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ROSES & THORNS

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ABSTRACT

The following piece is a work of fiction, accompanied by an analysis of the piece and my specific creative process. There will also be included a bibliography that lists the various influences that went into the work. The story itself follows the events of a man and the relationships he has with two of his friends. The focus is on how these relationships act as both a defining characteristic of who he is as well as a restriction on his ability to freely live for himself. It attempts to portray the two-sided dynamic of relationships and how certain ones can turn sour or develop into parasitic reliance, but how those can potentially, with plenty of work and understanding, turn into something more fruitful.

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Foreword

The following work is one that took a lot of effort and time to produce and one that has changed drastically over the course of the two semesters I worked on it, as well as the summer between them. To be technical, this work has been under development for far longer than that if I were to include the full span of time it took to produce the various drafts and different stories that stemmed from that same idea. It has been crafted from a number of various influences that I felt attracted to, some from my time at Behrend, others from my personal life both prior to and during the writing process. As a whole there is a lot to unpack about how this story came about and the various influences that went into making it what it is today, as well as what it may very well be in the future. There are also aspects that I want to discuss that I find to be up to the standards I set out to achieve, while there are others that I wish could be better.

To start off, the best place would be to discuss the various sources of influence that I have for this work. Since it is one of the tougher topics in this essay, I will first be diving into the influences I found during my various courses at Behrend. The difficulty stems from the fact that I cannot confidently say I was completely inspired by much of anything from my various courses regarding the creation of this piece. I could go on and on about the numerous songs that accompanied me writing the chapters or the books and films that I personally looked to for inspiration, but the things I read for school had not really affected me in much the same way. That said, I will rip the metaphorical bandage off and dive right into it.

To group them by classes, I would have to say that, if anything were to really stand out to me as an influential moment as far as this story goes, I would definitely have to hand it to my one writing course on the careful analysis of literature. The name escapes me and I likely would

not be able to easily find it again, but I do remember that we read various works of what many might consider “gothic horror.” Of the works we read, I find that three really stand out to me as far as influence is concerned. Those three are *Wuthering Heights*, *Dracula*, and *Jekyll & Hyde*. While this story of mine is in no way some kind of gothic masterpiece, it is likely the opposite of that, I did find a lot of influence in those works. More specifically their focus on human nature and the way people kind of act in ways that make them more complex than simply good or evil. My introduction to these three works drastically altered my focus in writing, though I will admit that initial changes to the earlier drafts of this story were a lot more melodramatic and fantastical than they are now, though some of the melodrama might still remain in places.

Another pair of books that influenced me are Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* and Hemingway’s *In Our Time*. Overall, these two books steered me towards a more modern period. With Hemingway’s book I even had to write a similar short story that mimicked the style of the work for an honors option project. That experience writing in a different period than I had previously really altered my perspective on the stories I had written so far. Prior to that, I was invested in writing a fantastical adventure of pirates and nobles, but those two books gave me an interest in writing about the “common man.” Writing that phrase sounds incredibly snobbish, but I genuinely gained an interest in writing about average people, rather than writing dramatic stories with the idea that I could even make them feel realistic in any sense. This shift sort of manifested itself in a switch from outright fiction to historical fiction with my inclusion of Marie Antoinette and the French Revolution in the work, but the true extent of my new direction was realized in the more recent drafts that led up to this current piece.

Moving towards influences I gained outside of my campus experience, I would start by acknowledging that music has had a fairly large impact on how my story developed. In many

ways I would consider myself a visual kind of person, both in learning and creating stories. How this connects to music is fairly simple, at least to me. Many times when I find myself thinking of what to write or how to develop a story, whether it be larger plot points or just a character, I will tend to listen to music to help inspire me. Sometimes this can lead to changes that shake the very idea of the story, other times it will just allow me to think more about a character and their development. A specific example of this, and one that is a more recent influence in my story, is the song “Home” by Catie Turner. The song is fairly mellow and very much follows the idea that Home is where the heart is. This song, to me at least, seems to speak of that kind of feeling one has with someone special, whether it be a friend, relative, or significant other. It also conveys an idea that one can be home, but still not feel at “home.” I very much like that theme as with this story I attempted to convey characters who long for the kind of feeling that this song speaks to. That they want to feel that warmth that home can bring, even if they are technically miles away from it.

Two other stories also sort of came into play with the creation of this story, more specifically the fairytales *Beauty and the Beast* and *Cinderella*. While odd to mention these after just listing two well known and respected authors that influenced me to be more realistic, I do like the fact that there is a kind of conflict there. That is partially why I added influences from these two works. While the idea is not entirely ground-breaking to modernize or retell a fairytale, I wanted to kind of infuse the core concepts of these tales in my work, or at least attempt to. With the character of Beau I wanted to include a kind of Prince/Beast clash, much like the idea of Jekyll/Hyde. This was, of course, done without the added violence and other aspects that tinged these two works. There are certain lines that I did not want to cross as far as writing complex and sympathetic characters, forgiving abuse or violence of most kinds was one of them.

That said, the dual persona aspect of his character, being both an open and honest person and someone who could delve into a lull of alcoholism and self-hatred, is something that I drew out of them. The same could be said for Anne and her Cinderella-esque personality. She was, at least in my mind, meant to be an outwardly strong person who builds up a level defense against anything that could drag her back down into a slump. I also wanted to convey a kind of mock retelling of Cinderella involving an extension of the tale as to how the shallow structure of the relationship in the original tale would lead to issues down the line. In my story there was meant to be an added bit about how Anne deals with a not so pleasant marriage and the repercussions of that and not initially sharing that. Time constraints and a lot of indecisiveness led to that not being included fully in the current draft.

In the vein of commenting on the current draft, I do have a number of complaints about the piece and how it turned out. The most blaringly obvious to me is that the piece, in its current state, is not as long as I would have liked it to be. The biggest reason as to why this problem came up is due to my inability to be confident in my work and stick to a story. Originally this thesis submission was going to be very different, both as far as setting and plot. Worse is that I had spent time in my first semester of working on the thesis writing up drafts of that story. My decision to change to this current story came roughly halfway into the process over the summer. I do not blame anything other than myself for that mess, hence why the current draft is not up to my standards as far as length, as well as detail. Some things definitely had to be sacrificed in order to meet deadlines.

On the subject of sacrifices, another aspect that I sorely miss is the lack of character changes in the piece. One of the things that I liked to do often in my previous works is change perspective between a handful of characters. I enjoyed this as it allowed readers to see characters

from alternative perspectives. Of course not every work of fiction would need this, much like how not every work needs to use first-person as its point of view, but I do find myself questioning as to whether or not anything is missing as a result of this and how different the piece might be with that included. That said, I can also see an improvement as a result of that as the voice of the main character feels more vibrant and put together without the interruption of another voice. Plus, the stress of crafting another equally as impressive voice no longer hangs over me like a dark cloud when thinking about this piece. That and my sanity is spared from having to switch voices and be sure they are different enough so as to not confuse the reader.

Moving to a more positive point of view, I am also very happy with how a number of things turned out. Though my advisor and myself had likely both reached our breaking points with how close a call this thesis was with the deadlines looming like a storm rolling in, I have to say that I am quite proud of the work I have produced. The characters are dynamic and lively, which is likely a result of the smaller numbers, which is the opposite of what earlier drafts had. I very much believe that I had exerted myself far too much with my earlier story drafts, hence why I grew tired of rehashing it over and over again to the point where I cracked and went in a completely different direction. The plot seems to be coming together quite nicely, though I will acknowledge that there are blaringly obvious gaps in the story that need to be filled. That said, I have enjoyed working on this piece and am very much thankful for the patience my advisor displayed while working with me on this thesis.

As I kind of conclusion to this preface, I would like to end on a note that in many ways was how this whole thing started for me. While I already discussed influences, one of the most important ones to me was from my own life. Something that has always remained consistent about most, if not all of my drafts of this story, is that the main characters have been gay. The

reason for this is, likely unsurprisingly, that I, myself, am gay. Something I experienced growing up was the severe lack of much representation of gay men to help me grow up into a person that could love and respect myself without getting caught up on my sexuality. Though it took quite some time, I turned this problem I had into a drive to make these stories that I believed to be lacking. Even now with more openness about the topic I still find myself feeling that same lack of genuine attachment to any of these characters people build up. Maybe it is my own mind tricking me into thinking this, but I find most of those depictions to be lacking one key thing, that being life. One of my main goals of writing this work was to make a character who felt alive and genuine without feeling like I was making their sexuality all they were. Beau, in many ways, is the opposite of what many might think when considering gay characters, but that is what I like the most about how I depicted him.

I want to be able to someday feel like I had helped others who went through that same empty feeling as I did make it out of there with a character who does not feel like a copout or flat stereotype. I want to represent the gay men and women who do not exist in some box that can be generalized or who do not all experience that pride in fully understanding themselves. So often I see homosexuals getting the same rehashed plot of conquering that feeling like the only thing against them is the outside world or that the problems inside are just the result of society. While both those things are very true, I also feel there is a lack of being able to depict many of these characters as people who don't have all this overbearing and heavily stereotyped pride and attachment to the "community." Though I doubt this point is entirely apparent in this work, which does not, in my eyes, hinder it at all, I felt the need to end on a positive that shows the underlying drive behind this larger work. To me, writing a story is to tell the character's story without feeling like I am supposed to adhere to some guideline that tells me what they should be.

Roses & Thorns

Chapter 1

Gym locker rooms are a weird place for me. Somehow they've got both that douchey manliness that never really seems to just leave some people and also a kind of softer side. Something less rigid and cold. Warmer in a way. That or I'm just going crazy from all the damned steam.

Honestly, how hot does someone need their shower to be. The fucking things are in a detached room and yet still fog up the whole damned place. It's like a sauna or the hills of Ireland in here.

I get that some folk like the heat, boiling water turning their skin red as tomatoes, but honestly...stop the damned masochism.

I'm sitting here on a wooden bench, trying to pack my shit into a bottom locker cause course I don't try to find a better locker somewhere else. I'm lanky and tall, got limbs like a fucking sasquatch, but I don't want to change shit up. I've got my spot and my routine and I damned well don't want to change it, but bending over like this is a bitch.

Anyways...I ain't enjoying the whole steam bath thing, cause I'm sweating already and I literally just got here. Is it too much to ask for a squad of middle aged hairy men to not crank the heat up like the devil shoveling coal into a furnace.

Thankfully I don't have to deal with this for long as the damned idiots shut off their showers and walk out, towels clinging to their waists.

Thank god is all I think. With a huff, I hop up and shut my locker. I wander out into the hall, greeted by the sight of ugly grey carpets and light blue walls. Pretty funny how generic gyms can be. Basic colors and a dull carpet. Really 'invigorates' the body to do more.

