feeling it in more ways than one.

Wrapping her thighs around my hips, her arms clinging to my neck, I pick her back up and hold her against my chest with one arm around her back as I work the faucet open with the other. The water turns warm, and I put the stopper in, working to open one of her soaps with one hand to create some bubbles.

The smell of sage and lavender fills my nose as the bubbles slowly rise. I lean over the open bath, the water deep enough now to set her gently down into it. She reluctantly releases my neck and settles herself back, wincing slightly as she does.

I know she's in pain. The mark on her upper hip has stopped bleeding, but the surrounding area is slightly red. Her cheek is a bit rosy from our heated little exchange, and I know her lady parts are swollen and sore from excessive use. I search through her closet adjacent to the tub, finding a fuzzy little hand towel that's soft to the touch.

I kneel next to her and dip it into the warm water, lathering it with her delicious smelling soaps before taking her arm and lifting it into the air above the water. I begin gently working the towel over her skin in small circles, taking extra care around the wrists as I clean her.

She watches me as I work the towel slowly up to her neck, squeezing the fabric and letting the soapy mixture run down her chest, then her back. I lean forward, placing a kiss on her temple before running the towel down her cheek, letting the warm water soothe the pain away. Her eyes blink up and find mine. Her expression is soft, almost sad looking as I hold the towel to her. I know how emotionally taxing this type of love-making can be. I'm not an idiot. I have two years of that psych degree up in this noggin of mine.

It's rough—the high from the adrenaline of being hit in the moment fades and you're left with confusing feelings, hurt, sadness, worry, feelings of

being used, not wanted after. But that's why it's so important to show her how much opening up to me in that light and trusting me so completely is worth it. Because afterwards, I'm still here, even more in love with this woman than I thought possible.

We fucked like animals, psychotic animals that have no sense about them. I licked the blood off of her, slapped her up, wrapped my hands around her little neck and clung on tightly as I choked her out like she begged me to fucking her into unrelenting orgasms. But this sad little look of hers scared the shit out of me.

"H-how are...are you...how are you okay?" I stutter out like an idiot, then I knit my brows, my face twisting.

Her brow lifts, and a huge smile crosses her face.

"Kai," she chuckles. "You're so cute when you get nervous."

I blow out a breath of air, then ask again. "Do you want to talk about it? Was there anything you didn't like? Are you feeling okay?"

She licks her lips, pushing some bubbles around with her hands in front of her lap.

"I'm more than okay," she whispers, her sad expression returning.

She swallows and shifts uncomfortably before her gaze slowly drifts up to mine again.

"What's wrong, baby?" I ask, cupping her neck with my hand, turning her jaw to face me with my thumb. "It was intense, but we need to be able to talk about it. I want you to be open with me."

We sit here, our bodies mere inches apart, yet it feels like miles for my heart that's already inconceivably connected to the one before me.

Her eyes do that thing again. The one where she's blinking wildly and they are darting all across the room in panic mode.



r “Just kiss me, Kai, please,” she begs breathlessly.

s I nod against her forehead, slowly pressing my lips against hers. She lets out a little whimper as our lips meet, and it breaks me. Her hands circle around my neck, pulling me to her before her tongue sweeps against my bottom lip, prompting me to open my mouth.

r Our tongues meet, and the sensation that sweeps through me makes me weak while strengthening the questionable parts of me. She comforts me with her presence, calms my nerves by just...being.

I lean up, placing a hand on the edge of the tub to angle myself above her better, when my hand slips off the edge and my arm goes into the tub causing me to topple my top half into it. A smile breaks, and she’s laughing again.

“You fell,” she says, making the obvious observation.

? “I fell a long time ago,” I answer truthfully.

She stares at me with wild, wide eyes. I’m not pulling back. She knows who I am, how I am. There’s no veil to my truth. What you see is what you get with me and Han is forever going to know the real me. The man who is so deep and painfully in fucking love with her.

o “But you already know that.” I shrug.

She looks down at the water, moving some bubbles around mindlessly before her eyes snap back up at mine.

k “You really aren’t like anyone I’ve ever known,” she admits, looking at me like I’m the rarest antique in the shop. “You’re the most original, truest form of yourself. You never hide your emotions. Why?”

“Why would I? I’m proud of them. I love to feel. Even if the feeling isn’t preferred, or in most instances appropriate.” I chuckle softly. “I’m still feeling. I’m alive.”

“What are you feeling right now?”

“I’m feeling so many things,” I answer, shaking my head at the thought plaguing my mind.

I want to make love to you again. I want to fuck you until you scream.

I want to hold you while you cry. I want to yell at you for hurting me the way you have. I want to tell you how amazing you are to me, and that your past doesn’t need to haunt you the way it does. I want to shake you until you are able to feel along with me.

“Just so many things,” I admit again. “Sometimes it’s good to feel, and, sometimes I feel too much, and I need to find a way to numb it all.”

“I understand that,” she says, taking the towel that’s now floating nearby and washing my arm with it. “More than I wish I did.”

“What’s going on in that head, Johanna?” I whisper softly as she squeezes the towel out, bringing it to my face and wiping a spot near my bottom lip.

I see the bloodstain on the towel as she dips it back into the water. She opens her mouth to say something, then flutters her lashes before slowly slipping herself under the water of the bath, her head beneath the mirrored surface.

My heart feels the familiar ache again. One I may have to just find a way to live with if she’s who I need. It feels like she’s running again. The realization sucks.

She lays underwater, the bubbles from her breath stop forming as her hands lay over her face. A minute goes by and finally she pops back up gasping for air. Turning to face me, she pushes her hair back off her forehead and eyes.

“I love you, Kai,” she says breathlessly. “It hurts, and I’m scared, but I’m in deep, terrifying love with you.”

She rushes the words so quickly I have to sit there and absorb them listening to them in my head to make sure it was real, that she just spoke her honest, raw emotions.

I “Say something, please,” she begs, moving her hands methodically against her thighs under the water.

Reaching out for my neck, she pulls herself into me, resting her forehead against my chest. I don’t want to hurt her again, but feel like my heart might just punch her in the face with how hard it’s beating at the moment.

“I know you do, Jo.” I cup the back of her head, holding her to me as my fingers weave through her hair. “I know. I’ve got you. It’s safe here. I love you. With everything.”

She sighs against me and I know how big that was for her fragile little heart. But, like I said before, I’m not looking to fix her. I’m here for the process, to break alongside her, so we’re in pieces together. Even the playing field, so we can build ourselves into something new, free from resentment and free from standards. We can just be us.

I finish washing her up, shampooing her hair and conditioning it with her soaps, then help her into a warm bath towel, rolling her up in it tightly after drying her off. Picking her back up into my arms, I cradle her little body and bring her back to the bed where I remove the sheets and grab a new comforter from her closet. I’ll wash the used stuff in the big ass dryer Hawk has at their place.

Placing some antiseptic cream on her cut, I find bandages and place one over the area. Gotta make sure she’s good.

She watches me work, amused at my antics as I sift through her dresser drawers, finding a large nightshirt and a new pair of panties. I hold up a lace thong and a pair of dancing peanut butter and jelly briefs. I make a stanl

,face at the thong, throw it across the room and smile, twirling the brief around my finger as I carry them to her. She bites her bottom lip, laughing at me with her wet hair tied up in a bun on top of her head.

t Getting her dressed, I wrap her in the large fluffy blanket so only her little face is sticking out of the top. Laying her on the bed, I face her on my side pulling the other comforter over me. We both sigh at the same, and I reach for her cheek, brushing my fingers along the soft skin.

“Do you want me to feed you tacos?” I ask, my thumb trailing over her lips.

e “Did I tell you I’m painfully in love with you?” she asks simply, making me cheese like a fucking high schooler in a rom-com.

e I’m lifted into the air like a fucking hot-air balloon by her words. I’m at a new altitude, the air so thin my chest constricts, and I can barely breathe as I rise.

“I knew it. Tacos were the way in,” I smirk, gently tapping the tip of her nose.

r She scoffs, then shrugs because it’s true. Tacos are the way to a woman’s heart.

“I grab some water for us from the kitchen and reheat the tacos that I left on the counter. After eating, we put on a movie, smoke a little weed, and finally we curl up under the blankets again. I hold her to me, breathing in the scent of her hair as I rest my chin on top of it, enjoying the close proximity.

e “Do you...” She trails as if she misspoke but then regains her confidence “Do you do that a lot or something?”

r “Do what?” I ask, not sure where she’s going with this.

d “The rough sex, the bondage.”

“Oh,” I nod, understanding. “No, not really. I mean, I have done similar

things, I guess, but definitely nothing like what we did. Why?”

t She turns to face me, rolling onto her side and finding my confused expression.

e “You just, I don’t know...” She itches the tip of her nose, which appears to be a cute little anxious tic she has. “You just knew what to do. You took care of me. The way I needed.”

I can’t help but smile at how adorable she looks right now. Innocent almost, and Han is anything but innocent.

“I mean, all that sex I just made up on the fly. I figured if it got to be too much, at least we had a safe word.”

“The sex was amazing,” she says quickly. “It’s not that, though. It’s how you cared for me. I’ve never experienced that part before.”

I “You’ve never had aftercare?”

She laughs like the idea is insane. “No, never. You have to remember I’ve been with a selfish asshole, and countless one-nighters. Aftercare isn’t part of a system where follow-up calls aren’t even considered.”

s I chuckle at the honesty, silently hating the idea of her with countless one-nighters.

1 Her hand comes up and cups the side of my face. “But you...” She sighs. “You really love me, don’t you? You prove it in your actions along with your words. Reassuring me afterwards, open to talking about it. You’re just so emotionally intelligent, and that’s...new to me. Especially because you’re younger than me, you know?”

I smile at her honesty again. She’s just adorable, seeing her trying to voice herself for the first time.

“I love older women. What can I say?” I chuckle as she nudges me.

r “I’m not that much older.” She rolls her eyes playfully.

“Whatever cradle robber.”

l “Kai!” she shrieks, nudging me again. “I’m only like four years and some change, right?”

o “Okay Grandma,” I say, wrapping her into my arms. “You’re talkin’ crazy again. Time to put you to bed.”

“I hate you,” she grumbles.

t “No,” I stop her, finding her lips again and brushing mine against them  
“No, you love me.”

o I watch her smile slowly return; our eyes locked as our heads remain pressed against one another’s.

√ “And I love you.”

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“And I love you.”

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40





**M**y eyes crack open to the light streaming in through the window, and I'm greeted by emerald irises.

I'd have forgotten where I was if it wasn't for the beauty locked in on me and me alone.

I feel the sensation of her fingers in my hair. She's on an elbow, looking down at me, massages my scalp with her nails. A soft, comforting feeling. Her stare melts into me. She's gazing at me as if I can't see her, as if her expression is entirely unknown to her. But I see it. She looks a little nervous, anxious, worried even.

"Babygirl," I groan in my cracked morning tone, pulling her down next to me again, wrapping an arm around her back until she's face to face with me. "What's wrong?"

She sighs, looking down at my chest, running her finger along the words there, reading the tattoos as she contemplates my questions. "Nothing really."

My heart feels the familiar ache. In the light of day, how do the words "love you" stand? Is she regretting anything? Did the intensity of the

experience force her into expressing feelings she's not ready for? It all wears on me.

"Tell me your thoughts, sweetheart. What are you feeling?"

Her smile returns, and her eyebrows raise. "Terrified," she admits chuckling and shaking her head.

"Me too," I admit, being completely and totally honest. "And that's okay. I think it's natural to feel that. It's all so new to both of us."

I place a kiss on her forehead, pulling her into a hug until I can feel her skin against mine again. I place my chin on top of her head as my heart and hers race together. We're both so scared of the changes happening, terrified of losing something we've only just found. It's new, it's raw, it's so fucking real.

"You know how people hate the smell of cigarette smoke, but if you're a real smoker, you just kinda find yourself oddly liking it?"

Here she goes with her randomness again. I fucking love it.

"I'm hoping there's a point to this statement, and the point not being that smell."

She laughs into my neck, the feeling of her breath against my skin sending an electrical current from the point of contact to the pit of my gut.

"No, you actually smell like soap," she says before sniffing me, her little messy bun tickling my neck. "Soap and sex."

"I should trademark that," I reply, running a few of my fingers along her spine.

Her skin is so soft and smooth, and I always find myself unable to stop touching it. Intricate little circles; I'm continuously drawing with my fingers on the softness.

"What I was trying to say was that smokers don't mind the smell because i

It becomes them. The carcinogenic residue that cigarettes leave behind infiltrates into your system. It's in your lungs, in your blood, in your skin. It becomes a part of you from the inside out, and you begin to love it, even though you know it's not supposed to be a part of you."

I wait for her to continue, wondering where this is going.

I "Basically, what I'm trying to say is...you've become like cancer."

I pause with my mouth open, about to say something, before a grin takes over my expression.

I "Jesus, Han. That's morbidly romantic," I say, my statement dripping with sarcasm.

g She laughs into my chest again before pulling back enough to look me in the eyes. We're both just smiling at each other, and I wish I could bottle this moment in time, pulling it out every chance I got.

"I despised it in the beginning because it was unfamiliar and felt foreign. Deadly even. But now...now you've become such a part of me, I don't think I could go on without it." Her eyes pinch in the corners as she swallows, the pain in her sentence evident. "I hate that I understand it now."

g Her last sentence confuses me. I drag my thumb along her lip, studying it while attempting to not look as confused as I feel. "Understand what?"

e She shakes her head as if to tell me not to ask. The question, apparently of no limits.

r "You're my cancer, Kai. You're my disease. Spreading throughout me, filling my lungs, infiltrating my heart, seeping from my pores..." Her breath catches. "You're everywhere."

s My heart squeezes in my chest when tears fall down her cheeks. She's having such a difficult time trying to love. It's as if she sees love as a toxic thing.

needed, powerful enough with the potential to kill. I mean, Jesus, she compared  
it to cancer.

1 “Well, do you want radiation? I mean, I’m sure we can eradicate this  
disease before it’s too far gone,” I joke, raising my brows humorously as  
I rub her nose with mine. She grins briefly before it falls from her face.

“You’ve already spread to every part of me. Nothing’s untouched. The  
desire of needing you surpasses the need to live.”

She presses her lips to mine immediately after the words escape her  
mouth, leaving me attempting to mull them over. I think of her past, her mother, and  
everything she’s potentially seen, curious as to the seriousness of that  
sentence. It’s impossible though, because the minute her tongue slips into my  
mouth, I’m in her world, at her mercy again, unable to do anything other than  
love her physically.

2 We stayed in bed, just kissing one another all morning. Hands exploring  
every inch of each other, yet nothing escalated. We just silently  
communicated our need for one another through our lips and tongues until  
we finally needed to leave to meet Hawke at one of the properties.

3 I entered the kitchen after showering, feeling lucky that I had extra clothes  
in my car to change into. Spotting Han with her back turned towards me  
and standing near the counter, I approach her with every intention of wrapping  
my arms around her from behind. That intention is ripped from me when she  
turns to face me first.

4 Her eyes are red, her face white as hell as she holds my phone out to me.  
My phone.

5 Opened on a text message to Tarah.

6 The ones I thought I deleted.

*No. No. No.*

l My stomach drops and my chest feels as if it's caving in.

"Are you...you're still seeing her?" Han asks, the look on her face immediately breaking me in two.

I My heart is racing and I'm on the verge of a panic attack. This can't happen. Not to her.

e I look at the messages. I successfully deleted the first one, but what remains is the last two.

; *Of course. Didn't think you'd be ready for more. Meet me?*

l *Text me time and place.*

t Followed by a new one from her I'd yet to check that appears to have come this morning, which is why Han probably saw it light up.

1 *Come over anytime you're done doing whoever else is lamer than me.*

I run my hands down my face, groaning into them. It looks so much worse than what it is. Fuck, it looks so fucking horrible.

y "No. Fuck no, I'm not seeing her." I run a hand through my hair and look at the ceiling. "It's probably some old shit."

I don't know why I said that. It's a lie. I know it's not old shit, but I'm panicking because it looks like I'm fucking around with Tarah on the side which is so far from the truth.

g "Kai, this is from last night. Don't fucking lie to me!" she yells before throwing my phone across the room.

Her eyes rim with redness, the pain present taking away from her normal softness. I can literally feel her coming apart. The kind of coming apart you dread. The kind of coming apart you can't bring back together.

"Baby, stop." I reach out for her, and she pulls away from me immediately "I can explain this."

"How could you do this to me?" she asks, tears falling out of her eyes a

she stares at the floor beside me, her mouth hanging open as if breathing isn't something she's ever had to work so hard to do.

"I tried to delete it before I came up because I didn't want you to think it was something it wasn't."

I say it, then literally slap my hand to my face. I'm a fucking idiot who needs to put his foot in his goddamn mouth. She stares at me in disbelief at my admission.

"You tried to delete it in case I'd find it?" Her voice is weak.

"No, I just...I meant—"

"Oh my God," she says breathlessly, resting the back of her hand against her head and looking to the ground as if it can somehow save her. "I can't believe myself. I'm so stupid."

I hate that she's having a conversation with herself. Suddenly I feel pushed to the curb.

"Goddammit Han!" I yell, grabbing her forearms and shaking her. "I'm not fucking seeing her! I hate that fake bitch. Don't fall back over something you don't understand."

She swallows, blinking for the first time in what seems like forever, her brows knitting painfully together as she closes those eyes I need to see to make me feel whole again.

"Explain it then," she says before opening her eyes to face me. "I'm giving you an opportunity, which is more than I should give, considering the context."

My lips part, and I don't know how to start. Telling her I'm trying to get more drugs from Tarah to determine what's in the substance that's taken me down a notch in the totem pole as one of the biggest and baddest drug dealers on the coast just doesn't flow right. Especially since our conversation about

time with drugs became such a sore spot for her. I can't admit the depths of what I'm into with Dario.

Her brows raise as I open my mouth wider, but no words come out.

"Jesus, fuck," she whispers, and I can hear her heart breaking into pieces.

A sob leaves her chest, but as quickly as it falls, she tucks it back in, swallowing it away.

"Leave," she says in a voice that's entirely too calm for my liking as she heads towards the door. "Just leave."

"No," I say, immediately, shaking my head, stalking back towards her.

"Leave!" she screams, walking backwards, away from me.

"No! I'm not leaving. I'm not fucking Tarah. I'm not involved with anyone in that regard. It's only you, it's only ever been you."

I push up against her, holding her to me again as her back hits the wall. The disgusted look on her face reaches me as she looks up and says, "That's not true. You've slept with other people since we've hooked up. And not that it really matters, but it just shows you're lying again."

My face distorts because unfortunately for me, it's true. I slept with that blonde chick at Bran's in the bathroom, and the other chick who fucked me for coke in the backseat of my car. Both of which technically happened after our LSD night, our first time.

She looks past me again, unable to keep her eyes on me. It tears through my heart. Her shaking hands raise up between us, before she shoves me back away from her.

"Don't." My voice cracks. "Don't, please Johanna, it's not what you think. I need you to trust me."

I try to grab for her again, but she pulls her arm away from me, clutching it to her chest like the idea of me burns her. I just need to fucking touch her.



f She laughs. "Trust you?" She scoffs. "I trusted you last night. That was my first mistake. My second was falling for you. I won't let my third be letting another fuckboy walk all over me."

"Let me explain," I say immediately, holding my hands up, trying to calm her. "It's not Tarah, it's the drugs. I wanted drugs."

She gives me a blank, emotionless stare, tipping her head to the side.

e "This is about drugs, Kai?" she asks, sounding entirely suspicious, not believing me at all. "Really?"

"Yeah." I nod.

"Kai?" she asks, waiting for my response with her brows raised.

e "Yeah?" I answer cautiously.

"You're a drug dealer." Her words hit me like a ton of bricks. "I may look pretty to you, but I assure you I'm not that fucking stupid."

s I blow air through my lips, placing my hands on my head again, pulling at the roots of my still damp hair. I don't know how to fix this, how to come back from it.

t "Just know that it has nothing to do with what's going on here between us. I've never been more serious about anyone before in my life. You think I'd fuck that up?" I pull at the collar of my shirt, fisting the material with white knuckles, unsure of what to do with this rage I'm feeling over my loss of control in this situation. "You own me, you know this!"

k Blinking away the emotion, I see her sigh and have the tiniest hope I'm breaking in.

. "Johanna, know that I love you. Know that I won't hurt you. Trust my heart." I pound my fist into my chest as her tears spill over again. "You know my heart."

She looks down at the floor again, her jaw tightening as I press myself

against her, pinning her hips back against the wall. I wrap my hands around the sides of her neck and jaw, forcing her to face me.

“Baby, please. I’d never let this go. Not over a stupid fuck, not over a fucking pill...nothing.”

Looking at me with unsure eyes, she doesn’t pull away.

“We are the same, Han. Me and you. We need each other,” I whisper against her lips.

She sucks in a shaky breath, breathing it out while looking down.

“Don’t make me an idiot, Kai. Don’t let me become that person again. Please. Not now,” she begs in a weak voice. A voice so unlike her. “Not after everything.”

She wants to believe me. She desperately wants to believe she isn’t making the biggest mistake of her life by letting someone in again. I get that. I feel it in the way her entire body is shaking, the way her bottom lip trembles in my hands. She can’t take one more break. She’ll crumble into nothing before me. There won’t even be pieces left to fix.

“I would never,” I promise her, emphasizing each word as I stare into her.

Her eyes study mine, analyzing them for the slightest detection of falsehood, anything to prove I’m not being honest with her guarded heart.

“Come here,” I whisper, pulling her into my arms where it’s safe.

Picking her up, I take her over to the kitchen. I place her on the counter, wrapping her legs around my hips as her arms find their way around my neck where they belong. My hand slides up behind her neck, sifting my fingers through her hair, gripping onto her, pressing her into me.

She sighs against me, her lips against the skin of my neck. I feel her breaths and wonder about the silent thoughts going through her head. Does she believe me? Does she trust me?

After holding her for a moment, I lean back to look down at her, combing her hair back with my hands before kissing the little spot on her forehead repeatedly where her stress shows.

I can feel my heart calming down a bit, my chest against hers again as our heads rest together, her eyes still cast downwards. But her heart is oddly calm now. In fact, her breathing isn't what it was just a minute ago, not to mention her shaking has stopped. I'd love to believe I have that effect on her just as she does me, but I know in that sick part of my stomach, that isn't it.

Pulling back from her slightly, I hold her face in my hands again, taking in her appearance as if I could read her thoughts.

But I see it like the way a sun sets into darkness. Slowly, then all at once. The tiny flame I'd provided, hoping to ignite her fire, has dimmed. There's a coldness in her gaze, almost as if the life in the eyes I saw this morning has faded along with that sun into the night.

Her darkness is back, and just as quickly as I'd fucked up after promising her the idea of us, it appears her past found a way to snuff it out.

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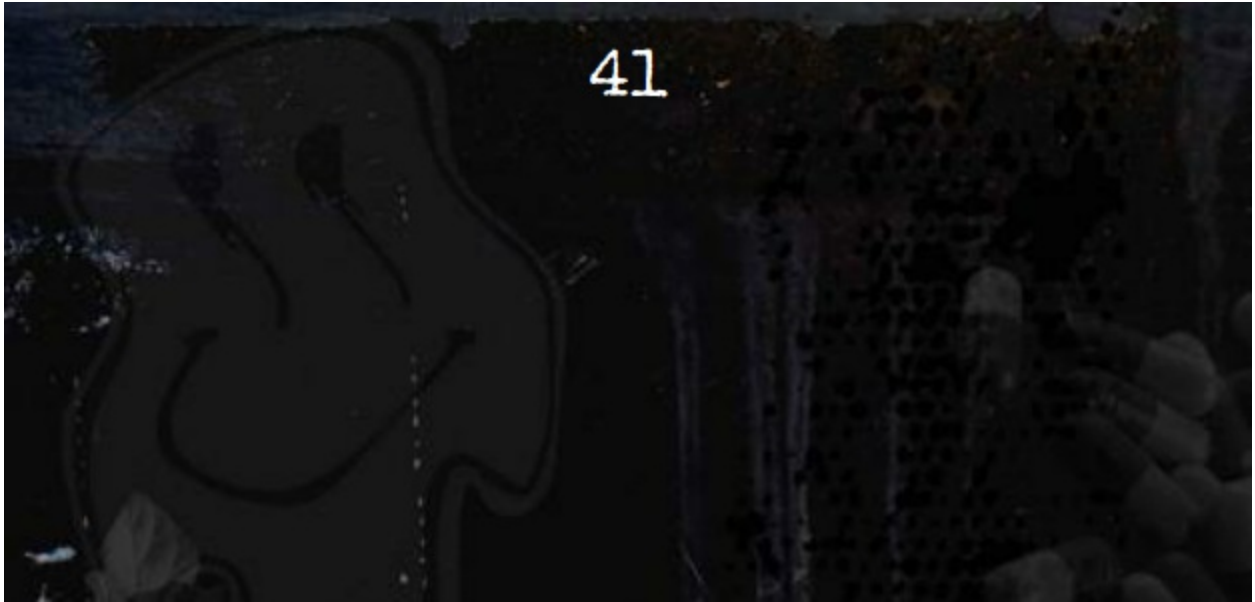
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**T**rust is a funny thing.

You want to hold it. See it. Know for a fact that it exists. But you can't. It's not a tangible object. It's a firm belief in something. And to someone who doesn't seem to believe in much, trust can be as useful as tit on a bull.

I left her place with an unsettling fear.

It'd been so long, too. I thought the idea was gone from her mind. But when holding her little face in my hands and staring into her, I saw the coldness in those lifeless eyes. The ones that retreat from pain in their own way in order to survive.

I'd rather she hit me again. I wanted that pain I sought from her. It made us real. It showed her emotion, her truth. But the minute she turned calm, I knew I was in trouble. She was switching up on me again. Finding any way she could to protect herself.

It was only a matter of time before she disappeared.

