

"OH FUCK!" she yelled as her body trembled and then sunk into the damp comforter. She wanted to wrap her arms around his relaxing torso as he settled against her, but her wrists were still bound to the bedposts behind her, leaving her completely vulnerable... and happy.

The shadows in the room created by the sunlight had shifted and completely disappeared during their invigorating marathon, but the passage of time is what neither had on their minds.

"Don't fall asleep on me," she teased, her tone softer than it had been, her breathing still not back to its usual cadence.

"What are you going to do if I did?" he mumbled against her cleavage as he used her breasts as pillows.

She let out a soft chuckle while hooking her legs around his hips, pressing him harder against her. There was nothing more to do. The distinct fragrance of their love making, her aching body, and the dim flicker of the candles was all she needed to join him in a content slumber. It was difficult for her to remember a time when she wasn't so content, so taken care of, so connected to someone, but it wasn't always this way...

Lauren considered herself a modern woman. She graduated college, traveled the world, built a career as a chemical engineer, and had dreams of retiring in an Italian village like Diane Lane in *Under the Tuscan Sun*. She was close (enough) with her family, her parents were in good health, her sisters were married and doing the family thing, which satisfied her maternal instincts by being close to her nieces and nephews, and she had a great network of friends. She was fulfilled and didn't think life could get any better.

At 5'6 and barely 110 pounds soaking wet, her toned body and naturally black hair could land her a man when she needed sex, but she wanted nothing permanent. Well, except for the five month experiment of being married just after graduate school, but since the entirety of that relationship was less than two years, she barely considered it. It wasn't that she was afraid of commitment; it was that she was committed to herself and her happiness. Feminists would probably bow down to her and raise her up as a model for their cause, but she didn't consider herself one of them. She loved men and didn't feel oppressed in any way or any need to go on feminist-type witch hunts. There were shitty men *and* shitty women in the world.

The lessons Lauren learned from being raised by a strong, stay at home mother shaped her in positive ways, but also helped her realize there was more to life than raising kids. So when she had a cancer scare at twenty-four that thankfully turned out to be benign fibroids, and had to choose between painful menstrual cycles or a hysterectomy, she opted for the latter and sealed her fate to be motherless. A decade later, she still was without regrets about her decision.

Lauren's network of friends was fluid and included both men and women in all stages of their lives. Some were finishing grad school, others were married, but most single or divorced. Her and her closest friends regularly went out on the weekends with the others joining in when they could. Sometimes they would go to a concert or a comedy show, other times they'd take a trip somewhere remote to get away from the city for a weekend, but more often than not, they made their way to their favorite hole-in-the-wall bar aptly named Fifth Street.

It was late October when the group took a break from the bar and decided to head out of town to take in the full effect of autumn in nature. Six of the friends rented a four bedroom cabin for the weekend with one of them bringing her two cousins; five women and three men total.

"We should've rented this next weekend," Tiger lamented as he joined the others around the fire pit, bringing a plate of burgers and hot dogs fresh off the grill. His name was really Tony, but he was a huge Detroit fan and somehow adopted the nickname because of the baseball team... and the cereal cartoon.

Lauren didn't know how long he'd had the nickname, but calling him Tiger was natural since that's all she'd known him as in their eight year friendship. "I don't know," she said as she put a hamburger on her awaiting bun. "This place is a bit more rundown than it appeared in the pictures on AirBnB."

"You mean it's creepy as hell," Jen added with a shudder as the wind whistled through the pine trees.

"You're such a chicken," Brandon replied. "Remember when you..."

"Shut it," Jen interrupted. "I should've left you in the theater."

Brandon introduced Jen to the group four years prior. They were dating at the time and when they broke up a year and a half after, she was so engrained in the group that she continued to hang out and became a core member. Yeah, it was awkward for a few months and Brandon avoided most intimate group gatherings, but as they say, time heals all and it turned out that they were really great as friends. They bickered like brother and sister, but it was a fun dynamic to the group.

"Was that the one where you listened to country music in your ear buds the entire time?"
Miranda mumbled with a mouth full of hot dog.

Jen rolled her eyes. "It was classical, which I happen to find very calming. I warned him beforehand that I hate horror movies. He took me anyway."

"Not my last mistake." Brandon smirked and took a long drink from his bottle.

While there was playfulness in their tones, everyone could feel tensions rise between the ex's.

"So... when did Kinsey say she'd be here?" Miranda was the peacekeeper of the group. She desperately wanted to be a mother and took every opportunity to use in her unsatisfied maternal instincts.