The main room is wide open and full of various machines. You've got cardio, weights, lifting, really anything one could want for any kind of exercise. Always find it odd, though, that two of the walls are lined with mirrors, some of the machines even facing them. Maybe it's for form or something, but I'm of the opinion that it's totally for those narcissistic assholes that stand around and flex or some shit. I can bet money that most of their 'work' is thanks to protein shakes and pills. Not that that ain't a viable way to get some gains, but don't act the hotshot and flatter yourself. It ain't you that put in all that effort.

Am I just jealous of them...nah. Ain't got a need to look like a beefed up idiot that can't bend their neck or move their arms.

Anyways, I hop up on a treadmill nearby and pop in my headphones. I make sure to blast my tunes, though not too loud cause I don't want to get any complaints. I don't pay for any trainers so I ain't a 'valued customer' here. Don't want to step on anyone's toes if I can help it.

I get all up and energized, feeling the vibes of the tunes kind of lift my spirit a bit. At least I think that's how it works. I ain't much of a scientist on the whole body response stuff so don't quote me on nothing. I'm probably not the first sucker to say I like songs that really just pump you up and make you wanna dance or do something when I exercise.

Sucks that I can't do some jogging outside though. I mean...I could, but it's damn cold and I don't want to get sick or some shit. Would be a real dampener on the whole month if that happened. I don't got a lot of health problems, but I'll be damned if allergies in autumn and spring ain't just the worst. Pollen and all that crap, makes my nose want to sniffle just thinking about it.

I'm getting real into the tunes, but then I realize I made the dumbest mistake and picked a machine facing those mirrors I hate so much.

Okay, yeah I probably could have avoided this situation by paying more attention to my surroundings, but I bet I ain't the only one to get tricked by those floor to ceiling jokers and their mind-bending bullshit. I swear I signed up for a gym, but sometimes I feel like I accidentally ignored the fine print about a funhouse or something.

I find my rhythm and happily jog in place, feeling not a breeze and scarce the smell of a single kernel of carmel corn on a nice day in the park. Ugh...the image makes me really want to stop by a store and get some. Love that stuff, gets real addicting. Autumn's nice, too, with all the cider, preferably hard cause I ain't in it for the sweet shit, and cinnamon and ginger. Really anything about the season gets me real excited, but of course it's all food and stuff.

Thinking about, I wonder how things are going for Maxi. The guy got an interview today for some kind of fashion blog or something. I ain't well versed in that world, but Maxi's got a real eye for that stuff. He could probably make a pig look like a Duchess if he tried hard enough. He's a damn good fairy godmother. He's a nice guy, I think he'll have no problems at all. He knows his shit and I don't think an employer would be dumb enough to skip out on him.

Maxi's a kind of old friend of mine, not really *that* old, but it feels like we've known each other for a real long time. Guess we just kind of clicked. Funny how we just kind of met each other randomly, total chance at being floor-mates. We call ourselves that since we, you know, live on the same floor in our apartment building. Neighbors even. We thought about putting a door in between our apartments, but the landlord almost had a heart attack at the idea. And we don't have balconies so a makeshift bridge is out of the question...and probably insane. Going to each other's door is the more neighborly thing to do anyways. Don't want to startle the other neighbors with that shit.

The beeping of the machine pulls me back out of my head. Guess time flies or whatever. I get off the machine, feeling already a bit sticky from sweat, but feel someone staring at me. It ain't like a freaky kind of staring, like 'oh shit is this guy gonna do something shifty' kind. It's more like that 'oh that's hot' type. Which, you know, is kind of flattering...at least to me. Some people probably aren't as big on the staring thing. Either because they're taken or...they've got some real bad memories of them shades of gray.

I turn around to spot the source of that intense staring and lock eyes with this massive hulk of a man. He ain't like a beefy mess of roids or something, but he sure as hell don't look like a 'I lift sometimes' kind of gym regular. His arms are probably as thick as my fucking head, like damn...that's kind of hot. Plus he's got a great looking tan, wavy light brown hair, and some piercing green eyes. Could probably shoot me in the heart with those like Cupid's little old bow.

I feel a little bit flustered from the sudden attention, but I get the vibe. Probably looking for a hookup, that or drugs...do people do that at public gyms. Sex I get...kinda, but I feel like deals would be a bit of stretch. Eh...that shit probably happens in school parking lots all the damn time. Everybody probably knows a suburbanite who just *needs* those drugs, like real bad.

I try my best to kind of give a signal, which ain't that easy cause I don't want to wave or something cause that'd look a bit weird. Plus, who'd get the message first, him or the blonde with not enough on that's trying hard to look like she's actually putting in the effort. At least she's trying...she's *trying*.

I try doing one of those 'make eye contact then glance in a direction' things. Don't really know what you call it, but it's like pointing, but with your eyes. Okay...that sounds real weird. It works anyways, he gets off his machine, which looks real small compared to him.

We try our best to not look shifty since some gym employees are around and it'd look kind of suspicious if we both went to the restroom together AND walked out together. That'd just not look right.

I make the bold choice of going first, cause, you know, I ain't here for a long time. Just want to get some 'exercise' in. Guess today's focus is on the upper body.

The bathrooms are pretty generic, lots and lots of tile. Cream is the color I'd best guess you could call it. It ain't white, but it ain't tan either. Looks a lot like the color of eggshells or something. It's off-white, I'll leave it at that.

There ain't nobody else in the bathroom. Lucky for us I guess. I double check to be sure, cause I want to play it safe, but don't see nobody hiding in the stalls.

I settle on the one in the far back, it's probably for the best since people'll probably not even notice us if they come in anyways...if they even do that is. Honestly, I've been here for like a month, maybe two now, and I haven't seen anybody go in or out of this bathroom. The locker room, yeah I've seen a lot of use out of that, this one not so much.

Rumors are that people used to shoot up in here, hence why nobody really goes in, but you'd think even the newbies would try it out. Eh...guess rumors probably just spread like wildfire sometimes.

After what feels like forever, the guy finally comes in. I know it's him cause I can recognize his sneakers from below the bottom edge of the door. That and he's like the only other guy besides me that waited to enter the 'druggies den' anyways. It ain't that hard.

He pushes open the stall door, steps in, and locks it behind him. In most cases people would probably think this was a horror movie or something, but it ain't like the lock is on the outside and there's not a key for it either.

Anyways, the guy is definitely better looking up close. He's got a nice face, broad and strong, eyes that want to make me go crazy. Heck, his hair's got a lot of grey streaks in it, but that's just kind of sexier in general. I ain't just attracted to older guys, but if the salt and pepper look works for some people, it just looks good on them. Grey hair is trendy anyways, or at least it was. Plus it's tied back in a nice ponytail and that just really works for him. He's got that wild man thing going on. Plus he's got some thick chops on the sides of his face. They go all the way down and over towards his chin. And don't even get me going on the body hair, it's pretty much everywhere on him. Places I can see, and probably some I'm gonna acquainted with real soon.

"We gonna do this, or somethin'?" His voice is just real smooth, like silk, but also gruff. Kinda like sandpaper, but only if it actually felt good.

I don't know...he's hot, got a nice voice, and I just want to give some head so the details just ain't that important.

"Yep," is all I say, hooking a finger on the waistband of his shorts.

I take a long draw from my cigarette, exhaling the smoke in a thick cloud like a factory smokestack. I feel cheap...and probably dirty, too.

The guy and I split off on good terms. He liked it a lot, made that clear with the moaning and groaning and shit. Clearly the guy was in a real need for release. Don't know why. I didn't really care enough to ask. Wasn't married though, that much was clear. Even gave me his number, too. Whipped it out like it was a business card or something. I've still got it, but I probably ain't gonna use it.

Even if it didn't go badly, I still have this real sick feeling in my gut. I don't really like it, but I can't put my damn finger on it. Irritating as all hell.

With a quick motion, I snuff out the cigarette in an ashtray and toss it in the bin nearby. The weather's getting kind of nasty at the moment and it looks like rain is gonna be a given for the evening. Sky's real grey, which sucks cause it makes the rest of the scenery all dull, too. Moved to Paris for the view, but haven't got much that looks like the postcards ever since that first day. Buzzed around like a damn tourist, even if I did weird people out by speaking perfect French to them. But I guess I'm just a 'Frenchman,' not a 'Parisian.'

The walk to the apartment building ain't too bad. I pass by the same bakeries and cafes. Almost always say hello to the same people, give dirty looks to the ones that aren't so friendly, and even pat the head of the dogs that this one scrawny schoolgirl has to handle every other day. Honestly she should just get roller skates at this point. Would be entertaining to say the least.

Routine is kind of nice I guess. Makes everything feel familiar, even if shit can get strange real quick. I just like the anchor. Feels nice when the wind just wants to rip me right out of my roots.

In the lobby I stop to grab my mail, which ain't much aside from a couple magazines that I'm still subscribed to. I don't really read them all that much, but I don't have the willpower or energy to go through with those damned unsubscribe processes. I swear it's always way easier to get started than it is to quit.

"You get anything good?" says the goth chick who runs the front desk. I call her 'goth chick' cause I don't know her name, don't really care to ask and she hasn't exactly stopped me either.

"Nope, same shit as always."

"That's sad." She goes back to chewing her gum and flipping through the magazine she's got in front of her. Looks like something *real* spooky.

We don't talk much at all, but I like her company...sometimes. She's been here for about two weeks now and hasn't failed that badly yet. Even the residents that initially protested the 'devil worshipper' and her purple hair and 'tainted flesh' of piercings, not the *other* 'tainted' mind you. I think I hold that title anyways.

Friendly conversations aside, I make my way upstairs to the third floor. I take the stairs cause the elevator is for the weak...and the disabled, elderly, and pregnant, but mostly the weak. That and I hate the damned thing. It ain't the claustrophobia that gets to me, it's the close quarters with people who either like me too much or not at all. I'm either getting looks from the rosary wearing cat lady from down the hall or getting chatted up by the scrawny twink who works at the bar the next street over. Honestly, would it kill anyone if we all just remained civil in the confines of a steel box that dangles in its metal tube from two thin strings...okay maybe I also hate the idea of elevators, too.

I get into my apartment, taking a bit of time to get my key out of my jean pocket. I like denim, but it's a bitch to get anything out of those pockets. Can't even use the ones on the back. I've tried. It never ends well.

I walk inside, closing the door behind me and...

"Holy mother of...Maxi, the fuck are you doing in here with the door locked?"