It was heartbreaking really, watching her retreat to her old ways in order to block out pain. The defense mechanism from her traumatic past, so integrated

into her that not even the cancer I was growing inside of her could overpower it. It was terrifying, how fast the change was from warm and open to cold and closed, and it made me question, yet again, what she's been through.

I would walk through hell to find out what made that girl. The answers to why she can't let go, the reasons she cowers at the idea of love. I want to be so aware and awakened to her. I want to hold her secrets as my own, feel her pain in my chest, and help her find the way out of that darkness, hand in hand. But you can't save someone who doesn't want to be saved.



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I reluctantly texted Tarah back, informing her I was on my way to pick up the stuff before I met up with Hawke. I'd asked her to meet me outside of her beachfront condo, but when I got there, she wasn't out front. She wasn't even at the door when I knocked. She was inside, yelling for me to come in.

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I groan internally, and push my way in through the large glass doors.

1

"You made it." She smiles as she speaks, sitting back on the couch in nothing but a tight little tank top and ripped shorts that are shorter than short.

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"Yeah, sorry I gotta run and meet Hawke," I say, shifting in the large entryway of her immaculate place, my hands in my pockets. "You got the stuff?"

She cocks her head at me, a smirk in place on her rich, entitled face. This won't be that easy.

o

d

"I have something you need, it seems," she says as she stands from the couch, placing a glass that's a quarter full of what looks to be wine down on the end table near her.



r It's ten in the morning and she's drinking wine. Rough life she lives. She's nothing compared to a woman who's actually been through shit. Real shit. Shit that has the potential to break a person. She's nothing like Han. No, Han is so high above this try-hard wannabe.

e She slowly stalks over to me, her bare feet pedaling across the dark wooden finished floors, her long tanned legs reminding me of a tricky spider ready to strike. I smell a waft of sweet-smelling flowers, my eyes falling upon a lit candle behind her.

“What I want to know,”—she trails a finger up along my arm to my chest causing me to look down and away from her—“is what you're willing to do for it.”

She presses her chest to mine, and I shift my gaze to the ceiling. She gets on her tiptoes and places her hands on my neck. Her lips brush against my skin and I back away as she tries to kiss the spot beneath my ear.

1 “Tarah, I gotta—”

“Yeah, yeah. You gotta go. I know.” She rolls her eyes. “I just don't know why all the Cali coast gets a taste of that big dick of yours but me. It's all everyone talks about, you know.”

*Jesus, I've represented myself well out here.*

e “Are you gonna give me the shit or not?” I demand, feeling agitated. “Because if not, I'm out.”

“Chill, Kid.” She smiles, rolling her eyes again. “It's right here.”

s She grabs her tits with her hands, squeezing them together until I see the tip of a baggie sticking out between them. I sigh as she chuckles.

e “God, you're seriously no fun at all.” She rips the baggie from between her tits and hands it over.

I hand her a load of cash in exchange and turn to leave when she says

s“Finally found something better than your own, huh?”

∴ Her statement makes me pause.

1 “Don’t take anymore of this shit, you got that?” She stumbles back slightly, her eyes narrowed in confusion at my sudden seriousness. “Stay the fuck away from it like your life depends upon it, because it literally does.”

r

g



;

5 Later that afternoon, I assisted in pulling up the old floors of a new property Hawke had recently come across. There was a slight mold situation in which we needed to remove the wood flooring and replace the plywood subfloor in order to revamp it so it passed inspection. Still feeling sick about the situation from this morning, I sent a text to Han.

v        **Kid:** If you’re looking for your shoes, stop. I stole them.

l

I hoped the message would make her smile. Or, shit, at least grin a little. I couldn’t have her running from me. So I literally stole her favorite chunk of wood sitting by the door before I left. We needed each other now. I was so in tune with her and her emotions and hellbent on solidifying the fact that she believed it was only us, so much so that I hadn’t even realized I’d woken up and started my day without a hit.

r I felt it, though, in my hands later that day. I got the shakes from not getting the coke in my system. I felt way more tired and drug out, but something inside of me made me want to prove to my body I didn’t need it.

,

didn't need drugs like the way I needed her. Was it stupid to have switched addictions from a substance to a person? Of course. I've never claimed to be healthy or mentally stable, but this was the first time in my life I'd actually decided to lay off the shit, and I don't even know what made me make that decision, if I'm being honest.

"I can't have you helping me if you're hungover." Hawke sighs in frustration, watching me try to line my tape measure against the window and failing miserably.

The end keeps falling with my shaky hand, the tape bending and popping roughly every time I attempt to reach the other side to get these measurements for the new windows he needs to order.

"I'm not hungover," I retort, trying it one more time, feeling the disappointment in his tone.

"I'm serious. If you're not feeling well, I don't want you here. If you get hurt, then I—"

"I said I'm not hungover!" I snap.

His forehead wrinkles, staring at me before he shakes his head and turns away. He doesn't believe me. Hawke's tone is scary when he's happy. When he's disappointed or upset with you, better believe that shit makes you feel two inches tall before him.

I throw the tape measure at the wall, making a loud sound before it drops against the floor, the sound echoing throughout the empty renovation property. I catch his eyes again as I sit on the floor, my back against the wall with my elbows on my knees. He studies me for a second, tipping his head to the side before I feel him register it.

"You're gettin' off the shit," he says in a softer, more compassionate tone.

I sigh, feeling the strange weight of a new change. I don't even want to

Itake credit for trying. It just so happened I didn't snort a line this morning  
eMy mind was preoccupied. I don't want him to think there's any real effort in  
ythis yet. There's not.

t "I don't know," I reply, running a hand through my hair. "I mean, it wasn't  
really planned. I just didn't take any today. Maybe I won't tonight either."

1 He nods, peering down at the floor between us, and then back again.

l "It's okay if you fail," he says softly, somehow reading my mind. "Own  
that you made a decision to try, even if it wasn't planned."

g I swallow down what feels like sandpaper in my throat. My jaw tightens a  
etwo random memories flood my mind: My father telling me I'd never mean  
more to him than a check from the government before he passed out in the  
echair as he drank away my lunch money, and Hawke as a twelve-year-old  
handing me a rolled up brown paper bag secretly by the lockers before we hi  
ttthe lunch room. It was a sandwich his dad made him, telling me he ate so  
much at breakfast, and it'd get thrown away if I didn't take it. He always  
knew, just like now.

s I don't know why I think of these things. But Hawke was always more of a  
nbrother and father to me than my own dad. He took care of me like I took  
lcare of him during the event that changed his life. I'd made it my mission to  
make sure he never went without in prison. I sent whatever shit money I  
smade from drugs and summer work to his books, calling him often to talk  
1and visiting him there to show support, sending new books and magazines  
,buying his car from him even though I didn't need it at the time. I made sure  
eI was the brother he needed when he had no one, because he was always the  
brother I never had.

"You know, I said some real nasty shit to Han, after the party," he admits  
orunning a hand along the back of his neck. "I basically blamed her for

everything when I shouldn't have."

I lick my lips, remembering the conversation she told me about Hawke assuming she'd been the one to lead me even more astray than I'd become on my own. But the truth of the matter was, she was the only thing pulling me out of it. Her words, a resounding presence in my head. *I think you're a passionate person. Someone who gets their addictions confused with a true need to feel things. That energy, that passion, it's yours to own, not the substances around you.*

We have our issues, no doubt, but somehow we know how to handle one another better than anyone else. I'm afraid to lose her, but I'm more afraid of her losing herself.

"The choice has always been yours. Not addiction, because it's a disease but everything that surrounds it. The people you hang out with, the setting you place yourself. I'm just glad to see you're starting to make the right ones. The ones that push you to be who you are," Hawke continues. "I'm always proud of you, even when you fail."

My eyes gloss over, so I wrinkle my nose and fluff my hair instead. He smiles and nods, turning to go finish buffing the floors in the other room when I reply, "It's her, you know."

Stopping in his tracks, he turns to face me again.

"She's the right choice. For me," I say, my voice breaking.

He listens, taking a breath, before his lips curl into a half-grin.

"Can't believe I'm actually saying this,"—he rubs his forehead with his forefinger and thumb—"but I think you're right."

,

r



2  
1  
2  
1The sun is setting on the day, just like it feels like it's setting on my  
2newfound relationship. I wish things weren't so complicated. And like  
2Hawke said, I let this happen by putting myself in situations that allowed i  
to. If I hadn't agreed to work with Dario, if I hadn't taken that shit at the  
eparty, if I didn't allow my addictions to rule my life, we wouldn't even be  
fhere.

Yet here I sit, watching Hawke pull away from the rental property, leaning  
against the back of my car, alone with my thoughts.

5 She didn't text me back. The message was opened, but no response came  
through. I can't risk driving to her place to see that she's left. I know it's  
5what comes next. Leaning there against my car, frozen in a space and time,  
want to keep from moving. I want to hold on to the idea that we aren't broken  
eyet.

1 It's a funny thing, knowing what happens next will break you, and yet  
wanting to remain behind the line, not crossing over into that new reality jus  
yet. Especially knowing exactly how bad it's going to hurt, knowing it might  
change everything. It's like living in some sort of sweet ignorant bliss, a  
world I knew all too well.

5 I wish we were better for each other. I wish we were both in a place that  
came from some sort of solid footing, so we could run together, far away  
from all the pain. But the truth is, Han and I are both so fucked up in our own  
right, maybe we can't save each other. And like she said, maybe we weren't  
supposed to.

The last truck that'd delivered the new flooring for the property began pulling away before me, the man giving me a little wave before leaving.

As the truck slowly made its way down the street, my heart stopped in my chest at the vision before me. My throat felt thick and constricted as a strange anxiousness flooded the entirety of my body.

There she was.

My Johanna.

Leaning against a strange-looking camper van with one foot kicked back, arms across her chest, her hair down around her beautiful face, her body covered in a tight black crop top with dark, distressed shorts that ride up the side of her perfectly toned and tattooed thighs, and bare feet beneath.

She's not wearing shoes.

I swallow, wondering if she came here to murder me for stealing her favorite pair of black High Top Converse. It's a real possibility, especially with the way she's currently marching up to me.

She stops before me, peering at her feet, then mine, then trailing her eyes all the way up my body until her eyes finally land on mine. She's scowling and my wide, terrified eyes leave little to the imagination about how I'm feeling. My heart is racing a mile a minute, my stomach in knots at the sight of her.

"I feel like running," she says simply, the tension in her face relaxing somewhat at her own admission.

I bite the corner of my lip, my eyes narrowing suspiciously as I slowly nod. "And you stopped by because you need your shoes?"

She just stares at me, her eyes wincing in the corners as her chest rises and falls.

"No," she says softly, shaking her head back and forth.

1 She's so close, yet so far from me. I want to grab her upper arms, needing to touch her, and pull her back into my body where I'm leaning against the hood of my car. But I don't. She would sigh into the fall, the sensation of her body pressed against mine again feeling like the kind of heaven you can only hope to find. But, I can't. I'd wrap my hands around her little exposed waist. Her eyes closed at the feeling of my hands on her skin. I'd love seeing what I do to her, feeling it without her ever needing to tell me. I know the look. But I don't.

7 We stand there, inches apart, both of our eyes studying one another, no sure of what to do.

“Remember when I told you that the next time I feel the need to leave...well, to come with me?” she asks softly, dragging her tongue over her plump little bottom lip.

7 “Yes, and I took it as a sexual innuendo.”

She smirks at me, breaking character, and butterflies give birth multiplying in my stomach. Flapping wings everywhere.

7 “Well, I feel the need to disappear again,” she says in a cracked tone looking back at the creepy van before turning her face back at me, her eyes glossing over. “But I need you with me.”

My lips part, and I still at her words.

2 “Come with me, Kai,” she begs softly, the sentence tearing through her. Tearing through me.

7 She wants me with her. She trusts me. She needs me. I feel my Adam's apple bob in my throat. Her eyes follow the roll before blinking wildly, biting her bottom lip with concern.

“Wherever you are, I am,” I whisper, my brows knitting together, like she should've always known that'd be my answer.



g She sighs, the tension in her shoulders becoming lax.

e “This is big for you,” I whisper, grabbing a couple of fingers that are playing loose in the hand next to her thigh.

y I pull her hand towards me, moving her slowly into me. Wrapping her arms around my waist, I grab her face in my hands, rubbing my thumbs over her rosy little cheeks. She closes her eyes at the touch, leaning into it. The feeling is better than I had imagined.

“Yeah,” she says breathlessly, the comfort of our contact never more present. “But it’s time.”

Her timid eyes gaze up at mine as our heads rest together. She’s shaking again. Her little body racked with the fear of her own past, the one that won’t let go of her, haunting her every move.

“I adore you, Johanna,” I whisper against her lips. “And I’ll still love you in your dark.”

, Her eyes close tightly at the pain of hearing my truth. I press my lips to hers, keeping my eyes open, watching her face change as I do it. The tension around her eyes loosens as my tongue sweeps against her bottom lip. She opens her mouth to me, whimpering ever so softly when our tongues touch. With my hands in her hair, I hold the back of her head as we continue our sweet assault on one another, reigniting that flame again, the one that can save us both.

I pull back from the kiss as her eyes slowly flutter open.

s “Is that the getaway van?” I ask, nodding towards the creepy thing that looks like it abducts children, maybe even adults, and sells them as sex slaves.

e A smile cracks across her face. “I promise you it’s way more dope inside.”

“That’s what she said,” I reply softly.

Her face breaks into a huge smile as laughter spills from her chest. The feeling I get in mine from the sound, like a bolt of lightning, electrifies my insides.

r “Well played,” she says proudly.

r “Alright, babygirl. Take me hostage,” I say, holding my wrists up between us. “I’m assuming I at least get candy and a kitten with my abduction,” continue teasing, keeping my face straight. “Am I right?”

e “Well, you might get some kitten,” she smirks as she walks backward towards the van, pulling my hand along with her as she does. My brows raise at her statement. “Actually, you’ll definitely get some kitten,” she says teasing my body from head to toe like a tasty treat she’s about to devour. “Lots and lots of kitten.”

1 I groan in delight, rolling my eyes to the back of my head. “Best kidnapping ever.”

o We make it to the van and she pauses. She turns back to me, and her smile drops. Opening her mouth to say something, she hesitates for a moment. The instant shift in energy, sending that flood of anxiety through my bones again.

. “I’m ready to break for you,” she whispers, still gripping my hand between hers. “But are you willing to crack for me?”

1 “Shatter,” I reply, pressing myself against her again, my hips pinning her to the van, my eyes cast down on hers as my hands hold her broken little face, making sure she knows the truth in the deepest part of her. “I’ll shatter myself into a million pieces just to meet your broken.”

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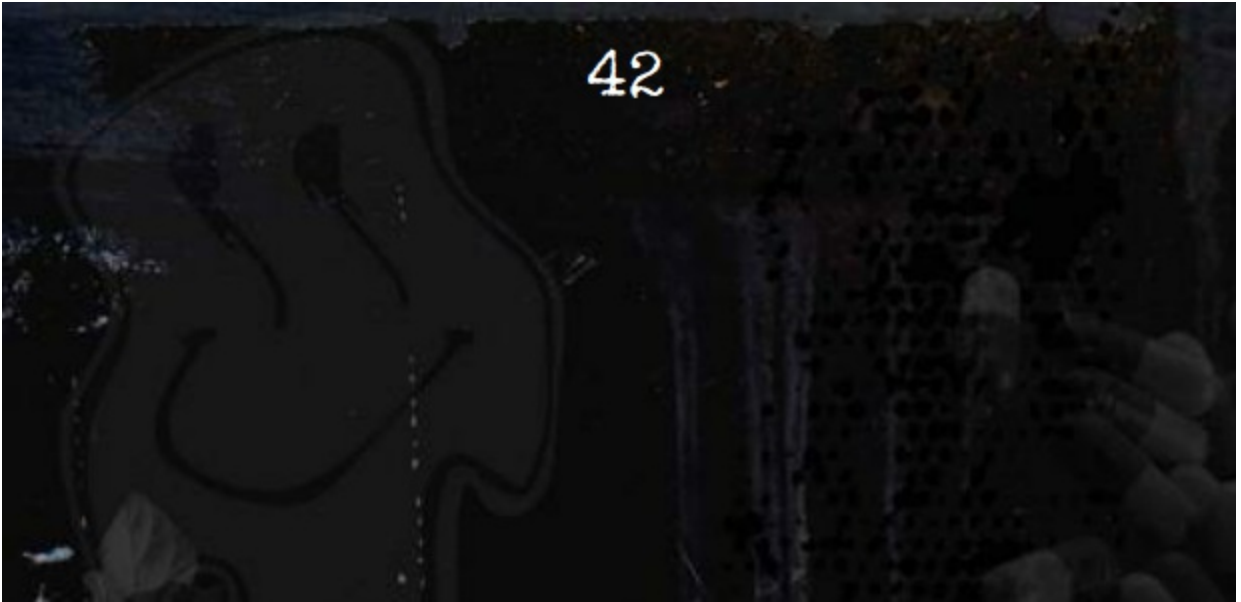
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“This van is ridiculously dope inside,” I say, looking into the back interior as she drives us away from Hawke’s place.

“I told you,” she flaunts, then smiles as she hits the highway. “I call her Myrtle.”

It’s a vintage 1975 brown Dodge B200 with a dull burnt orange and yellow stripe along the side. The rust forming on the edges of the door and exterior only adds to the rustic, creepy charm. The interior, however, had been redone with matt black painted over the wood paneling and an interesting large skull with dead roses coming out of the eyes and mouth etched on the wall between the windows.

The previous furry carpet was pulled and replaced with a light, pine-wood flooring. There’s a black mini-fridge behind the driver’s seat where a tiny kitchenette sits. A small futon couch sits in the back that I’m told folds out into a bed. Accents of dead and almost dead plants line the space, adding to the morbid look with odd perfection.

One thing I work towards looking past is the stack of white plastic barrels in the corner with a rolled up tarp inside. The shovel and rake hung up on the

ceiling doesn't really make me feel at home either. Is this premeditated murder?

"It's so...you," I say, smiling appreciatively as I touch one of the dried out crunchy roses hanging upside down from the rear-view mirror. "And I'm not even surprised you named her."

Her eyes watch my hand, and a tiny grin pulls at her lips. She knows I love her and her strange obsessions.

"Where have you been hiding this beast?!"

"It's always been parked at my apartment complex. You probably just didn't notice the beauty until it serviced you."

*I see what she's doing. Little smart ass.* She gives me a little sassy smirk as if my entire world didn't revolve around her from the moment I saw those green eyes in that dingy basement nightclub. Can't miss that kind of beauty no matter where she's parked.

"I'm not gonna lie. I was shocked to see you today," I say softly, looking over at her cautiously as I change the subject.

After she surprised me at the job site, I finally handed over her shoes seeing as that she wasn't running from me, but with me. She followed me and my car back to Hawke's so I could grab some essentials for our "weekend trip". Cole's face said it all. She stared at us with her mouth so agape that Hawke literally came by to push her jaw back into its normal position as we walked past her in the kitchen. Clearly Han and Cole don't discuss boys and sleepovers. Guess she thought we were done hanging out. So did I—until about a half hour ago.

Han glances over at me and immediately back to the road, her grip tightening on the fuzzy burnt orange steering wheel cover.

"I thought for sure you wouldn't trust me after this morning."

I really thought that'd be all it took for our story to end. With someone as fragile a heart as Han, you don't get second chances. Only breakups, and the risk of your new girl getting snatched up by her.

"Trust is more than what someone tells you, and while you're an occasional idiot who doesn't grab the right thoughts, you were right about one thing."

"That I'd make you a hot mom?" I ask immediately, my shit-eating grin plastered on my face.

She glares over at me. "No." Tilting her head to the side, she raises her eyebrows, almost reconsidering. "Well, yes, technically speaking, that would be true."

"Ha! I knew it!" I wrinkle my nose playfully at her. "Let's do it. Let me stick my kid up ya. I can't wait. I'll fill you with babies. I'll be a stay at home dad. Let my woman kill it in the real world and provide while I change diapers. Fuck yes, daddy duty. I'll be so good. I'd be the best."

"Kai," she says calmly. "Chill."

"Yes, ma'am." I clear my throat, sitting up straight in my seat, realizing I've voiced all my fucking thoughts again.

"No, you were right about something else," she says, getting us back on track. "That I know your heart."

Said heart feels like it's being squeezed internally by her fist breaking through my rib cage as I gaze at her.

"I do, Kai," she says softly, still staring out onto the highway through the windshield before her. "I know your heart like it's an old friend. A companion I've known before, in another life. And it's terrifying to me." She looks back over at me. "To feel known like that."

She's mentioned this to me before, and if I'm honest, I feel the same way



It's the kind of feeling you get when you connect with someone on an entirely new level where your being is exposed. It's a raw and powerful connection, one that doesn't happen with just anyone. A soulmate-type level.

I reach across the open space between us, feeling entirely too far away from her at the moment, even though we are only feet apart, and grab one of her hands from the steering wheel, lacing my fingers through hers. I pull the hand to my lips and kiss her knuckles, then drop it before she feels the trembling of my hand.

She smiles lightly, blushing at the romantic gesture that would otherwise be considered corny if not for the fact that it just feels so fucking good to both of us.

My legs begin to feel jittery, so I bounce my right knee to ward off the shakes. "I've never taken you out on a date," I say randomly, lighting up a cigarette to ward off the cravings.

Her face finds mine again before she sighs, looking all sad. "I'm such a whore."

Her words make my forehead wrinkle in confusion.

"I've let you cum in me. We haven't even been on a date. You've cum in me, and I'm a whore." She shrugs, like she's finally accepting her truth.

"Shut up, Han." I see a sign for a burger joint called Beefy Boys. "There go." "Go There."

She swerves the van abruptly, sending the side of my head smashing into the window and back.

"Oh shit," she laughs. "Sorry, Myrtle's gears are a little sticky."

"You're about to get my gear a little sticky after that shit," I say under my breath, rubbing my temple that's probably egging up at the moment.

"What?"

1 “Nothing, sweetheart. Nothing at all.”

l



y

f

2 “We’ll take two veggie burgers with the spicy avocado sauce, and a side o  
2 sweet potato fries,” I say, folding the greasy menus and handing them back  
over to the short, round woman who’s got her hand on her hip and a scow  
etched into her face.

3 Yes, I realize we are at a small town diner properly entitled Beefy Boy  
because of its beef and big, corn-fed truckers, but it’s on the menu. So sue  
me.

4 “Thanks”—I squint my eyes looking at her name tag, which is  
unfortunately on her very large breast—“Marg.”

5 She grabs the menus from my hands. “We’re out of sweet potato fries,” she  
snaps in a raspy, unapologetic tone.

“Um,” I say, looking at the distant menus under her arm, then back over a  
6 Han. “Normal fries alright?” I ask her.

She rolls her lips inward, biting down on them to stifle her laugh as she  
7 nods.

“Normal fries it is, Marg. Oh, and a chocolate almond milkshake for  
8 dessert.” I shoot her a quick wink, hoping to get some joy from our amazing  
roadside waitress. But sadly, my charms don’t work this far out of the city  
She grunts and makes a comment about fucking hippies before wobbling her  
9 way back towards the kitchen.

“I think you have some competition,” I smirk, reaching my hand across the  
table to my date.

“Is she prettier than your algebra teacher back in high school?” she asks her hands reaching over to meet mine in the middle.

“Hey, just because I’ve had plenty of flings with older women, doesn’t mean I don’t have standards. Marg, however, is a hidden gem. She likes to act all tough, but I know she’s the type to submit.”

“I’ve never been more jealous in all my life,” she says with a serious face. “But really? Veggie burgers? You eat meat.” She chuckles as I pull my twitching hands back away to wipe them down my face.

It’s true. I love meat. But Han is a vegan or veggie or some shit. I can tell by the strange assortment of products she keeps in her fridge. Tofu, some sort of edible moss, almond milk, the strange list goes on. As if almonds have nipples. I’d love to see an almond with nipples. Hilarious shit. So, I made the decision that I didn’t want to eat it in front of her.

“This date is about you,” I say, brushing her off. “But you’re a liar. I’ve seen you eat meat. I’ve seen you swallow it, too. Whole.”

I wiggle my eyebrows at her as she rolls her eyes and drops her head back against the plush cushion of the vintage booth we’re in.

“Tell me I’m lying.” I place my arms back along the seat, slouching down and dipping my head back, spreading my legs to get more comfortable.

Before she can respond, Marg reappears, smelling like fresh cigarettes with two large empty glasses and a plastic pitcher of ice water. She walks away without saying anything else.

“Thanks Marg, you’re a peach!” I holler at her turned back.

She throws up a hand, never turning around, and proceeds back to the kitchen as I pour up our waters.

“Our burgers are about to be nothing but ground up veggies and spit,” Han says, eyeing her departure.

, “I’m afraid you might be right.” I shift my weight, leaning forward again.  
“I’m sorry that this is our first date. You deserve far better than a roadside  
tburger joint.”

o I peer over her shoulder at the dirty windows of the diner and the rip in the  
plastic seat near her head, the smell of diesel and yesterday’s coffee filling  
.my nose.

y “Actually, I kind of love it.” She smiles, looking around at the empty  
booths. “It’s totally unexpected. Refreshingly so.”

l “Okay, so let’s do the first date stuff,” I say, changing the subject, folding  
tmy hands before me on the speckled table. “Where do you see yourself in  
efive years?”

e Her brows meet as her eyes narrow.

“Okay, next, what’s your greatest strength?”

e She tilts her head at the question.

“Alright, I’ll take the silence as a form of weakness. Next, how did you  
hear about the availability of this position?”

“This isn’t a job interview, Kai.”

1 “Alright last one, why should I hire you on as my new girlfriend?”

She dips her fingers in her newly filled water glass, then flicks them at me.

