

Welcome to the Fun Box

by

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Graduation December, 2020

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As my focus in English is creative writing, my intent for my thesis is fiction work. To be specific, I have written three short stories and three flash fiction stories that I feel especially align to a certain theme, and represent strongly what kind of work I often write. The stories are interspersed, starting with a short story and then a flash fiction, continuing on, and ending with a flash fiction story. The flash fiction stories are placed to enhance and compliment the short story before them and vice-versa.

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A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Department of English

East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in English

by

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Madison Towers

Mia hadn't eaten since California. She sat up with a low groan and glared at the hotel room's shiny flat-screen television. The mattress was supportive but soft, and the sheets had kissed her skin with a cool reassuring comfort. She almost fell asleep, but her stomach argued otherwise, so she gave up her calming cocoon till later. Heading for the door, she grabbed the little keycard and stopped at the mirror.

Her eyes needed some help. She opened her bag and retrieved her makeup. The long flight had caused slight bruise-like discolorations underneath them, and the tell-tale violet-blue wasn't something her mother would approve of. Adding a light coat of mascara to the faded black from earlier that morning, she dusted her face with foundation powder and was ready. She turned again, paused, and her knees buckled, twisting her waist, her palms landed on top of the dresser where she stood. An overwhelming grief rushed through her system. Mia fought to push the inner anguish away and bury it for later. Now wasn't the time; she had to stay strong for a while longer. Her family needed her and her well-known strength. It pulled at her chest and stomach and ran around through her back, up through her head, threatening to shoot through her eyes. She closed them, willed it away, and breathed deeply, counting backward.

No. Not yet. Not now. Keep it together for her.

What she needed, she decided, was food and a drink or two, and she finally managed to power through the moment and left her room to go to the hotel's restaurant.

#

Danny walked down the hall with a tuneless whistle, saying hello when he passed a woman with her head down staring at her phone, long gold-brown hair wildly obscuring her face. He heard a soft reply, and he was momentarily struck by her lissomness, yet her figure was

somehow postured in a way that made him pause for a moment. Her shoulders were slightly slouched, and her cadence had a lack of enthusiasm. She seemed defeated in some way, and it made the hairs on his arms stand up and pay attention. He managed to get it together before summoning up a grin toward her. His pace picked up, and he shook his head at himself, focusing on her almost balletic figure. She had curves that ballerinas didn't have, but she was graceful and dignified in her stride, even in a state. *Well, damn, I wonder what happened to her. Man, it's been a while being with a woman—sliding hands all over a woman's skin—that silky smoothness they have.* Danny finished walking to the dining area, and he paused at the bar, deciding he really wanted a drink first—he needed one now. He hung a sharp right and sat on a high barstool where he surveyed all the liquor bottles lined up neatly on their shelves. Thinking he should try something new and get out of his comfort zone for once, he squinted and read the labels. His eyes settled on a brown bottle of cognac—Hennessy—and his lips turned up remembering a popular rap song. His wife wouldn't be pleased, but she wasn't here. He sighed heavily. The bartender walked up to him smiling. She wiped the bar in front of him while she asked what he was having.

“I'll take a...” Pausing, he heard his wife's voice tell him to order a glass of wine or beer because hard liquor didn't sit well with him,

“Well, just your daily special tap.”

The bartender nodded and walked off to retrieve his beer while Danny brooded. Back in college he could pound down shots and get a bit out of control, but now he was older and knew better. That was in the past and shouldn't be held against him now—but he couldn't bring himself to order it yet. It was too soon since the accident, and even though he knew it might be foolish, he wasn't ready to stop doing what she would have wanted.

“Anything else, sir? Would you like an appetizer or a shot to go with your beer? Tequila Gold is our special today at four dollars.”

“Thank you.” He picked up his beer, sorely tempted by the cheap tequila. “I’m good right now.”

“Just holler if you need anything, then. My name is Sophie.”

Danny nodded with a smile, noting to tip her well. She looked like she was college age and restaurant staff made their main money solely through tips, he knew. He had been a waiter during his college years while attending with Melody. She blew him away with her blonde willowy looks and her way with words. An English education major, she was going to teach middle school; she picked that age group because her peers told her that was the last grades they’d ever teach. He admired her passion and contrariness. They immediately took to each other—he appreciated her feistiness—she liked his laid-back, easygoing ways. They met when she had yelled at him in the bookstore. Danny held a swallow of beer in his mouth, enjoying the sensation and stretching his long legs out, Melody floating in his head.

#

“Hey!”

Danny looked around. He spotted a tall blonde with furious green eyes and he forgot the fury when he took her all in.

She saw him acknowledging her. “You. Do you know how long I’ve waited here in this damn line? And you just... just... walked right to the front?” She looked at him with disdain and incredulity. Her eyes turned from a sea green to an almost solid emerald and he was done in. Without thinking, Danny walked over and kneeled directly in front of her.

“Will you marry me?”

“Are you crazy?” Her face was one big mass of giant O’s as her eyes and mouth widened in shock.

“Maybe. We’ll save that for later. But for now, will you take my place in the line?”

Her face softened slightly as she nodded and stiffly walked to the front of the line. Danny grinned as he heard a chorus of *Come on! Hey! What the hell?* He hadn’t been in line at all. He was just passing through and had paused when she yelled at him. A chance meeting of fate. He laughed out loud as he heard her reply, *Shut the fuck up. This is my spot.*

She could hold her own in a bar fight, but she was also kind and sensitive.

#

Staring down at his empty beer glass, he heard sharp laughter ring out, and he lifted his head in surprise. He didn’t realize how long he’d been sitting there thinking about Melody, and he didn’t know why he wanted that cognac. He also didn’t know why he didn’t just have it. He didn’t believe in the afterlife anyway. It had been some time now, surely even if she *were* watching him, she’d understand. Rising heavily, he laid down a twenty and a five for the bartender.

Danny turned before he was halfway across the small bar and looked at the young waitress. He walked back toward her and said, “Sophie. Hennessey. Paradis.” He didn’t even think to add, *please*; he was too determined.

“You got it.”

Now that it was done, he looked around. There were only a few people in the place, and he hadn’t even noticed before. He sat down and surveyed them. A tall blond man with a large mustache sat at a small table by the front entrance drinking a margarita-like drink while reading the newspaper. There was a young couple cozied up together in the corner by a large plant

drinking beer in bottles. They smiled shyly at each other and every so often reached over to touch each other on the arm or leg. He smiled sadly at their obvious newness. His eyes turned to the last patron. A tan woman with golden-brown hair hanging over her face was looking down at the drink menu. It was her. The curiously desolate and striking woman he'd seen in the hallway moments before.

#

Mia watched the bar scene as she sipped on a gin and tonic. A man with a somehow put-upon cheerful demeanor caught her eye, and she turned her eyes on him with interest. Something in his face called to her, and she felt a certain kinship but didn't know exactly what it was. She watched as he hesitated with the bartender, his uncertainty a palpable feeling that she often experienced too. She was intrigued by this man, and she couldn't figure out why. This of all places, of all times. Her mother was dead, and all the sudden she was fixated on a stranger? *Distraction technique*, she could hear her friend Sonora tell her. Sonora was good at reading situations. She was a therapist after all. A therapist and her closest friend. Mia knew she needed to call her soon to tell her the news. *I can't do this*, she thought, her mind on hyper-drive and bouncing out of control. *Why me? Why always me? Why not Whitney or Josh?* She sighed internally at the thought of her baby sister and brother. *It's all on me. Fuck this night.*

#

“Because you are the oldest, Mia.”

“But, mom. They're old enough to...”

“Mia. Yes. They are adults. But you know as well as I do, they lack a certain... shall we say, common sense? Sense of responsibility?”

“I don’t want to think about it, though. It’s morbid. I don’t want to think about anyone’s funeral. And Whitney’s not that bad. She has some sense in that vain head of hers. She’s just too pretty for her own good and she knows it.”

“Nevertheless—you—Mia. You.”

“Mom, it’s too soon to plan for...”

Mia stopped when she saw her mother’s face. She knew she had made up her mind.

“It is never too soon to have your future secure, Mia. I’m simply making things easier for you three. That’s all. I plan to be around for many years. Now. Want some coffee?”

“Sure,” Mia answered. She knew her mom was right, but she didn’t like to think about the day she would have to go to her mom’s home—find the key—go to the locked silver file box—unlock it to get to get the insurance and funeral papers. Her chest was becoming tight.

“How’s Turner?”

“Eh.”

“Oh yeah? That good?”

“He’s the same. Acting like a child and out at the bar with buddies all the time. I don’t know, mom. He pretty much sucks.”

Her mom laughed. “Well, what are you going to do about it?”