Almost on cue, the sounds of crunching gravel drown out the noise of the chirping crickets. "I'd say now," Tiger said and tilted his beer in a mock-toast fashion.

Kinsey was the artist of the group, a true bohemian spirit. She wrote poetry, created art gallery worthy paintings, and well, was a natural at almost everything creative. Lauren didn't know a person who wasn't naturally drawn to Kinsey; she carried herself with an enigmatic energy. "Are there any veggie burgers left?" she said as she walked up with a guitar in hand followed by the two people who rode with her.

"I ate them all," Tiger said as he handed her a plate with a veggie burger sitting atop.

"That would be the day," Kinsey said and took the seat beside Lauren. "A vegan diet would do you some good." She winked at Tiger who playfully scowled in return. "Man, traffic was awful."

"It was great three hours ago," Brandon said as he stood to meet Kinsey's guests, presumably the woman. "Hi," he said in his I'm-so-smooth voice and extended his hand to her.

"She's engaged, Don Juan," Kinsey casually added after swallowing her bite.

"I knew that," Brandon said defensively and offered Kinsey's cousin his seat anyway. "I did," he added answering the doubtful looks the rest of them were giving him.

"This is Payton and Joshua, my cousins. They're in town for their grandfather's funeral. I couldn't stand to let them mope around all weekend, so this trip was great timing." It wasn't that Kinsey was being disrespectful to the traditional mourning process, it was that she didn't see death as an ending. When one of their close friends died suddenly in a motorcycle accident, she wore the brightest yellow dress to the funeral. I think his family was offended, but for us, it was just Kinsey and she actually brought a lot of happiness to that dreadful occasion.

Payton accepted the chair that Brandon offered while Joshua sat opposite of Lauren across the fire. "So what do you usually do up here?"

Joshua's voice was deep and oddly soothing, Lauren thought. She couldn't make out any distinctive physical features in the dark, but liked the way the dancing light from the fire flickered on his face.

After a few moments of silence, Lauren finally spoke. "Camp fire, hiking, the guys go fishing at dawn..."

"And a wild orgy before we head home on Sunday," Brandon interrupted.

"The odds are much more favorable this trip." Tiger high-fived Brandon while Miranda and Jen groaned in unison.

Payton's posture instantly stiffened.

"They're only teasing, Pay," Kinsey interjected.

"Yeah, it's more like a hedonism resort... if you want to watch, cool. If you want to join, even better." Tiger and Brandon were laughing.

"Not in your wildest dreams, boys," Miranda said. She turned and spoke in her most motherly tone to Payton. "They are asses, hun. There's no sex. We're all just friends."

"With benefits!" The two high-fived again.

"NO BENEFITS!" Miranda shouted. She would make a good mother someday, Lauren knew. Clearing her throat, she regained her composure and soothing tone. "There's a farmer's market in town on Saturday mornings. That's where the girls usually go."

"That sounds... nice," Payton said as her body relaxed again.

"Speaking of benefits..." Brandon began.

Miranda and Jen both growled.

"I'm just saying, there are four rooms and the ratio of females to males is... intriguing. What's your plan to divide and conquer, Mandy?"

"Well, I had already considered this," Miranda began, adjusting herself so she was sitting with the posture of a school teacher ready to educate young minds. "We will do this fairly and pick names for the woman and man who will share a room. Since there are two doubles in all the rooms except the master, it shouldn't be a big deal."

"I volunteer to sleep with Lauren as long as we get the master bedroom." Tiger flashed a grin at Lauren who in turn rolled her eyes at him.

"Been there, done that, not doing that again, hun." Lauren and Tiger had a weekend fling after they first met. He wanted more, but she was not going down the relationship road again with anyone.

"Can't blame a guy for trying," he said without a hint of hurt in his tone.

"It's fine," Payton chimed in. "Josh and I can share a room. It's not like we didn't grow up in the same house."

Joshua shrugged. "Yeah, sounds fine to me. Just not the master suite, please. We're not like those *Game of Thrones* families."

Everyone laughed. "Hey, if I had a twin as hot as Jaime Lannister, I would consider," Kinsey said and began strumming her guitar, setting a relaxing mood for the rest of that night.

The following day, the women woke to a house void of men, got dressed, and went to the local farmer's market. After four hours of shopping, Lauren had seen everything there was... twice... and decided to walk back to the cabin.

"The hike will be nice. I love you all, but some alone time sounds perfect. I've got this big project at work and I could use the time to work through it." She left her sole purchase - a pineapple - with Kinsey and started her trek back to the cabin.