, “Hey!” I gasp. “You’re fired! Termination, effective immediately.”

s She flicks me again, and I let the water drip down my face. Marg stands  
silently behind me and I wonder how much of our conversation she heard.  
Delivering our meals at lightning speed, she glares at my dripping wet face  
efore peering over at Han, then back at me. Setting the plates down, she  
leans down over Han.

1 “Trust me, you don’t want the job.”

She pats her on the shoulder twice as Han laughs, eyeing me with

.amusement.

e “Real cute, Marg. We have great benefits over here! In case you’re wonder  
—”

e My sentence gets cut off by a fry being shoved into my mouth. Guess  
gthat’s my cue to shut-up.

We enjoy our veggie burgers and normal fries, and casual conversation  
ylike a normal couple might. Our laughter fills the empty diner as I tell stories  
of my past. I feel like my sunshine is spreading onto her, seeping into her  
gskin, finding the depth of her troubled heart. The warmth of me coating her  
rwith each smile she emits. Somehow, all of our worries and fears and regrets  
are left down the road. We’re in our own little world now, and as we both sip  
our chocolate almond milkshake together, I can only imagine what the rest of  
our time together might bring.

So far, it’s felt like free falling. But I know the time will come for the  
rweight of this trip to drop.

Tomorrow’s adventure is entirely unknown, but one thing is certain: her  
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“**Y**ou sure you don’t want to take it with us? We’ve got a fridge, you know.”

“Nah, baby, it’s fine.”

I finish paying Marg for our meal after only picking at it, leaving her a hefty tip because it’s Marg, and tipping your servers well is just a good thing to do. Fuck those people that leave a few dollars. These people are already working their ass off for a system that actively tries to screw them of any legitimate money, plus, they have families at home.

The food was actually amazing for a little hole-in-the-wall diner, but my appetite is all fucked. I’m having hot and cold flashes, I’m sweating, I’m shivering, every muscle in my body aches, and my head feels like there’s a fucking pole speared through it. I’m a mess.

I’m trying my best to keep it together and breathe through it, but if these side effects of withdrawal push me any further, I might need a tiny hit. Just to get through. At least for the next couple of nights. I can always start this again when I get back.

Fuck, no. I can do this. I can fucking handle it. Stupid fucking weak-as-brain.

The demon and angel talk amongst each other, watching my body bend and fold in their presence. Do the right thing. *What's the right thing?* You're pretending you can fix this yourself. *Why can't I?* You're weak, you're a loser. *I'm not that bad.* You have no purpose. *My purpose is standing right here.*

"Hey," she says softly, grabbing my hand and leaning me back against the van in the parking lot of Beefy Boys Diner. "What's going on with you? Are you alright?"

Her eyes are soft, her voice caring. She can tell I'm off. Of course she can. She can read me better than anyone.

"I'm just—"

"Jesus, Kai, you're burning up." She places the back of her hand on my forehead, running it down my temple and on the side of my cheek, her face full of worry. "Babe..."

"I'm alright. I'll be fine," I smile, grabbing her hips and pulling her into me.

"No, you're not alright. You're sweating, and your heart is racing. Kai, you're sick." Her hands cup my face and she gazes at me like a puppy that needs a home.

"I assure you, I'm feeling better." I kiss her forehead before running my hands on her shoulders beneath me, massaging them playfully. "Where to next, abductor?"

She cracks a smile. "One more stop before we park for the night," she says, gazing up at me. "If you're up to it, of course." Her face drops a little in concern. "We can just park, too. You can let me take care of you."

s    *That does sound amazing. But, no.*

      “No, no, no...I want you to take me where you’d go,” I reply immediately  
d“I want you to pretend I’m not even here. Show me what you do when you  
erun.”

a    She bites her bottom lip nervously before nodding and pulling away from  
tme. She grabs the door handle of the van, pulling it open. Turning back to  
me, she smirks.

e    “Gonna be hard to pretend you’re not here when my insides twist at the  
esight of you.”

      I hop into the passenger seat with a curious grin.

l.    “I do that to you?”

      I can’t even hold my smile back. God, I act like such a teenager around  
her. She likes me. Han really likes me. Duh, she loves me.

y    “You should see what you do to my pussy.”

e    My eyes bulge out of my head as all the blood in my body floods to my  
groin. Her devilish smile stretches across her face as she drives off.

o



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t

*Fuck, she looks good in those shorts.*

y    Han is bent over the bar, the bottom of her ass hanging out of the black  
o    distressed denim, talking to an older man with tattoos blanketing every  
visible part of him. The place is pretty empty, smells like piss and beer, but  
the music coming from the jukebox is bumping, and the neon lighting is  
visually appealing. This place is such a paradox of small-town bar mixed  
with gay rave. I can’t quite wrap my head around it.

She comes back to the table with two glasses, filled a quarter full with some brown liquid.

1 “On the house,” she nods, clicking a glass to mine before throwing it back.

Her throat rolls as the liquor slides down. And, I’m hard again. She holds the empty glass near her lips, using a finger to wipe the corner of her mouth.

2 “What?” She looks at me, confused.

I clear my throat, sitting up in the wooden chair, adjusting my pants beneath the table as I smirk. “Nothing at all.”

I down my whiskey as she straddles my lap. *Fuck me.*

“So you come to a small-town rave and straddle men with hard-ons? Running away must be fun for you,” I suck in a breath, feeling stupid for saying it. I’m insensitive as fuck.

But she doesn’t take offense. “Nah, I come here for the best drinks this side of San Fran.”

3 My brow cocks.

“Doug.” She points her thumb over her shoulder to the tattooed man with the red mohawk. He’s currently shaking up some drink in a mixer for two men leaning into one another at the counter. One of them has his hand in the back pocket of the other, grabbing his ass. “He’s my cousin.”

“Cousin?”

“Cousin, twice removed...maybe thrice, I don’t fucking know. We’re half-blood...somehow. His bar has always been one of my stops.”

4 I look back over at Doug behind the bar, with his wild hair and numerous facial piercings, as he leans over the counter, giving one of the guys a kiss on the mouth before leaning back and winking at him.

5 “Yep, definitely related.”

This guy seems more related to her than her own sister.

1 The small-town gay rave gets more crowded as the night continues, and bodies pack the place. I'm enjoying the environment, to be honest. The music is on point, and my guy Doug is chill as hell. Plus, he keeps supplying my girl with free drinks, making her a little tipsy, which is bringing out this relaxed, easygoing side to her.

She's dancing with a short bald man who looks to be in his mid-fifties on the small four-by-four foot dancefloor, the strobe lights illuminating them. Laughter falls from her lips as she attempts to teach him how to do the heel toe/happy feet. He can't pick up on it at all, but seems to enjoy her company nonetheless.

2 I watch her from my seat in the dark, smoking my cigarette off to the side. She keeps peering back over at me in the corner with the warmest smile, and it melts me. She's so free right now; carefree and happy. I love seeing her in this element, so natural and just so organically herself.

A new song comes on the jukebox. A heavy metal rock song I've never heard before, and Han screams out, throwing her arms to the ceiling at the same time as Doug. They point to each other and both start belting the words out. I watch comically as she pushes through the crowd on the dance floor towards the bar. He walks right to her like this is some sort of choreographed thing, his hand remaining outstretched for hers. He helps her on top of the bar, and she dances.

Han is dancing on the bar top, but not as you would expect a girl to dance on a bar. She's head banging and playing air guitar. She and Doug are both losing their shit to this song, and I'm living for it, my face breaking out into a grin as a laugh escapes me. They keep screaming lyrics in each other's face as she continues dancing.

Suddenly, the song breaks into a slow, sexy, electronic beat, and my mouth

ldrops open as time stalls around me. Han starts body rolling down, hand dragging from her neck down between her breasts until she reaches her exposed stomach. Her gorgeous frame shifts from side to side as her hips roll in a tantalizing seduction. She grabs one of the poles behind her, slithering down it like the sexy little vixen she is with her hand held above it, her crop atop lifting some so I can see the bottom of her breast dipping out beneath it.

In any other bar, I'd go fucking crazy. I'd march up there, peel her off the pole, throw her over my shoulder, leaving a handprint on her ass as I made my way out of the bar to fuck her until everyone nearby could hear her screams. But no one is even watching her. No one but me. These men are clearly into one another. There's freedom in that for her as she loses herself in the moment, feeling all the femininity that she has every right to own. *She's a fucking goddess, and she's mine.*

I swallow as the pressure in my pants intensifies, the strain against the dark denim, painful.

Her green eyes find mine in the distance as she pushes her ass against the spole, grinding slowly up the metal, her body rolling back against it. It's like she's my own private dancer. She touches herself, dancing sensually as her hands trail her delicious curves while she watches me. My head dips down into my chest and I glare up at her through dangerous eyes, my jaw tightening at the thoughts of all I plan to do to her. I couldn't look away if I tried. My knuckles are white as I aggressively twist the bar straw in my grasp.

She turns to face Doug and they point at each other, nodding as the music builds again. Before I know it, they are both head banging again. The song eventually fades out, and she jumps down off the bar, laughing into his embrace. She turns to find my eyes again, cocking her head while leaning back against the bar with a come hither look about her. If I wasn't already of

my face obsessed with this chick, that little get-my-dick-hard rock show  
would've done it for me.

l Standing, I make my way through the dancing crowd of people groping  
and grinding as the intense beats and flashing lights continue. I feel a hand  
grab my ass and I pause, tightening my fist at my side immediately. I turn to  
find a guy standing beneath me, wearing a spiked collar and false eyelashes  
biting his bottom lip as he winks.

e "I'm not the one," I scream out over the music. He sighs dramatically as  
continue pushing through the remaining crowd until I get to her.

e She's still smiling humorously at the sight of the little exchange before  
grab her by the back of the neck, bringing her directly into my lips. My  
tongue slips through her lips, exploring the inside of her mouth, and I feel her  
moan in surprise at the sudden kiss. She tastes like whiskey and honey, and  
knead more.

I reach around her, grabbing the edge of her ass that's hanging free from  
the shorts, groaning at the softness. Abruptly lifting her, she wraps her legs  
around me, my dick pressing firmly into her center. Our lips never part as  
continue to torture her tongue with my own, loving the feeling of the meta-  
stud of her tongue ring dragging along mine.

g She pulls the hair at the top of my head, meeting my needy kiss with her  
arm wrapped around the back of my neck. I hear Doug chuckling behind us  
as I walk her straight out of the bar, pushing through the doors with one hand  
until we're in the parking lot, reaching the van again.

g With her back against it and my hips holding her up, I grip the hair at the  
back of her head between my knuckles, pulling her apart from the kiss until  
she's facing me, both of our chests heaving between us.

f "It's time to go," I say firmly, slightly out of breath, staring into her dilated

veyes. “Just tell me where.”

She chews on her bottom lip, peering at my mouth, before blinking up at me. I can hear her thoughts as she imagines everything that I’m about to make a reality for her tonight.

Reaching into her back pocket with her free hand, she struggles to pull out the keys before finally holding them up between us.

“Take me.”

I “I’ll definitely be taking you.” I snatch the keys away from her, walking over to drop her little ass into the passenger seat. She squeals as she bounces in the seat, and I make my way around to the driver’s side. I hop in, starting up old Myrtle before throwing her in reverse. “I’ll be taking you on the hood, taking you on the seat, taking you on the bed in the back...”

I “Kai!” She laughs my name with her sexy cracked tone as I drive down the tree-lined back roads. “Left! Take me left!”

I veer onto the road she’s instructing me to turn onto, taking us into the darkness on new paths entirely unknown.

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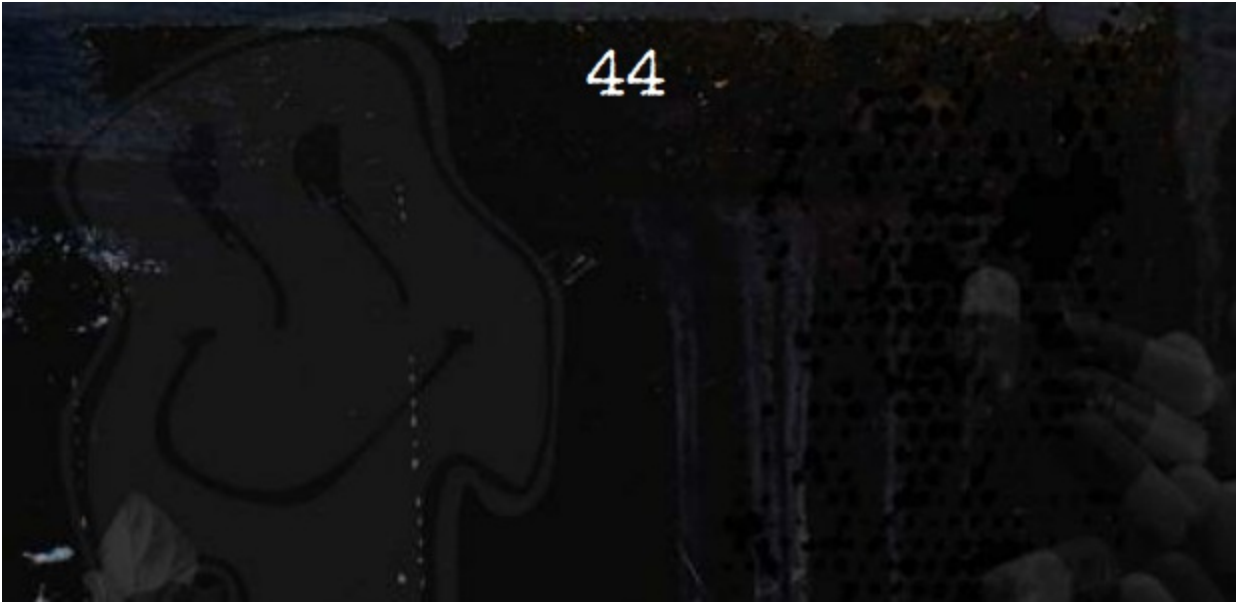
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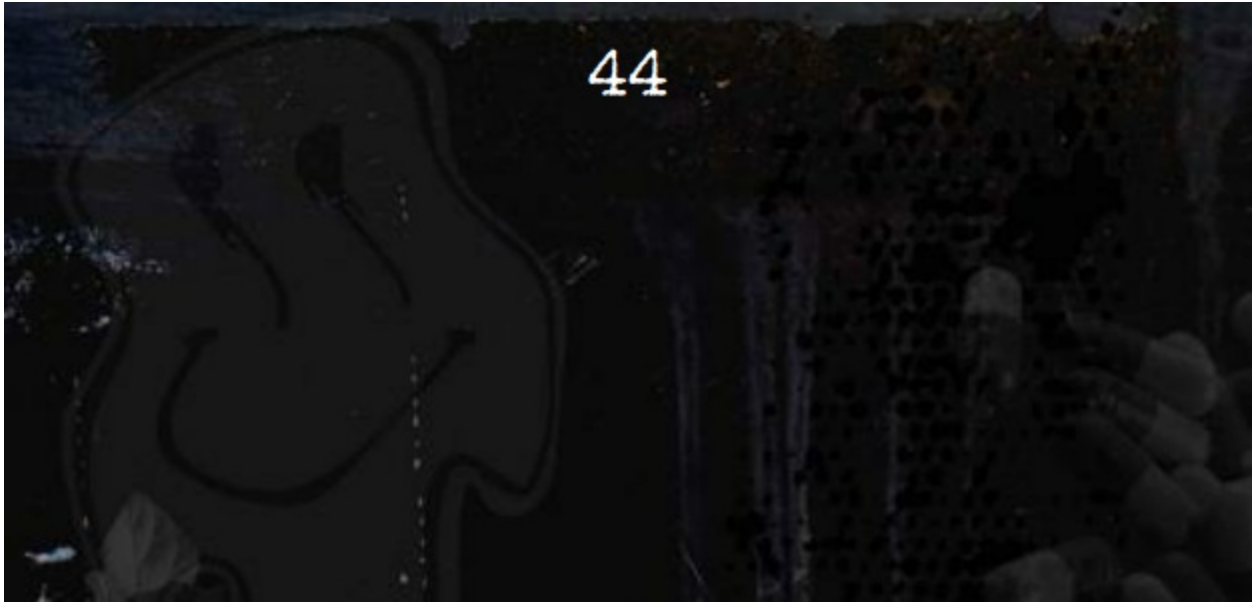
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**T**he instructions to the destination are wild.

It's hard to focus when you're laughing as hard as we've been.

Since getting in the van, we haven't kept a straight face. Her laugh as she teases me about the ass grab at the gay bar is lighting up any darkness I ever could have wished away, igniting me with something so much deeper than just lust for this woman.

I love seeing her smile. I love being the one to make her smile. I love that she does this thing when she laughs, where she cups her hand around her face, her thumb touching the side of her nose, trying to conceal the smile, but it breaks through regardless.

I love her quirks, the strange things that make her different that she probably hates about herself. It's all of those things that make me fall even harder than I ever thought possible.

We find the secret spot, driving through a wooded, secluded gravel road one that led us deep through the woods until it finally opened up into a clearing.

It's a campsite. An old campsite that has a picnic table, set with a firepit and logs ready to burn. But that's not what gets me. It's the open view of the ocean steps from me. It's the private sandy beach that appears to go on for miles. How she found this, I'll never know, but it's literally the perfect place to get away when you need to calm your busy mind. I see why it works for her.

Upon exiting the van, Han walks over to the sand. Without a second thought, she strips herself of her clothing; her crop top falling to the side of her as her hands work on the buttons of her shorts. She looks at me over her shoulder, giving a little smile, but not one that's overtly sexual by nature. No, it's more the look of a wild animal finally living in their environment, thriving and feeling every bit alive.

She walks naked into the water before diving under the surface. I follow her, stripping myself of my shirt, bouncing on one leg as I attempt to pull the tight jeans off of my ankle. She comes up out of the water, her eyes finding mine as she laughs in the distance at my embarrassing attempts to strip myself. Seriously clumsy and uncoordinated. I see her smirking at me as I finally walk in towards her.

Closing the space between us, I find her body beneath the water, her little head the only part of her above the surface of the dark waves. She bites the corner of her lower lip, her eyes focused solely on mine. Wrapping her thigh around my hips, her hands naturally slip around my neck. We silently smile at one another before my forehead rests down on hers.

Without warning, I plunge us both beneath the surface. Her scream captured by the water as I submerge both of us entirely. Pushing back through the surface, I wipe the water off my face with one hand, catching her expression. With her cheeks puffed, she spits a stream of water at my face.

treach out, dunking her again, before we're both laughing uncontrollably. She  
e fluffs my hair off my forehead before I shake it out like a mutt.

r "Jerk," she says with narrowed eyes.

e "Bitch," I reply with a smirk.

r She grabs a fist full of hair at the top of my head; her elbow resting on my  
shoulder as she hovers her lips centimeters away from mine. I tilt my chin  
lforward, trying to seal my lips to hers when she pulls back.

f "Say it again," she snarls, pulling my hair harder until my mouth drops  
open.

, My lip curves into a grin, the pain, causing my dick to swell. I love her  
; feisty ass. "Bitch."

The beautiful curve of her lip emulates mine as I press forward again  
vsealing us together. The softness mixed with the warmth of her mouth  
econtrasting with the cool water surrounding us, sends me into a blissful mix  
gof sensations. I line myself with her entrance, feeling only natural that we  
connect in every way possible. She arches her back, assisting me in finding  
lthe place we come together. Slipping inside her beneath the water, we both  
gasp a little. Her arms tighten around my neck and our foreheads rest  
together, our lips parted as the steady increase in our breaths mirror one  
eanother.

s "I didn't know how much I needed you," she whispers against my lips with  
her eyes cast downward at the water, moaning when I pull her shoulder  
down to meet my thrust. "Until you were here, in this space."

; I groan at the feeling of her warmth tightening around me. I think of her  
khere alone, and the thought literally drives me insane with this need to protect  
rher and her little heart.

I "I'm never letting you go," I whisper back, my eyes finally capturing her

timid ones, giving her all the promises she needs to know my truth. “Never.”



y

1 You’d think after a night of dancing, drinking, ocean sex, beach sex, van sex  
that you’d be exhausted and ready to spend the morning sleeping in, being  
slazy, and eating your weight in fast food.

But not Han.

r At the crack of dawn, I feel a rubber boot kicking my shoulder. My left eye  
barely squints open while the right remains sealed shut. I lift my head, seeing  
the rubber boot and follow it up to an exposed knee, to an exposed thigh, and  
further up to a girl with distressed jean shorts, an oversized, bleach-stained  
Nirvana t-shirt and hair, appropriately in messy pigtails.

e “Time to go,” she says simply, smacking me twice on the ass.

g “But I don’t wanna go to school, mom!” I groan into the pillow.

1 She straddles my lower back and starts massaging my shoulders and neck  
t I groan more, loving the pressure she’s applying in all the right places  
e Feeling my cock wake up before me, I roll beneath her until she’s now  
straddling my erection.

1 “Kai,” she says my name as a warning.

s I bite my bottom lip, nodding, letting her know it’s happening whether she  
tries to deny me or not, as I grab her hips, rubbing her up and down my  
r length. She gives me a little eye roll, smiling as she leans back to take off her  
t boots, giving in.

“No,” I say firmly, grabbing her arm. “The rubber boots stay.”

r “You gangster, you,” she says before I pull her lips to mine.



We hit the road, driving for about twenty minutes as she sips on the coffee she made us and I look around the van, wondering what in the hell we're about to do.

I tried to eat a granola bar she offered me for breakfast, but instead, I found myself sneaking off to go vomit in the woods. My body is killing me internally, screaming at me to fix it with a quick snort. My headache, begging for one last pill. And yet, I persist. I'm probably an idiot for it. I'm sure once I get back I'll start up again and this will have been for nothing.

I groan at the thought, making Han look over at me.

"Where are we going, and why so early? You know I'm practically a vampire, right? I glow in the early morning sun," I say, trying to save myself.

She rolls her eyes at me, then says, "You wanted to see what I do. Well, this is it."

Before I can ask another question, she slowly pulls the van over onto the side of the road, the tires crumbling through the gravel in the ditch. There's nothing around us. No one.

"Han," I say, wondering what she's doing.

She hops out of the driver's seat and makes her way to the double doors on the side of the van near me. She grabs the white barrels, pulling them apart before lining the interior with the large blue tarp.

*Jesus Christ, she's going to murder me. She murders weak, skinny tall boys with big cocks in the woods. This is what Han does.*



“Grab the bucket for me,” she instructs as she pulls down the shovel from the hanger on the ceiling.

I’m going to help my with own murder? *She’s ruthless.*

“You’re not really dressed right, but it’s alright. I didn’t explain well,” she says, eyeing my black joggers with the zippers everywhere, my new vintage Madonna t-shirt, and my crispy-clean chucks.

I was trying to look fly for my girl. *Guess this isn’t the right outfit to get murdered in?*

I hold my arms out, looking down at my outfit. “My bad. Thought you’d think I was sexy.”

She grins, cocking her hip as she leans against the shovel. “You are sexy.”

“Say it again.” I reply immediately.

“You’re so sexy, Kai!” she screams out, her voice echoing in the woods surrounding us. “Especially in Madonna.”

“Chill, girl, you’re starting to get clingy,” I retort with sass, causing her to roll her eyes at me.

She throws the oversized white bucket into my chest, making me grunt.

“Clingy and aggressive,” I groan.

“Why Madonna though?” She cocks her head, putting gardening gloves over her hands.

“I thought we established this.” I pinch the shirt by the shoulder, shaking it as I talk. “I have a thing for older women.”

Following her lead, I walk around the front of the van, my eyes darting all around me, ready to get shot in the back of the head or possibly eaten by a damn mountain lion out here. We walk a few more steps before I see it.

A dead possum lies on the right side of the road. Its head must’ve been run over because there seems to be an absence of a skull. The body is bloated

and flies and maggots are already festering.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I say beneath my breath.

I can’t even say I’m surprised by this realization. It makes almost too much sense to me, so much so, that I’m kind of disappointed in myself for not immediately knowing this is what we came out here to do. I’m slow as fuck without my addys.

“Hold the bucket please,” she says in a sweet tone as she drags her shovel along the grey asphalt, walking her skinny toned legs over to the roadkill. Scooping it up, she brings it over towards me. The dead animal is teetering back and forth on the shovel and I’m sure it’s going to fall on me and my freshly washed chucks.

“Fuck,” I say, twisting my face as I hold the bucket out for her to drop him into it. “This is nasty, Han.”

He lands with a thud, rocking the bucket in my grip as the flies disperse.

She places the shovel down against the road again, leaning on it with her palm on top of the handle. “One down, a few thousand to go.”

How do we spend our day? Why, picking up roadkill, of course. We drive the highways, slowing and stopping every time she sees something that looks pancaked to the surface of the asphalt beneath us.

“Aren’t there people who are actually paid to do this? Like, the government or some shit?” I ask, sighing as the vehicle slows again. I’m on the verge of vomiting, but this time from the smell of rotting carcass in a bin behind me. Whatever she thought she saw wasn’t dead, so she continues driving. “Plus, shouldn’t we just let nature take its course with these animals? Maggots gotta eat too.”

“First of all, they don’t do it for the reasons I do. They treat them like trash. Like their lives didn’t matter. Even though the only reason they die

was because we invaded their forests. It's our fault they died. None of this is natural."

1 "So...you collect roadkill, and...then what? Tell me you don't cook it and  
t give it to the homeless. They have enough problems. They don't need worms  
coming out of their asses to top it all off."

"No, Kai, I don't cook them and give them to the homeless," she replies in  
an annoyed tone. "The dead ones I give a proper burial."

. I tip my head to the side, pinching the bridge of my nose.

3 "Is this even legal? Where the hell are you burying this collection of dead  
animals?"

"On Larry's old farm."

1 *Larry? Why is that name familiar to me?*

"Naturally." I nod, stretching my lips into a tight line, not understanding at  
all.

r "Look, you don't have to understand it. And, truthfully, I don't give a fuck  
if you do," she snaps, suddenly angry. She sighs, swallowing down her  
emotion before calming herself down and saying, "This is just something we  
did together."