“Nothing. I can’t afford to divorce him. I just finished my Ph.D. I have all these loans to pay off and a new job. There’s no way I can live on my own. I’m just going to wait it out until I can get a decent place.” She braced herself for her mother’s words.

“Can you move in with Sonora?”

“No. She only has one bedroom.”

“Can you two rent a two bedroom?”

“She has a lease until next year.”

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

Her mom nodded, looking at her innocently as Mia stared back at her with narrowed eyes. They faced off, neither saying anything until finally, Mia won for once.

“Your grandma stayed with grandad for a long time. She ran around on him, you know,” Mia nodded. She’d heard it before. “Because he was never home.”

“She liked to think nobody knew, but everyone did. Until the day she died, she still pretended as if no one knew what she was up to going to the beach for weeks on end and leaving me with your aunts and uncles to watch.”

“Mom. What’s your point?”

“Mia, you deserve comfort and love. Not a man you’re unhappy with. If you stay with Turner because of finances, well, I’m afraid of what can happen. I’m not saying you’re a person of bad faith. Not at all. But it’s only natural for a human being to be deprived of companionship and to crave it emotionally and physically. It’s only a matter of time, and that causes more complications than I want for you. Not that’d I’d blame you, honey.”

Mia’s face grew hot, and she didn’t answer for a minute as she took in what her mother said to her. She wildly hoped her cheeks weren’t as red as they felt as she thought of Randy at her new office. Her mom was too spot-on for comfort. A tear squeezed out of her eye and dropped down on her sandal. “I don’t know what to do,” she said.

Warm arms and the familiar soft scent of Dove soap enveloped her as her mother wrapped her in a hug. She held her for a moment and then looked at her. “Let me help you get a place, baby. I have a little savings and we’ll work it out. Okay?”

“Mom, I can’t let you do that.”

“If I didn’t have it, I wouldn’t offer. Mia, you have to do this now, before it gets out of hand. Turner is bad news, and you need to leave. One day, you’ll thank the Lord that jackass is out of your life.”

Mia nodded slowly as she took her mom’s outstretched hand.

#

Mia put down the menu and looked back up at the man at the bar. He had been looking her way, as he snatched his head back toward the front when he saw her look up.

“Buy you a drink?” Mia asked.

“Ma’am?”

“Mia.”

“What?”

“Oh for God’s sake. Just Mia.”

“Mia. My pleasure.”

“Mine too.”

“And you are?”

“Hmm?”

“Your name?”

“Oh, sorry. Danny.”

“Nice to meet you, Danny.”

He nodded and stared at her, his eyes searching her face. “I apologize. I think I passed you in the hallway a bit ago. I was...”

Mia’s left eyebrow rose up. “You were?”

Danny kept searching and then threw his arms in the air as if to say *I don't know*. He continued to take sidelong glances at her, though, when he could. He couldn't believe how stunning she was, even with the beginnings of dark shadows from exhaustion starting under her eyes. Abashedly, he remembered thinking she must not be very pretty with a body so captivating. He then wondered what had happened to make her so tired. Maybe a late flight.

"What would you like? I'll get the first round," he said.

"I'll have a double martini. Extra dry."

"Sophie? May we get a couple of drinks?"

"Sure. Another Paradis?" She smiled as she motioned to Danny's empty glass. "And for you?" She motioned to Mia.

They ordered and Mia asked where he was from.

"New Hampshire. I'm on a business trip to California. You?"

"California, actually. I'm on a trip to the coast of North Carolina for a family visit."

"And here we both are in good old Texas."

"I couldn't get a plane past Texas until tomorrow, unfortunately. But I wanted to get a head start."

"Early bird gets the worm and all that," he said and shrugged.

"Sure. Something like that." She gave him a small smile.

Danny started at her reply. It was a common thing for people to say, but for some reason, it unsettled him to hear it from her after just thinking about how he and Melody met.

"What is it?" Mia asked.

"It's just something that reminded me of the past," Danny said.

"Tell me."

“My wife and I met in college; I met her in the bookstore, and she was having a bad day. She felt horrible for being testy with me, so she bought me a mascot pen. She was waiting for me outside the bookstore where it happened, and I’m afraid I bumbled.”

“What happened?”

“I didn’t answer right. She said she had been an asshole and I nodded. She asked me if I was just going to agree and not say she was having just a horrible day in defense. I was an idiot of the ages and replied, *I could*, which set her off and brought her to tears when she said *But you’d be wrong* and I said, *Something like that*.”

“Ouch. What a dick.”

“Yeah. Pretty much sums it up.”

“But you married, so all’s well that ends well.”

“Something like that.” A certain melting started in his eyes.

She was unsettled by the sudden intimacy, but then surprisingly, comforted her in a way.

“*Something like that?*” she asked.

“And you? Married?” He avoided the question.

“I was,” she answered.

“Ah. I’m sorry.”

“Thanks. But don’t be. I was young and dumb. I didn’t realize he was more interested in partying than he was in a family. It turned out all right in the end. I was lucky enough to have my...” Mia closed her eyes for a brief second and then smiled ruefully, her lips trembling. “Well, my family to support me.”

“Are you okay, Mia?” Danny asked. He reached out involuntarily.

Mia looked at Danny's outstretched hand in wonder and then looked back up at him.

"Something like that."

#

Ten minutes later, Mia was walking silently down the gray carpeted lobby, and the click of her heels resounded against the cement as she turned and reached the outside of the pool and whirlpool. It was spring, not quite hot enough for the pool to be in use yet. Walking through the gate after unlocking it with her keycard, she looked around at the lonely shimmering lights and glistening blue water. God, she longed for a good swim—she loved to swim, and it would be like nothing had happened—she could dive deep underwater and forget the phone call. Finishing the drink she had brought with her, she dipped her fingers into the icy water and snatched them out as if it had bitten them. Defeated, she reclined on a sun lounger, her brain spinning with last night's events, eventually falling into a deep sleep.

Mia was on a plane with her mom and they were going on vacation. She was sipping on a cognac and smiling at her mom, seeing a sadness in her face she'd never seen before. *I'll never see you again*, her mother told her.

Mia stared at her in horror, but her voice wouldn't work.

Goodbye, love. I'm the only one who's up for the task.

She tried to scream at her that there were plenty of others who could do whatever it was she meant to do, but she couldn't speak. The words were stuck in her throat like a stubborn popcorn kernel. She was panicking while her mom started to fade away right there in her seat. Her cornflower blue blouse that smelled of the store brand dryer cloths she insisted on buying; the battered grey Adidas that she loved; even her light hair smelling of cinnamon and wild orange cut short and spiky were all gone. Just... gone.

Sobbing over the empty airplane seat, the cognac glass now somehow sitting on its side, spilling golden liquid out onto the blue material, she placed her hand in the puddle. She heard her mother's voice coming from the airplane's speaker.

Oh, dear. Don't worry, Mia. I've got the perfect remedy for that spill. I'll clean it and it'll be like brand new.

But Mom, you're gone. What'll I do?

Why, you'll do nothing but dive in the ocean and swim to another country. You'll be all refreshed and rejuvenated.

Mother!

It's true, baby. You'll see.

A small giggle left her throat and Mia called out—Mom, please come out and let me see you. Come hug me, *please*. Mia kept calling her mother, begging her to come to her, when she heard a car revving its engine. *Please don't drive away*, she begged. She was no longer in a plane but standing outside her mother's new 4Runner. The revving became louder and louder until she couldn't stand it. Her eyes snapped open, and she was disoriented.

“Mom,” she called out. She lurched up and looked around. The car revved one more time and took off.

Pulling her knees into her chest, she whimpered once, and then bit the inside of her right cheek. Tasting metallic blood, her tongue flicked up to wipe it clean. Staving off the pain, Mia didn't hear the footsteps padding toward her lounge chair. A set of khaki-clad legs appeared, and she looked up, startled by Danny's surprisingly gentle handsome face. His eyes were blue, knowing, and kindred. Mia felt an odd pull toward him that told her he'd been where she was right now. She stared back, with unflinching misery. His response was to kneel and cover her

hand with his own. The feel of his smooth, well-manicured hand was a startling and soothing tonic for her tormented mind, not an alarming stranger's touch.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“No.”

“What can I do?”

“Swim with me.”

Not saying a word, he took off his shirt and pulled down his pants to reveal his boxer shorts. Mia responded by sliding off her dress, revealing no bra and red bikini underwear. Danny watched her dive into the cold water and didn't hesitate to follow behind. As he watched her lithe frame stroke through the frigid liquid, he was struck by her lean muscles and tidy waist. Her large round breasts bobbed up and down in the glittering waves she created. His body responded with an ache to touch them, to see if they were as soft as they looked—to gently glide his thumb over her nipples—watch them grow even larger and feel the texture. He longed to swim underneath her, to grab her sleek body and glide with her.