Sitting on my couch in the darkness of my living room, small as it may be, is Maxi. His silver blonde hair, pale skin, and monochromatically grey wardrobe making him blend in with the grey of the apartment. My furniture ain't grey itself, but with the weather outside and the lights being off the color is pretty much gone from the room. Real moody if you ask me.

That damn near startled me though. I'm always under the impression that we have this thing about not making it seem like no one's around when we visit each other's apartment. You

know, leave the door open, but not actually ajar, just not locked. Turn a fucking light on so your grey ass doesn't startle someone. And maybe, you know, say welcome home when you hear the damned door open and not just sit there in silence like a monk in prayer. This ain't a fucking temple, it's a shitty apartment in downtown Paris...kinda.

"Apologies for the surprise, Félix."

"I'm damn well glad you are. That scared the piss out of me." I toss my mail on the counter and toss the fridge open, grabbing a cold beer from inside. "You want one?"

"Sure."

"Okay." That's new. Sure Maxi likes to be a social drinker. I consider myself one of those as well. But he ain't the beer kind normally. He's all about the wine and other bubbly drinks. The closest I've ever gotten to those has been all those different kinds of fancy margaritas at chain restaurants in town. This...this is definitely new.

"So how'd the day..."

"Awful, just absolutely terrible." Maxi, cutting me off, grabs the beer from my hand as I try to set it down nicely on the coffee table in front of him.

"So the interview didn't go too well, I take it?" I give him a look like I honestly care about what he's saying, though I also am still totally shocked by the beet drinking.

Maxi downs the beer real quick, giving me a real weird feeling. It's like watching a cat bark or something. Sure the noise might not be as weird as hearing one speak or something, but it still ain't natural at all.

"Horrible. The bastards wanted some pushover who they could manipulate like a puppet on strings. It wasn't even my lack of skills, it was that I was too outspoken."

“Ouch, that sucks.” I give Maxi a reassuring pat on the shoulder, seeing the grey sky in his eyes cloud over like a storm’s brewing.

“What’s worse is that they gave me this pathetic excuse along the lines of needing ‘someone who can grow under their wings.’ In other words, they want a ‘pupil’ that will owe them everything and get nothing of their own in return. Disgusting.” Maxi crosses his arms and gazes out the window.

It’s starting to rain, the soft droplets hitting the windows. Loud enough to make a sound, but still soft, like delicate dancing.

“Well...sucks that your day didn’t pan out as expected, but think about it this way. They turned you down cause they think you’re too powerful. You threatened them and they cowered away. It sucks cause that was one of your dream jobs, but you ain’t gonna suffer from it. Their loss, not yours. You can go kick ass somewhere else.”

Maxi looks at me, his eyes glossy from tears, probably stress more than anything else. “Thank you for that.”

“I tried my best.” I give him a big grin, the best I can muster with that knot in my gut. Still hasn’t really gone away yet.

Abruptly Maxi leans forward and gives me a hug.

Initially I’m kind of surprised, mostly cause I’m still kinda sweaty from the gym and Maxi ain’t one for musk or any other strong body odor, but I end up giving in. I squeeze him tightly.

“Thank you, I needed that.”

I feel Maxi rest his head on my shoulder, his arms drooping slightly as he leans into me a bit more.

“Guessing somebody’s exhausted.” I chuckle, feeling Maxi’s soft and steady breathe on my neck.

“Terribly so.” Maxi perks up a little, getting out of the hug and looking into my eyes.

“Would you happen to have any dinner plans?”

“Nope. I’m open this evening.” I give him another grin.

“Good, how does something from a distant land sound?”

“Thai?”

“Thai.”

We both laugh. Maxi grabs his cellphone, scrolling through his contacts to find one of our usual places.

I always like when I can get a bit of a laugh out of Maxi, even the slightest smile can make me feel like I accomplished something. He’s always got such a serious look about him. Sleek designer clothes, perfect skin, styled hair, and artistically crafted makeup. But all of that really just seems to make him look so cold. I hate that. Not that he enjoys all that, but the idea that he would look so cold and rigid, like the embodiment of someone’s perfected equation. Raw numbers, no emotions, just the straight laced and corrected.

“Got any ideas of what you want?” Maxi glances over at me, his clear grey eyes looking at me with this bright spark in them. Probably some new idea forming, the gears clicking away like clockwork.

“Whatever you’d like. I’m open to anything.”

Chapter 2

The argument on the street is pretty interesting. A daughter is getting into a real heated argument with her mother about something. It definitely ain't a good sign. With all the gesturing and pacing, heck I could even imagine some fighting if it gets too hectic. Kind of like that one reality TV show with all those crazy weddings. That shit gets real heated quick. Hope the cops don't need to get involved or something.

Eh...I'm probably just getting way too into this. Fights aren't always like they show them on TV. They can be, but they mostly ain't that kind of thing.

Heck, the fight, if you can call it that, me and Maxi had last night ain't even that crazy. At least I don't think it was. Sure some words were said that ain't too great, but it's not like I threw something. Thought about it, but it ain't like you can just throw I takeout box like it's a frisbee. Well...I mean you can, but...okay I ain't focusing on dumb questions. Just cut to the damn chase already.

I probably fucked shit up with Maxi a bit. It's a lie that things didn't get a little bit heated. Nothing crazy or physical, I ain't that kind of person...well mostly if I'm being honest.

Maxi got all excited about that opportunity for him up in New York. Heck, if I were him I'd be that riled up about it too. It's like something out of the movies to get to join some kinda competition there.

And I just had to go right on and blow it didn't I. Starting the topic right out with the dumb shit. Like *is it worth it or do you want to risk something like that just to make a fool of yourself*. Talking that shit like I'm not the fool who fell for that shit. I tried my chances at stuff once, but that went nowhere and I fell flat on my damn face. Now here I am lecturing some kid on why that ain't a good idea.

He's got the skills and the talent so of course I think he's gonna make it. Heck, even if he loses it ain't that big of a problem. A show like that can make anyone look good even if they don't make it to the top. Hell, sometimes the first place winners get screwed over more than the "losers." Look at *American Idol*. Half the time the people on top lose their chances cause they're all tied up in shit contracts, while the runner ups get opportunities like they're fucking food stamps.

What am I even doing sitting here talking to myself like this. I clearly got some stuff to say to Maxi. I should just call him and tell him what I'm thinking and how I'm sorry about being so damned foolish last night. Heck, can't even look at Thai food the same ever again. Gonna probably have to call that T-Day or something. The battle over the kitchen table. I might've "won" the battle, but I am pushing way too far with this one. Ammunition's all out and the boys are starved. Okay...the military metaphors are a bit of a stretch.

I reach for the phone, but then I hesitate. I'm standing there, lights all out in my dingy ass apartment in nothing but a pair of old boxer shorts. I feel like a damn fool. Is it really all that dumb shit I'm thinking or is it...oh fuck it just call the damn guy.

I end up punching in the number for my friend Anne instead. Yeah...I ain't the kind to easily walk into a confrontation. If I can avoid them I will. Especially so early in the morning.

"Good morning," she says, picking up on the third ring. Her voice sounds pretty cheerful for being so early...okay it ain't that early. I ain't the kind of person to be peppy...don't really understand those kinds of people and that cheery bullshit. Could go without having to be all energy and no relaxing.

"Morning." I can vaguely hear myself echo on the other end of the line, I sound real tired. Damn, must've not had enough sleep...that ain't a surprise.

“So...how’s the day been for you? I know you’ve probably got a reason to call as I know you well enough that this isn’t usually your thing.” That sounds more like the Anne I know. Always the realistic person. Well aware of someone’s personality. Could read anybody like an open book in an instant.

“Oh...you know, the usual.” I mess with the phone cord, and yeah it’s an oldie, but I like it for what it is. Reminds me of the old days hanging around in the basement of my parent’s house. Miss those days...at least a little bit.

“Oh really, so why’d you call then? Just my curiosity...it’s *killing* me.”

“Heh...yeah, about that.” I pause, feeling myself take a moment to breathe. Feels like such a stupid thing to do, but I really feel like I ain’t breathing sometimes. Nice to remind myself that I ain’t just sitting on the sidelines. “I might have fucked up again.”

“Ugh...you know I’m not just some street side therapist. Most people would have you pay for that, ya know?” She ends with a laugh. It’s nice, sweet, but also so familiar.

Anne jokes about it a lot, but I really feel like she’s the rock I can rely on the most. It ain’t often one finds a friend that can be so reliable...though I feel like I can be a bit too abusive of that fact. She’ll tell me that just ain’t the case, but I ain’t so sure...

“Anyways...with whom did you ‘fuck it up again?’ Have you been dating around again? Cause you know, I’m *always* the gossip.”

“It ain’t nothing like that. I just kinda messed up with Maxi. Said some things I probably shouldn’t of. Something like that.” It kind of feels nice to get that off my chest.

“Mhmm, you sure this is something you need my help with? Was it *really* that bad? Cause, you know I could always just stay on the line and...”

“No...no, you don’t need to do that. Actually...are you open? I don’t got much going on here and it’d be nice to meet up for a chat or something like that.”

“Well...let me see what I’ve got scheduled on a very *blank* calendar.”

“The usual place.”

“You read my mind.”

When I pull into the parking lot of the old drive in theater I instantly spot Anne’s violet Cadillac. Vintage, too, though I ain’t too certain on the other stuff. Date, name, and shit. That stuff ain’t my cup of tea. Easy to spot. Though it ain’t that difficult in an empty lot where the only people there are her and me. Not a lot of people hang out around here anyways. Maybe drug dealers, but that shit don’t happen much around here anymore. Business is booming elsewhere I guess.

Anyways, I spot Anne sitting on the hood of her car. She’s got two fast food bags next to her, both from DQ of course. About the only fast food place around here that feels retro enough to fit with the setting. Always gotta get that feeling just right.

I pull up next to her and hop out. I feel kinda embarrassed with my tacky car. A kinda brown...ish color and it ain’t old enough to be vintage, but not new enough to be hip. It just kinda is...like it exists somewhere between all the cool shit. It kinda works I guess.

“Took you long enough,” she says, grinning. Her eyes are shining under the old lamp posts that I honestly still don’t know how they work. You’d think somebody would’ve shut off the power going here or something, but I guess the lights are better kept on anyway. Plus, who am I to question things that just work out that way. Better like this than sitting in the dark. Ain’t my bills anyways.

“I got a little lost.”

“Sure.”

Anne’s always the best dressed. Sitting there like some biker babe in her black leather jacket and purple dyed leather pencil skirt. The fishnets and heavy looking biker boots really finish off the look. It’s a real contrast with her grey hair. She dresses like she’s young and she really still is, but age is something people really like to home in on, especially with her.