As soon as she says the words, I sigh and look over at her with sorrowful  
eyes. I know who 'we' is now. My heart cracks in half as her eyes gloss over.  
1 She's right, I don't need to understand it, I just need to be here. With her.  
1 I want to say something else, but her gaze is peeled on the road through the  
windshield.

? "Shit," she curses under her breath, swerving roughly until she meets the  
side of the road again, putting the vehicle in park.

e She races out of the van, leaving her door open and the van still running.  
I quickly follow, wondering what it is she sees, until I come up beside her

staring down at the tragic scene.

A squirrel lies in the middle of the road. His back must be broken because he's just dragging his hind legs that are dangling behind him. The feet and legs appear to be crushed, and he's struggling to use his front end to walk off of the black, scalding pavement. His eyes are darting wildly and he's panicking even more at the sight of Han approaching.

"Aw, fuck," I say, running my hands through my hair, feeling awful for the little guy.

There's not a chance in hell he's going to survive. By the look of the blood coming from his bottom, it seems the internal damage must be severe, on top of the probable nerve damage to his back.

"It's alright little guy," she says softly, pouring a little water from her water bottle out on the pavement near him.

He leans down, diving right into the cool water, drinking it up abruptly.

"Aw, he's drinking!" I say excitedly. "He likes—"

BANG!

My mouth drops open as my eyes bulge from my face. Before he could realize what even hit him, Han brought the shovel down on him hard. Ending his life in one quick swing. Fucking. Brutal.

I stand there, my mouth gaping at the now dead squirrel, then back up at Han, who's resting on the end of the shovel again, staring off into the distance. We sit like that in silence for a moment that feels like an eternity.

From the angle I'm set behind her, I see the corner of her jaw tighten as her chest slowly regulates.

"Helping someone cross over when they can't help themselves could be considered the greatest form of compassion." She turns to face me, an image

;

of the soulless girl of her past appearing before me. “But it still kills a piece of the living to do it.”

I She turns her head again and continues staring down the long, winding road before nodding to herself and scraping the squirrel off the pavement with the shovel, walking back towards the van.

I stand still, following her with my eyes as she puts him into the bucket and hops back into the van. I stare at her silhouette through the windshield as she starts it up.

I I won’t even pretend I didn’t feel every part of that sentence in the deepest part of my bones. I haven’t even taken in a breath of air since the words passed her lips. The chill forces the hairs at the back of my neck to stand up as a river of emotions flooding through me as I’m hit with the significant weight of her reality. It’s heavy. Like the weight of a thousand worlds.

The most alarming part is knowing her statement wasn’t about animals at all.

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45







Silence can be so deafening.  
Han's especially.

Her silence isn't just a quiet ride through the woods, enjoying the serene beauty around you while basking in the smells of roadkill behind you. No, her silence is the kind that eats you alive, tearing through you second by second, knowing that the secrets she holds are growing larger with each house you pass, more momentous with each turn, more significant with every rock of gravel that crumbles beneath this van.

We've finally picked up her internal quota of roadkill as she turns onto another gravel road, only marked by a tiny green sign with a few numbers on it. The trees disperse themselves as a small house and farm comes into view.

Her words are soft when she finally speaks. "It's just over here."

I can't gauge how she's feeling at the moment. Is she nervous that she let out too much after the squirrel incident? Is she pulling away, feeling the need to retreat into herself again? Is she sad, possibly thinking of the loss of her mother again?

The phrase she spoke still sits heavy with me, and I wish I knew what was going on in that head of hers.

She finally parks the van behind a decent sized shed near an open field. It's beautiful out here, peaceful and serene.

"What's in the shed?" I ask, walking up to the double doors. "Bodies of boyfriends and girlfriends past?"

Ill-timed joke, but fuck it...the weird silence is killing me.

"If only they were so lucky." She smirks, walking towards me.

I swallow when she reaches me, her body closing the distance. Her chest presses against mine as I gaze down at her playful eyes. So funny how she can switch up like this as if the moment before was nothing. The death at her hands, forgotten like the flip of a switch. Defense mechanism?

All it does is remind me of the first Han I met at the club. Playful, flirty, cheeky, completely putting on a front from the real girl who enjoys the infliction of pain to remind her she's alive.

She wraps her arms around my waist, leaning her chin against my chest as she smirks up at me, and I can't help but smile back at her. She's so fucking sexy, and crazy, and chaotic, and nothing about her is simple. There within lies the attraction for me. I can't get enough of something I don't quite understand.

As soon as I'm thinking she's going to clasp her hands behind my back and hold me to her, I hear the click of a door open behind me. Her brow raises before she says, "I keep them alive to torture them slowly."

I'm trying to remember to breathe when she laughs her little cracked, sexy laugh.

"Kai." She sighs, shaking her head. "I sometimes wonder about you. You're kinda gullible."

s “Pshh, am not.”

That’s all I got in return. I am a dumb blonde, as they say.

s She looks at me for a moment with a glimmer in her eye, an appreciative look. She definitely loves me for all my flaws.

f “Come on, take a look.”

I turn and see the doors to the shed are open behind me. I duck in and take a step inside as the smell of dust, old wood, and something I’m unfamiliar with, some chemical, perhaps, hits my nose. There, inside the shed, is a small workshop. But not a wood carving workshop where Geppetto comes to fix up his son. No, it’s a taxidermy workshop.

r Various animals hang from the small interior; raccoons, ducks, fish, deer heads, you name it. I walk closer toward a desk against the wall, seeing the collection of tools used for the process. It’s creepy as fuck, I’m not even gonna lie.

There is what looks to be the skin of a rat peeled off and hanging on a small wire rack and a stand beneath it, prepped and ready to go. But a heavy layer of dust and cobwebs cover the desk and tools. A clear sign that no one’s been working here for some time.

e “Who’s shop is this?” I ask, picking up the skull of a small creature and rolling it between my fingers with my face twisted in disgust.

< “Larry’s,” she says with a sigh. “He hasn’t been able to work in...well, he hasn’t worked since his illness progressed. But they still let me come out here and do what I do.” She points her thumb towards the dirt pile behind the shed. The burial grounds.

“Wait,” I say, looking at the collection of mallards hanging against the opposing wall. “Norbert.” My brows knit together and I scratch the top of my head. “This is where your band came from?”

“Yeah.” Her eyes drop to the floor and her lips twist to the side, her expression emotional. “Larry understood me.”

There’s a brief pause in conversation as she peers at the animals, her little fingers touching the tail feathers of a stuffed pheasant. My gaze is stuck on her as she chews on her bottom lip. My beautifully broken queen.

“Anyway, let’s go bury these guys.”

With that, she turns and walks out of the shed, back to the van. Conversation off limits. Emotions gone.

I’m piecing it all together as we dig a large hole in silence. Han, obsessed with death, saving those that can be saved, and ending pain for those who need it. Keeping trophies of her failed attempts by having her buddy Larry stuff and dress them in ornate clothing to deal with the pain of her past.

It frustrates me, though. I thought I’d be the one to understand her more after this trip, but the only thing I’m beginning to understand is that she’s coping in all the wrong ways.

I finish shoveling the dirt onto the pile of smashed, twisted, and mangled animals, dropping the shovel just in time to bend over and vomit in the grass to my left.

“Aww, fuck babe,” Han says, running over to me and rubbing my back. “I didn’t realize you had a weak stomach. I’m sorry, I should’ve done this myself.”

If only she knew the real reason for my vomiting.

“Nah.” I spit, wiping my mouth with a shaking hand. “I’ll be alright.”

My face and neck are burning up. I feel like I’m on fire, and the only way to put me out is to douse myself in the substances I crave. My body hates me at the moment. I want that fucking hit.

“Kai, are you...are you getting sick? I think you’re sick. You were burning

rup yesterday and now this. Maybe you should sit down.”

“I’m fine,” I say, getting a little irritated.

e I’ll blame the killer headache I’m battling. Trying to act normal when  
feeling anything but is getting exhausting. That and the fact that she cares for  
me more than herself.

“No, you’re not fine, Kai. You’re sick,” she grabs my hand. “God, you’re  
shaking.”

Her concern is taking over her. She pulls me back over to the van  
drummaging through the back as I rinse my mouth with the mouthwash  
brought. Grabbing me a bottle of water, she sits me down on the bed. She  
ywets a hand towel with the water bottle before placing it on my forehead.

“I’m alright, Han, really...just...”

e “No, you’re not,” she says firmly, brushing away my attempts to remove  
the towel.

I’m irritated, agitated, hot, angry, achy, frustrated with her inability to open  
up to me. Wasn’t that what this trip was supposed to be about? The more  
I think about it, the more annoyed I become.

“You’re not alright, Kai, let me take care of you,” she says again.

I “*You’re* not alright!” I yell at her.

s Her hands drop to her sides, and her face goes blank. She stares at me in  
confusion.

“You’re not fucking alright!” I say again.

*I’m spiraling.*

y “This,”—I wave my hands in the air—“what we’re doing? Is not alright!”

e *Losing my shit.*

“This is crazy, Han! What you’re doing is crazy!” I sit up on the edge of  
the bed, tossing the towel in the corner as she backs away from me. “And

want to know why. Why you feel this immense weight on your shoulders' But you don't do that, do you? You don't open up about your past. Just bury it along with all these fucking animals, deep in the dirt, beneath the sun wherever your past can stay in the past."

Her face sets into a deep scowl.

e "Until it doesn't. Because that shit haunts you every waking moment doesn't it?" I ask, staring straight back at her. "You live with this...this weight, even if you don't want it. It's there. It's your fucking shadow, Han. It goes with you everywhere."

e Her stare turns to ice. Her eyes shooting daggers through me. I should've rethought this before visiting the death farm where it's all too easy to castrate and stuff my limp body, hanging me among the rest of the flock. Big Bird in all his glory.

I take a breath and try to calm myself. "I want to know you, Han. Every fucking part of you. Including the shit you deem unlovable. Because I want to love all of you. But you won't allow it, will you?"

"All of me," she calmly repeats. Way too calmly. She laughs through her nose, licking the backs of her teeth while staring at me.

"All of you," I repeat. "Even the parts of you, you don't love, Han. The parts you like to pretend don't exist. But they're always there. I just want the opportunity to love those parts, too."

The pain set internally slips through her parted lips in an exacerbated sigh. Her eyes suddenly dart to the floor as she struggles to breathe. She starts slowly backing away from me, her hands raised as she shakes her head before her voice barely comes out.

f "I should've never brought you."

I She jumps out of the van, grabbing her canvas bag and slinging it over her

shoulders as she walks with a purpose down the dirt path towards the tiny house on the property, her hands pulling at the roots of her hair.

, I sigh, running my hands through my hair at her departure. I'm frustrated sick, feeling helpless, and wanting nothing more than to hold the person in pain who wants nothing to do with me.

; I just want this cloud to part. I want the other shoe to drop. I want to know what's eating her from the inside out. I want to be here for her like no one else can. Understand her in ways no one else will.

After I sit for a few minutes with my thoughts, I grab my overnight bag, close up the van, and head toward the little house, the place I'm assuming we're cleaning up in.

1 I push through the wooden door, calling out her name so she knows it's me. She doesn't answer, but I hear the faint sound of water running in the distance.

2 The house, more the size of a cabin, is nice. It's older, with vintage chairs and a plaid couch, old woven rugs on the floor over the oak floorboards that look like they've seen an army on them in their day. There's an interesting smell of mothballs and lemon that fills my nose.

3 Old, faded pictures in ornate frames line the walls and there's a fireplace on the main wall of the living room that's covered in what looks like old river stone. It's clear at some point this was someone's home, but at the moment the darkness filling the space screams of days without life under this roof.

4 I set my bag down and walk toward the sound of the shower. Knocking on the door a few times, I push on it and hear the lock click open. Not wasting any time, I step inside. It's a small bathroom, one with only enough room for a single person shower.

5 "Han," I say, leaning my temple against the doorframe, not knowing what

else to say.

“Kai, just leave me alone, please!” she calls out desperately.

The desperation in her voice tells me she’s on the edge of breaking. Not a chance in hell I’m leaving now. I sigh and walk forward.

Once in the bathroom, I see the remnants of coke on the counter. I tighten my jaw as my salivary glands literally start releasing at the sight. Suddenly it’s all I can focus on. I can’t look away. I want to lick the counter clean, rub it all over my gums with my tongue, and finally breathe a sigh of relief at the comfort that would instantly surround me. I scratch my neck before cracking my fist to the side with my knuckles, remembering why I’m in here.

“Han, I’m sorry,” I whisper.

“Kai, get out!” she shrieks.

“Han, c’mon. I’m sorry.” I repeat, pulling the plaid shower curtain to the side. “I shouldn’t have—”

My stomach drops at the sight of blood, making me instantly panic.

“What the fuck are you doing?!”

She’s lying on the bottom of the shower in only her underwear and t-shirt with a blade in one hand and large cuts on her inner thigh near her artery. The blood oozes down her leg, swirling into the shower drain, mixing and blending with the water as it disappears.

Her eyes widen in fear when she sees me.

“Leave!” she screams.

I grab the knife from her grasp immediately, throwing it into the corner of the bathroom and lift her up under her legs. Picking her up and out of the shower, I walk her over to the counter, where I set her down. Scouring the cabinets like a madman, I drop random things across the linoleum floor until



I find the towels. Placing some over her fresh wounds, I force her to hold her head steady under the pressure as I grab her face between my hands, shocking her.

a “What the fuck were you doing?! You trying to kill yourself?!” I growl, feeling my nostrils flare.

1 *She can’t do this. I can’t...*

; “No,” she cries, “I was just...”

o “What?!” I shake her face roughly in my hands, angry at the idea that she might actually take her life from me. “What the fuck were you doing?!”

g “Stop, Kai,” she cries, wincing her eyes from the pain of my hands.

I feel my jaw tighten, my vision getting blurred by the tears just begging to fall. My voice cracks as I scream at her, “Why, Han?! Why?!”

I shake her head again, splaying her hair across her eyes.

e “You’re hurting me,” she cries.

“Why are you doing this?!”

A sob escapes her, and I’m even more angry now. I grip onto her arms and push her against the glass of the mirror behind her.

; “Don’t hurt yourself like that!” I yell, my fingers pressing firmly into the skin of her upper arms as I slam her back into the mirror again. “Don’t do it! Han! Don’t you fucking do it!”

I’m freaking out internally. I can’t lose her to herself. I love her way too much. The immediate thought, sending me into a crazed rage.

“Kai, please,” she cries, sealing her eyes tightly from my hold on her.

f “I can’t lose you to this! Wake the fuck up! Wake up!”

e “I-I was just numbing the pain,” she chokes out, sniffing. “Nothing else works anymore.”

l She blinks up at me, her eyes watering, looking more broken than I’ve ever seen her. My chest is heaving as the anger that’s coursing through me slowly

lsimmers and settles. My heart aches in a strange new place. I'm terrified for her. Memories flood my mind of her dead against a concrete floor in my dreams.

I want to shake this out of her. Wake her up to the reality before her. That I'm here now. I can take this load. That she doesn't need to suffer in silence anymore. But she won't let me help.

e We stare at one another before I pull her into my chest, wrapping my arm tightly around her. She grips my shirt, clutching onto me like her future literally depends on it.

o Crying into my chest, I hold her as she releases it all. All her secrets spilling onto my shirt in the form of tears. I hold her there until she calms, my hand along the back of her head, my breaths calming along with hers as gently stroke her hair.

"You're right," she says, her little voice breaking. "It never leaves. It's never left me."

I reach down, pulling back to see her face. She looks up at me, defeated and lost in her demons. They've pulled her down into their depths, taking the air from her lungs, the hope from her eyes, the tough exterior holding her together fading into nothing in their presence. She silently lives with her secret.

I pull her wet head against mine, my fingers threading through her hair kissing her forehead roughly as tears roll down my cheeks.

"I'm sorry," I say instinctively, my jaw shaking against her skin. "I'm so sorry."

I don't even know what I'm sorry for. I'm not sorry I walked in on this or I'm not sorry I stopped her. I'm not even sorry I got rough with her. I just want her to wake up from all of this, and finally let me in before the torment

rof it all becomes so unbearable that drugs and cutting won't be enough to  
ynumb the pain. Before I lose her to the fight.

Maybe...maybe I'm just sorry because I've realized how strong she's had  
to be on her own until now.

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of it all becomes so unbearable that drugs and cutting won't be enough to numb the pain. Before I lose her to the fight.

Maybe...maybe I'm just sorry because I've realized how strong she's had to be on her own until now.







The fact that her cheek against my chest can bring down her heart rate, my arms wrapped around her trembling frame can calm her thoughts and my thumb rubbing the back of her hand can cause the firm grip on my shirt to relax, gives me hope.

The idea that me, a stupid nobody who's sole purpose for coming out to Cali was to hook up with chicks, make more money dealing, and fuck off while I had a buddy like Hawke to take care of me, can find so much more than all of that other bullshit, is mind-blowing. None of that superficial shi compares to what I've stumbled upon.

The sun is slipping down through the tiny, dusted-covered window in the bathroom and it's clear by the rings beneath her eyes, the redness to the whites of them—she needs her rest. She's emotionally drained, needing time to just breathe and process. No more pushing from me, not tonight. She's already broken. Now I let her decide where to start mending the breaks.

After finding some bandages, I cautiously clean the area, pausing each time she sucks in a quick breath. Carefully drying the surface, I wrap the wounds. She watches me as I work, biting down on her bottom lip as I do

Her large doe-eyes, filled with embarrassment, find mine, speaking endless sentiments. *Thank you for helping me. Thank you for understanding and not blaming. Thank you for showing empathy. Thank you for staying when it's hard to want to.*

I finish the wrap, then stand up between her legs, dragging my hand slowly up her neck until her cheeks are in my palms. I lean down, kissing her sweet, wet lips, tasting the salt from her tears. She clutches the bottom of my shirt near my hips, drawing me further into her.

I stand there, our heads resting together while our thoughts race on alternative tracks. I want to care for her like she cares for me. I want to open her up, piece every part of that puzzle together, and figure out what makes her who she is. But more than anything, I want her to find comfort in knowing I'm not going anywhere.

"I love you." I kiss the tip of her nose. "I'm here." I kiss her cheek. "I'll follow you anywhere." I kiss her forehead.

Giving her every type of confirmation she may need, I seal it with my lips on hers.



I wake up alone, and it's not unexpected.

I assumed as much. That she'd be struggling throughout this little trip of ours. She's never invited anyone to see this side of her. Never let anyone in like I've been allowed. It's only natural for her to need her space to breathe especially after the flood of emotions that nearly drowned her last night.



s Stretching, I rub my eyes and stand off the back of the van through the  
topened doors that expose the futon bed to the beautiful scene outside.

s I couldn't see where we ended up last night. Han drove until the sun set  
after we cleaned up and changed, even though I insisted I be the one to drive.  
sBut she said she needed to keep herself busy, and that just sitting beside me  
would allow her mind to wander. I understood more than I wished. My mind  
ykeeps finding ways to justify this eight ball in my bag before I actively snuff  
the ideas out.

1 After turning down the sub sandwiches we had in the back, I practically  
1swallowed mine whole while she found the next stop. We finally parked  
scrawling into the back of the van to pass out for the night. She rolled up onto  
her side, tucking her face into the blankets. I instantly crawled beside her  
wrapping an arm along her abdomen and pulling her back into me. My heart  
warms at the memory of her threading her fingers through mine, holding my  
arm against her like the safety of me was keeping her together.

s We drifted off together, her body practically tucked beneath the size of  
mine like the little spoon she was meant to be, and every part of me  
protecting her with my hold. Leaving the words at the cabin, we held each  
other, needing only us and this moment of peace.

And now, here I stand, the ocean raging beneath me with birds actively  
scouring the rock below for some breakfast fallen upon them, alone with my  
thoughts. The smell of the salt water and wet sand fills my nose, the rays of  
the sun hitting my face like a warm blanket.

1 It would feel nice to anyone else, but to me, a new cold-turkey drug  
addict? I simply feel like the trash that was left out to rot in the sweltering  
heat. But we must be making some progress because my headache seems to  
have regressed.

e I make my way around the far side of the van, taking a leak before losing the contents of my stomach into the dried grass nearby. Spitting and wiping my mouth with shaking hands, a new normal for me, I stand with my arms draped over my head, turning back around to look for her on the random hillside lookout point we seem to have perched on.

d I find the familiar outline that sends my pulse racing in the distance. She's sitting on the edge of a jagged rock near the drop off, staring off into the ocean, her lips parted as her focus remains. Her gaze is locked upon one spot deeply set, where the ocean connects to the heavens. Where reality meets the unknown. A simple line that's not so simple at all.

o She hasn't blinked in the few seconds I've been watching her, and I scratch my head. Where is she right now?

t Is she back in that bathroom with her mother, clutching onto her after she ypassed? Is she with him, fighting through the pain of their traumatizing breakup after throwing everything into the wrong person? Is she with me feeling the awakened pain of our twisted love in the cut of a palm, the carving of belonging, the firm grip of hands claiming?

1 I study her from a distance, giving her the space she so clearly needs as grab a bottle of water and my toothpaste from my bag. Brushing my teeth o ythe vomit, and drowning my heated face with the cool, crisp water, I chug the yrest of the bottle before tossing it back into the van. Finding my own jagged rock to perch, I kick up my heels, resting my elbows on my knees as absentmindedly grab a stick next to me and begin breaking it off in small pieces between my legs. I count them as they fall.

g *One, two, three, four, five.*

o Anything to keep my hands busy.

I turn my head back towards her, watching until she finally blinks, a shiny

g  
tear falling down her face. Then another one. Her lips remain parted as if the  
g  
thought of breathing isn't something that comes naturally anymore, as if it's  
s  
as hard as clawing and grasping at the invisible air around her, expelling it  
n  
with the force of a thousand hands.

There's such a weight, such a deep-rooted pain to her that never lets up. I  
s  
chases after her like a shadow of affliction. It's why she lives in the darkness  
e  
of her own clouds. The thought of my light casting that shape of fear behind  
;her, yet again, haunts her endlessly.

e But she tries. Boy, does she try to fight it. She's fighting right now. At this  
moment, she's fighting it as she turns her head to connect eyes with me  
n  
She's fighting it as I get up from the position I'm sitting and begin closing the  
ever impending distance between us. She's fighting it as I wipe her tears with  
e  
my thumbs, bringing her back into the comfort of my heartbeat. Fighting it as  
g  
she shakes against me when the emotions become too much. Fighting it until  
;she doesn't need to fight it anymore.

e She lets go in my arms again, sobbing and clutching my shirt in her grasp  
with white knuckles, until finally succumbing, and melting into me. I pick her  
l  
up, my arms beneath her legs, holding her to my chest as I make the wall  
f  
back to the van.

e I sit on the edge of the bed, exposed to our new view, my legs hanging off  
d  
of the end as she straddles my lap. I hold her against my chest, her body  
I  
wrapped around mine, thighs around my hips like the night I cared for her  
l  
when she begged me to never let her go.

Running my hand along the back of her head, I hold her neck, her chin  
resting on my shoulder. We sit for a while until her breathing calms.

"I've got you now," I say aloud, feeling the vibrations of the words into  
y  
her own chest. "You don't have to carry it alone anymore."

e She sits back in my lap, wiping her eyes with the edges of the oversized black sweatshirt that's almost drowning her tiny little frame. Reaching into the front pocket, she pulls out a tiny vial with an all too familiar white substance that literally makes my mouth water.

t God, one hit and this aching pain in my muscles would go away. One hit and I'd be able to think clearly again. Maybe I'd be more of a help to her if my mind was clear? Maybe I need to do this for her?

“No,” I say, snatching it away from her hands immediately.

s I'm not even saying it necessarily to just her at the moment. I'm telling myself. Screaming demons, those continuous thoughts that want me to slip up just because it's easy.

1 She tries to grab for the vial when I bend my arm, holding it further away from behind my back. Her face twists as she stares back and forth between my eyes. I hold her chin in my other hand and simply shake my head “no” at her broken face.

2 Her eyes drop to my lap again, but I force her gaze back up to mine with a nudge.

k “If we do this, you give me all of it. All the pain. Nothing dumbed-down by drugs.”

f Han blinks slowly, as if she's holding back the dam of tears that are on the verge of breaking free again. Her fingers twist the sleeves of her sweatshirt, before she sighs and nods her head, reluctantly agreeing with me. Needing some space, she hops off my lap, sitting down next to me on the edge of the van to face that horizon line again, almost needing it to ground her.

“I sometimes think I might never be okay,” she admits softly, combing her hand up into her hair, holding onto the roots as if it minimizes the pain in her head.

l I prop my heels on the bumper beneath the bed, resting my elbows on my knees again while I twist the tassel of a blanket between my fingers, both of us now mindlessly fidgeting while I stare off into the distance along with her just being here. I'm the wall collecting the graffiti of her past right now absorbing it all as she releases her endless torture through soft, unspoken words.

"That maybe, this isn't something I'm ever going to get over. That I just have to find my ways to live with the immeasurable weight."

y I pick up her right hand, placing it in mine to thread my fingers through hers. We still stay facing the ocean, but I need her to know I'm here. That I know exactly where she is so she can transfer the heaviness onto me.

y There's a stretch of silence, and she's in that bathroom again, the memory of her only vision. Her spine stiffens before she talks.

r "I'd never seen anyone love like her," she begins, eyes narrowed as she talks into the distance. "She loved so hard. So much. She was unrelenting in her admiration. Obsessed even, but it was who she was. A hopeless romantic."

l I squeeze her hand gently at the pause.

"High school sweethearts. They were always whole until he broke the heart, dividing the pieces unfairly."

t I place my arm on my knee, propping my head as I turn to face her, totally invested.

e "She found condoms in his suitcase, saw the messages on his cellphone even intercepted a call once. But it was too late. He was already emotionally gone, and being emotionally gone from a person who was left feeling emptier than empty was the beginning of the end. She was stagnant in a place that was void of the love she needed to survive. The love of her life left her and

yshe couldn't cope. She didn't know how to live without him. She didn't want to.