Mia barely felt the icy water after she plunged into the freezing pool. She began swimming, and it was exactly what she imagined. She was lost in the matrix of water that soothed and caressed her body as she sailed through and shook off life's miseries for a moment here in this aquatic sanctuary. Mia glanced at Danny's strong thighs and the determined stroke of his arms. Her insides crumbled, and her eyes moved up to lock with his.

Two merpeople merging with each other on an odd day of longing at this strange hotel of sorrow. Danny stroked his arms and swam out to meet Mia in the deep end. She grasped his outstretched arms with her hands, shivering violently, their eyes filled with a consuming gaze.

“My wife died five months ago.”

“My mother died last night.”

They cradled their heads together and breathed with the same rhythm.

Horror Movies for the Jaded

I clawed the couch with sharp acrylic nails, pulled at the blanket until it bunched into fists, trembling from belly to toes, then grasped at my best friend for a bolster.

The movie on television displayed torture scenes so revolting, even jaded viewers were repulsed at the sight.

It played in the background unwatched.

This was my first-time being with a woman. I'd do anything if I was allowed to see her again. They were the best moments I ever had in my life, and I don't tell the story to many, but I'm telling you, so listen closely.

I closed my eyes to shield this new face, conjuring the memories from a worn-out brain cell MP4 played a million times.

Her hand crawled imperceptibly from innocent ankle up to impish inner thigh. Wild currents ran through my limbs when taut fingers indented according flesh, lighting up an old and familiar but new and foreign craving. *This is crazy*. A slow agreeing nod. My top was around my neck with a quick flourish, and then it lay abandoned on the floor. Her mouth on my body, my extolling sounds seemed to come from elsewhere, and her lips and tongue are Felicity.

Two is Better than One, we sang the next day, taking selfies and giggling like teenagers. Not taking our eyes or our hands off each other whenever there was a chance, our DNA had combined, reacted, and formed magnets. Our arms crisscrossed the car, resting atop each other's soft thighs in frenzied anticipation. Exchanging shy, thirsty glances, it was an unearthing—best friends *and* loves—mates like no other. We knew exactly how to touch—we were simply touching ourselves. A sharp squeeze on my tender leg and I turned toward her, not the red stop light, and she leans in because she *can*. Her lips and tongue are Nirvana.

A liaison in a master suite, and our progression improves from exceptional to stupefying heights of eroticism. We don't want the king-sized bed—a twin, a cot—a cradle. We were two strands intertwining together, and we became one braid. Her knee and tightly gripped hands held me captive to her, no. *My*, no. *Our* whims. Bending to me, her mouth and our merged tastes are Euphoria.

Eyes without her glasses are slightly unfocused, yet still penetrating through my irises—my last visual before my lids flutter open to avoid the blunder that crushed it. The thin gold band on my left hand's finger flashes, catching the fading afternoon sun, reminding me anyway. I ruined the Jubilee; she's missing. I didn't lock my phone. I peer in the face of my new love. She smiles movingly, and then she's tasting me, and her lips and tongue are Eden.

Candy & Jay

With Regards, Jaydynne. Jaydynne? Candy had been assuming the spelling was Jayden, or even Jaydin. She realized people liked to be original. But what kind of spelling was that? She is so absurd. Jayden was a millennial name, a nom du jour. Why be ridiculous and confuse people with the fucked-up y's and n's? Had she changed the spelling herself to be different? She wouldn't put it past her. Candy didn't know why it ruffled her feathers. There were worse-spelled names out there. She only knew she couldn't stand the woman, *or* her stupidly spelled name. Jaydynne set her nerves on edge every time she turned around since the day she met her. Blinking at the darkened screen, she startled and moved. She grabbed her mouse, covered in little blue whales, and clicked it with force again and again, exiting out.

#

“Candy, meet Jaydynne, our brilliant new marketing/copy editor,” Ben said.

“Hi, Jaydynne. It's nice to meet you. Welcome to our team. If I can help you, please ask.”

“Thanks. I'm pleased to be here. Love your work, Ms. O'Connell, and I've admired you from afar for ages.”

“Thank you, Jaydynne.”

Candy smiled tight-lipped at whom she presumed was “Jayden” and the properly spelled Jaydynne held her eyes on hers for a nanosecond too deeply. The bottom of Candy's stomach tangoed, and it shook her. She blinked hard when Jaydynne turned to Ben and beamed at him. She was being ridiculous herself now. A nanosecond? What the hell was wrong with her? Get a grip, Candy.

So many things made Candy instantly dislike her—her patrician air and her cream Chanel suit. Her A-line skirt hugging a slight waistline and the little opal buttons trailing down her backside. Hazel-green eyes and pale smooth skin with a smattering of freckles on her nose. The

way she's studying me—smug or something. It hit her with the force of a baseball smacked into her chest, knocking the breath out of her and then pain setting in when she could breathe again.

“Jaydynne. Let's go meet Jayson and Millie and the others.”

Ben winked at Candy as he guided Jaydynne out and they turned away. She stared at Jaydynne's back, her short black hair stopping at the nape of her pale buttermilk neck, curling in small tendrils. Candy noticed Jaydynne's slim, diminutive frame and glanced down at her own, grateful for her curves but slightly jealous of the new editor's tight compactness. *Bitch*, she thought, appalled at herself. She snatched up a pen, nudged Jaydynne out of her mind, and ripped the paper with force as she wrote.

#

Candy got along with almost everybody. While speculating, she had a rare moment of empathy for Jaydynne and her predicament of name woes. She understood how names can mess with one's identity. Her own name sometimes formed first impressions that might cause some to think of a stripper or a dumb blonde. But she refused to go by Candice, as that wasn't her given name. Her mom had named her Candy after her favorite aunt, and that's what she used. She made up for it by doubling down on being professional around management and coworkers. She shot down men and their advances and shot up in her career in editing. Anyone who knew her knew that her name *Candy* didn't mean sweets, dumb, or stripper. Candy was a name they respected, and she worked hard for it and earned it. Never mind sexy Jayson, who made her knees buckle every time she saw him pass by her office or when she passed by his. He had asked her out three times and she passed up his smoky eyes, enormous hands, and long tousled hair all three times for fear of getting the *Candy* reputation. She was almost at her breaking point with him though because she was pent up with sexual tension. She didn't really go out and only knew

people she worked with. She pretty much *only* worked. It was the one thing in her life that made her happy. She realized it was time for a connection, whether it be a one-night stand or similar. She usually slept with an equal status coworker when she got an urge. Employees could date if they weren't your boss or underling at the publishing house, but she never let it to go further like Jayson wanted. Now her options were getting slim. She had to stay in control and not make waves. She didn't want her and Jayson to become close, break up and have to continue working together. She remembered their one time together fondly, but she had to convince him there wouldn't be a third if she broke her rule and let there be a second. She looked up at the white speckled ceiling and decided she shouldn't break her one rule. Groaning at the messages piled on her desk, she heard feet approaching with an assured step. She turned to see who it was.

“Hey, Candy. Where's the file on Raimi?” Ben asked.

“It's right here. Right where I said it was in my email?”

“Oh yeah. Right.”

“Don't you ever pay attention to emails?”

“Not really.”

Candy snickered. “Course not. You're only the office manager.”

“That's beyond my duties. I have too much on me as it is.”

“You poor thing.”

“Hey. Why don't you come out with me tonight? We'll all be there, even Jaydynne. even *Jayson*. Come on, love. Don't say no like always.”

Her face crinkled in distaste, but she said, “Maybe. What time?”

“Come on. It'll be great. You're *so* obstinate.”

“I said I'll come. What time?”

“Are you playing with me?”

She stared at him hard.

“Nine O’clock.”

“I’ll be there.”

Candy wanted to glare at him, but she laughed. Ben was her best friend and she let him get away with anything because she loved him so much. He had taken her under his wing when they hired her eight years ago, looking to move on from her second job after college. She ranked up fast and had been looking to settle down somewhere lucrative. He helped her focus her skills and she was now one of the most successful editors. She often spent weekends and holidays with him and his husband Charlie at their home since her family lived on the west coast. She had fun there; Charlie, whom she called Chuck because he hated it, was a museum curator, serious and cute. They had supported her during a dark time she had gone through. Ben and Chuck had been together for eighteen years and they treated her like a treasured friend and daughter.