It was around a four mile drive back, but since Lauren had spent many summers up in the woods as a child, she decided to take a longer route through the forest. There was an old, abandoned house that her and her sisters used to beg their parents to check out, but her mother always said it was too dangerous. "I wonder if it's still there?"

An hour and a half into her adventure, Lauren found what she was looking for. If Jen thought the night before was creepy while sitting around a campfire with friends, she would've been absolutely

terrified by the ruins. It was an old farmhouse that was left to nature to consume. Lauren marveled at the sight and tuned out the warning voice of her mother that resonated in her head.

The dried grasses surrounding the house crunched with each step until her foot made contact with the rotted out wood porch, which groaned in warning. Lauren's curiosity and wonder overruled any sense of caution she should heed.

"Hello?" she asked as she stepped through the doorless threshold. Not that she expected anyone to answer, but it was the polite thing to do when entering a house.

An animal scurried away from her, frightened by her presence, but Lauren was still unafraid. Her eyes moved around the room: glass from the windows was long gone, a thick layer of dust covered everything, while trash and graffiti from squatters littered the modest room. She was in awe and desperately wished her youngest sister was there with her to experience this. "It's just like I'd imagined."

Lauren spent time walking the small house, imagining how it would have been furnished and what the people who lived there did and why they would have left. It was easy for her to lose track of time in this timeless place and before long, the shadows had grown long, but it wasn't until her phone rang when she was brought back to the present.

"Did you get eaten by a bear?"

Lauren laughed. "No, Mandy, I'm just enjoying an old memory. Do you remember when I told you about when I came up here as a kid and found this old house? Well I found it again."

"So you'll be back for dinner?" How very motherly of Miranda.

Lauren rolled her eyes. "Of course. I'm heading back now. I'm only a mile or two south of you guys. Be there within the hour." The call ended just as the battery died in her phone. "Dammit. I thought I plugged this in last night. I'll definitely have to let the owners know their outlets suck." She took one last look around and for the first time, she actually imagined sharing this with children of her own. She silently blamed Miranda for putting family thoughts in her head, smiled, and walked out of the structure.

This time, as she walked on the decrepit porch, it rebelled against her weight. Lauren's foot continued through the rotten plank to the earth beneath and a loud *Snap!* was heard, very different from the breaking of the wood. "FUCK!" she yelled, scaring some birds from a nearby tree that had just returned back to their nests for the night. Through the pain and shock, she managed to free her limb.

Instinctively, she pulled out her phone. Still dead. "Great. I'm going to be the same if I don't find a way to get back." She inspected her ankle and was pleased that a bone wasn't sticking through her skin, but the swelling and deformity were enough to confirm that it was definitely broken. Still on the porch, she rested her back and head against the beam to wait out the wave of nausea that accompanied the shock.

Fifteen minutes later, the sweating and dizziness stopped and she reassessed her situation. "Okay. I'm in the middle of nowhere, no food, no phone, and no one knows where I am. Perfect. It's grad school all over again." As the last sliver of sun descended past the horizon, she quickly looked around for a stick large enough to use as a walking aid. She surveyed the grass and saw something that might work about twenty feet away... until it moved. "Great, add snake bite to my list of things my mom will get to say 'I told you so' about when she hears this story."

After a bit more scanning in the dimming light, she found a non-moving stick that would work. Lauren mentally prepared herself for the pain that was inevitable as soon as she tried to move, took several deep breaths, and used the leverage of the post behind her to become erect again, yelling the entire time. The pain was worse than she thought, but she was determined to get to the stick and make it back to civilization.

One hop... pause for balance... hop, hop... it was a slow process to move those twenty-five feet, all the while she swore the ghosts in the house were laughing at her and her foot was swelling the size of a watermelon.

She had imagined the stick would be like Moses's staff in The Ten Commandments as he parted the sea, but it turned out to be much smaller, and was sure she looked like a circus freak using a ping pong paddle for a crutch. Still, she persevered and hobble-hopped her way towards the tree line.

Lauren had very little idea of how much time had passed before she reached the trees, but the stars were fully out and the crickets were singing their mating song. "Hoo!" she heard from an owl in a nearby tree. "Just call me bear-bait," Lauren grumbled as she rested her shoulder against the bark. As good of shape as she was in, she was winded and her muscles burned in her left leg from her awkward hike, not to mention the shooting, throbbing pain in her right ankle with every adjustment she made to move forward and stay on her one usable foot.

As she was about to muster her momentum and carry on, she heard someone calling out to her.

"Lauren?" It was distant and she didn't recognize the voice.

"Over here!" she called back, wherever "here" was and then saw a light scanning for her up ahead and to the left about 100 feet. "I can see you!" she shouted again to whoever the "you" was. "I think I broke my ankle, so you'll have an easier time coming to me!"