; I wince my eyes, squeezing her hand gently and rubbing my thumb over hers.

1 "I stopped her multiple times." She sighs, trying to breathe through the memory. "I caught her with a knife to her wrists, stuck fingers in her throat forcing her to vomit up pills time and time again after finding her semi unconscious with a bottle next to her on the bed. I even hid my grandfather's old revolver for fear she'd find it."

I "Jesus," I breathe, shaking my head, feeling the agony in her admission.

"I knew it wasn't anything Nic needed to be around or witness. Luckily yshe'd already moved out. I wanted to protect her from the ugliness of my mother's depression, but it became too much for me to handle. My father thought everything was for show, and didn't take her seriously when she'd called saying she'd do it if he didn't come back to her."

s "Johanna," I whisper, pain lacing my tone.

"She had no idea I was watching her through the door of her room when she sat in front of that mirror, hair done up, makeup set, pearls in place. She looked beautiful. There she sat, staring at her reflection for what felt like forever, until she took her hands and dug her nails into her flesh. From the ybottom of her chin to the edge of her collarbones. Claw marks. To save her youngest daughter from the truth."

; I sit up suddenly, vaguely remembering Hawke telling me about the yattempts to "free" herself from being caught on the towel hangers.

r "I should've stopped her, Kai. I should've stopped her. Like every other time before." She hops off the edge of the bed, her bare feet hitting the gravel, the pain of the rocks unknown to her as her fingers weave into her

thair, pacing. “But, I couldn’t. I couldn’t get myself to move. I didn’t stop her because it was what she wanted more than anything.” She turns to face me.  
r “More than me.”

The statement causes me to wince in pain. I feel her confliction like a boulder to my chest. I stand off the edge of the van, grabbing her arms, stilling her incessant movements.

- “I watched her kill herself,” she cries, turning into me and breaking down while her eyes remain locked on that line. “I allowed her to take her last breath, knowing it’s what she wanted. What she begged for. I watched as she finally succeeded in gaining that last bit of attention she needed from him, knowing her actions would change him forever. Ending her pain the way she wanted to, I watched her die for love.”

r Her lips part as the inability to breathe takes over. Her lashes flutter, and she stumbles slightly. I wrap my arms around her waist, one behind her neck to cradle her depleting form.

“I hate that I understand it!” She cries, throwing a fist into my chest, pushing against me. “I don’t want to understand it! But you’ve made me understand that living without the one you love can be the worst form of torture. She was dying every day she was alive without him.”

e I’m firm in my hold on her. She’s so torn with this guilt of understanding but not wanting to. She was purposefully hiding from the power of love, knowing what it’s capable of, knowing how it haunts her.

e She shakes her head. “But it’s my fault I let her do it, and—”

“Woah, woah, woah...” I say, stopping that sentence immediately. “It’s not your fault because you didn’t stop her. Clearly she would’ve done it regardless. It wasn’t your responsibility to keep saving her, Han.”

r She sighs but says nothing, and I don’t think she believes me. She’s held

the responsibility for far too long now.

“Nic knows nothing of it. She thinks it was an accident. They ruled it an accident, Kai.” She shrugs lightly, facing me.

*Jesus, the weight of this secret is so heavy.* She’s been tirelessly protecting everyone around her, but who’s been here to protect her?

She pushes off me, scowling as she sits with a thump on the back of the van. Following her steps, I sit beside her yet again. More minutes pass, the silence weaving through us like the invading breeze from the ocean beneath.

“I started coming out here when the weight of the world caved, becoming crazed for the need for the answers to death. What happens after? Where do we go? Does it all just end? Is there hope for us after this life? Is there peace? I wanted answers,” she says, a gentleness to her tone.

I squeeze her hand again, bringing it to my lips in an attempt to kiss away her troubles.

“Larry told me once that just like these dead animals, I can only be repaired if I’m deconstructed. All of my pieces broken before I can put myself back together again. He wanted me to deal with the pain I held at bay. Even made death out to be a celebration of life, hence the mariachi band.”

She scoffs lightly. “But then, as he got sick, I fell back again. I found drugs, sex, I fell into Bran and his sweet talks, looking for some form of comfort, and forgot who I was ever supposed to be.”

I wrap my arm around her shoulder, pulling her back into my front until my arm reaches across her chest, holding her trembling form. My other arm slips around her waist, pulling her into my lap. Kissing the top of her head, I rest my chin there, thinking about her words and why they sound so familiar.

“Some secrets should remain in the dark. Bringing them to light does nothing but rip more wounds into the healed,” she whispers.



Her face turns back towards me, swallowing down her fears as her wide eyes find mine.

“She can’t ever find out, Kai.”

I nod. “You never have to worry. This conversation stays here, out on this cliff, above the water, close to the heavens.” I drag my thumb along her jawline, gaining her entire focus. “It dies with me.”

Her lip quivers between us, her eyes swell up with tears again. She blinks, letting them drown her face while she melts against me. Our heads remain sealed together as we both grip onto one another, our need never relenting.

“It’s staggering, really.” I smile to myself, thinking of my own struggle and how she’s helped me unknowingly.

“What is?” she asks, her brows knit.

“Even at our worst, both drowning in chaos,” I breathe, my expression growing somber. “Together, we’re our best.”

There’s a crease in her brow as she gazes up at me through wet lashes. She places her temple against my collarbone, her hand reaching up, gently stroking the side of my neck in the most comforting way.

The shift in weight is evident.

She sighs again, feeling lighter already.

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I

s

Her face turns back towards me, swallowing down her fears as her wide eyes find mine.

“She can’t ever find out, Kai.”

I nod. “You never have to worry. This conversation stays here, out on this cliff, above the water, close to the heavens.” I drag my thumb along her jawline, gaining her entire focus. “It dies with me.”

Her lip quivers between us, her eyes swell up with tears again. She blinks, letting them drown her face while she melts against me. Our heads remain sealed together as we both grip onto one another, our need never relenting.

“It’s staggering, really.” I smile to myself, thinking of my own struggles and how she’s helped me unknowingly.

“What is?” she asks, her brows knit.

“Even at our worst, both drowning in chaos,” I breathe, my expression growing somber. “Together, we’re our best.”

There’s a crease in her brow as she gazes up at me through wet lashes. She places her temple against my collarbone, her hand reaching up, gently stroking the side of my neck in the most comforting way.

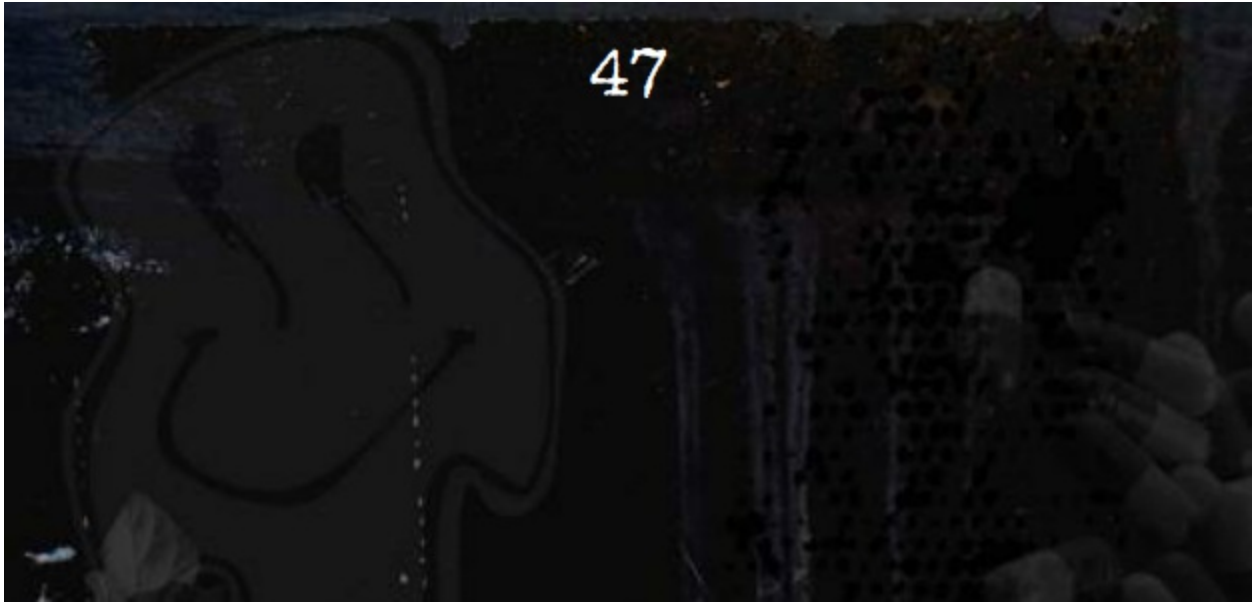
The shift in weight is evident.

She sighs again, feeling lighter already.

47



47





I wake to her hand running along my cheek.

She's sitting sideways in the now stopped van, smiling at the sight of me while Jim Morrison sings about all the ways I love her madly on the radio. I hadn't even realized I'd fallen asleep, but these damn seats are like recliners. They're comfortable as fuck, and the lack of sleep from the stress and workload of today seems to have taken me under.

After she opened up to me, we spent another full day doing what seems to help ease her pain. We scraped dozens of animals from the asphalt, sweating our asses off, and actually enjoying ourselves as we did it. We talked so much today. Memories of our past, my relationship with Hawke, his relationship with Cole growing up. We laughed, we got serious, but our conversation never faltered. It was like the dam had broken and she was fully open to me now.

After burying another batch of mangled animals, we showered at the cabin, picked up some food, and began our drive back home. In all, this weekend together was entirely productive, bringing us closer together than I ever thought was possible.

“Fuck, I hate those people,” I say, sitting up immediately.

Her brow cocks in question at my random statement.

“Those people that fall asleep when you’re driving and leave you all alone with your thoughts. Assholes. I’m that asshole.”

“You’re not,” she reassures, her lips curling up into a sweet little grin

“Besides, I wasn’t alone. Not this time, anyway.”

The sparkle in her eyes fills my heart. The way she’s looking at me does something strange to my insides. I want to kiss her, love on her, fuck her senseless until she screams from the top of every mountain that she needs me like I need her. It’s overwhelming, these emotions. I love this woman and she’s right to feel that she wasn’t alone. She’ll never be alone again as long as I’m living.

“Are we back?” I ask, sitting up, rubbing my eyes as I try to look through the windshield. Everything outside is already dark.

“Almost,” she smiles softly, fluttering her lashes in the dim lights from the dashboard. “Figured we could make one more stop, if that’s okay?”

We stare at each other silently for a moment, and I catch her drifting immediately. *Did she really just pull over to bone me?*

As soon as my grin hits, she’s out of the van, circling around to the front. Around the vehicle and walk towards where she’s stretching up into the night sky.

The stars twinkle around her beautifully proportioned silhouette, making her look like some sort of night goddess owning the darkness around her. She makes time and space bend, like the gravity of who she is, pulls everything else into her orbit.

I stand at a distance just taking her in, feeling like I’m viewing a scene from her past, present, and future all in one breath. It’s hard to explain.

She finally turns to find me with her gorgeously natural smile, standing here, admiring her in her sports bra and large baggy sweats like a weirdo before she waves a hand, instructing me to reach her. I come up behind her as she peers off in the distance, wrapping my hands around her hips, slowly sliding them around her exposed abdomen until my arms are crossing gripping her tightly to my front.

I gently press my lips to her shoulder before kissing the corner of her neck softly, dragging them up her neck and breathing in her honey scent. Her hands slide over my arms until her fingers find mine and interlock solidifying my hold on her.

“The dark side of the moon,” she whispers.

The phrase hits me and takes me back. I remember one of the first times we were hanging out together. We were down at the cove after I followed her from the house party. She’d asked me if I’d ever been to the dark side of the moon before we tripped on acid. I didn’t understand it then, just as I’m trying to decipher it now.

The dark side of the moon is a metaphorical place no sunlight reaches. It could resemble the underlying truth in the darkness, the dark side of ourselves we keep hidden from everyone else. The side everyone has, but we keep in check, in order not to let it own us, driving us to madness.

My eyes finally look up, peering beyond her, and I see it. The ocean stretched out before us for miles and endless miles until the darkness blended into the night sky. Down below us, the waves rage in the moonlight, wilder than the stop we were at this morning. The waves crash upon the rocks beneath us, beating their anger out relentlessly, while we sit high above them searching into the sky above.

Her head turns back to face me as I absorb the beauty of the night

gilluminated by none other than the universe herself.

, “It’s you,” I whisper, tearing my eyes away from the scene to meet hers  
s “It reminds me of you. Raging with violent beauty, demanding to be seen  
y amidst the chaos of the world beneath it.”

, She swallows, her lips parting as she sucks in a breath. Her eyes well with  
tears at the deep understanding. A whole universe stands beneath me. The  
mysteries and complexities in her gaze, a wonder that I’d spend my entire life  
r attempting to explore.

, “You were so unexpected,” she says simply, her fingers lacing through the  
hair at the back of my head. “And yet, so necessary.”

Grabbing the back of my neck, she pulls me down to meet her lips. We  
scrash together like the chaos that we are, needing, wanting, knowing that this  
rthing between us is more than we can both handle, but requiring it  
enonetheless.

g I make my way to the hood of the van, picking up her little body and  
placing her on top of it. Her thighs reach around my ribs because of the  
theight and she wraps them tightly around me, pulling me into her, my chest  
fto her center.

e Her hand splays across the back of my neck, fingers weaving into my hair  
the way I love, and she pulls tightly, causing my head to dip back and face  
nher, the blood flooding my groin as my dick swells. I swallow, and her eyes  
s follow the roll of my throat.

r “I love you, Kai.” She says it first, surprising me. “And I’m so fucking  
grateful for you.”

, *Fuck*. She makes me forget about everything. About my shitty past, the  
world around me, drugs entirely. This feeling I get with her surpasses

,



anything and everything I could ever experiment with. She'll always be my substance of choice.

1 “You broke for me, by allowing me to break for you,” she says softly, eyes filled with emotion as she runs her other finger from my lips, down my chin and down my throat, trailing my neck tattoos. “I never thought I’d be so lucky. To know someone who gets me like you do. Someone who accepts me; shows me it’s okay to love. Someone who can love me in my dark.”

I bring my hands up from her thighs, skimming over her soft, smooth skin and holding the side of her neck. I look up at her, entirely at her mercy.

“I’m the lucky one, Jo.”

e I lick my bottom lip while eyeing hers before diving in to kiss my girl.

s Making sweet, torturous love, we bite, nip, scratch, claw, grasp at each other until we meet our sweet release. She comes on top of me in the back of the opened van, her body etched and carved out by the light of the moon and her unrelenting moans tear through the dark night. My hands, never seeming to feel enough of her; her lips, never seeming to touch enough of me.

t It’s one of those moments that permanently adds chapters to your life. It’s a moment, stamped into your mind, your timeline, your memory. A moment that succeeds others, feeling heavier than most.

e We hold each other, gazing out into the stars, wrapped together in a warm splash, sherpa blanket as we lie naked with nothing between us.

“We need to be more careful,” she finally whispers against my chest, her fingers trailing down my abdomen as we listen to the sounds of “While My Guitar Gently Weeps” by *The Beatles*, that somehow harmonizes with the waves beneath us.

s “Yeah, people could make a hell of a lot of money if they recorded us out here. Our sex is fire.”

y She smacks her hand against my bare stomach, making me groan.

“Not what I’m talking about.”

s I chuckle, grabbing her jaw and turning her face up towards mine.

l, “I think we’re careful. I mean, I pulled out the one time,” I say, shrugging  
slightly.

s “Only because you love the look of my neck painted with you.” She rolls  
her eyes at me with a little smirk on her face, mimicking my earlier statement  
in the heat of the moment.

I rest my head back against the pillow and sigh with a satisfied grin at the  
beautiful memory. “So true.”

She smacks me again, and I grab her wrist this time. Her eyes widen as  
I squeeze it, gaining that attention from her I require.

f “You’re on the pill, and I’m *definitely* not sleeping with anyone else.”

s She looks down at her wrist, biting her bottom lip, and I can literally feel  
her plagued mind.

“The Tarah situation is not what you thought it was. I shouldn’t have tried  
to lie. It made it seem worse than what the truth is, and the truth is I was  
literally using her for something stupid, just like you use Bran. I promise you  
that.”

, Han’s eyes silently find mine again, and an anxiousness takes over her  
expression. I haven’t divulged the situation to her, but she also hasn’t  
divulged hers to me.

y “I hate being tied down to that fucker,” she says, her eyes almost silently  
pleading for help.

“What do you mean?” I ask, feeling insanely protective of her. “How are  
you tied down to him?”

“You remember that day you were outside my apartment and Slate was

there?” she asks, moving her hand so it aligns with mine, pressed against it before her fingers slowly drag down the palm.

“Yes,” I answer cautiously, already feeling a strange form of jealousy while enjoying the sensation of her nails gently tracing the lines of my palm.

“Well, I was inquiring about a job at his tattoo shop.” Her eyelashes flutter up at me. “He had someone quit and needed a new office manager. Thought it would be a good fit for their team. Besides, he knows my situation.”

“What situation?”

I hate knowing anyone knows more about her than I do. It’s my right to know. I’m the one who owns her heart. Mine.

I “I’m trying to disconnect myself from Bran and his family.”

“And how are you connected?” I ask immediately.

I probably sound like a psycho with all of my incessant questions, but I feel the need to know everything. I should know everything. I’m her man.

“I work on one of their charter boats, Kai.” She locks her fingers through mine as I remain silent. “Taking tourists out to dive. It’s what I do.”

Jesus, of course. That’s the family business. Of course, they would be disconnected in such a way. The thought disgusts me, even if it means her working at Slate’s tattoo shop. I don’t necessarily like that rock personification any more than Bran, but shit, at least he seems innocent. So far.

“Yeah, you should definitely work at the tattoo shop,” I respond immediately. “I don’t want you associated with that fucking tool at all anymore.”

“I know. I’m trying to find a way out.”

She chews on the inside of her cheek while watching me deal with my jealousy. My nostrils flare, and I seal my eyes shut and scratch the top of my head to rid myself of the anger at the thought of them together. That prick

,was inside of her at one point. His dick was in her. My girl. The idea, twist  
my stomach in disgusting knots.

y “Kai, stop thinking about his dick inside of me.”

“What?! I wasn’t—”

r “I can feel your hands tighten around me. I can hear your back teeth  
grinding together. I know how possessive you get.” She smiles, wrapping  
herself around me tighter, and I love that my jealousy doesn’t seem to bother  
her at all.

o She just accepts it. Probably even likes it a little.

“It’s okay, it’s only you for me,” she says in a light hum, falling asleep.

My chest rises and falls as I exhale some frustration.

“I just need to find that last piece,” she mumbles to herself before yawning  
I “Then I can be done with him forever.”

I turn my head to face her, about to ask what in the hell she’s talking about  
but her eyes have closed. Her palm rests against me as she lays peacefully  
next to me. I trace the curve of her cheekbone down to her jaw, drawing a  
line to her lips. Those lips that I continuously lose myself in. I pull the  
blanket up higher on her shoulder, tucking her in against me as her breath  
slows and she slips into a deep sleep in the comfort of my arms.

And that last piece she’s referring to? She can guarantee that whatever it is  
I’ll be fucking finding it for her.

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y

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“Twenty minutes is twenty minutes too long, Han,” I whine in the driveway as she tries to get out of my grasp.

“Baby, I’ll be right back over, I promise,” she says, giggling when I pull a her outstretched arms, bringing her back into my chest. “Besides, you really need to talk to Hawke. He wouldn’t be texting you like crazy if it wasn’t important.”

She’s right. He’s been blowing up my phone since the drive back, and I’m thinking it has to do with a certain surprise he needs help with. A surprise that even the most confident of men tend to lose a little faith in themselves over. A proposal.

“Tell me you’ll come right back,” I say firmly, wrapping her arms around my waist again and locking her to me. “No wasting time. Get your hot little ass back here to me.” I grip her ass in my palms, squeezing it roughly before spanking her. “Mine.”

She fake bites at my nose before pecking it with a quick kiss, leaning back to say, “Yours, Big Bird.”

*Fuck me, I’m crazy about this chick.*



I finally release my hold on her as she jumps back into the van to change clothes and grab an overnight bag to stay with me. I insisted she didn't need any clothes at all, and that showering with me is actually better for the environment, but she made it a point to leave me so I'd be forced to talk to Hawke.

I walk into the house, smelling something delicious cooking as soon as the first wave of air hits my nose.

"Honey, I'm home!" I call out, seeing Cole in the kitchen.

"Kid!" she squeals, wiping her hands on a towel before running and jumping up on me. "The man himself is finally back."

I swing her in a circle, then put her down, placing my hand in hers as I waltz with her to whatever classical music she has playing in the background.

"What is this? Chopin? You're really trying to get cultured now that you're a big girl living near L.A., huh?"

Her laugh warms my heart as she pushes off of me. "Shut up, idiot. It's just some classical piano station on Pandora. Helps me cook, makes the food taste better too, I think."

"Well, it smells good as hell," I follow her to the counter. "What's the occasion?"

A smile breaks across her face. One that I know has everything to do with a certain friend of mine that stole her heart.

"It's Sunday night, and my man needs to eat. No occasion." She grabs some dressing and begins coating the lettuce in the bowl before her.

"You're such a good girlfriend, Cole." I lean casually on the island with an elbow. "Always keeping your man's stomach full and his balls empty." I sigh.

"You never change, do you?" She cocks her head back at me.

e “Only for the right one,” I reply with a cheeky grin.

d “Like my sister?” she asks, her eyes coming up from the salad she’s tossing, eyebrows raised.

c My smile shifts.

“There,” she says, pointing at me with a large salad fork. “There it is.”

e “There what is?” I scoff.

“Your smile changed from your goofy, smart-ass smile to a real one. I saw it. You *really* like her.” She drops her fork, looking out across the living room. “Oh God, you *love* her, don’t you?!”

“Aw, don’t get sad now, baby. If we keep it in the family, it’s not considered cheating.”

. “She’ll skin your dick for even saying that, ya know. The jokes are over. Jo-Jo don’t play when she finds someone. If that’s what this is? Are you guys seriously together? What is happening?!” She runs her hands down her face.

t My expression turns serious as I stand upright. “We are. Time to accept it and move on, Cole.” I shrug my shoulders. “It’ll be tough. Tears will be shed drunk attempts at getting me back will happen, but if we go into this knowing our affairs will be limited to holidays and birthdays, we’ll find a way to make it through. Together.”

1 Her lips stretch into a flat line. “God, you’re an idiot.”

“That’s not what your sister said. More like, ‘God, you’re so good at this!’” I fake a woman’s moan.

She tosses lettuce at my head. I let the leaves fall down my chest as this reaction was expected. She tries to hold in her laugh before offering me a light smile, returning to her salad.

“So, how was this weekend? What did you guys end up doing?”

*Deflect. Deflect immediately.*

“If I told you, you’d want me even more than you already do.” I give him my cheeky grin. “I’m just not ready to break my man’s heart.”

“Break who?” Hawke’s deep voice echoes through the hallway as he approaches us from the bathroom.

He’s shirtless, of course, wearing only a towel while he rubs another one over the top of his wet, dark hair, somehow flexing every muscle in his abdomen as he walks.

g “Put some clothes on.” I scoff. “No one needs to see this.”

“I do,” Cole says in a seductive voice, running her hand down his tattooed chest as he leans forward to kiss her forehead.

“Cole, please,” I roll my eyes. “A minute ago, you were telling me how all that muscle turns you off. That you’d rather discover what it’d be like with a tall, lengthy man. A man who has personality and flare, rather than bulk and stamina.”

t Hawke tries his best not to crack a smile while staring at me, but neither of them can hold it in.

g “Think she likes her choices, man,” he says, running the towel down his chest where a drop of water runs effortlessly down his deep cuts. Cole’s practically salivating all over him, as if they haven’t been home fucking the entire weekend.

t Lights shine through the window, indicating my girl is back. Hawke catches onto it.

s “She know about the lack of stamina?” he asks, pointing a thumb toward the doors as Cole laughs into his side.

“Fuck off,” I retort, running around the island to head out to see Han. “She loves where I carry my bulk!”

I hear Cole groan in disgust as I walk outside to see Han’s vehicle parked

rin the oversized driveway next to my car. She's staring over at it with an odd expression as she wraps her canvas bag over her head to sling across her shoulder, getting out of hers.

"Did we forget one, or...?"

e I draw my attention towards my car and I see it.

s Blood everywhere.

A headless rabbit sprawled out on the hood of my car.

My stomach drops and immediately I'm hit with a wave of anxiety. My eyes dart down the dimly lit street, searching cars and houses nearby for anyone that could be watching us.

l Walking closer, I see the words 'better be quick' spread in blood. My heart is racing as my mouth becomes dry at the sight.

l *Jesus, fuck.*

Han walks around her vehicle to inspect it, so I quickly take the rabbit's leg, smearing the words out with his body before she can see it.

"I, uh...accidentally hit him when I ran to the gas station. Tried to swerve but hit the poor little guy." I absentmindedly toy with the shell of my ear standing in front of the car as I study her eyes. "Picked him up so we could bury him properly."

She stares at the body for a second, and I get nervous. I swallow, opening my mouth to say something else, maybe a reason for the decapitation, when she says, "Well, at least it looks like it was quick. Flipped on the hood and everything?"

I nod my head. "Quick indeed."

e After dinner with Cole and Hawke, Han and I retreat to my room for the night, but not before Hawke pulls me into the hallway for a quick chat.

l He's anxious as fuck, but explains how tomorrow is the day he's planning

this proposal. He wants us to make sure to both be at the house before dinner as part of the surprise. I agree to make it happen, and consider telling him about the rabbit incident, but at the last minute decide against it. I don't want him panicking. I can handle this.