Ben had been trying to get her to go out with him and the others again, but she hesitated because the last time she did, it was a near disaster. Jayson had never shown up, George got so drunk he threw up on her new Balenciaga’s, and Jaydynne had shown up long enough to sneer at them from the bar only to leave with the smoking hot guy Candy had been eyeballing all night. She didn’t want a repeat of the situation any time soon. But when Ben asked her now, she said yes because it seemed like good timing. Candy looked around at her coworkers in her muted pale-yellow office and through her enormous window and open door. She promised herself she’d try to have an enjoyable time tonight.

All of the sudden Candy could sense Jaydynne’s presence before she heard her voice.

“Candice, I have the Whitman file for you.”

“Who?”

“Whitman? You know, your client?”

“Not *that* who. Who the fuck is Candice?”

“Huh?”

“Who is Candice? Because I don’t know anyone by that name.”

“Uh, you? What the hell?”

“No. My name is Candy. Not Candice. That is *not* my name. Never call me that.”

Candy snatched the file from her hand and turned around, ignoring Jaydynne’s stricken face and the hot tears that reddened her green eyes as she blinked them back.

“Oh. My bad.”

Jaydynne sung out her response casually as Candy started typing on her computer. Candy had to give her props for remaining cool after her shitty behavior. She had no idea why she reacted so brutally to Jaydynne’s easy mistake, and now her stomach ached. An invisible fifty-pound lead shawl settled around her neck and shoulders. She stopped typing and got up from her chair. She stood, not knowing what she should do. Jaydynne left, and she was alone with the memory of her leaning down to hand her the file. Her button up Chanel blouse had gaped open slightly when she bent over, and her eyes had met a quick glance of Jaydynne’s ballet-slipper pink bra and the small rounds of cleavage that escaped from the tops. Unprofessional. Her eyes heavy, she closed them and took a deep breath. She walked over to the Keurig station and grabbed a random K-cup, sticking it in the coffee pot and filling it with a cup of water. While it warmed up to brew, she looked for a pack of yellow sweetener as the machine hissed at her.

“Pink, blue, white,... I don’t want sugar, damn it. Where is the goddamn Splend...”

“Here you go,” Jaydynne said.

Candy jumped up, startled, her knees aching from kneeling down on the laminate at the low cabinet hunting around. She straightened up and smoothed her pants at the knees, taking care to wipe off any tale-tale dust.

“Thanks,” she said, accepting the four yellow packets Jaydynne offered her.

“Welcome.”

Jaydynne smiled sweetly and as she turned to walk away she said, “I was getting water and I heard you griping to yourself.”

“Jaydynne, wait.”

“Yes?” Jaydynne turned back around.

“I...,” her voice faltered, “want to apologize for... for being so rude. I’m sorry. I was in a foul mood over a client.”

“Yeah. Don’t ever fucking talk to me like that again. Got it?”

“What?”

“You heard.” She paused. “You pompous ass.”

Candy stared, at a loss.

I mean, she isn’t wrong, she thought.

Jaydynne turned to walk away. Candy was still gawking with dazed eyes. Jaydynne tossed Candy a look before she got out of earshot.

“Gotcha good. Candy *Cane*.”

She smiled sassily and said it in a way Candy understood but didn’t, and it aggravated the life out of her. She was in a nasty mood again. She grabbed her coffee and shook all four packets into her purple mug with such force the fine white powder flew everywhere. She looked down to see it snow sweetener on her suede boots.

#

“She’s terrible, Ben. Why’s isn’t she gone yet?”

“Why would she be? She’s good at what she does.”

“Ehhh. She’s barely efficient. She’s too young. She probably eats avocado toast and drinks coconut water every morning.”

“Candy. What’s gotten into you?”

“Nothing.”

“Come on, Booboo. What’s up? You can’t lie to your old Ben.”

“Nothing!”

Ben gave her a hard stare that she couldn’t match, and she wilted like two-week old romaine lettuce before dropping her gaze.

Candy shrugged. “I can’t stand her. I have a deep disgust for her *and* her stupid name.”

“Huh.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Just, huh.”

“Ben...”

“Bye, babes. Gotta make some paper.”

“Ben! And that’s outdated slang anyway, old man.”

Ben half ran to his office, laughing all the way. Candy crumpled up a piece of paper on her desk and threw it after him, not even coming close. His laughter got even louder when he started singing an older hit about kissing a girl.

“What was that all about?” Jaydynne asked.

“I have no idea. Ben doesn’t make sense sometimes,” she said. She stared after Ben, shaking her head.

“I like Ben. What’d he do?”

“Why are you always here? What, are you stalking me?” Candy asked Jaydynne.

“Yep. I’m your biggest fan. Better call the police.”

Jaydynne made an exaggerated googly-eyed face and Candy was again speechless. She wasn’t used to being called out, probably because she wasn’t usually such a smart ass at work.

“Here’s that other file you wanted,” she said and dropped it on her desk. “You know, work? Business?” she asked, walking away.

Candy’s familiar sullen stomach and lead scarf sitting on her stiff shoulders did their work. She dropped her head to her desk, a loud bang filling the air when her forehead met the wood.

“Ouch.”

#

Get a fucking grip on yourself, Candy. You’re the epitome of professionalism, and you haven’t been acting professional one bit. It astonished her how snarky and aggressive she was acting towards Jaydynne. She wouldn’t half blame her if Jaydynne complained to HR. She told herself she had to get control. She wasn’t a mean girl. She didn’t like being this way, and she doubted anyone else did either. After this meeting with herself, she resolved to cool her jets.

#

Candy was busy approving the sales department’s budget on a client when Jayson moseyed up to her desk. She paused and admired the way his tall lanky body wore his clothes—dark blue skinny jeans with a brown belt, black button-up shirt, and a modern grey blazer topped

off with expensive dark brown ankle boots. He was fashionable, handsome, and oozed sex-appeal with that hair of his. Today worn in a man-bun that should look stupid, but somehow, he made it hot—and he knew it.

“Hey, Candy. I heard you’re coming out tonight. That’ll make a good crowd.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah. I do.”

“Good to hear.”

“What time you are coming?” An emphasis on coming.

“I’m not sure. What time will you...come?”

Jayson sat down on the corner of her desk and leaned into her, making the slight flush that had started on her chest creep up.

“I think I’ll come about eight. Sound good to you?”

“Sure. I can come at eight. Or sooner.”

“Sooner sounds good. We can have a pre-drink drink by ourselves. Yeah?”

She pictured them naked with a couple rounds of body shots, and the flush crept up to her scalp.

“Yes.”

He leaned in more, then sat up as if he remembered where they were and cleared his throat. He stood up.

“I’ll see you tonight.”

“Yeah. See you tonight.”

I’ll see all of you, with vodka in your belly button, and my tongue too.

Her eyes followed him as he walked away, only this time admiring what was *underneath* his attire. She remembered the office Labor Day party and rubbed her coffee cup with her forefinger. Putting the cup up to her mouth, she stuck her tongue in the liquid. As she looked up, she saw Jaydynne walk by, smirking at her as she passed.

#

Later, tumbling thoughts like sagebrush in the desert had Jayson lying around with vodka in his belly button, a smirking pink bra cleavage'd Jaydynne, and Candy was wired. An angrily-typed memo about keeping supplies full at stations for coffee and tea accompaniments spilled across her screen. She ignored the pile of files sitting beside her, full of Jaydynne's research and the sales department's budget costs. She was about to hit send when a voice behind her spoke.

"Hey, Candy. I wanted to ask for advice?" Jaydynne asked.

"Oh... okay. What?"

"George asked me out. I'm not sure what to do."

Candy frowned. Her stomach lurched, antagonized in a way that made little sense to her. She took a small sip of water to steady her nerves. Why was she coming to her? They weren't friends. Her earlier resolve flew out the window with an immediate blazing fury.

"Why are you asking me? What do you want me to say? Go for it?"

"No. I wanted your advice on dating within the company. You've been here for a good while and I wanted to feel it out because I don't know any hard rules about dating coworkers," Jaydynne said.

"It's right there in the book everyone gets. General rule—no dating between an employee and higher or lower staff. You and George do the same thing, so do whatever, Jaydynne," she replied, her voice not even hiding its irritation.

“Why is your voice like that?”

Candy paused for a moment and tried hard to collect herself.

“I’m busy.”

“I’m sorry. Oh. Um,” Jaydynne said.

She was looking hard at Candy’s computer screen.

“*What?*” she snapped.

“I don’t mean to get in your business, but I’d rethink before you send that. If you send it with that tone, you’ll never get what you want. If you reword it, you’ll get what you want,” Jaydynne said.

“I just stated the truth asking that everything stay stocked. Why should I sugar-coat it?”

“It’s not sugar-coating to be considerate, Candy Cane. Here, let me have your keyboard.”