"Okay!" the voice called back. It was likely a ranger, Lauren thought, since that would be who Miranda would think to call. She wondered how long it had been since they spoke on the phone.

Lauren could hear the crackling of the underbrush, which made her cringe because it was very close to the sound her ankle had made. Soon the light was shining in her eyes and she had to squint to try to make out the face of her rescuer. "Hey guys, I got her. Meet back at the cabin." It wasn't until he was talking on the phone that she realized it was Joshua. "No, she looks alright but says she broke her ankle, so tell Mandy she can relax now. Yeah, I'll check in with you, but we should be back soon. Alright. See you soon, Kins." Joshua tucked his phone into his pocket and gave Lauren a once-over look. "I'm guessing the bear got the worse end of this? You don't have a scratch on you."

Lauren wasn't sure if he was being funny or mocking her. She weighed responses in her mind, from snarky retort to genuine gratitude, but must have taken too long to reply because he tucked the flashlight under his arm and wrapped his free arm around her waist. "Must've been a cat, not a bear, and it got your tongue." He chuckled at his own cleverness. "Don't worry, I'll hunt it down for you once I get you back to the cabin. Do you think you can walk back using me as a crutch?"

She was relieved that she didn't have to piece together a witty response. "I should be able to, although there's a steep climb ahead and I can't put any weight on my foot. Are you sure you can manage? Maybe we should call the ranger to come get me?"

"Come on, I got you. And I promise not to bite... for now."

Lauren was sure that if it had been light out, she would've seen him wink. Was he seriously flirting with her while she was wounded? It should have bothered her more than it did, which was not at all. "I'll hold you to that promise." The reply came out of her mouth without even thinking about it. Was she seriously flirting back? Maybe she hit her head when she fell. Regardless, she was grateful to be found and on her way back to her friends.

The walk back took a long time... three phone calls from Kinsey, to be exact, and Kinsey wasn't generally a worrier. In that time, the ice was broken between Lauren and Joshua. He was surprisingly easy to talk to and the conversation took her mind off the pain. As they reached the door, Joshua scooped Lauren up into his arms, evoking an uncharacteristic squeal.

"That didn't hurt, did it?" Joshua asked as they entered the cabin.

Lauren couldn't help but giggle. "A little."

"We've been worried sick about you and you come in all smiles and giggles like you just got married?!" Miranda was furious, which only made Lauren laugh more.

"Yes, Mandy, this was all a plot to give you an ulcer," Lauren managed.

"Bring her in here," Kinsey directed. Payton and Jen were hovering around the couch with her. Joshua brought her to the couch and set her down with ease.

"Damn, someone's getting lucky tonight," Brandon remarked as he entered in after them.

"I knew I should've gone that way," Tiger added.

"Down boys," Lauren said. "Any luck regarding me is definitely bad tonight."

Jen and Payton helped remove Lauren's shoe while she hissed and clenched the arm of the couch.

"Oh, that looks bad," Brandon said.

"No shit. Did you think I couldn't have made it back if it was a little sprain?" Lauren was annoyed and embarrassed. "Ouch! Don't poke it!" she snapped at Kinsey who was palpating the swollen joint.

"Guys?" Joshua had stepped out of the room after he set Lauren down and got the keys which he jangled at the gawkers. "Don't you think we should take her to the hospital?"

Lauren shut her eyes and sighed. It was like she wasn't an adult who could speak for herself.

"I can't take her," Miranda declared. "I'm a nervous drinker, remember?" All that was needed after that sentence was an intoxicated hiccup. "What?" she asked with both innocence and accusation in her tone. "I wasn't the only one."

"We were all worried about you, hun," Kinsey added.

"Seeing that I'm the one who brought her this far, I might as well take her to the hospital. I can drive your car, right Kins?" Joshua said.

The looks shifted between Lauren, Kinsey, and Joshua.

"Of course. Just be careful of third gear; it's a little sticky."

Lauren knew the guys had a vulgar comment to insert there but thankfully had enough tact to keep it to themselves.

"Sticky third gear. Got it. Anything else?" Joshua waited for any other objections before picking Lauren up again. "Alright then. I guess we'll honeymoon elsewhere."

The laugh was silent, but Lauren's body shook softly against Joshua's as they left for the hospital.

"Do you remember that night in the ER?" Lauren lazily ran her fingers over Joshua's scalp as they lay in bed. The sun rose hours before and her arms were once again her own.