I get back into my room, jumping for the bed just as Han slips into her oversized black t-shirt, taking off her shorts and staying in her lace panties. She crawls up the mattress, scaling my body, and straddles my shirtless form as I open the comforter for her. Her hands are on my abdomen, her thighs spread wide, and she tilts her head to the side, looking at me with the cutest grin and something on her mind.

"I think I like spending time with you," she says with a wrinkled nose.

"You think?" I ask, running my hands up her smooth thighs.

"I just realized I'm not sick of you yet. Like, at all. And we've spent a lot of time together."

Her seriousness makes me laugh. "That's how it's supposed to be, sweetheart."

"Well, anyway, I think we should get tattoos."

My eyebrows raise in surprise. The girl goes from being surprised that she enjoys hanging out with me to wanting couples tattoos. *I fucking love her.*

"I'm down," I say immediately. "Set up the sesh."

She grabs my chin, leaning forward so her hair is framing her little heart shaped face. "I'm serious, Kai."

"Me too, Han." I copy her serious mannerisms.

She sighs, rolling off of me and laying down beside me, facing the ceiling by my side.

"But what will we get?"

"You pick mine and I'll pick yours. We'll be cliché as fuck," I grin

rexcitedly.

1 She's quiet for a second, then pops up on her elbow, facing me.

t "Okay, but it has to be something no one else will understand besides you and I. Something personal. Something rare."

r "I think there's already something pretty personal on you," I reply with a deeper tone, my eyes narrowing as I pull her leg back over mine, running my hand up along her hip where a certain initial remains lightly embedded into her flesh.

t Her eyes flutter lightly when I touch the letter, her lips parting as we stare into each other.

I chew on my bottom lip as the air between us changes.

"Kai," she whispers, her fingers tracing along my chest.

t I grip her wrist, pulling her back on top of me to straddle my growing hard-on because I like the way it feels.

, "What's wrong, babygirl? Daddy Kai is here to make it all better." I smirk up at her, sticking my tongue between my teeth.

"You're not going to leave me, are you?" she asks softly, refusing to make eye contact.

My silly smirk fades into concern. "What are you talking about?"

"I mean, at the end of the summer. We've never really talked about it. Are you staying in Cali or going back home?"

"Is that even really a question?" I laugh, grabbing her chin and forcing her to look at me. "I'm wherever you are, Han. I'll find a way to stay. Find another job to make more money if I need to, an apartment...whatever it takes. I'm not leaving. Fuck no, never."

She stares at me silently for a moment, almost registering my words.

1 "We should probably just move in together," I suggest with an eager nod

“I’m a great roommate. I’m clean, except in the bedroom. Respectful, except in the bedroom. I always pay up, especially in the bedroom.”

1 This finally breaks her, and she laughs. *There’s that smile I love.*

“Oh, okay, you’re just gonna move in with me? Sure.” She rolls her eyes.

a “Why not?” I ask, my smile gone.

y She looks back and forth between my eyes, her forehead creasing slightly

o “You serious right now?”

“I mean, fuck, we’re together every night anyway. I wouldn’t mind waking up to this ass every day.” I give her a tight squeeze, biting my lip.

I can tell she’s processing the pros and cons of it in her head at the moment.

“Your rent would be cheaper,” I add in, cocking a brow.

g “It’s not the rent I’m worried about,” she rolls her hips so her sex presses into mine. “I’d tie you to the bed until you paid up.”

κ My mouth drops open and a groan escapes me. “Take what you need landlady.”

e She laughs, dropping her head to mine, an unsure look still plastered on her face. “This is crazy, Kai.”

I lick my lips at the sudden closeness of her mouth to mine. I’m amazed that I only want her more with every second we’re together, that her scent can still cause my skin to awaken, my hair to stand on end. I eye her lips as she breathes her in. “That’s the best part about it.”

d Practically hearing her heart racing beneath her delicate skin, I gently wrap my hand around her throat, my fingers splaying out, covering the entire front with my forefinger and thumb, and the side with the rest. Her pulse is pounding as her breaths become labored.

l. I reach down beneath her, pulling my gym shorts down my thighs while

our eyes remain locked, letting her know what I need. She leans forward into my hand, reaching up and holding my wrist. She takes my hand, turning it so my pinky is under her chin and my thumb and forefinger are around her neck by her collar bones.

She lowers herself down my thighs, her eyes becoming dark with lust, and my brows knit with confusion.

“I want you to feel yourself in my throat,” she says in a sensual tone.

My eyes drift into the back of my head as she wraps her lips around the swollen head of my cock, twirling her tongue the way that I love. I groan as she licks the side of my shaft with her tongue ring, wetting the surface before doing exactly as she says, taking me in her throat. I thrust my hips up into her while holding her neck. It feels so fucking good, so bad. I love doing dirty nasty things to her, just as she loves being a naughty little slut for me.

I fuck her soft, velvety throat until her eyes are watering and she’s choking around me. I pull out as she catches her breath; the spit dripping down her chin as my cock shines with her saliva. Her swollen lips call to me, so I pull her up my body, quickly lifting her shirt over her head before bringing her back down to me by her neck.

We’re suddenly in some sort of rush to connect. I grab her breast with my other hand, cupping her perky weight as she moans into the kiss. She runs her teeth along my bottom lip as I pull her thong to the side, lining the swollen head of my cock at her entrance.

“I want to feel myself in your stomach,” I say before pushing the tip of myself into her wet heat.

“Oh, fuck,” she moans against my lips, her eyes sealed tightly as she sinks down on me.

I feel her spasm around me as I stretch her, pushing deeper and deeper.



until I see her swallow all of my cock, and the thick root of me is all that remains. I place my hand on her lower abdomen, above where we connect, and I pull out and drive back into her again.

“I love that shit.” I groan, feeling myself deep up inside her from the outside. “Hitting my girl deep.”

Her legs spread further apart on me as she tries to accommodate me, the angle of her above me driving me deep. I drop my thumb, finding her swollen pink clit. Slowly rubbing it in circles, her head drops back as she rides me as her hips rolling to meet my thrusts.

She shudders as we pick up the pace, and a loud cry slips through her lips. My eyes widen, and I stall the movements abruptly. I roll her over so I’m on top of her now and pull out, quickly flipping her onto her stomach beneath me, leaning over to find her ear.

“We ain’t at home yet, baby. You gotta scream into that pillow.”

I roll her lace thong down over her ass before sealing her legs together with my knees on the outside of her thighs. Gripping her soft flesh in my hands, I pull her open. I bend down as she arches her back, licking her from behind. Her fists grip the pillow before as my tongue finds its way to her ass. She squirms beneath me, so I spank her roughly.

“Stop.” I demand, opening her back up, sticking my tongue inside her tight, forbidden hole.

“Oh, God,” she murmurs into the pillow.

I lean back, looking at the sight that has me ready to cum, and spit down onto her before lining up with her sweet little slit. I slide back into her from behind as her muffled screams filled the room.

“Jesus, this ass,” I groan, feeling myself harden inside her as I slide in another way slowly. “So soft.”

t “Baby,” she cries out, reaching her hand back for me.

s I grip her hand in mine, leaning forward to kiss her spine as I continue to drive into her, making the moment more intimate.

e “Let me cum in you,” I whisper against her neck as a throaty groan escapes me, signaling my closeness. “Please, baby, let me cum up in you.”

e “Kai.” She moans, arching her back further, angling herself so I can hit as deep as possible.

, “Jo, let me put this fucking baby in you,” I grunt, teasing her with my words.

. *I’m out of control.*

1 “Kai, stop it.” She swats at me with her free hand, but I seal my body to hers, wrapping my hand around the front of her neck again.

She swallows and I feel the roll of her throat in my hand, reminding me where my dick just was, and where it is now. I press my mouth against her rear.

y “Shut up, girl, you know you want it.”

1 *I’m a psycho.*

. “You’re fucking crazy,” she says, her lips curling into a little grin, clearly enjoying my nonsense, before I drive into her again, the smile dropping as a moan slips through her wet, swollen lips.

“You’re goddamn right I am,” I say, turning her head to find her mouth. I slip my tongue along her lips as she tightens around me.

1 I quicken my pace, gripping her neck tighter the way she likes

1 “I’m coming. Oh God, I’m coming, Kai!”

Her spasms and sweet moans send me over the edge, and I thrust myself so deeply inside her while her body clamps itself around me and she milks me dry.

A deep, guttural groan leaves my throat as my cum mixes with hers.

o I'm panting out of control as I stiffen and thrust a few more times emptying myself exactly where I needed to. Finally finding my breath, I rest my forehead against her spine, my hair sticking to her perspiration. I place a few kisses along her shoulder blade, gently pulling out of her before turning her over on her back to face me.

"Jesus, Kai, you're seriously insa—"

y I cut off her words with lips, kissing her hard until she loses her fight against me, melting into my mouth with a sweet sigh.

"Insane for you." I finish for her. "I know. But don't act like you didn't know."

She bites the corner of her lip as her lazy smile pulls it from her teeth. Her mischievous eyes stare up into mine before she grabs my neck, pulling me back down for more.

I'd like to say this woman has the ability to take my mind off everything but the only thing I can think about as we roll around in the dark of my bedroom, is how we've started to work through the past that haunts Han, but I have yet to deal with the one that still haunts mine.

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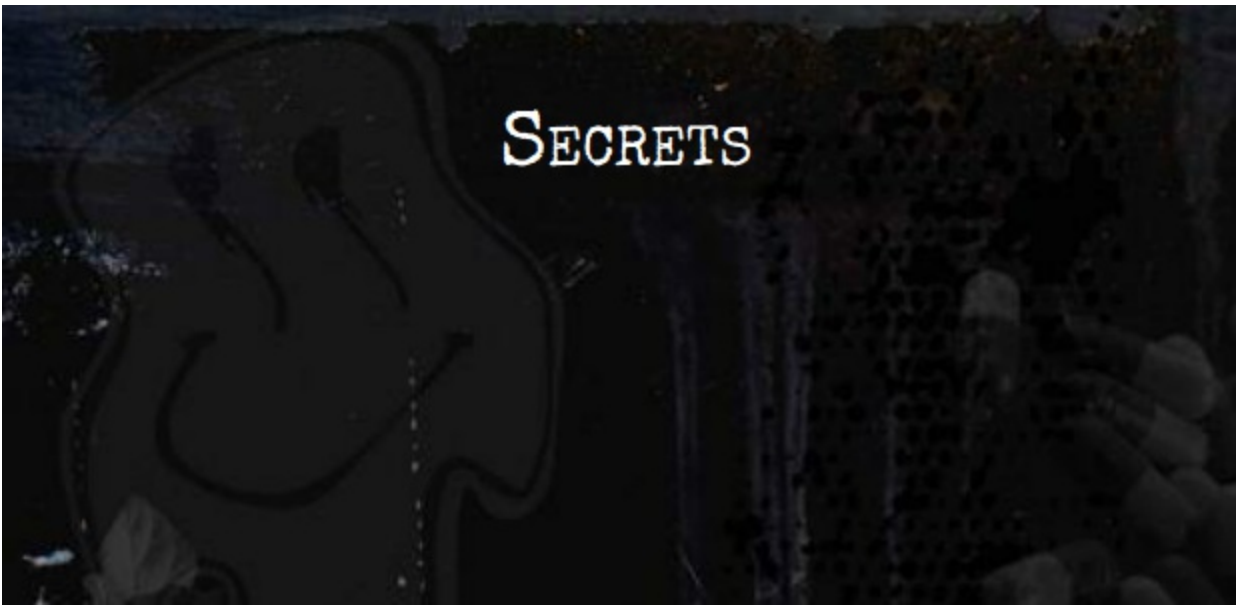
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**Y**our past has a way of disrupting your future if you don't address it properly. Han taught me that. But even so, here I sit, contemplating all the ways in which I can brush mine under the rug.

I haven't dealt with the Dario situation at all. I don't even know what I'm doing, to be honest. The drugs remain in the secret compartment in my car just sitting there since I picked them up. I bought the drugs from Tarah with every intention of finding out what it was they were mixing. Maybe I'll buy one of those test kits from the internet to attempt to decipher what Bran and his dick-licker, Silas, are conjuring up, potentially taking that information to Dario to sabotage their idiotic plans.

Whatever they're mixing has the potential to be deadly. I know that much because of how it affected me both times I tried it. That alone tells me that there's no rhyme or reason to whatever concoction they're attempting to create. It's careless, it's dangerous, and if Dario knew that, he'd cut them off immediately, getting me back on his good side, perhaps making myself useful. Dead clients aren't good for making money, and if word gets out where it's from...well, let's just say it's not a good look.

I spent the morning on Cole's laptop at the kitchen counter after asking if I could borrow it for a few hours. She gave me a funny little smile, but was more than happy to lend it to me, as long as I didn't download a bunch of porn. To her surprise, no viruses overtook her work.

Truthfully, I used it to apply for some online training to get my certification as a Realtor. I was hoping to get that knowledge under my belt as Hawke had recommended, knowing that I would excel in it, and potentially help him in selling new properties in the future. I had the idea that this could be a good path for me. Maybe we could even continue working together.

Han's words hit deep last night. I need to make sure I'm going to be around for her, and getting into a legit business or even starting one on my own is a great next step. I know people and I know how to work people. Getting the education I need to push me further will help to solidify a future for myself and for her.

She was right when she told me I never cared for myself. She told me if I put half the effort into myself as I did into pursuing her, I'd be in a great place. What she didn't realize was that she was my reason for bettering myself. We all have our motivations, and she is the greatest one yet. Before her, I lived day to day, but after her, I'm living for the promise of tomorrow.

After signing up for the online course, I spent the rest of the day with Hawke at one of the properties, where he went into detail about the plans he had for the evening. We painted rooms in various shades of grey as he described how he wanted it to all go down. Dinner with some good friends then head to the dock for a boat ride to view the fireworks display he had ready from the shore. The dude was way more nervous than I'd ever seen him. Sweating, pacing, stuttering...it was great. I loved it, seeing thi



I confident, tough guy in a new light. This woman was his everything, and I understood the nerves more than he realized.

f Showering and dressing for dinner tonight, I take one last look at myself in the mirror and smile. I look good. And not in a self-absorbed way. There was a new twinkle in my eyes. Cole saw it too. Here, before me now, is a man in love, but not only that, a man who is finally taking care of himself. I look healthy with my bright, crystal-blue eyes and face filled with color. My cheeks aren't as hollow as they'd been, eyes bright with no sign of redness from the drugs. I even combed my hair, styling it with a little product to make the white blond pop even more. I'm wearing a stylish sweater with some dark jeans and a few light chains around my neck for the occasion.

y It was the first time I saw my reflection and didn't hate it. The impulse to send my face through the glass, gone. I'm proud of myself, and feeling better than ever. I did this myself. I did this by wanting to change. To finally be worthy of someone's love. Han's.

I "You're a stud, Kid," I say to my reflection, giving myself a wink and a head nod before heading to Han's to pick her up.

g Cole and Hawke are still getting ready as I leave, so I let them know I'll meet them at the place they dined at when they first moved to California together. It's a beautiful place that holds a lot of meaning for them. It's where they could finally be free from their pasts, loving each other in a beautiful new light.

e Han and I enter the double doors of the place, me holding the door for her, of course.

d "He chokes me out and holds doors open? How'd I get so lucky?" She smiles her gorgeous smile as I take the opportunity to pull her to the side between the doors.

I “This dress was a horrible idea,” I whisper into her ear, leaning close against her, pushing her against the wall. I slip my hand under the flowered and flowy dress, loving the feeling of where her soft ass meets the back of her thigh. It’s literally making blood flood to my dick. “We’re in a classy restaurant, and all I can think about is bending you over the table and sticking this cock where it belongs.”

“Kai!” she giggles as I press myself into her, my lips trailing her neck. “You’re getting hard.”

I bite my bottom lip, sucking in a breath before the inevitable grin spreads across my face. “You better head in first, then.”

She smiles, licking her lips before leaning up on her toes in those platform black combat boots, giving me a sweet kiss.

“Let’s go, babyboy.”

I clutch my chest, throwing my head back at her little nickname for me. She chuckles, pulling me along behind her with her fingers interlocked through mine.

The place is stunning. Upon entry, the clear view of the ocean backdrop is visible through a wall of glass windows. The sun is setting, lighting up the waves in a magnificent sparkling scene. Light piano is playing in the background while the sound of silverware and plates brush together softly. The hostess walks us to the table near the back where we meet up with a few of their other close friends. We chat and enjoy light conversation until Colton and Hawke finally make their appearance.

They look amazing together, both dressed-up looking magazine ready. Walking hand-in-hand, with smiles lighting up their faces, they appear like cover models to some sort of “bad-boy meets sweet girl” ad.

We sit and eat a delicious dinner, enjoying the company as Han and I hold

hands beneath the table. I like this. This feels good to me. Normal even. Us, enjoying one another in public as a couple. We share little smiles and smirks and can't seem to keep our hands to ourselves.

Han lightly touches my arm on the table where it rests, placing her hand on my thigh. Cole even picks up on it from across the table, smiling with admiration. Not trying to inflate my ego or anything, but I think she's honestly just happy to see her sister this happy. I don't know that she's ever seen her like this with anyone before. I hope not anyway.

"So that big house of yours..." a good friend of theirs named Julia asks aloud as we sit back in our seats after dinner. "When are two gonna start filling it up with kids?"

Cole blushes as she looks over to Hawke, who has his arm around her chair, pulling her even closer to him.

"Soon." He grins down at her, his eyebrow raising. "If we don't already have one on the way."

Cole gasps, slapping his chest while laughing at the crude joke.

"Do your parents live close, Cole?" Julia asks. "Having your mom nearby always helps with the little ones. We know all about that." She smiles nudging her husband to the left of her as they both smile, agreeing.

I watch as both Cole and Hawke's smiles slowly fade. Hawke clears his throat, leaning back in his chair as Cole looks down at the table, licking his lips. I peer over at Han who's also staring into the tablecloth with a blank face, her lips slightly parted.

It's clear that even though they are close friends with these new people they've become acquainted with in California, there are secrets that are only kept between the two of them.

"Family is everywhere," I interject quickly. "I'm literally a live-in

s babysitter, ready for some little nieces and nephews. Dirty diapers and spit up, my new conquest.” I give my cheeky grin.

Julia smiles at me adoringly as Hawke shoots me an appreciative but quick nod from across the table for disrupting the awkwardness. He grabs Cole’s hand in his. She turns and smiles up at him with broken eyes she’s attempting to hide.

Who’s not hiding their brokenness is Han. I turn to face her again, giving her hand a little squeeze, but she’s still facing the tablecloth before her, her eyes wincing in the corners. I see the tears being held back, close to falling as her mind runs wild.

“Well, I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’m ready for a drink.” I announce, pushing my chair back. “C’mon babe, let’s hit the bar.”

The rest of the table begins slowly talking on their own again, and no one notices the shaking girl on my arm who can barely walk to the other side of the room. I wrap my arm around her lower back, leading her towards the coat closet near the restrooms and into a little secluded area where we can talk.

“Come here,” I say immediately, pulling her into my chest once we’ve escaped the eyesight of everyone dining.

I know how hard that was for her. I can’t imagine the guilt she continuously feels weighed down by, especially thinking about her baby sister with a baby. I’m sure the thoughts of not having their mother around hurt more than she’d ever let on.

“Kai,” she cries out softly, clutching my sweater in her little fists, needing me to hold her as she finally feels free to let go of her emotions.

“I know,” I say, running my hand down her back.

And I do know. She doesn’t need to say anything else. She’s hurting, and I’ve got her. It’s all she needs to know.

- “I took that away from her,” she says in a broken tone, sniffing after she says it.

κ “No, baby. No, you didn’t, Jo.” I pull back from our hug, gently placing my hands on the sides of her neck, needing her to see my eyes as I say it. “She would’ve done it with or without you there. You didn’t take anything away from her. It was out of your hands. You can’t keep blaming yourself for her decisions.”

r “I could’ve stopped her. For Nic.” Her tears flood her face as she falls apart in my palms.

Her broken eyes close tightly, and I pull her into my chest again, wrapping my arms firmly around her trembling frame, holding her together as she cries into me. But nothing can stop the unfortunate timing of seeing the face that I’m met with when I lift my head.

f Cole is standing two feet away from us, staring straight into my eyes with a ghost-like expression. Han is in my arms, unaware of her sister behind her.

Cole’s head shakes in disbelief as she slowly starts backing away, making it more than obvious that she heard the tail-end of our conversation.

“No,” I say to her. “No, Cole, no...”

e Han’s head abruptly turns from my chest at the name, seeing her sister behind her now.

l “Cole, come here,” I say, still shaking my head. “It’s not—”

“Wh-what?” she asks breathlessly, staring at her sister with wide eyes. “Stopped her? You mean...she...you...”

Cole falls back into the wall behind her, her palm slapping against it, attempting to hold herself upright at the newly acquired information her brain can’t seem to register. Her body slides down the wall, and I reach out to grab

her before she falls. She's blinking wildly as if her eyesight is blurring and the room around her is darkening.

g "Fuck!" I pick her up beneath her arms as her eyes roll back into her head.  
: "Cam!" I yell out into the restaurant anxiously.

g He hears my anxious scream and comes running over immediately, his face in horror at the sight of Cole passed out in my arms.

"Jesus Christ, Cole!" he yells, bending down and taking her from me. "Call 911!" he yells to the hostess stand. "What's wrong, baby?! Wake up!" He slaps her cheek gently, attempting to wake her. "Kai, what happened?!" he yells.

s "She's okay. She just passed out," I stutter, my hands shaking.

t Her eyes flutter open, finding Hawke above her. I turn to face Han, only to notice there's no one behind me now.

a "Shit!" I curse, standing up and looking around the restaurant quickly.  
"Han?!" I call out.

g Hawke looks up at me, confusion and the need for answers radiating out of him.

"It wasn't a freak accident, Cam." I spit out. "Han's known all along, saw it happen." I tell him quickly, knowing he'll understand, needing him to know so he doesn't go ape-shit on everyone.

I frantically look down the hallways to see if I see her as I spin, running. my hands nervously through my hair.

His mouth drops open to look at me in disbelief as Cole comes to. I simply nod my head, staring into him with eyes that tell him I'd never lie about something so serious as I walk backwards towards the exit, deciding Han must've left.

"Fuck!" he curses out, holding her tightly to him on the floor. "You gotta

lgo get her.”

His eyes find mine again. “You *need* to go get her,” he demands.

. I hate that he knows like I do, if I can’t find her...

I struggle to breathe at the thought. I slam through the glass doors in search of the broken woman who can’t handle any more wounds to the tattered scars that make her less than whole.

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“Han!” I scream, reaching the restaurant parking lot, searching everywhere as I run through the parked cars. “Han!”

A couple passes me on their way in, the man with his hand on the woman’s lower back, guiding her along.

“D-did you see a girl? Black hair”—I wave my hands frantically thinking of her outfit—“black and yellow dress, boots?!”

“No.” The woman shakes her head, her eyes nervous for me. “No, I’m so sorry, I didn’t—”

I take off running again before she can finish her sentence. After scouring the entire parking lot with no sight of her, I run to my car to check for her there. But it’s empty.

“Fuck!” I yell, slamming my fists on the hood.

I take a breath, blowing it out as I rack my brain for where she could’ve gone so fast. Did she hitch a ride with someone random? I wouldn’t put it past her in this situation. She needed an out and was going to find it however she could.

I brace myself on the hood with my palms, my head dropping between my shoulders. I look up, peering inside my vehicle, seeing a sight that stops my heart.

“Oh, fuck no! No!” I scream to myself, my hands dragging along the hood as I scramble for the door.

I pull it open, diving into the passenger seat, inspecting the damage. She ripped into my center console, opening the secret hatch. The baggie of coke...

It's gone.

And not just any coke. The coke I got from Tarah.

I scream out, hitting the dash with ultimate force at every curse, my knuckles finally splitting on the last hit.

She was the only other person who knew where I hid it. And now, with her sister finding out the one thing she couldn't have her knowing, she was on the edge of risking it all to numb her torturous pain, needing to find a way to erase the lifetime of guilt she's been forced to endure.

But she has no idea what's in that baggie. No idea what kind of danger she's in.

I have to find her.

Jumping into the driver's seat, I peel outta the parking lot, rushing toward her place. I call her phone, only to hear it ringing on the floor beneath the passenger seat beside me. I punch the steering wheel with my bloody fist making the horn honk unintentionally.

*Ok, Kai. Calm down.* I take a deep breath, letting it out as I race down the road. Where would she go? How would she get there? We came together in my car. She couldn't call anyone without her phone.

My tires squeal into her parking lot, the car fishtailing wildly. I escape the

vehicle, not even taking the time to park properly or shut my door before I'm running to the main entrance of her apartment. Han's van is still there in the lot, and I make a mental note of that as I race up the dim cement stairwell to her front door. I knock frantically, feeling a sickening nauseousness permeating throughout my core after no response.

"Jo, baby." I fist my hair. "Where are you?!" I whisper breathlessly to myself, slinking my back down against her apartment door, feeling defeat.

My phone rings in my back pocket, making me stir with hope. I pull it out seeing Hawke's name.

"Where is she? Is she there?" I rush out.

"No, no sign of her. Cole's been taken to the hospital. She's fine, but where are you?"

My stomach drops and my hands shake. "At Han's place. Her car's here but she's not."

He curses into the receiver. "Where would she be?"

"She's in trouble, Cam. She's in trouble!" I say quickly, panting as my voice cracks at the end of my sentence.

I'm panicking.

"Alright, alright." He takes a breath, calming himself as if he senses I need to sit right now. "Where does she go when she runs away?"

"Her van is here! I told you that! She didn't run! She's..." I pause for a second, my brain working to solve this. Where else would she be? Our spots? Where are our spots? Where could she have gone without a vehicle?

"The cove," I say. "She's at the cove."