I got lucky with a few graying hairs here or there in my otherwise light brown hair, but she’s gone full grey. There’s some cool dimension to it with thick streaks of light and dark grey. Makes her look like a total badass, but she’d rather not talk about it too much. I try not to bring it up on her bad days.

At least her style hasn’t changed much. Long out of style, her voluminous slicked back hair that trails behind her like a snake's tail just really adds to her overall rocker look. I still remember the look on her parent’s faces when they first saw the piercings she got. Ain’t always great to think back to that time, but like hell there ain’t some really good moments to think about.

“Well...it doesn’t matter that much. The food is still pretty fresh. I kept it all warm in one of those fancy bags from the grocery store. Reusable, but also soooo functional. Love that thing when I have to bring home leftovers.” She pats the folded up bag on her lap as if it were a prized pet or something. Guess even an inanimate object deserves some praise sometimes.

“Good. Glad that *that* didn’t end up going bad.”

We hunker down for the evening, laying back on the hood of her car. The food gets divided up between the two of us, both of us getting our fair share of burgers and chicken fingers. And there’s fries a plenty. Could probably feed a whole football team if we wanted to...which we don’t.

“So...what’s the film for tonight? Got anything good?” I glance over at Anne, who’s busying herself with another burger, her third for the night. I ain’t counting, even if I am tracking the position of my own stash. I try desperately to keep my food between my legs, but Anne’s got the special ability to distract me in just the right way or sneak something out from my pile. ‘Course I realize pretty quickly and get defensive, but the handful of fries or piece of chicken is gone before I can say anything.

“Well,” she says, chewing on a mouthful of fries, “I’ve selected the ever so appealing classic monster flick *The Wolf Man*. It’s a Universal classic and just a great monster flick, plus it’d get us in the mood for the upcoming holiday. Any complaints?”

“Nope, none from me.”

“Well that’s good, cause it’s the only disc I have on hand. You’d have to get another one if you so much as moaned or groaned about it.”

About halfway through the film the sky starts to get real dark, grey clouds blocking out the sun. At first I thought the sun had just gone down, but nope.

“Looks like rain.” I point towards the clouds that are starting to roll in, getting darker and darker the further away they are. Kinda ominous if you think about it. Explains why any movie ever that wants to be creepy has at least one rainy and stormy scene. Gotta cash in on those cliches if you can. Seems to work pretty well for most of them anyways.

“Damn, that’s gonna be a bitch.” As if by command, it starts raining. Initially it’s kinda just a soft dribble, but it gets going real quick.

As if by instinct, the two of us hop of the hood and get inside her car. Anne makes sure to grab her laptop, the headphones dangling off of it, and the extra bag of food, while I scramble to grab whatever I can before the rain completely ruins it.

“Well ain’t that just great,” I say, staring out at the now pouring rain. It looks like it’ll be a real pain to drive in. “Hope that shit won’t last all damn night.”

“Nope,” replies Anne as if on cue. She points a painted black nail at the tiny glowing screen of her phone. “It’ll only be about another hour, which works pretty well since that’s about how much longer we have with this movie.”

“Well ain’t we lucky.”

The inside of Anne’s care ain’t the most ideal place to keep going with the film, but I ain’t gonna complain. Would rather be dry sitting in comfortable leather chairs than drenched like a wet dog with a metal hood against my back.

Heck, sitting like this in the driver’s seat kind of reminds me of how me and her first met. It feels kinda dumb now, but back then it was one of the better moments of my younger days. I was pretty much at the end of my senior year in high school and I wasn’t getting much in the way of social attention. I had ended up going to the senior prom...I know, real cliché...with one of the more popular girls at the school. Guess she either found my wolfish and wild appearance captivating or she just saw a poor fool to manipulate into going with her so she could win back her actual partner. You know, high school lovers and all that bullshit. Heck, half of them are probably broken up, married with kids, in jail, or dead by this point.

Anyways, we all, meaning the entire school body, planned on going to the drive-in theater to watch a new movie. I forget exactly which one it was cause I never really paid

attention to it. I was too busy trying not to look like a damned idiot while my 'date' messed around on the backseat of her 'boyfriends' car next to me.

To make shit worse and to tie this story up quicker cause it ain't exactly that necessary to have all the details, but I wasn't sitting in my car. It wasn't my parent's either. Nope, it was hers and guess who got ditched in a drive-in theater on prom night. This guy, if you couldn't tell.

Self-pity aside, I ended up wandering around for a bit like a ghost. I think people might've laughed or something and it definitely started raining cause I remember being soaked completely and I was sick as hell the day after, but I'll always remember meeting Anne for the first time that night.

I should probably say that that wasn't really the first time we had met cause we both had an interest in theater and had spoken a little to each other in that class before, though it was mostly a 'hi, do you have yesterday's notes cause I was sick' or 'hey can I borrow your pencil' kind of thing. Maybe we said 'hi' in the halls a couple times and we did one group project together, but that wasn't really that memorable. Neither of us were really the outspoken personality type anyways.

I remember her sitting there underneath the awning of the food stall, hugging the majority of the skirt of her prom dress. It was really 80s and the thing might as well have been a tent, but I didn't care much at all. Kind of like finding s lunch table, I had found the misfits spot at the prom and she was the leader.

Was pretty common for her to get screwed anyways, especially since she was the only girl 'from' Japan in the school. Her family wasn't actually from Japan directly, nor did she have any 'accent,' but that didn't change shit. People mocked her for that crap at any opportunity they got, which was pretty often in the halls or behind her back. Heck, I still remember one of the

other girls who claimed to be her ‘friend’ walking in one Halloween pulling the corners of her eyes with buck teeth in her mouth. While I ain’t too sure of the girl got the stereotype completely right, it still ain’t a nice thing to do at all. Anne was pretty much done for the rest of the week then. I don’t think she came back for the whole of November even.

We got to talking under the awning as whatever movie was on kept playing. We didn’t really care cause we were so busy relating to how overbearing our parents were and how we never really felt right in the small town we grew up in, though we still haven’t *really* escaped it just yet. I don’t think we even want to, but it’s nice to dream about the chance anyways.

Nowadays we don’t talk about that night much. Probably because we’ve both moved on from it and grew as people. That and we really took off in college, joining the drama club and just enjoying the idea of theater. That never really left our systems either, though I don’t really look at it as much else beyond a nice therapeutic exercise to do from time to time.

“Hey,” I say, tapping on Anne’s shoulder. Thinking about the theater reminded me of the upcoming fest. “You told me there was something involving the town theater you wanted me to get involved in. Never really gave me the details so what’s it exactly?”

“Oh...oh yeah, *that*. So...you see...” Anne pauses, which she often does whenever something important is about to drop. Still remember that awkward silence after I accidentally came out to her that one night back in the late 90s. Neither of us are ever gonna forget that.

“The theater group is trying to put together a short production. Not really sure exactly what it’s going to be or if it might just be a mashup of different plays, but they’re looking for some decent talent outside of the normal group and I may or may not have mentioned you in passing.”

“Oh...so...”

“Yeah, would you be interested in getting involved. I mean, unless you’ve got something else going on, then of course I’d understand, but...”

“No...no, of course I’m open. I just...”

“So you’ll do it then.” Anne cuts me off mid sentence.

I was going to say that I’m not sure if I could do that again. I don’t have some kind of major trauma to talk about, but I just ain’t that into it. Besides, I’m kinda rusty and it would be a lot of effort to get back into it all over again.

“I don’t know...”

“Oh come on, for me? Besides, I know that Maxi is heading out of town and I *know* that you can’t use him as an excuse anymore. No ‘it’s his birthday’ or ‘it’s his cousin’s cousin’s birthday.’ You’re all open.”

“Well...maybe I have...”

“Have what? Unless you might self-combust in the next week or two I don’t think you’ve got much in the way of excuses at this point.”

“You caught me. I’ll do it.”

“Great! I’ll let them know as soon as I get the chance.”

As if on cue, the rain clears out. Slowly at first, but after a bit it stops enough to be outside and not feel like you just got dunked in a bath full of ice water. Great, my chance to escape.

“Looks like the rain has cleared up.”

“Yep, and the credits are rolling...so I guess this is goodbye for now. Thanks for the night out. I needed that.” Out of the blue, Anne gives me a kiss on the cheek.

I recoil, not out of like disgust or something. Really I was just kind of surprised. It wasn't some kind of affectionate kind that felt romantic or something.

"That's new," I say, staring at her blank-faced. I can feel my cheeks flush a bit.

"Yeah...I thought I'd try it out...not a fan. Too cliché."

There's an awkward pause, but the two of us start laughing. It's nice to get back together with Anne. Usually I'm always being busy, whether I want to be or cause I make myself busy, but it always feels off not hanging out with her.

"Should do this more often."

"I'd like that."

Chapter 3

I get back home at around midnight. While it's late, almost all the lights are still on, which is easy to tell since there aren't a lot. I live in a trailer, it ain't that big. Turn on one light and the rest of them might as well be. I still remember the day I flipped one fucking switch and those new bulbs I got once made the whole thing light up like I had the damn sun in my place. Never buying those damned things again. I smashed them to bits that day. Didn't give a damn that we had to go a week without light in the place.

Heading in, I make sure to close the door behind me and lock it, something I am told I don't do a lot. It's a bad habit.

I toss my keys onto the kitchen counter. They almost make it into that flat little wood plate thing a friend got me once...it almost did. Really don't get the use of those. I'd be better off just putting them on the counter or something, but nooo I gotta have that fancy key holder thing. What even is it anyways? A plate or coaster? It ain't big enough to eat off of, but I sure as hell can't put a drink on it. Damned thing has no other uses, but I can't toss it cause that'd be rude.

Anyways, I just leave my keys sitting besides the thing. Silent protest or whatever you want to call it.

I make my way over to the couch, trying my best not to make a lot of noise. I know Maxi's around here somewhere and I'd be damned if I interrupted something.

Could be anything with him. One day it's "me time" or whatever he called it, next he's all dolled up in women's lingerie standing in the middle of my damned bedroom...emphasis on MY bedroom...posing for some "tastefully explicit" photos.

Now he's going on about photography and self expression and stuff. For all I know he's turned my room into a fucking photo processing set up. And he'd probably go all out with it too.

I consider myself an open person. I don't mind the revolving door of male lovers that come through...heck I've participated in a couple triples or quadruples myself, but by god if I ain't a bit pissed every time I walk in and see my place turned into a funhouse. Half the time I don't even know where he gets that shit.