Joshua chuckled and traced her curves with the tip of his index finger, enjoying the bumps left in its wake. "The emergency room... you'd think I'd remember something like that..." he teased, his breath causing her nipples to harden. The way her body reacted to his touch was extraordinary and he enjoyed the progression from the reacting skin, to muscle twitches, to her back arching off the bed as he drew farther down. Over her hip bone and down the crease to her leg, he choreographed a seductive dance with the very essence of her being. "Maybe you should remind me, Ren. My thoughts seem to be... elsewhere."

"Mmmm," she moaned. "I like where your thoughts are." Lauren's hips rolled as he glided across her swelling folds.

Joshua removed his finger and placed the palm of his hand on her hip, forcing it back to the bed. "No," he said, "tell me about that night."

Lauren bit her lip and exhaled a shaky breath. "You're so mean," she pouted, but the smirk in the corner of her mouth discredited her words. It was strange to her how much power he had over her. She was far from a submissive woman, yet every fiber in her body craved his strong, sometimes rough touch. She'd been in all kinds of sexual situations, but rarely surrendered to any man. She had learned

over the years that if she wanted any kind of satisfaction, she had to take control. It had always been different with Joshua, though.

Lauren's hand flopped to the pillow with a muted thud. "Fine," she said. "I think what I remember most about the hospital was how green you looked the entire time."

"Hmph. You were seeing things in your drug induced euphoria." Joshua's hand relaxed the tension that was holding her hip down, but didn't move while he protested her memory. "I would've thought," he began and shifted in the bed, urging Lauren to roll over, "it was the woman in the next curtain area recreated the When Harry Met Sally scene."

Lauren giggled and flipped over onto her stomach, her legs slightly parted. "Now that I would've blamed on the morphine. So she really was having a fake orgasm?"

"Not sure if it was fake or real, but I wasn't going to check it out."

Even though Lauren couldn't see his face, she knew his nose was crinkled up in that cute way that made his eyes squint. "Who would orgasm in an emergency room? It's disgusting there!"

"You obviously don't watch enough porn, babe. The doctor/nurse or doctor/patient theme is a favorite, so I'm told." Joshua resumed caressing her skin, fingers lightly raking down her spine until they separated from her body suddenly. *SMACK!* His flat palm landed on her left cheek. "Now finish telling me about the hospital."

Lauren giggled and placed her left hand on his thigh, lazily drawing circles while Joshua resumed caressing and kissing her back. Her skin tingled as she tried to focus on recalling their first night together. Far from a traditional first date, but traditional anything never suited Lauren.

"The doctor will be in to talk with you about the x-rays in a few minutes," the stocky nurse explained. It was hard not to stare at the mole on her cheek that had a thick hair growing out of it. Lauren wanted to pluck it... why didn't she just grab tweezers and pull that sucker out? There had to be a pair around this rural hospital.

"Thank you," Joshua said, excusing the nurse from their sectioned off area. After the nurse's footsteps faded down the hall, he chuckled. "It's mesmerizing, isn't it?"

Lauren let out a delirious giggle. "I'm glad it wasn't just me." Then she sighed and closed her eyes. After a few moments of quiet she said, "I'm sorry about your grandpa. Were you close?"

Joshua shrugged and rested his head on the edge of the bed and studied her face. They had been in the emergency room for over three hours. "When we were little, Pay and I would spend the summers with him. He took us fishing, camping, and made us virgin drinks at his bar."

"Those sound like happy memories," Lauren commented and opened her eyes to look at him. He looked exhausted. She had the urge to touch his face, to comfort him, but between the ordeal of the day and the drugs, her fingers barely twitched on the starchy sheets.

"We moved away after my parents divorced when I was in high school; Mom got a job on the East Coast. But he would write us letters every month. Mom talked to him on the phone at least once a week, so we kept in touch. He was an amazing man." You could hear the passion through the sadness he obviously felt.

Lauren remained quiet while he reminisced about his grandfather, listening as Joshua spoke with obvious awe and respect about this important man in his life. "...which is why I studied business in college. He did all of that without a degree, but told me that was his one regret, that he didn't go to college. He set aside money for me and Pay to get an education. Sometimes I think he did it the right way, though, building his business from the ground up with pure determination. People respected him for who he was and what he accomplished, not a degree hanging on the wall, collecting dust."

"I never knew my grandpas. They died when I was little and neither of my parents was close with theirs," Lauren added when Joshua took a long pause.

Joshua's hand rested on hers and he smiled softly. They continued their conversation about their pasts while they waited for the doctor to return. It was oddly intimate in such a cold, sterile environment.

Lauren paused in her story, enjoying the memory of that night.