Jaydynne bent, taking over. Candy tried to decide whether to slide over or not. *Do not stare*, she told herself, while staring at Jaydynne’s slightly open blouse. She was so close, their legs were touching, and she smelled the scent of coconuts and citrus fruits from the shampoo in her hair. Goosebumps snapped up on her skin and she wondered if the air conditioner was blasting. Embarrassed, she felt her nipples tightening from her shivering. She hugged the front of her shirt with her arms to cover them.

“There,” Jaydynne said. “Much better.”

Candy tore her eyes away, leaned forward and read the revised memo and, much to her chagrin, agreed.

“You see? You can’t write a memo mad as fuck, Candy Cane. Nope. It’ll always be shitty.”

“Well...”

“You’re welcome.”

Candy gave Jaydynne a tentative thank you smile, and Jaydynne smiled back at her like she had won a goldfish at the Carnival.

“You’re going tonight?” Jaydynne asked.

“Yeah. I guess so. You?”

“Yeah. I guess so.”

Jaydynne sat on Candy’s desk where Jayson had sat earlier and crossed her skirted legs, swinging them happily.

“I think I’m a little excited.”

“Why? George?” she asked. Candy sneered as the name came out before she could help herself. She hugged her chest harder.

“No. Someone else. Someone totally... different.” Jaydynne cocked her head to the left and paused quizzically, “You okay? Are you cold?”

“A little. I’m fine.”

Fuck. She’s after Jayson.

Jaydynne did the weird eye voodoo trick like when they first met and her eyes penetrated and held Candy’s, but before she could say a word, it was over. Candy reeled back, her skin hot, wet with sweat gathering. No longer shivering cold, she felt like a lobster in a boiling pot. Perimenopause at *her* age? She was barely even forty...

“What were you and Jayson up to before?”

“What, are you all up in my business now? Mind your own,” Candy snapped.

Jaydynne’s ridden-up skirt wasn’t checked when she snorted out a laugh and uncrossed her legs to slide off the desk elegantly, yet unabashedly. She strutted out of the office with her

head high while Candy stared at her ass; *Grabbable!* she thought, as it swayed out. Now a quick blurry flash of matching pink underthings would play on a loop in her head. Great. My very own gifs on auto-play. Fuck me. *Grabbable?* Perimenopause for sure. Why deny it? I'm acting crazy as a loon. She should call her doctor. Then she ran to the one-person stall all worked up. She didn't stop to wonder why.

#

Jayson didn't show until 10:00 because his car had a flat and he didn't know how to change it. Candy had to figure Man Bun in his three-hundred-dollar tee shirt wouldn't; he was closer to Jaydynne's age than hers. He had to call Ben, who had to leave to rescue him, then they came back together. Chuck had to work late at the museum for someone who didn't show up. Jaydynne arrived and joined them instead of doing her own thing. She wasn't very pretty in Candy's opinion, so it didn't bother her concerning her gameplay with Jayson. But she snagged Hot Guy that time at the bar, so she wasn't *not* pretty. Okay, she was pretty, but that didn't mean she disliked her any less. Jaydynne was disturbing and distracting, and Candy was off her game missing Jayson's advances she had looked forward to. She didn't hear him say how he wanted to lick a body shot off of her when no one was looking. She swatted him off like a dive-bombing hornet. Instead, she zoomed in on Jaydynne's every move out of some sense of competition... danger... she only knew something compelled her to keep an eye on her for the sake of her sanity.

Ugh, she thought as Candy saw Jaydynne talking and laughing with the office good-guy. Lawrence was tech, always in an excellent mood and making jokes, doling out good food to anyone who came in his office. He still eyed Candy appreciatively since their wild evening at his place six months ago. *Stupid*, fun Lawrence, she pouted. Foul mood up again, a queasiness

flooded her belly running up her chest and into her mouth. She sipped her wine to get rid of the bad taste. Look at her in those tight fucking jeans all tiny and her ass round and high and... she makes me so testy and so... fuck. Is the heat on in here?

“Candy,” Jayson said. “Want a shot?”

“Yes! Tequila Gold with lime. Make it a double.”

Jayson left for the bar and Candy waited. She continued watching Jaydynne, glad to be by herself, and then Jaydynne looked back at her and their eyes met and locked. It jarred her and made her stomach tighten and tingle, and the nausea disappeared. Suddenly, she felt like she had already drunk a few shots.

Candy tried to break eye contact, but Jaydynne’s eyes wouldn’t let her. She searched those eyes, and they answered thirstily, saying *I know. Me too.*

Jaydynne walked over to her, still holding eye-contact.

“Hi?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Yeah?”

Candy nodded.

“When?”

“Just now.”

“From the moment we met.”

“How?”

“I just knew.”

“George?”

“To get your reaction. I didn’t know.”

“I didn’t like it.”

“I know.”

“I don’t understand,” Candy said.

“Me either.”

“What do we do? What happens now?”

“Come with me. We’ll figure it out.”

“Only if I can call you Jay.”

“Call me anything you like, Candy Cane.”

“You’re the only person in the world that can call me that and not get punched.”

“I know.”

The loud drunken voices shouting in the crowded bar didn’t break their gaze. Their eyes still held as Jayson shouted out.

“Hey, Candy! I have your shot.”

“She’ll take it to go,” Jaydynne responded.

Jaydynne snatched the shot from Jayson’s outstretched hand as they passed him, and they laughed softly, covering their mouths as they walked out the door into the inky hungry night. Jaydynne lifted the glass to her lips and tossed it down. She rested her arm around Candy’s waist and a rush of heat spread through Candy’s head to her toes when Jay’s small hands pushed into her side. That heady sense of powerful longing had been building for weeks, which she hadn’t understood—and her unhesitating reaction was to pull Jay into her—taste her and her beer-stained lips and her tequila-lime tongue. She had to sample her like the macaroons she loved and couldn’t decide what flavor to buy.

“You’re killing me,” Jay said. She gasped.

“I’m nearly dead.”

“Not on the street.”

“I can’t stop.”

“I can’t either.”

“Come on. There’s a place.”

“Candy, let’s go to one of our cars.”

“I have to now. *We* have to.”

Jay nodded.

Candy grabbed Jay’s hand and pulled her to an abandoned gas station. It had a covered unlit space for them to stand unseen. They walked down the sidewalk until they turned to follow the dirt that led to the compact building. Candy pushed Jay against the wall and took her arms, raising them up high. She held both of Jay’s wrists together with one hand, clamping it shut tight. With her other hand, she took her fingers and stroked from the tip of Jay’s fingers, stopping between her breasts, slightly aware in the back of her mind how foolish they were being.

“What’s gotten into you?” Jay asked. She was breathing fast as she spoke. “You’re always so strait-laced and you follow the rules.”

“You’ve gotten into me. Well... at least that’s what I’m trying to *get* you to do.”

She took her hand from her the center of her chest and placed it on Jay’s lips. Jay took Candy’s finger in her mouth and sucked and nibbled on it. Candy’s head fell to the side, and she panted, putting another finger in her mouth. They stood with nothing but Jay’s sucking filling the air. Candy’s head was cloudy with raw lust and her underwear clung to her. Candy moved another finger in, and Jay stared at her, her breath coming hard until she let out a sound of longing. When Candy heard her, she let out her own small cry of urgency, and she dropped Jay’s

wrists, pulling her fingers out of her mouth. Candy pulled down Jay's jeans and then Candy placed her mouth onto Jay's and searched every space with her tongue. Jay hunted Candy's mouth with the same intensity, like she hid treasure in there somewhere, and if only she'd find it, she'd be okay. Jay put her hands inside Candy's untucked blouse and Candy shuddered as Jay found the small hook in the front and unsnapped it, her hands full and then her mouth. Candy's hands occupied where Jay's jeans had been, touching where she always wanted to, and her grabbable ass didn't disappoint. Moving to the front, she held Jay, who gasped at Candy's fingers. Candy bent down and Jay stopped her by grasping her arm. Candy looked up at her and Jay's face was slack and lit up pink from kissing and arousal while pulling off Candy's underwear beneath her skirt. Her fingers grazed under the delicate fabric as she paused before tugging the underwear down and Candy fell on her, nearly coming. Jay pulled them both down onto the dirt-covered ground and whispered, *not yet, Candy Cane. Plenty of time for that. Let's get dirty.*

#

Candy woke to a slow, warm hand sliding along her thigh; a sharp cheekbone and soft, thick hair on her breasts—the hand creeping up. She stiffened and drew in a sharp breath that spun into waves of panting when Jay turned her mouth to her chest and her hand reached her open legs. Still ready from the night before, she finished quickly while she held onto Jay's midnight curls. She sighed a sigh more like a moan of deep satisfaction and raised Jay's head with her hands to see her.

“Morning,” Jay said.