I let the guy crash at my place cause he's in a bit of a slump and I do my best to support his photography business. I'm his fucking model...muse or whatever else he damn well calls it. It's better than drag cause I doubt he'd get as much of an opportunity with that. He's good, just not THAT good. I even let him put together a little set up out back with a tent and everything. He's even got a space heater with him for those cold Nevada nights. All I ask is some privacy. "Me time" I guess you could say.

Heck, on the occasion I've even let him use my bed. I'm no saint, but I ain't a crook. If he needs a nice place to sleep or there's a big creature out back I'll let him crash inside. Heck, I've nursed him when he's sick while I had my own shit to deal with.

Damn, I'm really diggin into him ain't I? I feel myself get all flustered. Got a feeling in my gut like I've done something wrong.

I like the guy, I really do. Maxi's great where it counts. Maxi, or Maximilian as his parents call him...or used to, is a fun guy. He's got a lot of spirit in him. Can't go a day without him getting at least one laugh outta me. Course he's a bit eccentric, dressing femininely and wearing makeup on the occasion, but I like that about him. He's my opposite and it just kinda works.

And he likes me cause he can talk about stuff with me that ain't a lot of other people out there willing to listen about. And as a bonus I can too. He's real nice about being understanding. Great listener. Could probably talk forever if I wanted to.

Point is is that they're the real deal when it comes to friends. Could rely on them for anything. Specially nice now with all the stuff going on in my life. I know life's supposed to be about all those ups and downs, but it's nice to have a constant like him.

I try my best to not plop myself down onto the couch too loudly. Well...the opposite happens...kinda. So the couch I got for my living room is on the old side. Like old. As in, probably from the 60s or 70s old. I got it for the character. One look at my trailer and you know who I am. Rugged leather couch, a sturdy wood stool, plaid curtains, wood plank walls, and a nice aged beige carpet. Makes me feel right at home.

The problem with that is that half my stuff is old or "vintage" at best. Sure I like it, but damn does half this stuff only kind of work. The couch is one of the worst offenders. It creaks when you want it nice and quiet and barely can be thought of as comfortable on the best of days.

I love it though, I really do. Been through a lot together. From heart breaks to secrets only me and the cushions know, I've got a lot of emotional attachment to it. Sure it's got some mystery stains, but I ain't given it up.

"Back so late?" says Maxi in his shrill voice.

Okay, it ain't that bad, but I'm not at peace with how high it sometimes go. We can be someplace and his voice'll go from kinda smooth and velvety to scream laughs that make the glasses shake.

"You've been drinking?" Maxi comes out of my room in his fancy pink robe. He calls it a kimono, but even I can tell that the only "kimono" thing about it is the half-assed pattern some factor makes somewhere in bulk.

Aside from that train wreck, he's got a towel wrap on his head and is waddling like a duck. Probably because he's been painting his nails. Looks like a real fool.

“Yup,” I reply, taking off my boots. I kick my feet up on the coffee table, my split second senses letting me narrowly avoid resting my heels on a mysteriously wet spot on the coffee table. I don’t wanna know what it is, but I’ve got two good ideas.

“Let’s be serious.” Maxi gives me this look. It’s kinda accusatory, but not really. About the only harsh thing about it is that dang bright purple eyeshadow and thick black eyeliner. For a guy on the small side he really towers over me. Standing there looking at me with a hand on his hip and eyes peering into my soul.

“Feel like you could kill someone with a look like that.”

“Ha, I know. I’ve been practicing.” With a dismissive wave of his hand Maxi plops himself down next to me on the couch. Not right next to me cause we ain’t that kinda close. The couch is just kinda small.

“So what have you really been up to?” Maxi, as quick as a hummingbird’s wings, goes from a cheerful expression to a kinda serious one. It ain’t that bad, I can still see that usual spark in his eyes.

“Nothing crazy, if that’s what you’re thinking. I just hung around with some friends for a bit.” I give Maxi a shrug, trying my best to play off the conversation. I know what’s probably coming.

“Who?” he says with the quick sharpness of an owl’s cry. Heck, might’ve thought there was one in here if I weren’t looking right at him.

Yep. Knew it was gonna come up.

“Anne,” I reply, my gaze fixed to the floor. I glance up and spot Maxi’s souring face.

“Look, I know how you feel about it and I...”

“Hey. Enough talking.” With a quick movement, Maxi pushes a finger onto my lips. The strong and really nasty stench of nail polish floods my nose. Hate that shit. It reeks so damn much.

I can tell Maxi ain't interested in going at me again about the whole Anne situation. He hates it when I bring her up...and also hates it when he brings her up.

Maxi ain't a fan of Anne. Specially after she became Angelique. To him she kinda changed. I don't really notice it, but he thinks she's off or that something ain't right about how often she comes by. Claims she's just using me cause I'm weak willed or some bullshit like that. If you're gonna call a man a doormat then go for it.

I mean, sure, we had our feelings for each other in the past and those kinda soured, but she's still my friend. I want her to be happy, especially since she's so close. And hell, who better to come to for advice on making a name for yourself than the guy who did...kinda. Okay, not really, but I came close.

All she wants from me is someone to rely on, especially now more than ever. Her family sure as hell don't give a damn about her. So if that's the case and she ain't got nobody else, why wouldn't I offer? It's the least I can do.

“I picked up a small cake earlier. Thought it would be a nice dessert to split. It's in the fridge if you want the other half.” Maxi gives me a kinda sympathetic look. Can't really tell if that's what it is. For all I know it might as well be pity.

“Cool, thanks. I'll keep that in mind.”

Maxi smirks, a kind of wide grinned smile. The one you'd give someone who you have more to say, but are too afraid to say something. It irks me a lot.

“You got something else you wanna say?” I cross my arms, scratching at the hair on my elbows.

Maxi pauses for a bit, thinking written all across his face. While he can be pretty difficult to read most of the time, sometimes there’s those rare cracks where I can see right through him.

“Well...” He kinda trails off for a bit. Guess he second guessed himself. Probably for the best. “...are you still open to tonight’s agreement?”

“Yup, you can have my bed for the night.” I give him a wide grin, though it feels kinda fake.

Spending all night at the theater with Anne made me focus on other things, but now that I’m here and sitting down I really get left to my thoughts. I glance over and watch as Maxi goes into my bedroom. It’s weird. I’m getting this kinda tugging feeling. Like something’s toying with my heart. Kinda makes me want to tell him to stay out here for just a bit longer...and he’s gone.

With an audible click I watch as the door closes. Feels weird being alone again. The drive was fine cause I had stuff to focus on, like driving to start with. Plus I’m a wee bit under the influence so that made it an experience in and of itself, but now it’s just kinda nothing.

I look around, feeling kinda like one of those meerkats in those documentary television things. Lost, confused, a little scared, and just really, really...lonely. The kitchen’s the same as it always is, ugly countertops and all. Real tiny too. Still kinda regret ripping out the breakfast bar thing and replacing it with an actual bar. Sure it’s kinda nice to have a spot to fix drinks and entertain guests...ourselves, but it don’t look that great. Kinda sad, really. Looks so out of place.

My body feels kinda weak and I can feel the urge to just flop down onto the couch take over. Resisting the tempting idea of sleeping fully dressed, I pick myself back up off the couch

and wander into the bathroom. Flicking a switch, I'm greeted to the sight of ugly dull blue tile and old worn down linoleum floors. The buzz of the lights...or is it the fan...kicks on as I close the door behind me. I consider locking it, but it ain't like Maxi's gonna just barge right in, plus he's seen more than enough already.

Plopping down on the toilet seat, I start taking care of my...business. I glance over at the tiny magazine stand next to my dingy porcelain throne and grab a few. Shuffling through, I am greeted with various faces of attractive models, all pretty much male. Some ladies are in there too...probably. Some of these magazines are on quality fashion. You know, tasteful, elegant, refined, and what other bullshit words someone throws out their ass. Most of them, though...not so much. You've got dirty mags to hell an back. One heck of a selection. Feels like something a fraternity should have. Always feels weird having them out like this, but Maxi's pretty much set on keeping them where they are. Don't get too much company anyways. Plus, who even reads the magazines anymore.

Thinking about it, Anne don't come around here much...well that's probably just for the best I guess. Maxi would probably have a fit if he ever spotted the "enemy" inside of our sanctuary. Wouldn't really call it much of that as the whole place just reeks of something. Musk maybe...if you'd call it that. I mean...I ain't the most well cut, prim and proper guy around, but I ain't that bad...I guess. I can clean up real nice. Maybe the laundry situation ain't the best and I sometimes feel like I'm in some frat dorm, but we ain't that bad over here. Eh...who am I kidding. Probably is that bad sometimes.

Or is it Maxi's *friends*, cause there's always that really strong smell that comes from all those kinds of places. Like those back alleys or spots next to dumpsters behind gas stations...okay maybe that's just being straight up dirty. But, you know, brothels and shit.

Always got that weird mix of cheap perfume and that sweaty stench. Kinda like two polar opposites that really just don't go that well together, but somehow fit...almost kinda right in a way. I mean it probably don't smell great, but I ain't...okay why in the hell am I focusing on smells all of a sudden.

After reaching my limit of looking at shaved guys with their beef all out in the open, I toss the magazines back in the rack. I sit for a bit, but then start feeling a little bit restless. Mindlessly I just start trying to keep my attention off my thoughts. I'm either acting like I got my hands for the first time or doing some kind of rhythmic "heel-toe" bouncing with my feet...

God damn my socks are bad. Real dirty, full of holes, and looking ratty as all hell. Heck, my big toes sticking out of the right one like a thick and hairy sausage. I start messing with the hole in my sock, tugging at it, hearing the stings all rip apart.

You know, seeing Anne again really makes me think a bit. I remember back then how she'd always be the kind of person to be respectful of somebody, but also put herself in places when she'd see something that just ain't right. Heck, that's kinda why we got together I The first place...

Wait, why did we get together in the first place. I mean, it ain't like I'm a prince charming or something. More like a damned brute if I'm being honest. Anne, on the other hand, is like an angel from heaven or something else that just don't belong in this world. She's gonna be something special to somebody...

Looking around I spot the shower drain and well pretty much the whole damned tub itself. It looks like a real mess in there. Lots of hair in the drain and the tub basin is starting to get a kinda grime on it.

“Probably should deal with that at some point,” I mutter to myself. I glance back down at the progress I’ve made on my sock.

“Damn it.” I sigh, kinda heavily. Sounded more like I huffed or puffed like the big bad wolf or something. I ripped the whole all the way across the front of my sock, from big to pinky. “Well that’s a goner.”

Getting back up, I shuffle over to the sink. I glance at myself in the mirror, a bit dirty as it is. Looks like one of Maxi’s toys left a lipstick message on the top corner.