"Is that all you remember?" Joshua broke her silence and then bit her shoulder. He had been enjoying the story, enjoying her voice, enjoying massaging her, and didn't want her to stop.

Her eyes looked sideways to see him and she grinned as her hand crept higher up his thigh. "That was the highlight of the night," she teased and brushed the tips of her nails against his balls. "Besides, I'm enjoying the 'now' right now."

Joshua growled and grabbed her wrist, pinning it above her head while he shifted his body between her legs, pushing them outwards with his knees. Hovering over the back of her with her left arm pinned, he lowered his lips to the side of her neck, just below her ear and whispered, "The 'then' fuels the 'now'. Please continue."

His lips against her neck, in particular, was intoxicating. Lauren swallowed hard and tried to focus on continuing.

The sky was illuminated with the dimmest light and the stars were beginning to dissolve in the sky by the time they left the emergency room. The birds were barely waking with only a couple of distant chirps to greet the exhausted pair as Joshua helped Lauren with her new pair of crutches to the car.

Joshua sent Payton text updates until about 2am when all they were waiting for was the cast to be put on. At that time, she was going to bed, but arranged for Lauren to have the master bed to herself with Jen volunteering to sleep on the couch. They were all relieved that Lauren didn't need surgery or lose her foot completely (Miranda's concern, but to be fair, she was highly intoxicated).

"I wonder if anything in town is open yet?" Lauren yawned as she spoke, but was starving after her misadventure. The crackers and frozen juice they provided in the emergency room were a poor substitute for dinner.

"Isn't it a general rule that everyone in small towns have to wake at the butt crack of dawn?" Joshua yawned, too. He would be content with a cozy bed, but had no issue with staying up with Lauren awhile longer.

The two drove slowly through the empty streets until they came upon a diner that had just turned on its lights. The blue and orange neon sign was definitely a welcoming sight and they parked in the gravel-y lot and went inside.

Lauren ordered a country breakfast, complete with eggs, bacon, sausage, and biscuits with gravy on top. Joshua was content with a cup of coffee. He entertained her with stories of Kinsey as a child. Their dads were brothers, but the cousins stayed connected even after Joshua's parents divorced and he lived with his mom.

"I would've loved to see little Joshua all dressed up like a girl." Lauren couldn't stop laughing at the imagine of Kinsey and Payton forcing him to play dress up.

"It sucks to be the youngest when your cousins are girls. I was only three, so I guess it was alright, but I got my revenge. When they slept that night, I dismantled their Barbies and scattered the pieces around the yard."

"Brutal," Lauren chuckled and reached for her orange juice. "It sounds like the back story of a serial murderer." Her eyes widened. "You're not one of those crazies that helps injured women only to

kill them, are you?" Okay, so Lauren was half teasing, but in her exhausted state of mind, there was a hint of truth to her concern.

"Man, now I have to kill you for sure," Joshua said, shaking his head.

The waitress shot a look in their direction while wiping down a table and Lauren's fork clinked against the plate. "Ummmm..." she stammered.

"Geez. I'm not going to kill you or anyone. I mean, if I wanted to, wouldn't it have been a better time to do that when you were lost in the woods?"

Lauren considered and wiped her mouth off with her paper napkin before pushing the plate towards the middle of the table. "I suppose you're right. Just had to check." She was sure the waitress was listening to their conversation and it was confirmed when she walked to the table and placed the bill down. Lauren snatched it up before Joshua could grab it. "I got this," she said and pulled her debit card from her purse. "Consider it payment for not killing me... errr, I mean rescuing me."

She was relieved when he laughed, breaking the slight tension that was created by the murderous conversation. "Alright, but my fees are a lot higher than a cup of coffee."

Lauren cocked her head and looked at him with confusion. She still owed him something?

When the waitress returned with her card, she was still waiting for an explanation from him, but Joshua simply said, "Ready?" and stood up.

Tucking her wallet into her purse with furrowed brows, Lauren simply nodded and reached for her crutches.

Back in the car, she broke the silence. "Since I still 'owe' you something, we have one more stop to make before we head to the cabin. Make a left here," she directed.

Joshua smirked and followed all of Lauren's directions until they came to a stop on a dirt road that abruptly ended at a barbed wire fence.

"The ground is uneven here. Do you think you can help me?" The pain medicine was beginning to wear off, but despite her discomfort, Lauren wanted to do this one last thing before they ended their faux-date.

Joshua walked around the car and wrapped an arm around her waist, supporting most of her weight. "Should I be concerned that you're the homicidal maniac?"

Lauren grinned and looked up at him; they were close to the same height, but he was just tall enough that she had to look up at him. "Maybe."