“Some good morning that was,” Candy said.

“Your special wake-up call.” She studied her shyly. “You're still here with me.”

“Course I am.”

“I wasn’t sure you would be,” Jay said.

“Well, this *is* my house.”

“You know what I mean. You don’t seem the type.”

Jay hit her arm mildly and Candy laughed.

“I guess I might be.”

“You guess you might?”

“Uh huh. Stop acting so coy. Coy you ain’t.”

Jay laughed and play punched her again.

“This girl thing... it’s like... so much delicious foreplay but coming... all the time.”

Jay grinned. “Yeah. It is. Speaking of that...” She slid her hand across her naked body and Candy wriggled down between Jay’s legs. Jay began her own round of panting and sighing.

#

Watching each other solemnly, lying on their sides, Candy and Jay talked into the evening. Now and then they would stop and come together unbidden, their bodies magnetized and finding new ways to please.

“That was particularly gifted,” Candy said.

A fine line of sweat gathered under her long hair at the base of her neck. Jay rubbed it with her pointer and middle fingers while they rested.

“I am talented.”

“How did you know to do that?”

“Figured I’d have liked it.”

“You’ve never done it before?” Candy asked.

“No.”

“For real?”

“Yes. Why?”

“You’re just so... good at it. I assumed you’ve been with a woman before.”

“No. Why? Have you?”

“Well, no. Only you,” Candy replied.

She looked away briefly.

Jay pulled her hand from Candy’s neck and painted her face in loving strokes. Candy closed her eyes and savored the feeling.

“What’s the scenario tomorrow? What will happen at work with us? How will this play out? I hate to bring it up so soon, but we’ve sort of already passed the dating phase...”

“I don’t know. I haven’t thought about it.”

“We have to.”

“I know. It’s just so unexpected.”

“It happened.”

“I *know*.”

Candy pulled back and turned her body in the other direction.

“Candy. It’s okay.”

“Never *mind*, Jay. Can you shut up?”

“Candy. What’s gotten into you?”

“God, Jay. Take a *hint*. Fuck.”

“I’ll give you some time to think. I understand.”

Jay stood up and turned to grab her clothes sprawled on the floor. Candy’s mascara-smearred eyes shut, and she dashed away tears that threatened to roll out had she not dabbed them

first. Jay put her clothes on slowly. Dressed, she started walking out of the room. Candy lay on the bed sobbing. It was too much. It was too soon. She couldn't deal with this right now. Why did she have to ask so many questions? They only fucked once. What did she want from her? She didn't need her. She didn't need anyone. She only needed... her heart lurched in her chest.

“Jay! Jay. *Wait.*” Candy bounded from the bed and ran to the front room.

Candy's arms wrapped Jay from behind and she felt her clothed body sink into her naked body, and she absorbed Jay's dread that had been there minutes before. Her body shivered. She nuzzled her neck with her mouth, wetting it with her tears. She turned Jay around and clung to her, willing the dread away.

“*Stay.*”

I Was Adored

If you ever have the absolute fortune of having someone adore you to the point of worship, don't do what I did and merely revel in it like a queen accepting her due. You may think saying *please* and *thank you so much* is enough, but it's not even close. Be in the moment, *really* be in the moment. Memorize it in your brain—each bite of exquisite food—the dripping buttery oysters; the shimmering sexy sashimi—and sip of exotic drink—exquisite high-end gin squeezed with tart tangy lime; sake tossed back on throat, tasted again later from intoxicated lips; every laser stare prying inside your eyes to find you; every kiss pushed onto your warm, pricking skin; every loving word traveling from tongue reaching your brain—process it in a file cabinet marked *I Was Adored* and store it in a little wrinkle there; it has plenty of room. It has space to remember foolishness such as that meme about your favorite TV show and the name of that singer no one else knows from 1999 because you had a mad crush on her when she was briefly a one-hit wonder. Appreciate her—adore them back a little—give them a sign that you're in it too. Stop rolling your eyes when they fuss over you. Say *Okay, I'd love to* when she asks you to go to a movie they long to see. Yeah, it's a little too easy to pout and call the shots when you're a person who's adored. They'll do whatever you want to please you. Don't be a simpleton—please them for once. Kiss them all over *their* body for ten minutes longer than they did you. Stop being a twat and wake up. One day you *won't* be a person they adore. They will grow weary—so weary of getting nothing in return that they will leave you high and dry, shocked, and astounded. But I'm telling you now, do not be amazed when it happens, as it happened to me. I was that twat—I leaned back, the Queen Bee in my glittering crown and shimmering capes with my hands out—I said *more*—and oh, yes, I got more. I was pampered, spoiled, indulged, coddled, petted, and catered to my every whim in every way. Then, with not a hint of it coming—the one that

adored me was gone. *My life*, I decided, *the love of my life!* *What have I done?* I begged, pleaded, cajoled. I pampered, poeted, soliloquized. It was, of course, too late. *But I did love. I loved back*, I cried. Those words you never, ever want to hear: Sometimes love isn't enough, I had been forewarned. *You just wore me out.*

Jane. So?

Kennedy Rose stood up and downed the vodka tonic she was holding, pointing at a couple in their late twenties across the restaurant.

“See them? The two lovebirds right over there by the giant sconce? That’s not us, Evan. It never was. I had fun though.” Her glass smacked the bar with a satisfied thunk as she sat it down, and she smiled wryly at Evan’s befuddled face. She was done with relationships. They all sucked. Disaster after disaster. She was best on her own—strong, independent, and free to do what she wanted when she wanted.

Kennedy Rose’s long legs strode across the floor toward the sconce on the wall. Without a look back, she paused at the table where the couple sat, talked animatedly, making them laugh. She sat down after she exclaimed surprise at the invitation.

“Where’s that darling shirt from, Jane?” Kennedy Rose asked to help fill the silence.

Jane’s cheeks glowed as she touched the pale-blue silk. “It’s from a little store called La Haute Couture et Vous. I like to check them out from time to time. They have great little finds.”

“Oh my God, you’re kidding me, right? I love that place. One time, I found a Versace dress I had been drooling over for months. It was well less than half the cost online, and it was perfect. I almost cried when the woman rang me up and handed me the bag.”

Jane stared at Kennedy Rose’s snakeskin deep-plunge halter top with admiration and envy. “I wish I could wear *your* kind of style.” She tipped her head toward Kennedy Rose’s top.

“This?” Kennedy Rose looked down at the racy halter. “Why couldn’t you?”

Jane giggled. “It wouldn’t have the same effect on me.”

“Wanna bet? Levi. What do *you* think?”

“I think you should listen to our new friend, Jane.” Levi winked at Kennedy Rose and then smiled fondly at Jane.

“Ehhh.” She dismissed them both and flushed deeply, picking the napkin up off her lap, smoothing it, then placed it back.

Kennedy Rose smiled at her fussiness, and then her smile grew wider. “Jane? I have to visit the washroom. Do you need to go too?” She raised an eyebrow and emphasized her words to imply she needed help.

“Oh, yes. I do, actually. Be right back, Levi. Don’t steal our drinks, now.”

“Don’t tempt me, darling.”

“Very funny. You steal it, you buy double.” Kennedy Rose said over her shoulder.

Kennedy Rose watched Jane stare at herself in the huge restroom mirror, her eyes wide and unsure. Standing beside her, dressed in Jane’s pale-blue silk blouse, she thrilled at Jane in her own halter.

“I don’t know...” Jane stopped.

Kennedy Rose didn’t know how to respond except to blurt out a racy expletive, so instead, watching them both in the mirror, she reached over and adjusted the plunging neckline on Jane, her fingers skimming over Jane’s skin as she worked. She saw Jane’s breath increasing in the reflection, and her fingers became less gentle as her own breathing seemed to become work. She jumped and snatched her hand back as she heard voices.

“And then he said he was leaving. Can you believe that? What a jerk. After all, *he*’s the one that cheated.”

“Men. We would be much better off without them.”

“Well, if only we could conjure them up when we *truly* need them.”

The two chatty women giggled as Kennedy Rose smirked, walking past them with Jane out the door.

Reaching the table, Kennedy Rose watched Levi's reaction as Jane's expression clearly told him something unexpected. She was greatly amused seeing his own expression turn from confused to shocked to unguarded fervor. This was going to be a fun night after all.

#

The bed was so comfortable, she thought she was in a five-star hotel on vacation before she opened her eyes. Stretching, she delighted in the exquisite sheets and the warmth of the cocoon of blankets over her body. Her wandering hand nudged sharp cheekbone and smooth skin and Kennedy Rose smiled slowly. Her sleepiness was dissipating into reality, and she knew where she was. Blinking open her eyes, she rolled over and was face-to-face with Jane, the wife of the lovebirds.