“Bastard,” I mutter under my breath. The red kinda just moves around while a try to rub it off with my hand. It just ain’t doing the trick. I push it one way and the smudge just moves with it. Almost like the damned stain is just adapting to whatever I do. That isn’t gonna go nowhere if I’m being honest with myself.

I stop myself from making the whole mess worse and catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror.

“Damn, you’re one ugly son of a bitch,” I say before looking back down at the sink. Watching the water drain. Spinning round and round like a ride that I’d rather just get off.

It feels right, I guess, to say that to myself. I look like a fucking drowned rat or something. My hair’s all matted and sweaty, sticking to my forehead a bit. Plus I’m getting on the scruffy side and I’ve got some nasty looking bags under my eyes. Teeth don’t look much better, but that ain’t a problem worth fixing at the time being.

Feeling real groggy, I stumble back out and over to the couch, flipping of the lights as I go by the front door. Takes a bit of extra effort, but I get out of my blue jeans and take off my flannel. I take one last trip over to the kitchen and toss my socks in the trash. I shuffle back over to the couch and flop down on it with a loud creak.

It takes a bit, but I finally drift off into a heavy doze.

I wake up to the smell of pancakes and maple syrup. Smells real nice, but I realize real quick that ain't nobody other than me in this house able to properly cook shit. Definitely not Maxi. The smell of something burning hits my nose and I hop up real quick, glancing over in the direction of the tiny fire extinguisher off in the corner by the counters.

“Good morning,” Maxi says, looking real surprised in his man candy apron and pink bunny slippers. In his hand is a pan that he's holding over the trash can, pushing the burnt hockey puck of a pancake into it.

“Morning,” I reply, just as shocked as he is. Maxi never cooks, heck I've never seen the man wake up early enough to do this in the first place.

“What time is it?” I glance over at the clock above the sink. “It's fucking 7:30 in the morning. Did hell freeze over or something? You never do this kinda shit normally.”

“First of all, rude, and, second, I just felt that I was a bit too...stand-offish last night. I thought I'd do better by making breakfast. Clearly...” He pushes another burnt pancake into the garbage, accompanied by a loud flop...or crunch. “...I'm just not that good of a cook.”

“Okay.” I rub my eyes, getting out all the morning grogginess. “Sorry about the jab, I was just a bit surprised is all.”

“And...?”

“‘And’ what? Breakfast is in the garbage with my old socks and I don't see much else on the table.”

Maxi gives me a look, a mix of puppy dog eyes and a sour glare. Don't know how he does it, but he can make to very different looks work together so well.

“Ugh...thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now was that so hard?” Maxi looks real pleased with himself.

To show him up and add extra salt to the wounded ego, I walk over to the trash and reach in to grab a puck-cake and move to put it in my mouth. “Looks pretty good anyways.”

“WhaaaAaat?” Maxi shrieks, his eyes glancing at me, horrified. “Put that thing back.”

“I kid.” I drop the burnt thing back into the can, hearing a thud as it lands on top of its siblings.

“Good...” Maxi gives me a once over, glaring down at something. I can list a number of guesses, just depends on how dirty he feels at the moment. “Now put THAT away, too.”

“Huh,” is all I get out, feeling all flustered. I glance down real quick and get greeted...with nothing. My manhood is still safely tucked away in its pouch as it should be. I feel my cheeks get real warm when I hear Maxi chuckling. “The hell?”

“Oh, keep it down. I’m just playing. Besides, breakfast is burnt and I was getting a real craving for sausage and eggs.” Maxi gives me a wink. “Would you clean up, I’m starving and you look like a mess.”

“Fuck off,” I say with a chuckle, waving him off. I head off towards the bathroom to clean up. Gonna be a long day anyways.

The parking lot of the mom and pop family restraint we, meaning Maxi, picked looks empty as a desert. Barren save for a few solid looking trucks. I maybe spot one minivan, but ain’t much else as far as people. Unless one of them trucks is a clown car or something. Hope that ain’t a bad sign. Eh, who am I kidding...the food probably sucks. Hard to find anything that great out here. It’s like finding a needle in a real big haystack.

“This is...nice,” Maxi says with a real heavy layer of sarcasm.

“Yup,” I respond while watching my breath come out in tiny clouds. Damn weather forecast said it would be hot as hell outside, but it’s damn cold, even for fall.

“You sure you don’t have any other ideas.” Maxi gives me this look, the kind that he normally gives when he expects me to have a better answer in mind.

I do, but I ain’t saying nothing. “Nope, this is the place you wanted to try so let’s go to it.”

With a sigh, Maxi heads towards the door. I trail behind him, mostly because I enjoy watching his walking when he doesn’t want to go through with something. He gets real tense in the shoulders and tries to make himself walk looking like he’s more confident than he really is by using a runway walk. It don’t work. He looks funny as heck. Especially in his oversized black trench coat. He might wear nice clothes, which is where all his money goes half the time, but he sure as hell can’t pull them off most of the time.

We get seated without much of an incident, save for a couple people staring at us like the circus just walked in. Maybe we were the clowns I was talking about. Anyways, ain’t much we can do about it. He’s a kinda tall lanky guy wearing makeup with flaming red hair in a trench coat and heels and I look like a flannel wearing sasquatch that just walked out of the fucking woods. We look about as right as prostitutes in a cathedral. Luckily we got a corner table so we won’t have to deal with that weird feeling of people staring at your back. God I hate that feeling. Sends chills down my spine just thinking about it.

The restaurant looks okay, though. Very “I like to hunt” in here. Lots of animal heads and stuffed tiny critters. One squirrel looks like it’s giving me the evil eye or something. Plus it’s got all wood. Floors, walls, ceiling. Everything is wood. I know I normally like that rugged feel, but this might be a bit too much for me. Goes from homey to backwoods real quick.

Soon enough the waitress comes out all dressed up in an old timey country style dress. The checkered kind with those puffed sleeves. Basically just picture Dorothy Gale and you've got the whole look down perfectly. It looks real odd and I don't think I like the feeling of it. Anywhere else I'd be looking at that like it were a damn dream, I like that vibe of the old days...even if they ain't the golden days some might think they were. But with all this *stuff* around us I feel real uncomfortable.

It ain't like everything in here is screaming 'you don't belong' or something. No, it's just that feeling. Like taking a wrong turn somewhere. You know you ain't really lost, but that chill running down your neck, hairs standing up like a tense dog. Something just ain't right.

"Interesting decor choices." Maxi looks around. He's about as uninterested in the place as I am.

"Yup."

"Hm."

"There a problem?" I can tell by the look on his face that Maxi is seconds away from just bolting out that door.

"Mhmm." He gives me a slight nod.

"Doughnuts?" I reply.

He gives me the okay sign and we both get up, set down a couple bucks for the waitress that only just showed up, her mouth only just beginning to form the word 'Hi' like she's said it a million times before, and book it.

A couple minutes later we're down the street sitting in the bed of my truck pigging out on some doughnuts. I've got my glazed and cakes, Maxi's got his sprinkles. Added bonus we found a place that sells some decent coffee. I down almost half the cup in one go.

“Better?”

“Better.”

I pause for a moment, taking in all of the surroundings. Trucks are driving by on the highway. Couple of RVs too. Camping sounds fun, but the work I’d need to put into it sounds awful. Plus an RV ain’t cheap.

“What’s all this really about, Maxi? You ain’t the kind to do something for nothing.” I take another swig of my coffee, trying my best not to look over at him. Maybe I’m overreacting or something, but I just get the feeling that this ain’t the kind of conversation that’ll leave everyone feeling great. “This is all nice and stuff, you buying the grub and being all sweet-talk like nothing happened, but I ain’t stupid.”

Maxi stays silent for a bit, sipping on his drink through a straw. Suddenly I feel his head resting on my shoulder. I glance down at him, trying not to react too quickly. Sometimes with him I feel like I can get a bit defensive when physical contact is involved. Ain’t like the occasional *action* was just a cakewalk from the start. We’ve done a lot of things, but I still ain’t quite sure where we stand on all this.

“I just want you to be happy.”

I definitely feel like I just got punched in the gut and it ain’t pleasant. My eyes may even be watering up a little bit, but it ain’t as bad as I thought it might be.

“I worry that you’ll get hurt.”

And there’s the kicker. I feel myself tense up real quick and I know that Maxi felt it too cause he shot up real quick.

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Then what did you mean by that, huh?” I can tell the tone of my voice is getting defensive and I hate how easily I fall into that same damn track, but dammit if ain’t had enough of this bullshit. “Cause I think I know exactly what you mean, and I ain’t a fan of you starting this again.”

“Okay, yes, you get it. My point is crystal clear to you. All I’m saying is that it seems a little weird that she would just come back into your life out of the blue and just want some help.”

“And what else do you think she wants? Money? Cause I just have a shit ton of that lying around in my fucking trailer. Don’t try beating around the damn bush anymore. What is the real issue you have with her?” I can feel myself turning red as all hell and my vision’s getting blurry. I’m pushing too far this time, I can tell that much, but it’s so hard not to.

“Ugh, fine. She’s a bitch. I don’t like her. She’s done nothing, except be a bad influence on you. She walks all over you only when she feels like it. There, I said it, happy?”

I can tell Maxi is staring at me. I can feel the gaze he’s giving me. It’s anger, but also so much pity. “You said it.”

“Let’s be serious here for a moment. Why would she, the preppy chick from college who could have dated literally anyone else, want to stick around with you. You’re a mess.”

“Yup.”

“You crashed and burned the second you left college. Tried being a famous cover artist, that flopped instantly because all you were good for was shitty Vegas shows and even those didn’t want you in the end. You tried writing a shitty self-help guide because you had a waning level of fame and wanted to bank on that for something. And what happened, you shredded the only manuscript at chapter 1. Chapter 1, Beau. 1.”

“Yup.” I can feel that stabbing feeling you get when someone you trust just kinda rips off the bandage on old wounds. And it ain’t like he’s wrong. I went in with that cocky attitude that Anne loved so much and ended up flopping harder than I’d even thought possible. Heck the only reason I stayed out here is cause of the fear of going back home making me dread seeing anyone again.

“And it just so happened that Ms. Angelique found someone new right as you crossed over the edge of that cliff. I get that life ain’t fair and bad things can just sometimes pile up, but I know damn well when someone is trying to fuck me over and that’s exactly what I see.”

I just feel defeated at this point. The tears are flowing now, my body’s starting to shake from sobs that I don’t want to let out. I don’t have much of a choice in the matter cause I can feel my throat getting sore, but I want to hold them back so badly.

“I...,” I feel the words kinda get stuck in my throat. Hurts a lot. Like I’m choking, but I ain’t really. I can breathe, but it ain’t that easy. Feels like a knot in my chest is about to burst or something.