They both laughed and made their way to the final destination.

"Here," Lauren said after they'd maneuvered through a gap in the fence and up a small, rocky trail on a hill.

Joshua looked around and nodded with approval. They were at a high spot, able to look around to most of the surrounding forests. A hawk was flying in the distance, looking for breakfast, just as the tip of the sun appeared from behind the eastern most mountain. It was like the sun woke the air and a crisp breeze caressed them as they marveled at the sunrise.

"Beautiful," Joshua whispered.

But when Lauren turned to see his expression at the beauty before them, he was looking directly at her. There is only one first kiss between two people and that moment of euphoria shared is both terrifying and exciting. Their eyes remained locked for several moments before Lauren leaned in. Joshua's head tilted and in no time, that vulnerable feeling faded and the two embraced each other's kiss.

"I can't imagine you afraid of anything, Ren," Joshua said before kissing her lips. The grip on her wrist had lessened, but she was still firmly pinned beneath him.

The kiss ended with a little nibble of his lips and a grin. "Bats," she whispered against his close lips. "I'm terrified of bats."

"Are you afraid of them sucking your blood and turning you into a vampire?" Joshua teased with a mock-Dracula voice before biting her neck.

Lauren squealed and wiggled under him, but he continued his playful assault. "Something... like... that. STOP!" Really, she didn't want him to stop - ever.

"Mmm.. but you are quite tasty. I can see why you'd be afraid." While he assaulted her neck, Joshua's hand slid down her side and beneath her. "But I think you should continue your story." His middle finger tapped against her button before sliding between her silken lips. "That is, if you'd like me to continue." His finger dipped inside her for a brief moment before he withdrew it.

Lauren groaned and squirmed with desire.

To say they were exhausted when they returned to the cabin is an understatement. Lauren's head rested against Joshua's shoulder as he carried her to the bedroom, eyes barely able to see straight. Finally she was comfortable in bed and had to struggle to keep her eyes open once her head was resting on the pillow. "You should probably sleep in here with me." She sleepily tapped the other side of the queen size bed. She knew the house would be waking up soon, but they'd be quiet around the master bedroom so she could sleep. He'd benefit from their caution. That and she felt happy with him nearby, an emotion that she hoped wouldn't wear off when the medicine was gone. *Odd*, she thought as she tried to keep her eyes open to watch him undress for bed. *I don't want this weekend to end*. Could this be more for her than a one-night fling? She fell asleep contemplating that and was barely aware of him pulling her close before he fell asleep, too.

When Lauren awoke many hours later, the sun was on its descent in the western sky and the bed beside her was empty. Rubbing her eyes, she scanned the room for Joshua's clothes, but they were gone, too. *Maybe it was just a dream?* She moved her leg and felt the pain of her ankle immediately. Nope. Not a dream, at least not that part.

"Hello?" she called out and sat up in bed. "Is anyone here?"

The door opened and Jen stepped. Cautiously, she sat on the bed and looked at her friend. "How do you feel?"

"Sore," she admitted. "Where is everyone else?" Lauren really wanted to know where Joshua was, but didn't know if anyone else knew about the kiss or him sleeping in the bed with her.

"What? Am I not enough for you?" Jen paused dramatically and then giggled. "We were supposed to be gone by four, so they all left about half an hour ago. Josh and Payton had to catch a plane home, so Kinsey left with them maybe an hour and a half ago."

Lauren's face fell. "Oh," was all she could manage. How many weekend flings had she had over the years? None left her feeling this... hollow.

"I stayed to drive you home, though. If you're up for it, we could stop in town and grab a bite to eat first."

Lauren wasn't hungry even though she probably should have been. "No, I think I'd like to get home and figure out how I'm going to get around with these annoying things." She grabbed the crutches and stood. "Can you help me get my things in the car?" The helpless feeling sunk in and she was suddenly very annoyed about the entirety of the weekend.

"Josh loaded your things in the car before he left." Jen left it at that.

Lauren was certain Jen was fishing for more details, but she wasn't in the mood to talk about Joshua or how hurt she was that he left without saying goodbye. She didn't even have his phone number and would be damned if she asked Kinsey for it. No, if he wanted anything more, he would've woke her or something, anything!

The ride back home was quiet except for the radio. Jen must've sensed Lauren was stewing over something, but didn't pry. Jen was good like that. She was always there to lend an ear or shoulder to her friends, but she wouldn't force them to talk. This made Jen very easy to talk to, but for now, Lauren just wanted to get control of her emotions in silence and move on with life like she always did.