“Hi.”

Jane responded by smiling slowly and pulling Kennedy into her body, kissing her in all the right ways.

Kennedy Rose asked in between breaths, “Is this okay? I mean, without Levi?”

Jane gripped Kennedy Rose's wrists and straddled her. “What's it matter? We've already been together.” Her mouth was just out of reach as she bent over her tantalizingly.

Kennedy Rose stared at Jane's mouth and then her hovering breasts below and nodded.

#

“It's not that I do this sort of thing as a habit, but some couples have a rule where it's only allowed when everyone partakes. That's why I asked. I wouldn't want to complicate things.”

“Mmmm.”

“Where is he?”

“Levi? He’s at work.”

“I see.”

Feeling slightly uneasy but not sure why, Kennedy Rose cleared her throat and thought of ways to get out of there smoothly.

“I’ve, well, *we’ve*, never done this before,” Jane said.

Kennedy Rose looked at Jane and her left eyebrow rose slightly. “I didn’t think so. Are you okay? Any regrets?”

Jane shook her head with that same slow smile, and Kennedy Rose felt uneasy again.

“It can be tricky. Be careful that you two don’t examine it too much.”

“Oh, it’s fine.”

She said it so airily and sure that Kennedy Rose was perplexed at Jane and her personality. She was so confident, so aggressive in bed, yet she seemed so gentle and willowy when not. But right then, it was like they were in bed again, and she was that self-assured aggressor that took control. Kennedy Jane’s stomach clenched and beyond her abdomen, she warmed and prickled.

Jane walked over to her and kneeled down, placing her cheek on Kennedy Rose’s tan thigh. Her long light brown hair felt like satin raining on her as she gently moved her face back and forth. “You’re so beautiful. So sweet.” She sampled her thigh as if to prove it.

“Damn, Jane. Come here.”

“I’ll come here, all right.”

#

Lying in her own bed, Kennedy Rose watched flashes of her night with the couple in her head. But the surprising thing was that she saw Jane, and hardly Levi at all. She couldn't work that out. She and Levi had seemed to have a brilliant connection. They had much in common, as they were the first to hook up and Jane had joined in after watching them for a while. Jane was strange and Kennedy Rose wasn't sure that she even liked her very much. Levi was funny, warm, and safe. But every time she closed her eyes, Jane smiled slowly at her and grabbed her wrists, straddling her, or she kneeled at her lap and rained her glorious hair on her thighs. Kennedy Rose got up and went to retrieve a bottle of vodka.

#

The overhead lights flooded her dark office at the mid-sized city newspaper she worked for as her coworker Landon crashed in and turned them on. Kennedy Rose was hungover and groaned as the brightness hit her aching brain. "Fuck's sake, Landon."

"You've got another one of those messages."

"Jesus." She put her hands on her head as he dropped the note on her desk, smirking at it.

"You really need to find better fellas to date, man," he said.

She glared at him as hard as she could with her eyes feeling like they were being stabbed.

"Thanks. Great advice from someone who uses smokinhawtbabes.com. Idiot."

"Aww, come on, buddy. Don't be so cruel. It's a sure thing and really, who wants to commit? Or, you know, get these creepy creeper messages all the time?"

"Would you kindly get the fuck out of here? I'm dead hungover. And for fuck's sake, turn off the light. *God.*"

"You suck, darlin'. See you for lunch at one?"

"Yeah, yeah. One."

After Landon left and the lights were dimmed again, Kennedy Rose daintily lifted the message. Holding it far away from her face as if to avoid the writer, she snatched it closer to her eyes after taking it in.

Meet me at Tova tonight at 8? –L

She stared at the note trying to make sure she was seeing it correctly. *L*, it was signed. Levi. Not the usual *JO* for Jane Olivia. Her eyes grew heavy and she closed them, falling back against her office chair. She gently examined her feelings on this turn of events.

Does he know about how his wife has been contacting me for weeks, and he's wanting to tell me to back off? Is he encouraging her and she's using him as back up to persuade me? Is he wanting to get me alone like she is? Does he know that I did go see her? Half a dozen times or more? Then I stopped because she was too... I don't... but... Jane... I don't understand. I don't do women. I love men. I just wanted to be and do whatever. What is going on? I should have never messed with these people. I don't even care for polyamory, really. I just needed to let off some steam after awful, stiff Evan. Three times. I've only done this three times including these weirdos. What to do? Why do I feel so strange and so, so... off kilter?

After popping four Ibuprofen and letting them settle her pounding head, she made a decision.

#

Nervous and shaking, Kennedy Rose arrived early at Tova. She turned off her car engine and sat silently, pushing her wavy blonde hair back from her face. Staring at the elegantly lit building with people smiling and bustling in and out, she swallowed hard. What's the problem, she asked herself. I never get this way. This is nothing. What happened to the Kennedy Rose who boldly walked up to that table inserting herself and ended up in bed with a couple? It's only

been a couple of months but I'm a totally different person. Why am I a mess right now? What the fuck happened?

#

Tears fell from Kennedy Rose's eyes as they rocked together. The feeling was so intense, she had no idea she was even crying at first. When the spasms were over, Kennedy Rose touched her cheekbone and looked in surprise at the wetness on her finger. Laughing, she turned her finger for Jane to view. "You brought me to tears, you nut."

Jane smiled that sweet slow smile of hers and kissed her tear-stained finger. "You bring me to tears every day."

Taken aback, Kennedy Rose flushed and smiled. She wrapped her arms around Jane and took everything about her in—her smell, *tart coconut*, the feel of her skin, *velvet-silk*, her warmth, *home*—her whole being.

Jane inhaled her back and for a brief moment, Kennedy Rose was inside Jane, and Jane was inside Kennedy Rose.

#

"I'll have an unsweet tea with lemon, please."

Levi grinned at the waiter. "A dirty martini. Two, please."

Kennedy Rose frowned as the waiter walked off with a nod. "Two?"

"You look like you could use one, Kennedy."

She frowned again at the shortening of her name, and then sighed. "You're not wrong. Look, what's this all about? I can't stand it anymore."

"What?"

"Why this meeting? You've got me all on edge."

“Why, Kennedy? I don’t understand. Didn’t we have a good time? A great connection?”

Levi studied her with genuine perplexity.

Kennedy Rose’s face pinkened as the reality sank in. She was paranoid. Levi just wanted to meet as friends, or whatever they were. That’s all. That was it. She was losing it. “Oh, um, well, I wasn’t sure if something was wrong. You waited a while to get in touch with me,” she tried.

“I’m sorry. I really am. I meant to sooner, but I’ve been swamped with work. We have a project going on and it’s taking all my time.”

“No. That’s okay. I understand. I’m glad you’re good.”

“Are you good?”

“Yes. Sure I am. Why?”

“Just asking. Kennedy? Are you sure you’re okay?” Levi watched her curiously.

Kennedy Rose lowered her head.

“Hey.” He gently tapped her chin with his forefinger.

“I’ve met someone.”

She looked up at him, and his surprised face equaled her own.

They embraced at her car and she thanked him for being so gracious and kind. Inside, she cringed and flung insults at herself for her feelings for this nice man’s wife. She was all in a whirl. Should she feel so bad, after all? He had participated freely and his wife, with no regrets seemingly. This is what can happen, she reckoned. People sometimes connect and damn those that get left behind. Well, that wasn’t her and she wanted no part of breaking up a solid union. The thought of Jane caught in her throat, and she had to do something immediately to relieve the intense pain. Looking around wildly, she didn’t see anyone. She waited until she saw Levi drive

off and then she stepped back into the restaurant. Coolly, she surveyed the place until she spotted what she needed to numb the agony.

#

A yellow sticky note was on her nightstand when she woke up in the morning. *Nick—332-222-1111—Call me. I think you're fantastic.* No way, buddy, she thought. He was great last night when she needed the distraction, but that was it. He held no appeal for her outside of emergency sex. She flopped back on her pillow with a yawn. Too bad that distraction didn't hold over to today. *Jane.* What was it about her? Her eyes shut and she remembered the last time she saw her.

“Did you know I married Levi when we were 17? I was pregnant but then I miscarried. It was okay though. I loved him then.”

Kennedy Rose asked her, “And then?”

Jane had replied that they were just teenagers and they got through it and made a pretty good life together. Kennedy Rose asked if she was happy and without a pause, Jane replied, “You make me happy, Kennedy Rose. You just do, and I don't know why, but you do. It was like a dream that you waltzed up to us and did what you did.”

Astonished, Kennedy Rose wanted to know how she knew.

“Knew what, honey? That I've been waiting for you?”

Kennedy Rose sighed out, “Jane...”