I hop up, scaring Maxi from his spot next to me. He looks kinda dazed and confused himself, like a lost animal that just went on the defensive. I hate the look, it scares the hell out of me. Without thinking, I hop into the driver’s seat of my truck.

“Where are you going? Beau, answer me.”

“I don’t know.” I can’t say much else, even if I do know that I’m just heading right home. Ain’t making no stops or nothing, I just gotta get out of here. The stress is killing me and I ain’t gonna handle it well. Feels like I’m just being ripped apart at the damn seams and I can’t keep doing that kind of shit no more.

Without thinking twice I speed off, leaving Maxi in the rear view mirror.

Chapter 4

Thinking about Maxi gets me all flustered again. Don't like the feeling. Yesterday we ended it on a pretty bad note. I kinda ditched the guy in the doughnut shop parking lot. I sort of get pretty heated in an argument and my nerves about had it that day. Feel real bad about it. Probably tossed and turned all night over that one. Luckily he got a ride from a passing trucker and got home a bit later...yeah that ain't helping much. I know the guys probably pissed at me. I probably deserve that much.

I flop over onto my stomach, the sheets get tossed off the bed. Whole room looks a mess. Got some beer bottles sitting all over the place. Some of them look like I hardly touched them. I definitely had too much, if the damned headache ain't a wake up call.

"Damnit," I mutter groggily, putting my hands over my eyes.

My alarm starts going off, making loud beeping noises. I want to shut it up, but I ain't about to get my ass out of bed just yet. But the longer it keeps going, the more annoying it gets. Making my headache feel like a hatchet got buried in my forehead.

I resist the urge to just slam my head into the headboard. Instead, I stupidly decide that the best option on what to do next about my life is slamming my fist down on a nightstand corner. I miss the whole clock completely. That bastard. "Fuuuuck."

Gritting my teeth before any more of my sailor mouth starts running any more swears, I stumble out of bed. After getting my bearings through groggy eyes and almost tripping on those damned sheets, I stumble out into the hall. Just barely miss a broken bottle. Would of been one hell of a start to the day.

In the hall I'm greeted by the sight of Maxi sleeping soundly in the couch. Looks like a damned cherub all wrapped up in pink fluffy clouds. Wouldn't be so bad to see if I didn't feel the urge to vomit looking at him. And it ain't disgust. Guilt's just got a real good left hook is all.

Guess maybe something else is the cause too, 'cause out of the blue I get real nauseous. Taking an abrupt turn, I barge right into the bathroom and aim for the porcelain goal.

Couple minutes later of alcohol coming back out, lots of painful dry heaving leaves me feeling all kinds of sore, achy, and watery eyed. I prop myself up with my elbow on the toilet rim. Gonna need a damned cold shower after this one. Feels like my guts just got all tangled up.

I can feel my chest shaking, my breath coming out ragged. Damn near killed myself with that run probably.

"You good?" asks a both disinterested, but also kinda concerned voice from beyond. I glance up at the pink clad Maxi standing over me.

"Speak of the devil." I don't really feel like saying "yes"...or "no" cause I ain't about to start another round of dependency on Maxi. For all the shit I give him for acting like a damned fool and living like tomorrow ain't nothing more than fiction, I sure as hell ain't gonna act all weak again.

He's a damned kid compared to me. Sure we ain't too many years apart, but the guy's got more spunk than me. Heck, his career swapping probably shows more intelligence than I'd give him the credit for.

"Okay, let's get you up big fella." With a lot of struggling, Maxi gets me off my ass and in some kind of standing position. "To the couch we go."

We stagger back out into the hall and, with a lot of maneuvering, manage to get to the couch. I spot Maxi's pink blankets covering the couch and instantly want to recoil at the idea of getting on top of them like I am right now.

"What? Is it the pink? I can get..."

"No, I just don't want to ruin your blankets is all."

Maxi gives me this look, a kind of accusatory one, but a bit more lighthearted. "You're wasted...and insane, but a mess first and foremost."

Maxi quickly fixes up the blankets, grabbing one to drape around my shoulders. It's comfortable, even if it does have a lot of sparkles in it.

"You sure," I say, looking at his eyes for a genuine response.

"Yes, now sit down and quit whining. They're blankets, not thousand dollar sheets. I bought those at fucking Walmart." With a kind of forceful push, Maxi gets me down on the couch and quickly covers me up with blankets. "Besides, what are trailer-mates for other than to help each other out in their time of need. And you clearly need some help."

"Well...thanks then."

"Now...how many did you have? Two, three...?" Maxi stares down at me, looking kinda concerned, in a motherly kind of way. Like he's got this whole saintly caretaker vibe going on. It's kind of unnerving.

"Seven," I mutter under my breath.

One of Maxi's eyebrows raise up real high. Maybe it's just his makeup, but I swear the guy has got some really angular brows. Like mine aren't bad, but damn. He doesn't say nothing though. Just gives me this look and then walks towards the kitchen.

I hear him making his way through the cabinets, making noises as he moves stuff around. I swear I organize my shit, but I guess it ain't that good if he can't find exactly what he's looking for. That or he's looking for the rat poison.

“What you searching for, Maxi?”

“Coffee. Thought you bought some recently, but...op, found it. It was behind all the cereal.” Maxi peers out from behind a cabinet door before shutting it. “You know you buy a lot, and I mean a LOT, of cereal. How much of these do you even need?”

“It ain't that much...” feeling judged, and embarrassed, I bury my face into the blanket, feeling my sweaty bangs getting shoved into my face. Not as pleasant an experience as the soft blankets would lead you to believe.

“It's like a whole supermarket in here. For a trailer...this is a lot.” He motions towards my cereal stash.

I feel the judgement radiate from him. “Other than judging me, what else are you doing in there...you know, anything helpful?”

“Working on it.”

“On what, exactly? All you got out was coffee.”

“A special hangover concoction I made in college. You'll enjoy it. Works really well.”

“It damned well better.” With a huff, I try to stretch out on the couch. That goes about as well as I expected. It hurts, a lot. Aching all over ain't fun at all.

“Here.” Maxi hands me a cup of real sludgy looking coffee. Black as can be, too.

“You sure this'll work?” I gaze over at the pot he's still holding. “And that?”

“Hush, don't worry about it. Drink up.”

I take a sip...and instantly regret. First comes the gagging. The taste is awful, like burnt rubber. Heck, this is probably what straight tar tastes like. I ain't a fan. Then came the burning. Like it ain't hot, like burning your skin hot, but it still isn't nice, specially when downing it.

“What the h...”

With the speed of a cheetah, Maxi dumps the contents of the pot on top of my head.

I feel it run straight down my neck and back.

“The Fu...CK.” I instantly toss off the blankets and shoot straight up. The damned ice cold water went all the way down. All the way down.

“That's what I call my 'hangover fix.' A shitty cup of coffee that I tossed into the microwave for a couple seconds and an ice cold pot of water down the back. Works every time.”

“The fuck kind of 'fix' is that?”

“One that doesn't make your drinking habits sound comfortable and relaxing. I'm not running a spa either.” Maxi crosses his arms and scowls at me. “Plus you can take it as revenge for yesterday. You left me in that damned parking lot. Probably spent the day drinking, too. Can tell I'm right since your floor is evidence enough.”

“Okay, I get it. Deserved that anyways,” I reply, readjusting the strap of my underwear. It moved and I don't need no surprises at the moment.

“You definitely did.”

“Well, I know it don't mean much, but I'm sorry about that. I can get way too angry real quick. And I...”

“I forgive you.” Maxi gives me a cheerful look. For someone who looks like the type to hold grudges, Maxi is really the opposite. He holds on to only a few connections that he's made. Double-edged sword sometimes, but I want to try not to be one of them.

“Hug,” I say, holding my arms out wide.

“Ye...God, no. You reek, go shower. Make sure you actually get everywhere, too.” Maxi exaggerates his reaction a lot, which is entertaining as always.

Today’s the first day of all those fall festivities in town. Starting off the season right with a Halloween fair that goes way into the night. It’s kinda early for anything Halloween, since we’re only through half of October, but everybody’s got something going on closer to the date and ain’t nobody going to leave their houses...or kids...unattended. Plus, who doesn’t like showing up to a big fair with all sorts of goodies and treats. Heck, it’s fun to even dress up. Most of the time the costumes people buy get one use and then they’re collecting dust in a closet somewhere. This gives those folks a reason to make that purchase worthwhile.

As far as I go, I’m all about the holidays. All of them are fun to me. Couldn’t pick a favorite if you asked me...okay, that’s a lie. I like Halloween. I always go all out with the costumes. Decorations too. Probably where all my money goes by the end of Thanksgiving. Have to go overtime for Christmas. Got to get Maxi something nice to show how appreciative of his existence I am.

“You sure about this,” I’m struggling to keep the goat horns on my head. The damned things keep falling off.

Maxi made the suggestion that I dress up as a satyr for this year’s fest. Claimed it would work well with his Aphrodite look.

I didn’t really give a damn about our costumes clashing, but I’ll take any excuse to dress like an animal. Anything that I can pull together from stuff that looks all natural is fine by me. Satyrs are definitely no exception. Only part that got real messy was trying to line my eyes with

brown. I can handle makeup without any problem, but by God not the eyes. But...it sounded cool so I did it anyways.

“Yes, it looks great. Besides...” Maxi brushes a blonde strand of his wig out of his face. “...it looks really cute on you.”

I’d take the compliment if it weren’t for the fact that this is one of the least comfortable costumes I’ve ever worn. For starters, the horns are irritating as all hell. That ain’t nothing new. Plus, the makeup is kinda weird. Eyes, upper lip, and some on my nose. Really, really want to scratch an itch.

“The freckles are nice.” I look myself over in the mirror again. I feel proud of how it came together, even if I do hate how it feels. At least I get to wear plain clothes. Just tossed something together out of my closet. Pair of old blue jeans and suspenders. No shirt though. Maxi says I got enough fur as is. Hence why he thinks I should show it. Only “satyr” thing about it is a goat head necklace and fluffy brown tail that Maxi made for me. He wanted to make sure the color matched my real hair. Consistency and stuff like that.

“Okay, quit feeling yourself. You look good, but I need my moment, too.” Maxi, with padded hips, shoves past me sending my goat ass out into the hall.

Honestly, how we both fit into that bathroom with him in his costume is a shocker to me. I ain’t one to be superstitious, but that’s some magic if I’ve ever seen it.

“You almost done?”

“Five more minutes, please. Lady’s got to look her best for the main event.”

“‘Five more minutes,’ my ass. I’ll be outside.”