I hang up the phone, running back out to my car. How stupid of me to not think she'd find her way there. The driver's door is still open and the engine

astill running, so I slide in and peel out of her parking lot, heading towards the  
eplace she frequents alone.

o It's getting dark now. The sun has set, and trudging through the sand in  
sthese clunky boots helps nothing. But I run. I run as fast as I can, hoping I'n  
not too late.

o "Jo!" I scream at the top of my lungs, the echoes being swallowed by the  
wild waves of the ocean before me.

; Stumbling down the boulders, I pause at a little ledge, peering down into  
the darkness of the tiny cove. The moonlight does nothing to help me  
visualize her form amongst the jagged cuts of the shadowed rocks.

t And yet, there beneath me, I see the tiniest hint of a red and black-fringed  
blanket on the sand near the water, just barely poking out.

; It's hers.

"Han!" I scream.

Without thinking, I jump down a rock the size of a car. I stumble and roll  
my ankle to the side, feeling an immediate snap. I hiss, grabbing for the pain  
that's now searing through my lower leg. Breathing through it, I hobble my  
way over to the edge of the blanket. The closer I become, the more I see.

l The blanket.

The edge of her boots.

a Her bare legs.

? Her seemingly lifeless body.

My stomach sinks as a wave of terror sweeps over me.

*It's too late.*

t I can barely breathe as I fall next to her, my knees in the wet sand  
grabbing her limp body with her barely open eyes, and holding her to my  
chest. Tears flood my face, and my mouth opens, attempting to gasp for air.

e “Han, baby...no,” I cry out, seeing the opened baggie lying next to her.  
*I’m too late.*

1 Quickly scanning her face, I see streaks of dried tears down her cheeks, her pupils fully dilated. I kick the shit with my free leg, sending it into the sand, the contents now immersed with the tiny rocks of the beach where we once sat, finding out who we were before we knew anything. A time when tragedies were left uncovered and our only focus was exploring how to bend time together.

e I curse out at the moon, cradling her in my grasp as my palm holds her cheek and my tears obstruct my vision. She’s cold and clammy in my grasp, but then her chest expands.

*She’s still breathing.*

I feel for her pulse as my heart pounds in my chest. It’s barely beating through her delicate little neck, but it’s still there. Her breaths are few and far between.

1 “Stay with me, baby! Please stay with me, Han!”

y Standing on my bum leg, I hoist her up into my arms, frantically making my way up the rocks. I turn when I hear the echo of my name being called.

“Kai!” It’s Hawke. “Kai!”

Fighting through the pain, I carry her little, limp frame up the side of the rocks, meeting Hawke who’s running backwards towards the car, shouting questions out at me right and left.

“Did she take something?!”

“Yes!”

, “Do you know what it is?!”

y “No, not sure!”

“Was she trying to ki—”

“No! Fuck off!”

I won't even let him finish that sentence. She wouldn't. Would she? She couldn't leave me. She couldn't. She didn't know.

He takes my keys, and I get into the backseat of the car with Han, racing to the hospital while Hawke transfers the information from me to the awaiting staff on the phone.

They take her from me as soon as we hit the drive-up, the scramble of nurses muttering off about an apparent overdose. It angers the fuck out of me. She's not just some druggie chick who overdosed while partying it up on the beach. She's an intelligent, beautifully broken woman, who cares deeply for the living, yet feels like life is too heavy at times. Because, guess what? I fucking is. I hate their assumptions as they look at her.

My fingers sweep across her cold cheek once more before they rush her between the doors to the emergency room. And then she's gone.

I stand there for a moment, mud on my boots, sand on my knees, and a bum leg, just watching as they take her away from me. The chaos, the wild scattering of people swarming us, the spouting off of blood pressure numbers and random medical terminology...all of it, suddenly quiet.

I'm left standing there in utter silence, with nothing but a loud mind. The smells of alcohol and plastic fill my nose from the sterile environment. It's deprived of any heart or home, leaving me feeling like the closest person I've ever known is now lost to it.

Anger, regret, and heartbreak hit me all at once, and I can't take it anymore.

I slam my forehead against the wall, my fists pounding into the cement above me as my chest heaves.

*We were so close. We'd come so far.*



“Kai, keep cool. She’s where she needs to be,” Hawke says, coming up behind me. “They’ll take care—”

“I did this!” I interrupt him. “I fucking did this! I’m careless and so fucking stupid!” I slam my fists above me again. Getting frustrated by the lack of destruction into the cool wall, I find a corkboard nearby, ripping off all the flyers and papers hanging on it, scattering them across the hallway.

“Kai,” Hawke says again, reaching out for me.

“No, fuck off! It’s my fault!” I yell again, brushing him off as he closes in on me, pushing him in the chest before my fingers find their way back into my hair and I pull. I curse again, my back sliding down the wall until I hit the floor. “Why am I like this?! What was I thinking?! What’s wrong with me?!”

I drop my face into my hands, raking the pain that’s radiating in my head down with my fingers. I feel the weight of my mistakes in life catching up to me by affecting the only one I’ve ever loved enough to change for. I broke her open, only to shatter her.

The squeak of rubber shoes on the speckled tile floor approach us, but Hawke tells them to go away, and that he’s got it under control.

I can’t get the visual of the lifeless look in her eyes out of my mind. It’s only been minutes since I saw her, and I already know the image will haunt me for a lifetime. How she handled seeing her mother and keeping it in so long is beyond me. The potential loss of her is eating me alive.

“Don’t fall now,” he whispers beside me. “You’ve come so far.”

I take a few breaths, trying to calm myself as I turn my broken gaze to Hawke. His jaw is clenched, holding in the pain as his eyes search through me, staring at the friend he’s been silently watching and rooting for all along.

Sometimes I think he knows me better than I know myself.

He throws his arm around me, pulling me into his chest, his hand grasping

the back of my neck as he comforts me.

And I cry.

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the back of my neck as he comforts me.

And I cry.







Time is a funny thing.

I understand the need to bend it.

We find ourselves needing to speed it up when going through difficult or traumatic moments, and slow it down when we're feeling satisfied with love and contentment. But the thing about time is that it's consistent. It truly doesn't change as much as you'd wish it would. It's consistently there ticking away, reminding you that there is an end to everything. That our time is limited, and whether or not we use it correctly, is up to us.

But with every end, there are also beginnings.

Feet approach us and I notice the black scuffs on the Doc Martin immediately. Looking up, I see a man in his early forties, his dark hair speckled with the evidence of a stressful career.

"Are you the family of Johanna Brooks?"

"Yes. Yes we are," Hawke answers immediately.

I clear my throat, standing awkwardly as I hold my ankle up. Hawke joins me at my side.

"Are you alright, sir?"

“Is she alright? W-what did she...what happened?” I ask, ignoring his concern for me.

“She’s, well she’s—”

“Can we go see her? Is she asking for me?” I interrupt, feeling impatient.

The way he pauses and the hesitation in his eyes suggest he’s anxious to tell me the next bit of information.

“She isn’t asking for anyone at the moment,” he says sadly. “She’s...not awake.”

“Awake, what do you mean? She’s sleeping right now? She’s tired? What did she take?!”

Hawke places his hand on my shoulder, sensing my impending spiral.

“She took more than her body could handle. It shut itself down in order to self-preserve. She’s in a coma.”

I fall back against the wall.

“I’m sorry, sir. The fentanyl we found in her system caused her respiratory system to slow to such an extreme rate that the brain was deprived of the oxygen it needed. Luckily, upon arrival, we administered Naloxone to reverse the effects. She’s been intubated and we are currently breathing for her. We’re keeping her stable, but are unsure if there was any further brain damage at this point.”

“Fent—” I exhale loudly. “I’m sorry, did you say Fentanyl?!”

“Yes.” He sighs wearily. “It appears she had a mix of cocaine and a potentially lethal dose of fentanyl.”

“Holy fuck.” I fall down the wall, my eyes wide as I stare into the floor attempting to digest the words. *These pricks are cutting coke with fentanyl?!*

“She’s lucky you brought her in when you did. It doesn’t take long for systems to slow to a point of no return. We’ve had multiple cases lately of

skids coming in with similar symptoms and, sadly, some fatalities.”

Jesus Christ.

“Can I see her?” I ask, with hopeful eyes. “I need to see her.”

“You are family, correct?” he asks suspiciously, trailing his eyes from me to Hawke and back.

“Of course. I’m her husband,” I spit out quickly.

I feel Hawke’s eyes dart over to me before he nods behind me.

Doctor Silver Fox looks at my left hand, cocking a brow, noting the missing ring.

“We’re new age. We don’t believe in the traditional inconveniences of modern marriage.”

“Mhmm...” he hums, pausing as if deciding what to do, but shrugs, given the circumstances. “Well, come on back.”

Monitors are beeping, cords are hooked up to her everywhere, and there’s a tube running into her mouth. Her color has come back some. The bluish tint on her lips isn’t there anymore, and it gives me hope, while the entire image of her in this hospital bed breaks me yet again.

I feel my jaw tighten as I fight the tears I feel building. I gave her the tool that put her here. Guilt is a bitch. The shame I’m feeling is crippling me. As Hawke walks towards her, I take in a shaky breath. I fall at the bedside grabbing her hand in mine and bringing it to my mouth. I can’t even face her. It hurts to look at her.

Hawke gently fixes her hair, his kindness making my tears spill over.

“My baby,” I say with a shaky breath, kissing her knuckles. “Fuck Johanna, I’m so sorry.”

Suddenly the fear of seeing and touching her fades, and the need to immerse myself in her smell again comes over me. I lean forward, kissing her



forehead, then eyebrow, then cheek, before laying my head near the crook of her neck.

“I’ll give you a minute,” Hawke says near me. “I’m going to go check on Cole again. She’s a floor up.”

*Cole.*

I instantly pop my head back up, finding his eyes.

“How is she?” I ask quickly, my eyes wincing.

He sighs, looking down at Han, then back at me sadly. “Physically fine they are just checking her over, but mentally...not good. But she’ll be alright. She’s a strong girl.”

I look back down at my fingers intertwined with Han’s. This was supposed to be the happiest day of Cole’s life. An engagement to the man she loved more than anything. Yet here we are, the second most painful day she’s ever known. She found out the truth behind her mother’s death, while her sister lays in limbo from an accidental overdose that could’ve killed her.

“As fucked up as this sounds, I’m glad for everyone’s sake this happened.”

Hawke contorts his face, looking at me suspiciously.

“She needed to know.” I nod, looking down at Jo again. “And she needed to let it out.”

His teeth press down on the corner of his lip, nodding in a silent agreement. As much as it probably pains him to think of Cole finding out this unfortunate truth, it might be the key to fixing their turbulent relationship. Han and Cole can finally grieve the way they need to together.

“I just wish it didn’t happen like this,” I say, fixing Jo’s bangs as my tears build again.

“Sometimes truths break free whether we want them to or not,” he says softly, shrugging his shoulders. “Universe shit.”

f I sigh, appreciating his honesty. “Universe shit.”

A few hours later and I’m still next to her, staring. My mind is racing with positive and negative thoughts. I’m in disbelief that this is my reality at the moment. She’ll come back to me. Of course she will. She has to. She’ll push through like the fighter she is.

Then her words infiltrate my toxic mind. *Helping someone cross over when they can’t help themselves could be considered the greatest form of compassion.*

. No. Never. I refuse to believe we’ll make it to a situation where that sentence rings true. Besides, she even admitted it kills a part of the living to do it. She’d never want me to kill off a piece of myself. She’s coming back to me. She has to.

r I turn off my overthinking mind and focus on counting her steady breaths until I reach 1,253. A nurse in neon colored scrubs with a perfectly formed Afro pinned back by a matching headband walks in, and I sit up a bit.

’ “How’s our girl, darling?” she says, immediately checking a computer monitor next to the bed.

d She’s got a motherly vibe, I can already tell. It’s comforting.

“If I knew, I’d tell ya,” I reply, running my hands over my face.

t “Well, keep talking to her,” she says, looking at some monitor paper that’s sprinting out on a long sheet before her. “It appears she likes it.”

. My eyes dart from her to Han and back. “She can hear me?”

“By the way this is reading, sweetheart, I’d say she knows you’re here.” She smiles and winks at me, heading towards the door again before pausing. “Which is why I’m not letting the other family in quite yet.”

s *Other family? Her father?*

I’d hoped the bastard would be here. But how would he know?

Han's finger twitches slightly in my hand, bringing me back to her.

1 "I'm here, baby. I'm not going anywhere," I whisper in her ear, gripping her hand against my chest as I lean over her frame. "I love you. I love you so much." My fingers brush across her cheekbone and I sniff lightly. "My Snuffleupagus. My crazy little jellyfish that never dies. That's you, Han."

r I kiss her forehead and cheek again before settling back into my seat again beside her. I think of a memory of us to myself, but decide to voice it all in case she is listening like the nurse who left the room suggested.

t "So, remember when I was at your place for the first time? The time we tripped on acid?" I say the sentence, then quickly look around with wide eyes.

Jesus, the hospital staff really doesn't need to know all this. The doctor will definitely lock my crazy ass up.

d "The time we skipped on placid," I correct myself. "Well, anyway, I never told you but your buddy Norbert...he really likes me." I smile, thinking of how wild that night was.

"Remember how I said he started talking to me while you were helping to take care of me? You were getting me a glass of water, and he started spouting off at the beak." I roll my eyes. "He said I was so naïve, and that you'd never let me in. The prick."

I just called a dead duck a prick. Living my best life.

"Ya know, he even asked me to bring you back to him, as if I could somehow save you...like he ultimately knew that I was the one to break through and reach you."

I pause, needing to grind my back teeth. *We've come so far since then.*

"Well..." I clear my throat, blocking the pain so I can continue. "Actually he told me to bring the band together. That bringing that twisted little

mariachi band together would somehow bring you back again...to him.”

g Sucking in a breath, I blink wildly as my brows knit together.

o “Bring you back...” I whisper to myself, my mind racing.

y My eyes narrow as I stare at the pale blue and white pattern on the blanket covering Han.

1 “The band.”

1 I scratch my forehead.

“You found the other ones. Somehow they were taken away from you and dispersed, but you found them, didn’t you? The duck with the harmonica, the stuffed toad in the colorful poncho playing the banjo...” I drag out the words.

“The squirrel wearing the black sombrero with maraca in his twisted little arm! I saw him!” I shriek, my eyes wide.

*The fucking squirrel!*

r “Your attachment to Bran! Y-you said there was one piece left,” I stutter at the realization. “One thing that held you to him. It wasn’t just your job, it was that squirrel! That motherfucker stole your squirrel, and you’ve been searching for him ever since! That’s why you were looking in his safe that night, breaking in to see if he hid it there. That’s why you’ve been calling Gerald’s Gem’s looking for it to turn up like he said. Gerald...”

I pause again as everything pieces itself together.

“I went to Gerald’s,” I breathe. “I met...” I stall for a second as it truly connects.

< “I met Larry,” I tell her while nodding vigorously. “Your Larry. Y-you said he got sick. He is sick, but he’s with Gerald now. Larry made you that band in his workshop, as a celebration, a way to break you free from that past that held you down. He’s been there at Gerald’s shop trying to help you find the pieces, Han.”

I stand up out of my chair, the bottom of it screeching against the tile floor as I lean over her.

“Larry told me we belonged together,” I whisper in disbelief as the realization continues to hit. “He said we fix each other, but only after all the pieces have broken, all the cracks in place.”

I shake my head, looking her up and down. It’s why she looked at me all crazy when I uttered those words to her. She’d heard them before, from him. We are broken. Completely shattered, all of our cracks in place. Now we can finally fix each other.

“You had no idea what Bran did with that squirrel,” I continue, voicing my thoughts. “No idea where it went after he stole it. It’s why you’ve tried to remain close to him...it wasn’t only to protect me when you realized I was on his radar. It was to find that last piece. The last mate to complete the band.”

Her pinky twitches in my hand again.

*Oh my God. It’s all real. Norbert’s words spoke the truth. Complete the band and bring her back.*

“Don’t worry, baby,” I say confidently into her ear, holding her hand to a new and determined heart.

“I’m about to get that fucking squirrel.”

y

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The music is rattling through the walls, drowning out the sound of the screen popping off the window. I stick a leg over the edge, nearly falling off the side of the house as I try to remain balanced. I grip the edge of the windowsill, wobbling slightly before tilting my weight inward, falling clumsily into the room. It's pitch black in here but the sound of the party continues on outside the closed door of Bran's room.

The tiniest hint of light from beneath the wooden door guides me toward it as I trip over a heap of clothing or blankets, or something on the floor. Who knows? I reach out for the door handle, only to have it fly open. I suck in a breath, falling back against the wall behind the door with my hands raised and palms out, as Bran and some chick push their way in, mouths locked together.

She's moaning into the kiss while he reaches for the edge of her shirt. If I wasn't playing the part of strange-boy-hiding-in-the-darkness-in-order-to-achieve-my-goals-of-stealing-a-dead-squirrel, I'd knock his dumb-ass out before he could get to second base.

But I'm hoping maybe he's distracted enough that I can somehow slip out of this room.

They continue kissing as he removes her shirt, pushing her back onto the bed. Just as I'm thinking I'm going to need to wait out whatever sexual experience they are about to perform, she stops him.

"Wait, wait...Bran."

He must not be listening because I can hear him continuing to kiss her neck. *Fucking pig.*

"Bran stop! I have to get the stuff before I forget."

He groans. "Seriously Cami?"

"My brother will kill me if I don't."

"Fuck your brother," he comments as I hear a zipper open.

*God, he's disgusting.*

"Bran!" her whiny voice yells again.

Huffing in frustration, he gets up and off of her on the bed, not even helping her up, before he stalks back out into the house down the hallway. She finds her shirt in the light pouring through the now open door, quickly following after him.

I finally let out a breath at the lucky escape. Peeking around the door, I find the hallway empty as the party rages outside. Tiptoeing my big ass down the dark hallway, I see the door that I remember belongs to the attic. Carefully opening it, I quickly slide behind the door, shutting it behind me. I walk up the wooden stairs, finding the pull light above my head again.

Illuminating the space, I squint my eyes to adjust to the light. As everything comes into focus again, I spot the old couch Brynn and I were making out on, then look up into the corner where the stacks of radios were. There, hidden in the outskirts of the light, is that little beady face staring right

tdown at me. I'm hit with a wave of warmth as my heart clenches in my chest for Han. I've never been happier to see a deceased animal in all of my life.

e I look around, finding a wooden chair at the opposite end of the attic. I bring it near the stack so I can attempt to reach him. Teetering on the edge, I grab for his twisted little arm, sucking in a breath when the radio beneath him falls forward.

r "Shit!" I curse, holding him in my hand, but now using my forehead to hold up this vintage radio from toppling.

I carefully lower my feet back down onto the chair, gently pushing the radio back and balancing the stack of them again before letting go. They stay put as I slowly back away. Blowing out a nervous breath, I count my blessings that the entire mountain of antiques didn't collapse into a devastatingly loud avalanche of destruction.

With my squirrel in hand, I trot the rest of the way down the wooden stairs. A satisfied grin resides on my goofy face as I clutch it to myself, until I open the door and I'm met with nothing but hard eyes.

y There, behind the attic door, stands Bran, Silas, and their little gang of dick-lickers and ass-eaters behind them, staring me down. *Fuck me.*

I "You really thought you'd break in and out of here without someone noticing your ugly ass?" Bran asks, cocking his head to the side.

. I sigh to myself, knowing there's really no way out of this. I'm about to get my ass beat.

"You really thought you'd lace coke with Fentanyl and no one would find out?" I retort as the guys' eyes widen around him. "You dumb fuck."

e I'm not scared of this prick. If anything, I'm excited about the opportunity to knock him down a notch. Bring him out of his fantasy drug-dealing land.  
t

where he thinks he actually reigns and knock him back into hard reality where you have to pay up for your mistakes with your face.

“Aww, he’s still jealous, guys.” He laughs, nudging Silas, who looks a little anxious. “Guess your little morbid mate isn’t looking so highly at you now that you’re out of a job, eh?”

Of course, he has no idea she’s literally in a coma from the shit he’s carelessly tossing around town.

I stalk towards him with the squirrel behind my back. “Talk about her to me again.” I warn, my nostrils flaring as I stare down at him with venom in my gaze.

“I love knowing your weakness.” He smirks up at me. “You’ll get down on your knees for her, only for her to get down on her knees for me.”

Yep. That’s all it takes. I’m done.

I swing on him. A nice little right hook to the jaw. His head spins to the side as the mountain of men come at me.

The hits come hard and fast and from all around me. I clutch that fucking squirrel to my chest before it’s stripped from my hands and I take another blow to the face. I got a few swings in before they jumped me. I take rib shots, kidney shots, someone even punches my dick. No Robo-Hawke to save me this time. My vision becomes cloudy and the ringing in my ears is so pronounced that I don’t hear the scream that causes everyone else to turn.

Whatever happened, it has all of their attention.

I roll to my knees with a groan as the guys run down the hallway toward the apparent commotion. Feeling the blood pour out of my face, I gently touch the side of my cheek and suck in a breath from the pain. My nose is probably broken and my left eye is already hot and on its way to swelling up

yClumsily, I stand, bracing myself against the wall, squinting out of my good eye. *The squirrel. Where's the squirrel?*

a Whatever happened caused them to all panic like bitches, leaving me and  
tossing it to the side as well. I slowly bend down and grab him, clenching my  
teeth in pain before turning into Bran's room, leaving the house the same way  
sI came in.

Sirens blaze from far away as I fall into the seat of my car. I buckle my  
Mariachi squirrel into the seatbelt of the passenger seat as the pedal hits the  
floor, tires screeching in my race back to the hospital, back to my girl.

1



2“Sir?” The lady tries to stop me. “Sir, we need you to fill out some form  
first.”

3 “I’m not—” I pause where I’m walking, looking down at her. “I’m not  
here for care.”

4 “Sir, you need help. Now, you’re in the right place, but we need a little  
information—”

5 “He’s with me.” I hear the deep, familiar voice.

I turn to face Hawke, his eyes widening before he slaps on a calm  
collected face again, peering at the front desk lady.

s “He needs help!” she says in frustration, waving a hand over my bleeding  
and broken form.

s “Trust me, I know,” Hawke says, gripping a hand around the back of my  
neck and leading me down the hall away from the lady.

l “Thanks for your concern though, desk lady! I appreciate you!” I sl  
before Hawke pulls me harder, turning me forward.

l Rounding the corner, he leads me to a restroom, dropping his hand as  
yfinally get a look at myself in the mirror.

y *Jesus.*

My clothes are tattered, and my shirt is ripped near the neck, exposing my  
ycollarbone. Blood is dripping all down my face, dried, crusted blood trailing  
edown my chin. My shirt is a brand new shade of grisly gore. My left eye ha  
me looking like a second place boxer, and my bottom lip looks like I jus  
came back from a visit to my local cosmetic doc for some fillers.

“What the fuck happened to you?!” Hawke exclaims, pulling some pape  
towel from the holder and wetting it for me. “And what are you carrying?!”  
His face contorts in disgust at the presence of the squirrel under my arm.

s I take the paper towel and begin attempting to wipe the dried blood off my  
face.

t “I had something I needed to do,” I comment, hissing when I touch th  
opening cut under my eye.

e “She’s been asking for you,” he says desperately, making my stomacl  
drop.

“She’s awake?!” I drop the tissues to the tile floor.

, He shakes his head slightly. “Not really. But they removed her intubation  
tube. She’s been calling out for you, mumbling what sounds like your name.”

3 I turn, pushing through the door of the restroom immediately. My swollen  
ankle gives out and I stumble into the wall across from the bathroom door.

y Hawke quickly grabs me, hoisting me up. “Dude, you’re not okay righ  
now.”

“Just get me to her, Hawke.” I demand, my eyes glaring through his.

r He must sense my incessant need because he simply nods his head before placing an arm around me, helping me limp to her room.

I They're all in here now, staring at me with horrified faces. Cole runs up to me first.

"Oh my God, Kid?! What happened?!" she shrieks, cupping my face tenderly, her glossy eyes showing her worry.

g "D-don't worry about me. How is she? How are you?" I stutter all of it out at once.

t Cole licks her lips, looking back at Han, then at the old man in a way-too-fancy-for-the-hospital suit, who's sleeping in the corner.

r *Guess they let him in.*

"Better." She gives me a weak smile. "We started talking. All of us."

My heart squeezes in my chest, and I get the impression that she said all she needed to say to her sister while she could do nothing but listen. A therapeutic release, I'm sure. But she seems more at ease. She seems oddly comforted and, for whatever the reason, I'm just happy to see her like this.

"We'll get out of here," she whispers, wiping away a loose tear. "She wants you. Only you."

My chest fills with a warmth I've never known as I make a pained face clutching my bloody shirt in a fist over my heart. Cole wakes the man in the corner gently, and he quickly sits up, orienting himself. His eyes find mine before they shoot open, peering between Han, Cole, Hawke, and then me again.

Standing up awkwardly, he clears his throat. "You're Kai?"

t I chuckle at his first view of me. Every father's dream. I don't think any man would approve of this piece of wheat grass covered in blood, bruises

endless tattoos, crazy wild hair, and ripped clothing before him. Not for their daughter, anyway.

o “Sorry. Unfortunately, I am.” I frown with a light shrug.

Then, surprising me, he clings himself to my bloody, lengthy frame. His arms wrap around me as hands pat my back roughly. I peer at Cole behind him, with her arms crossed over her chest and her eyes filled with what I can only describe as sad appreciation.

He leans back from the embrace, holding both of my forearms. He has he-dark, black hair, even if it's speckled with age, and those green eyes, framed with nothing but red, tormented veins, are clearly hers. The look of a man who's seen better days, but is feeling the heavy weight of regret. As he should.

l “I can only hope to be as good of a man as you one day,” he says with hurried in his gaze.

y My brows lower in confusion as I wonder what was said about me. He simply nods before brushing past me and leaving the awkward space.

e Cole smiles lightly, giving me a quick hug before she sidles up with Hawke and they walk out of the room. It feels like all of their hope for her resides in me now being here. It's somewhat intimidating, if I'm honest.

e The monitors continue beeping as the silence in the now empty room encompasses me. I sigh as I reach Han again. I grab her hand, immediately locking fingers with hers, pulling the back of it to my lips for a kiss before place it where it belongs, against my heart.