“It's true, love. How else could Levi and I do what we did?” Jane searched her eyes and Kennedy Rose crumpled into Jane, sobbing.

#

She made love to her one last time that night after Jane's confession. Then she left and never came back. Jane called, texted, and left messages at her job. Kennedy Rose didn't reply to any of them. She built up a shield of sorts, telling herself Jane was mistaken, she was just enamored, it was just a crush and she and Levi would be fine. She couldn't come between them. She couldn't have contact with her anymore if things were changing from mind-blowing sex to... feelings. Then, when Levi contacted her, the shield began to crack. *How else could Levi and I do what we did?* Levi had asked to meet with her to fuck her. Alone. Simple facts. Just like his wife. This ran through her brain over and over until she thought she'd go mad. What did that say about *her*? Nothing? Because she was single? Or was she considered a low life because she had engaged in it? No. That has to be wrong because Jane wouldn't have told her what she did. Kennedy Rose was exhausted from her tumbling thoughts. She never questioned her sex or love life before all of this. If a man did these things, no one would say a word except, *congratulations—well done*. She tried to stop thinking about it and get to work on the article she was supposed to write for the newspaper. Fingers in position, she hovered them above the keyboard until they lowered and started to tap out words.

#

She hit send with a huge sigh, and the story about a murder at the local grocery store was through the cloud to her editor-in-chief. Relieved, she smacked the lid down on her computer, and then stuffed it into her bag. She decided to work outside at the park near her apartment. It was such a beautiful day, and she couldn't bear to miss it. Standing up from the bench and stretching, she gazed at the clear blue sky until a waterfall of light brown familiar hair caught the corner of her eye. Her insides froze and she almost ceased to breathe. *Jane*. Her first impulse was to run, run to her and hold her as tight as she could to feel her skin against her own skin. As

quickly as that impulse came, her next thought was to run, run far away from her, and to never look at her again. Panicking, she looked to her left and then her right. It was too late. Jane saw her. They locked eyes and Kennedy Rose tried to gauge what Jane's eyes held in them. There wasn't enough time to assay as Jane was right in front of her within seconds.

“Kennedy Rose.”

She melted inwardly at Jane's soft, sweet voice, almost swooning on the spot. “Jane.”

“How are you? I've been wondering about you. You never got back to me.”

There was a darkness that came over her light blue eyes and Kennedy Rose took a step back. “I'm okay. I'm sorry about that. I've just been working a lot. Overwhelmed. You know.”

Jane watched her distance herself and frowned slightly. “I hope everything's okay. I've missed you.”

She hoped Jane couldn't see her hands shaking. Why was she so god damn sweet after everything? She was killing her. “Yeah. It's okay. I promise. You okay?”

Jane nodded solemnly and stared at her intensely.

“Levi okay?”

“Sure.”

“Good.”

“Kennedy Rose, I want to...”

“Jane, I have to go. I have an appointment I'm late for,” Kennedy interrupted.

Jane looked down at her feet and mumbled, “Okay.”

Kennedy Rose nodded and turned to leave. As she walked into the fresh air of spring, she watched the birds fly off into every direction. They flapped their wings, and soared off to places unknown to her and maybe unknown to them. Her attention turned to the squirrels darting here

and there under and up the trees surrounding the area. They were busy little things. They were running around gathering nuts or just looking around for sustenance.

She paused, staring at one squirrel who was busy nibbling on a tossed away apple core.

“Jane!”

Jane was walking away, and she turned and looked back at her with questions in her eyes.

Kennedy Rose stumbled as she ran up to Jane, then she asked her breathlessly, “Are you and Levi together?”

“We are. But...”

Kennedy Rose’s face fell, and her skin paled so that Jane had to grab onto her elbow to steady her. “Oh. All right,” she said, weakly.

“Wait,” Jane, said, “Just wait. We’re only together for one reason. We aren’t really together together, Kennedy Rose. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry to give you such a shock. But... I’m pregnant, and that’s the only reason. We aren’t together in any other way.”

“You... you’ve been... ?” Kennedy Rose couldn’t get the words out, and she knew she had no right to even ask.

“No. It was from, well, *that* night. When we first all met.” Jane turned pink and looked down at the grass. “I had no idea it could happen. We haven’t used protection for over ten years.”

Kennedy Rose’s brain felt like it was seizing. She couldn’t think properly. Jane was pregnant? With Levi’s child? Again? And from the night they all had together? She started to tremble and as much as she tried to shake it off, she couldn’t.

“Love, are you okay? Come on, let’s get you a seat for a moment.” Jane grabbed the crook of her arm and led her to the bench adjacent to them.

Kennedy Rose sat obediently and put her head in her hands. “But... but, how?”

Jane shrugged and smiled ruefully. “Dunno. Maybe it was you.”

Kennedy Rose looked at her through her fingers. “*Me?*”

“Yeah. Think about it.”

She shook her head and buried her face in her hands again, her hair wild and flying in the heavy breeze that had started. “I didn’t sign up for this, Jane. I just *fell* for you and I finally realized it. I didn’t know I’d be assigned to an automatic family—girlfriend, baby, *and* husband. A more than full package-deal. I’m not prepared for this shit. Hell, I’m barely even prepared for falling for you.”

Jane turned and took hold of Kennedy Rose’s hands, pushing them away from her face. “Look at me. *Look*. I love you. And I know you love me. I felt it. I can *feel* it, and you’re here now because of it. So stop it right now. Grow the fuck up, my love. I need you, and you need me too. You’ve got to stop this nonsense. You can’t keep searching when you’ve found what you were looking for, you know? I told Levi, and while he’s not thrilled, he’s okay and he’ll deal. So, what are you going to do? Keep searching for something that’s not there? Sex that’s hot but without commitment? Without intimacy? Love? Care? Or are you going to stay? Stay with *me?*” Jane’s face crumpled at the word “me” and she dropped her hands and looked down at her lap.

Kennedy Rose winced at Jane’s sorrow and her throat thickened and ached. Swallowing roughly, instinctively reaching out to touch Jane in solace, her hand hovered lifeless in the air at the edge of Jane’s slender waist. A baby. What in the world would she do with a baby? She pondered all the things they needed and started to panic with how much she didn’t even know. The bench shifted slightly and Kennedy Rose, lost in her alarm about the care of babies, realized Jane was moving to get up. As Jane stood, all thoughts cleared from her mind except one. If Jane

walked away from her right now and kept walking out of this park and out of her life, she would be devastated. She would be lost. She would be making the worst mistake of her life. Baby or no baby or twelve babies. Kennedy Rose stood and nuzzled Jane's neck with her mouth, kissing it again and again in quick succession.

“Well, I’ll be damned.” Kennedy Rose paused her kissing to exclaim.

Jane snatched her head around in surprise to stare at Kennedy Rose.

“I guess I’m going to be a daddy.”

Slowly, Jane comprehended what she was saying and smiled the smile that made Kennedy Rose weak. She held her hands out and Kennedy Rose took them and squeezed hard.

“I guess you’ll have to marry me eventually. You know, make it official.”

“Yeah?”

“I guess so. After all, a kid needs their fathers.”

“And their mammas,” she said, as she dropped to her knees.

Chatty Gifts with Tape over Their Mouths

Each tenderness, thrill, eroticism—she stacked away in a box with the flaps shut tight, taped to keep them from chattering. She shoved it with her sweet little foot and kicked them into the back of her blue and pink closet. Slamming the door shut, she locked it with the puzzle piece key chain I gave her. Do they ever manage to peel the tape aside and whimper—their expunged voices drunk with freedom until she can no longer stand the brazen resonance? Does she bring reinforced tape and apply it with tyrannical force—stifling the past into an ersatz present?

I imagine she mourns me on occasion—when the song—*I. Mean. Every. Single. Word, baby*, plays. A naked truth to move me. *She quoted a song*—that was the night I finally fell, sunk, surrendered, submitted—*a love song that would fell anyone*—flushing high color with a dizzy rush like bumblebees zooming in my head down to my stomach—*that song brought me to my knees*—I lay there with my hot pink headphones, the tiny hairs on my arms suddenly displaying excellent posture to listen closely. Those lyrics—*My God! Does she really feel this way about me?* There was no movie, no boom box, no boy—just *her*, and my candescent comprehension—*Over and over I listened. Altered and consumed by her*. She got what she ached for the entire time. Ironically—*my* chase. But my box has no constraints—its lid is cut off neatly—a gentle lodge for the sweet gifts to idle. Scarlet sheets for the passion to roil. Taut ropes for the thrills to singe—all quelled by the lullaby left. They rant, croon, recollect—never letting my sorrow rest—telling me, *Welcome to the Fun Box, baby*. And it was.