“Kay.” Maxi gives me a quick wave and a general glance in my direction. He likes to do that often when he’s “deep in thought.” Really he just got it from an old film and decided to mimic the act till it got old. It’s gotten so old that it’s decrepit, but he’s still going at it.

Outside it’s kinda nice, at least for Fall. The sun’s not out, but it’s still pretty light in the sky. It’s a light calming gray, not a dark stormy gray. Comfortably in season without the added gloom. Plus the trees are all getting their colors and the town just looks a lot more cheerful with the added warmth. Summer doesn’t really get that bright here so the place looks a bit dull. The holidays will turn that right around...god I sound like a Hallmark movie. Got to mark that channel off my list this season...that’s a lie.

There’s a nice breeze, too. Would be better if I weren’t still dealing with a mad headache from earlier.

The neighbors are out in full force, wandering about in all sorts of costumes. All kinds of ghouls and creatures of the night passing by. Kinda nice that the spooky vibe can be stretched out even a little bit longer than the normal years. Anne’ll probably love it.

Bringing Anne up trigger another round of fresh tears and a raging headache. Feels like someone just smacked my forehead. Goddamn do I wish all this would just pass by without an issue, but it feels like shits just about to go down. Especially with the play and all that coming up real soon. Feels like it’s rushing by, but I just want it all to slow down so bad. Feels like a bad case of whiplash. Everything’s just dragging me along, but I’m wanting to walk at a leisurely pace. Trying to enjoy it all, but I feel like I’m tumbling down.

Okay, enough of the doom and gloom. Not the time for that now. I pull myself together. Grabbing the cooler, I lug it over to the back of my truck and toss it in. Well...I did something. Ain’t nothing I’m forgetting. I glance back at my trailer. Looks kinda sad. It’s old red siding and

white trim windows. Real quirky, but somehow feels plain to me. I mean it wasn't ever really the ideal position I'd like to have been in at this point in my life. Working a couple jobs, living in a trailer with a roommate, and being single at this point all ain't so bad. All of it's just not ideal. Feels small in comparison to...

Okay, enough. Got to focus and not let the bad shit come to the forefront. I ain't here to argue with nobody and I'm not about to start now.

"All done," Maxi announces, stepping out of the trailer in the gaudiest of outfits I've ever seen, which is about as much of an insult as it is a compliment. For starters, the wig is a bit much. A real golden blonde, like gold gold, not honeysuckle or some shit. It's straight bold gold. Plus he's got on some ornate metal laurel crown. White gold though, at least the color. The dress is also a lot. Draped in all the right places, but still so much more excessive than I'd think you'd need to pull off that Greek look. Thank God that he won't be moving much. Would be hell trying to get him around in that thing. He's got on that damned shawl, too. That thing looks like he just bought a shit ton of sheer gold fabric at a store...okay definitely that's what he did...and then just decided not to cut it. The damned thing could pass for a bride's train if you stretched it out all the way. But Maxi's always gotta be the one to show everyone else up.

"You look a bit...much." I don't know if that makes the most sense, but I feel like there just ain't much else someone can say in the face of such an over-the-top person standing right in front of them. Heck, could probably pass him off as a literal goddess if we tried hard enough.

"Wait..." Thinking about it, I don't know if Maxi'll even fit in the truck. "Are you gonna be able to get in the truck? It ain't small, but that's no clown car."

"Watch me."

After a couple minutes of pushing, tugging, and all sorts of tucking, we're finally on the road. Luckily the drive to the theater is pretty straightforward, just got to head downtown. It ain't central, but it's close enough to one of the squares that I won't have any trouble. Haven't been there since a couple nights ago and I ain't exactly excited about the prospect of seeing some old faces popping up again.

Chapter 5

That Bitch is all I can think, sitting there on the concrete slab or whatever the hell you call those damned yellow things in parking lots. Maybe they ain't always yellow, but they're almost always there stopping you from pulling right on through. Yeah it'd be nice and easy to just drive ahead, especially when there ain't nobody to stop you, but nope, those guys just gotta black you right from doing that.

Anyways, concrete hating aside, that *Bitch* just went and left me alone...on prom night...standing here in my damned rental tux, blue as can be, looking like a real fool.

You know, everything was going real nice. I was a perfect guy, doing all the right shit to make things best as can be. Got the tux with the few savings I could scrap together, one of those dumb flower wrist things and even a matching one for myself, one in the chest pocket of course, like the movies and stuff. Heck, I even took her out to the best place a highschooler could afford. Sure DQ ain't something special, but it ain't cheap either.

All that don't mean shit when her boyfriend, thought they were exes at this point, shows up. Started out like an annoying conversations, one of those ones you'd hear in a soap or something. My Ma would probably get a kick of it. She was always a fan of that crap anyways. But suddenly it got real heated and then they made out. Started really slow and crap, but then got crazy. Looked like a pair of trout smacking up against each other. Looked real stupid, but I got out of there quick. Ain't gonna stick around for that mess. One second they're going at it, or at least looked like they were, and the next she hops in the driver's seat and then speeds off.

Sure the guy was kind of hot in a weird way. Looked like one of those slasher film jocks, the dumb kind that get killed off first. His suit barely fit him and his dull blue eyes and tuft of

blonde hair looked off with his Neanderthal brow, but I ain't gonna judge. Maybe he's got a big dick or something...

Great...now I'm thinking about that dumb jocks dick. The fuck's wrong with me.

I tried to get to a phone or something like that, but the jackass at the food stand wasn't having any of that, probably cause he got a kick out of my torment or something. He bared his damned braces-plated teeth like a hyena laughing and mocking me like I was an idiot. Almost considered punching him square in the mouth...almost.

Now here I am, sitting here probably looking like I'm blubbering like a damned baby, even though it's definitely just the rain. I ain't crying at all. Real pissed is what I am. I damn well worked my ass off to pay for this crap and she just blows me off the second some other meathead with a meat stick comes by. They're probably meant to be together, the airhead and the meathead, but I still ain't happy about not having a ride or a car to sit in.

Plus the rain is pouring down now and it don't look like a break in sight.

"Damn," I mutter under my breath. Standing up, I fix up my tux as best I can, though there really ain't much reason to as it's already fucked as is. Soaked all the way through and probably gonna need a long time to dry completely. Thank God it was cheap.

I wander over towards the food stand, weaving my way through cars of all kinds. Different shades, some with headlights on others left in darkness. Some pairs are probably getting it on while others are just occupying themselves with whatever flick is on.

Getting to the stand, I spot that the awning is kinda open. Plus it's just wide enough to block some rain from coming down. At least I can stop myself from getting any wetter than I am...just hope I don't get a cold or something. Graduations coming and I ain't interested on messing up that. Pa would be pissed about that. Don't know what he'd do. Plus it's just plain

suck to be sick for all that...sitting there for hours, sniffing while they call out names and hoping you don't sneeze when you get your photo taken or your diploma.

Spotting an opening between the few people standing around smoking their cigarettes, I speed walk in that direction, though I slow down real quick when I spot a blob of light blue.

Okay 'blob' is a bit rude, but she sure as hell looked like one, sitting there with her knees tucked in and the skirt of her poofy dress just kind absorbing her like a giant fluffy cloud. She looked like she was both real comfortable, but also in the most annoying amount of pain imaginable...maybe that's a bit of a stretch.

The small-looking girl, she might not actually be that small who knows, just kind glances my way, her grey eyes looking at me with this dull and cold stare. Either she wants to say something, or she just ain't really staring at me.

"You're blocking the movie, could you move?" Her voice kinda comes out like a whisper, her lips barely moving at all, but I can still hear her just fine. Odd, but I don't really question it.

"Oh...sorry about that." I shuffle out of the way and just stand kinda awkwardly beside her. Not quite at the spot I wanted just yet, but I can spot the smoker standing right next to me getting ready to move out so I prep myself to grab the spot as soon as possible. I ain't about to lose out on that.

"Thanks," the girl responds, her eyes barely glancing in my direction, continuing to stare right ahead at the screen and whatever's going on on it.

It's funny how bored she looks, yet her dress just screams princess. Like I'm pretty sure that's one of those Cinderella dresses. All baby blue, puffy sleeves, and blooming skirt. She

could really pass for her, too, with her pale blonde hair and glistening eyes, if only they weren't grey and looking real dull staring at the screen.

"Soooo...anybody sitting there next to you?" I kinda point towards the spot in the concrete next to her.

"Nope."

"It ain't a problem then if I take it?"

"Nope, you gonna keep interrupting the movie?" She kind glares at me, but also doesn't really seem that interested enough in giving me her full attention. I don't really think about that too much.

"Not anymore." I plop myself down kind of next to her. I try not to accidentally sit on her dress, which is a bit difficult with how big it is. I end up sitting squished up against the trash can, leaving some space between me and her so I don't sit on her dress. I try real hard not make myself take too much attention, don't want to piss off my begrudgingly new acquaintance.

Settling in to my new spot, I try to get invested in the movie that's playing. It's some real dumb looking romcom about some teenage couple. Real stupid and full of shit about abstinence, but I try not to groan too much. School probably gotta pick something that won't fuck up the minds of the young and shit. Parents gonna complain anyways.

A bit of time passes, the two of us staring at the screen absorbing the stupid from the film. If I didn't already have enough problems about sex and shit, I sure as hell do now. Probably gonna have dreams about this stuff anyways.

"You're real invested I this movie, ain't you?" I glance over at the girl.

Her eyes haven't really changed focus that much, but they look a lot more glazed over now than they did before. Is it possible to even get more dull. Like ain't there a limit or something.

"Yeah I *totally* dig this kind of shit."

Well damn, swearing ain't the first thing I'd expect from someone who looks about as sweet as a princess, but I guess it ain't surprising. She don't look like a happy princess anyways.

"It's just the best. I get to watch something that takes zero effort and can just zone out on it."

"Lucky you, I guess. I ain't so lucky since this stuff just makes me cringe a bit."

"Ha, I can't take that stuff either. Makes my skin crawl, but I just try to ignore that stuff. Kind of easy when you get that beaten into you all the time so you just become kind of unphased by it." Her entire appearance just kind of changes in an instance. One second she's just this dull shell of a person and the next she's got this spark in her eyes like she'd just found the best thing ever.

"Well...I thought you weren't a fan of interruptions?"

"Oh, I was just waiting for a good one. What might that *interruption's* name be?" She extends a hand, her dress kind of tumbling down a little, spilling over like a waterfall or an overflowing pot of water.

"Beau." I take her hand and shake right back.

We lock eyes and I can tell this ain't gonna be a normal prom night in the slightest. At least I'll get my money's worth.

"Nice to meet you Beau. By the way, the name's Anne."

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