“I did it, baby,” I whisper. “I got him for you.”

y I gently place the shriveled up squirrel on the blanket over her lap between the gap in her legs.

“You can come back now.”



r I sit there for a moment, my eyes tracing over her hollowed cheeks, her skin that looks slightly paler than it did before I left. Her lips, still chapped and dry from having that tube there when she needed help breathing.

s They said she was doing better. Even mumbled my name, or so they thought. Why won't she wake up? She needs to wake up. I did what I was supposed to do. Now it's her turn.

"You can wake up now, Han," I say again, squeezing her hand tighter in mine. "I'm here. I'm right here. I've got your squirrel, you can come back. The band's complete. I stole him from Bran to bring you back. I've got you. I told you, I got you. We can be happy now. It's over."

e I mutter endless words that begin to feel useless, the beeping continuously ticking in my ear like a clock of defeat, slowly making time around us seem stagnant. I stare down at her in disbelief, almost getting agitated.

"Come back, Han," I demand, edging her on as if I have the power to convince her. "Come back."

Sickening silence answers me, making me question everything. I wait as her chest rises and falls steadily, counting the breaths again. It's not like the twisted fairy tale I'd envisioned. I don't kiss her, hand her a stuffed squirrel and then she suddenly wakes with a smile. No, this is life. And I'm reminded how unfair and fucking ruthless it can really be.

y I was expecting something. Anything. But this? This silence? This deafening, gut-wrenching silence?

*What if she's suffered more brain damage than they expected?*

*What if this is as good as it gets?*

1 *What if she never comes back?*

"No," I say aloud, answering my own thought and pushing it away.

But it's slowly removing the hope I'd built around us, caving to the

runfortunate dread of a new reality that's seeping its way in.

1 A reality that doesn't coincide with the one we'd hoped.

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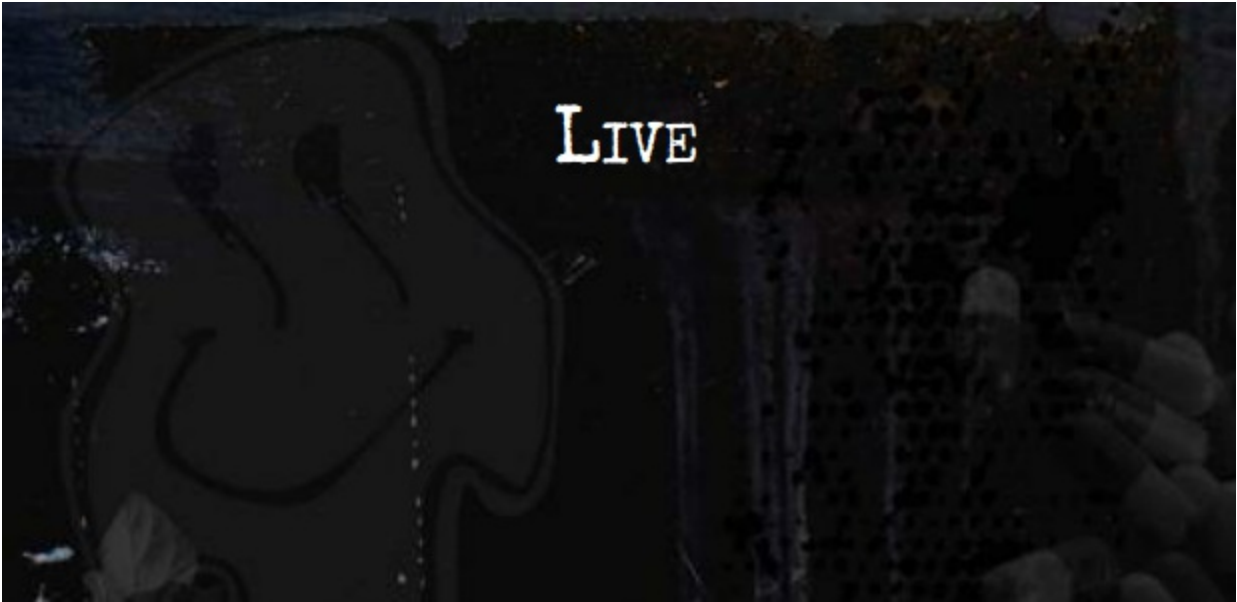
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unfortunate dread of a new reality that's seeping its way in.

A reality that doesn't coincide with the one we'd hoped.







I feel it before I open my eyes.

It's surrounding me. Here, in this unfamiliar space, somehow keeping me grounded. Warming me from head to toe in a peculiar comfort.

It's something I've learned to accept and let in over the past few months. Changing me in every way.

My lashes flutter open, and the pain in my head is almost unbearable. That is until I see *him*.

His hair is a mess, tossed about crazily. White-blond strands, shooting out in all directions on my lap. His arm is draped across my thighs and the other is clutching something in my lap, but I can't seem to get my eyes to focus on anything.

*How did I get here?*

I feel exhausted. I'm not sure how I ended up with him clutching onto me in a hospital bed like I might evaporate if any part of his body isn't sealed against mine. *How did we get here?* We always seem to find each other damned in our own right, abandoned, lost to our own personal hell. Maybe our lives weren't meant to intertwine, but something bigger brought us

together. Or maybe we're just a couple of the lucky ones who find comradery in the chaos. Lucky as fuck.

I lift my hand to touch him, feeling the pull of tape and a needle in my hand, making me flinch. Yep, definitely alive. A reminder of the dinner flashes before my eyes and my heart sinks. Where's Nic? How is she? Is that how I ended up here? Did I try to kill myself? No, I'd never. When I cut, I'm careful. I don't feel pain in my legs as if I tried. I never wanted to die, only ease the guilt that never leaves me. I could never leave a world with him in it.

I ignore the reminder of the pain and reach for him, anyway. As soon as my hand touches his soft hair, a sigh escapes me. I thread my fingers through it, how I do, holding the back of his head while rubbing my thumb along the softness. He brings a peace to my tortured soul I've never known. I know whatever is happening is going to be okay now, because he's here with me along with that feeling of his unrelenting love that's kept me grounded. He brought me back, that much I know.

I don't even try to focus my eyes. They feel heavy again, so I close them.

I feel the weight of his head moving on my lap.

"Her hand!" he shrieks, his voice laced with shock. My hand drops to my lap as he notices where it was on the back of his head. "She touched me!"

I don't know who he's talking to, but his excitement is adorable. He hasn't even realized I'm listening to him. I can hear him, but I can't see him.

It takes everything in me to open my eyelids as I squint to adjust to the light seeping through the opened window. Attempting to clear the blur, I blink a few times until things finally come into focus.

He turns to face me, and my stomach drops at the sight. I feel myself suck in a breath in complete horror.

We sit there, just staring at each other, both of our faces mirroring the

ys shock. We speak at the same time.

“What happened to you?!”

“You don’t remember me?!”

My brows lower as I try to register what he’s talking about.

*He doesn’t think I remember him?*

“Han, it’s me...Kai,” he breathes, the panic in his eyes confusing me when he leans back warily, as if suddenly afraid he’s invading my space.

“You’re a little too intense to forget, Big Bird.” I croak out, my throat still hoarse and somewhat painful for some reason.

That makes his eyes widen, and a huge open-mouthed smile takes over his face. Before he or I can say anything more, he captures my lips in his mouth, cupping the sides of my face, his hair dropping to my forehead.

I close my eyes, sighing as the sensation of his lips on mine ignites a fire in the pit of my belly again. A feeling I felt the first time he kissed me on the hood of his car that night outside the club. A feeling I’d never felt before him, one that initially shocked the fuck outta me.

He pulls back, his look of happiness gone, a new look of concern coating his icy blue eyes.

“I thought...I worried...” he stutters, shaking his head and looking from my eyes to my mouth and back.

His panicked eyes gloss over me before he lets out a deep breath, as if finally able to. As if he’d already begun settling into despair. I cup his bloodied, swollen face, holding his forehead to mine as we stare into each other. Me, staring lovingly, him, staring in complete wonder, as if we just got a second chance at life.

“It’s my fault. The stuff you had...it was laced,” he stutters, anxiety racking through him. “I knew it was bad, and I was attempting to stop them from



producing, but then you took it, thinking it was normal when you needed the numb. And I put you here, in a coma. I put you here, and I can't ever forgive myself--"

"Kai...no. My problems are my own." I interrupt, letting the reality sink in. *I was in a coma?* "You couldn't have known..."

1 He breaks down into his hands on my lap; the guilt weighing heavily. He's drowning himself in the shame of it all. But I don't blame him for anything. This was on me, and it's up to me to deal with my coping mechanisms and finally fix things. For me, for Nic, for him.

s I pull his heavy head, back up to mine, sealing our foreheads again.

, "I'm sorry for ever making you feel like you'd lost me," I whisper against his lips, echoing his words from a different time.

1 He screws his eyes tightly, running his hands over my hair as tears build and fall down his cheeks.

, I love seeing him cry for one reason alone. He wears his emotions on his sleeve. It's my favorite trait of his, his inability to hide the way he feels. I mean crying is a trait?

"What happened to your face?" I ask, gently touching his swollen eye.

y "Nothing," he replies simply, brushing it off.

"Liar," I retort.

f "Indeed," he says, sniffing as a smirk pulls at the corner of his mouth.

s "Painful?" I ask, worry setting in.

1 The corners of his eyes pinch together as if contemplating the answer. "Worthwhile."

We're right back in our one-worded conversations again. A weird little thing we do but never talk about.

1 "I love you," I say with an exacerbated sigh. "I've loved you for so long

eKai. Centuries of love enclosed in a few short months.”

e He tightens his jaw at the sentiment before his lips finally part and a breath of relief leaves him.

. His lips press against mine again softly, sweet love in every kiss before pulling back slightly to say something between us.

s “We really need to brush your teeth, baby.” He kisses me again like it truly doesn’t affect him, but he needed me to know.

d The harsh statement hits me before I break out into laughter. *This asshole sure knows how to make me smile.*

He sits up with pure joy in his eyes, helping to sit me up better.

t It’s then that I see Chauncy. My stomach drops for the second time today.

“What?!” I reach for him in my lap, holding the old squirrel up before me. “How did you...where did you—”

“Norbert wasn’t lying,” he interrupts me with a simple grin. “He told me if I brought the band together, I’d bring you back. And I did, Han. I brought you back.”

“You did, Kai. You brought me back. I felt you here, and somehow you found him,” I cry out, clutching him to my chest. “My Chauncy.”

“Chauncy?” He tips his head to the side. “Not even surprised.”

I’d been searching for him ever since Bran dispersed the Mariachi band out of hate the night after he found out about Sera and I. Guess stealing your ex’s new fling out from under him can set his anger into overdrive. He knew how much that little animal band meant to me after I stupidly told him they held such significance. What he didn’t know is everything the man in front of me does. Kai knows my secrets and loves me even more because of them.

I never thought I could be lovable after what I’d been through. I never wanted a love that could take hold of my being, make me incapable of living

without it, like I'd seen. I fought to fend it away, to deny it until I couldn't anymore. Until it seeped into my veins, into my blood, into my bones settling itself deep within my being like a cancer I couldn't live without. I'd succumb to it, die from it in order to be reborn again with him.

Kai never let up. He wouldn't allow for a superficial love. He wanted my darkness like no one did. He craved it, begged for it, knowing it was those pieces of me that made me whole. It was those pieces I didn't want anyone to touch for fear of scarring them with my sharp edges. But he touched them. He grabbed hold of everything I feared he would. He bled with me as I cut into him with my past. Broke alongside me, so we could mend ourselves together in a new form, stronger than before.

I don't know what I did to deserve a man like him in my life, but I'm so grateful he found me, sunk his claws into me, and never let go.

"I just want to be good for you, Johanna," he whispers, resting his temple near mine as we both gaze at Chauncy. "I love you with everything."

I get goosebumps on my arms. Every time he calls me Johanna, it just feels more real. He's my family now. The family that finds you.

"You are good for me," I reply, turning my face to him. "No one could ever be better."

He kisses my lips again, like the time without me has been as awful as his face makes it look.

"How do you feel?" He asks, his hand running down the side of my cheek.

"Confused, mostly," I admit. I lean into his hand. "But I know I'll be alright."

He stares at me for a moment until it sinks in. I'll be alright now, I know that. Because he's here with me. He kisses my forehead softly.

"I'm clean now," he whispers after pulling back from the kiss, searching

my eyes with a subtle nervousness. "I'm making changes. For us."

, I look back and forth between his eyes, reading into his look.

d "That's why you were sick," I say, finally understanding. "Kai, you were detoxing? Why didn't you tell me?" I cup the side of his face, feeling awful knowing he was silently trying to struggle with it.

s "It was just something that happened. I didn't plan it." He shakes his head lightly. "Plus, I worried if I made it a real thing and voiced it, I wouldn't stick to it."

o He shrugs his shoulders lightly, as if it's not a big deal. But, it's a big deal. And even if I've been a user for years, I know how hard it can be to give it up cold turkey, especially around other users.

o People use for many different reasons. To feel good, for fun, to numb...to forget. Everyone has their reason, but Kai's always seemed veiled as a good time. What may have started out as fun and recreational became a crutch for him when he felt he wasn't better than the toxicities around him. I saw it in the short time I've known him. Drugs became the only thing he knew. Dealing, the only thing he was good at. He refused to invest in himself because he never felt worth it or saw a real reason to. He's the kind of guy that lived for today, not for tomorrow.

s The knowledge of that upset me.

It wasn't until he started showing me how obsessive he could be that I finally understood it. He had an addictive personality and latched onto things he knew could hurt him because then he would never be disappointed. He knew what to expect. But I wanted him to love himself the way he loved me. I desperately ached for him to love the man I knew was worth loving. I wanted him addicted to who he was and who he could be.

g It appears over time, he'd done just that.

I shake my head as we stare at one another. "I'm so in awe of your strength."

"Says the girl who just woke up from a coma." He chuckles, still cupping my face as his eyes well with tears. "So much has happened. There's so much to digest."

I wondered about that. What happened since Cole found out the truth about how our mother died? What happened since I took that trip to the cove to find my release from the endless wound? What happened to him as he went out in search of the last piece of a past I'd actively tried to forget but never could?

Would I finally be able to work through my trauma and mend that relationship with my sister? Could she ever forgive me for knowing those secrets I held so deep? Would Kai and I be able to depend on each other without the toxicities that numbed us? This was a new beginning of sorts. A restart to a new discovery of dealing with the things that hurt us, coping in healthy ways, and finally working through our problems together.

I couldn't have made it without the man that tore my walls down with his excessive love and overbearing personality. He was always just what I needed. Full of the life that I was afraid of. But there was time for all of that now. We had time, and we needed to embrace it.

"I'm not afraid of death anymore," I admit, grabbing his hands and pulling them to my chest. His forehead wrinkles as he listens intently. "I don't feel the need to alter time like I once did. I don't want to bend it, speed it up, or slow it down...I just want to live it. With you."

His eyes drop to our intertwined hands and back to my eyes with those crystal blues that see through me.

He swallows, silently absorbing my words. The man of so many words humbled by the promise of growth between us. He nods his head with a

rdetermined grin, as if knowing we'll make peace with our pasts and finally be  
able to do just that.

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determined grin, as if knowing we'll make peace with our pasts and finally be able to do just that.

Live.



This is strange.

We're supposed to be on our way to the rehearsal dinner that could've sworn started in an hour, and yet Kai's pulled up to some parking lot in front of a string of office buildings.

He turns to me with a goofy look on his adorable face as he puts the car in park. "So, remember how I've never taken you out on a date?"

My brows lower. "That's not true. We had veggie burgers, the beef spot your girlfriend, Marg...remember?"

That was technically our first date in my book. The countless fuck sessions before that could count, but Kai wants to be romantic or some shit.

"We don't count that. Food is required."

I shake my head. He's so ridiculous sometimes. But, it's why I fell so hard

"So anyway, I figured I'd take you out."

I look around the parking lot, then down at my black silk dress and over at his fitted pants and button-up shirt.

"We have a rehearsal dinner to get to and you want to take me on a date...now?"



Kai said Hawke instructed groomsmen and bridesmaids to be at the restaurant at five. Yes, the engagement finally happened. Hawke got down on one knee shortly after the chaotic incident, proposing to my baby sister in front of all of us on the beach behind their home. It made even the coldest of hearts cry with happiness. Their love is one to be admired.

His smile widens before he nods vigorously. “Yep, we’re already dressed up. It works.”

Stepping out of the car, he walks around the front of it, and I admire how handsome his tall frame looks dressed up. He even slicked his blond hair back with some product today. Such a stud muffin. My stud muffin. I want to eat his dick. Again.

I spent the entire morning with his cock inside me. Between my mouth and his mouth, we tend to keep ourselves pretty busy. Busy and satisfied. We’re animals for each other.

He walks me to one of the glass office doors, pulling it open before I have time to read the name of the place on the window.

A man standing near a front desk wearing a modest suit turns to face us with an easy smile.

“Kai, it’s so good to see you again.” He eyes my man from his icy locks to his polished combat boots. “God, you look great!”

He pulls him into an embrace as their hands slap each other’s backs in a friendly manner. As soon as they pull apart, the man turns his attention to me.

“Johanna, it’s so wonderful to finally meet you.” He holds out a hand for me to shake.

I eye him suspiciously before meeting Kai’s smile again. I shake the man’s hand, and he introduces himself as Dave. Then it clicks.

“You brought me to therapy,” I state, looking over at Kai with my hand

estill in Dave's. "For our first date."

1 He raises his hands, looking around the place. "What better than a little therapy to bring us closer together?!"

f The guy has no idea what a date is. I'm convinced.

His excited energy is palpable. Nothing about him is normal, and I love every bit of that. It's not like we haven't talked about it. Therapy is definitely something I need for my own mental health. I have loads of trauma locked inside this dark mind of mine. Kai's old drunk class instructor has helped him so much, he recommended I meet with him too. But, I mean, seriously, who brings someone to a therapist for a date? Kai, that's who.

"Have you ever attended therapy or seen a therapist before?" Dave asks kindly.

e "No, but my baby daddy swears by it." I say, then shoot a smirk at Kai.

Dave cocks his head to the side, grabbing a chart from the counter behind him as he quickly shuffles through the documents. "You guys have kids?"

"No." I say.

s "Not yet," Kai clarifies, scolding me with his eyes.

I press my teeth into my bottom lip, withholding the eye roll. It never ends with him. "*Let me stick my baby in you, beautiful*", should be tattooed on his forehead.

a "We have a hamster named Rupert, and Kai likes to pretend he's their biological father." I roll my lips inward, raising my eyebrows.

r Dave's eyes narrow as he looks between the two of us.

"It's the first animal we've kept that wasn't dead," I continue, trying to clarify. "We've only ever had dead plants and animals. Thought we'd take care of something alive before we tried our hand at kids."

l Dave's mouth drops open.

“And we’re doing a great job, baby mama,” Kai adds proudly. “You should see her with him. She’s great.”

The expression on Dave’s face is to die for. He looks petrified.

Kai’s ridiculous. Literally still obsessing over getting me pregnant. I told him how idiotic it was, even though I know he’ll be an amazing father one day. We’ve only been living together for a few months. He moved into my place shortly after I left the hospital, and we’ve been connected at the hip ever since. I must say, having access to that tongue 24/7 is truly worth it, in and of itself. He lives for waking up between my thighs.

He’s been busy working towards getting his realtor license while still working with Hawke. He applied for student loans and was accepted into a program shortly after moving in. Never was there a better salesman than him. He could sell a glass of water to a drowning man, that guy. My sexy, witty and charming, and charismatic man.

He’s been busy assisting Hawke with expanding their business, and actively house shopping for us, even though I keep telling him we need to continue saving. He’s never been more motivated, and I gush every time I hear him explaining his newfound passion.

I’ve been working as the office manager of Coastal Ink for three weeks now. It’s going great, and throwing myself into something new and different has been so refreshing. I enjoy the people I work with, and actually feel valued in the company. I don’t get paid nearly as much as I used to on the chartered scuba boats, but I’m glad to have gotten out of that company before it collapsed.

After the accident, Kai explained everything to me. The dealing, the Fentanyl, the trouble he was in...everything. But fate took over for us. Bran’s family and business ended up suffering massively. Not only had I been the

victim of the laced coke, but apparently a guy who was at one of Bran's parties with his sister ended up overdosing in front of everyone. This moment, as unfortunate as it was, probably saved Kai's life that night. The guys would've never let up on him had the incident not happened.

The cops were called, searched the place, and they traced the drugs busting Bran and Silas for possession, distribution, and trafficking. Kai even told me that Silas ultimately ratted out some big drug lord named Dario that the D.E.A. had been after for years, in order to knock a few years off his sentence. I was so grateful that Kai got out of that business when he did, and safely, even though he still regrets ever being involved.

It took a long time for him to find a way to forgive himself for what happened to me, but he has. Just like I've found a way to forgive my mother, I've been searching for new ways to deal with my pain rather than numb it away. Kai and I stopped the reckless and dangerous drug use. We still smoke pot, don't get it twisted, but only when relaxing at home with pizza and a good comedy.

He's been clean for four weeks now. It would've been ten, but he slipped up once at a party we attended the other weekend. Peer pressure can definitely be his downfall, but he's aware of it now. Immediately after the party, he made an appointment to go see Dave again to get back on track, and so far, he has. I'm so proud of who he's becoming in front of me. Someone with goals, ambitions, drive, even if he slips up sometimes. Because that happens, and he's human. He still inspires me every day.

"Chrissy," Dave calls for the lady behind the desk. "How much time do we have scheduled for today?"

Kai sticks his tongue out at me as I hold back a chuckle at the fact that Dave now has some idea of the disaster he's about to conquer.

s After leaving the office an hour later, my makeup was in ruins. I'm talking smascara smeared down my face. Therapy shit.

e Kai is leaning against his car in the parking lot with his arms crossed in front of his chest. He pushes off with his elbow as I approach.

, "How you feeling, darlin'?" Kai asks, running up towards me and wrapping his arm around my shoulder as we walk back to the car.

t We pause at the passenger side. He presses me back against the door with his hips, surrounding me with his body, his hands on my cheeks, thumb wiping away the bleeding mess of mascara.

I sigh, looking up at him. "Lighter already."

t He stares down at me with admiration. He's proud of me. I feel it.

. Leaning down, his fingers tuck the hair behind my ear before I feel his warm breath tickle my neck. "This was big for you," he whispers before kissing the skin there.

a I swallow down the emotions as he leans back to find my eyes again.

"Thank you," I choke out. "For saving me when I denied needing it."

d His chest expands and lets out a deep sigh before he gazes at my lips needing them against his. He kisses me so sweetly, his tongue gently sweeping between mine. My hands find his hair as I open myself to the kiss. He groans into my mouth, and my insides stir.

e Pushing himself back off me, his eyes are closed as he separates us, almost needing a second to calm down before he takes me on top of his car in front of Dave's office.

e "You gotta let me put that baby in you, beautiful. No more swallowing my kids. Give them a chance."

t "Kai!" I scoff, smacking his arm playfully.

He's back at it again.

g “What?! I don’t like that Hawke’s ahead of me,” he whines like a child. “I wanted to be the first one to knock up one of the sisters!”

1 It’s true, he isn’t the first. Which is why we are somewhat rushing the wedding events. Cole found out while in the hospital that she was pregnant with their first child. The news was an unexpected surprise to them, and they waited to tell anyone, wanting to focus on my health and recovery first. But to be honest, new life has a way of motivating people like nothing else can. The thought of having a niece or nephew to help care for makes me only need to better myself more.

The feeling of a family again is comforting. Not only do I have Kai, but I have my sister back again. We’ve had many deep and honest conversations about the past, and I regret never opening up to her about it. She’s so much more mature than I’d imagined she could be. Mature enough to even begin allowing our dad back into our lives again. It’s been hard, but we are slowly working towards mending that relationship together. One step at a time, as Kai says.

, “Well, it’s too late for that,” I reiterate to him. “You need to focus on being a hot uncle.”

. “I got that in the bag.” He smiles, wiggling his eyebrows. “Oh, and speaking of the ocean...”

t My eyes narrow in confusion.

t “We were in the ocean.” He stalls as I twist my lips, arching a brow. “You know, when I tried to save you and almost drowned like a wet noodle...the whole ‘saving me when I denied needing it’ part a minute ago.”

He’s so random with the memories. I love it. My tongue ring glides along my teeth as I smirk at his cuteness.

“So, as I was saying,” he begins, opening the door and helping me inside

He hops into the driver's seat, starting it up. "Speaking of the ocean..."

He holds his large hand out; the palm turned up, awaiting mine. I place my hand in his, and our fingers slide together like they do as our wrist tattoos seal together. He started doing this after we got them. It's like our own secret little hand shake.

We chose them for each other and didn't unveil what they were until we were both done. It just goes to show we were meant for one another. I chose the blobfish for him and he chose the immortal jellyfish for me.

I smile at him lovingly as our sea creatures press together. He raises our wrists, bringing the back of my hand to his lips, kissing the area softly as he gazes at me. A slow, knowing smirk stretches across his handsome face when his mischievous blue eyes catch mine.

"My lips were on it first."

THE END

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THE END



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This helpline is a 24-hour-a-day, 365-day-a-year, information service for individuals and family members facing mental and/or substance use disorders. This service provides referrals to local treatment facilities, support groups, and community-based organizations.

Addiction is a disease. To anyone out there struggling, know I'm here for you in any way that I can be.

*"It's okay if you fail. Own that you made the decision to try, even if it wasn't planned." —Hawke*

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