"I'm glad you're a light packer," Jen commented after she returned from her car with Lauren's bags.

The trip up the stairs to Lauren's apartment was excruciatingly slow with the cast and crutches. Lauren also seemed to be lacking energy, but wasn't sure if it was from the new prescription she had filled or from... no, she wouldn't pine over any guy... no matter how good he smelled or kissed.

"I'll be fine," she promised her friend who was hovering.

"Just don't take any more medicine for six hours," Jen warned. "And with food. You should eat now or it'll destroy your stomach. I can make you—"

Lauren cut her off. "No, it's fine. I don't feel like much, so I'll just have a bowl of cereal or something in a bit. I just want to relax for a few minutes." Lauren managed a small smile which calmed Jen's worries some.

"Okay, hun. But if you need anything at all, call or text. Are you going to be able to drive to work tomorrow? I can always take you," she offered.

"No, I already texted my boss that I'm taking a couple of days off. The ER gave me a note for work, so I'll be fine. They want me to stay off it and let the swelling subside."

"Okay, so if you need food or company or a movie from RedBox, you'll call, right?"

"Miranda's rubbing off on you, Jen." Lauren managed a chuckle. "I'll be fine and I'll call you if I need anything. Okay?"

Jen nodded, but eyed her friend with concern as she exited Lauren's apartment.

Lauren exhaled audibly as she grabbed her phone and sunk into the couch. She sent a group text to the gang to let them know she was home and thanked them for their help before putting her phone on silent, hoping she could get some rest. She put on her Pandora station and attempted to get comfortable, all the while her thoughts betrayed her resolve to put the previous twenty-four hours out of her mind for good.

*Am I just a night of lust and lost temptation?
Is someone like me his destiny? He'll never know.
I gotta find a way to show my expectations.
He ends it where it begins but I won't let go.*

*I know you don't love me, but still I burn for you.
I know you don't love me, this flame won't die, it's true.
My soul bared completely, don't seem enough for you.
I know you don't love me, but the message can't get through."*

The upbeat, jazzy song by Caro Emerald that played only made things worse. Lauren pulled a throw pillow over her mouth and screamed. She imagined what it would be like to suffocate and not liking the idea much, she tossed the pillow to the far end of the couch, hitting her cast. "Ow! Dammit!"

Lauren wasn't going to find peace in trying to sleep, so she sat up and started unpacking. "Where's my pineapple?" She tore through her bag for the one thing worth keeping from the weekend, but didn't find it. Her inner child jumped for joy for having a reason to text Kinsey.

Hey, do you still have my pineapple?

Kinsey replied back almost immediately (something Lauren had always appreciated about her friend). *Yeah, sorry. It was with all my stuff from the farmer's market. Do you want me to bring it over?*

"No, I want Josh to bring it over." Lauren sighed and replied. *Whenever you're in the area, you can drop it off.*

Okay, hun. I have to run to the store later for some bananas. I'll drop it off then.

Lauren paused before she sent the next text. She wanted to ask if Joshua had said anything about her, but deleted it and sent something less obvious instead. *Did your cousins make it back in time for their flight? "Please say no, please say no,"* she begged as she waited for Kinsey to reply.

Yeah, all is good. They seemed to have a good time.

Lauren sighed and frowned in defeat. *That's good. I'm glad you invited them. Always nice to have new people join us.* It wasn't Kinsey's fault that Lauren was crushing on one of them. She sent another text to close the conversation (and hopefully the thoughts she was having). *I'm grateful for Josh's help. When you talk to him next, tell him thank you for me, since I didn't get to say it before you guys left.* Lauren hoped that didn't come across bitter.

Will do, she replied.

Lauren frowned at her phone and then at the mess she'd made unpacking. "Time to move on," she said and forced herself up to begin getting her apartment and life back in order.

"Ahhh, so I tormented you from the very beginning. Should've been a warning," Joshua said as he curled his fingers inside Lauren while kissing and nibbling her venus dimples on her lower back.
"How come this is the first I'm hearing of it?"

He was making it difficult for her to breathe, let alone speak. "Ooooh, god baby." She panted a few times and glanced back at him. "I think... you knew... know... exactly what you do... to me." Her muscles contracted around his two fingers.

Joshua growled and with very little effort, flipped Lauren to her back again. "I do know." Because she tormented him, too, in the most exciting of ways. With a swift motion, he buried his shaft deep inside her welcoming body and stared deep into her eyes as they made love.

Hey, do you want to come over and hang out? Lauren needed something, no someone, to get her mind off Joshua. It had been a week and she was still twisting with this new emotion that Joshua created in her. It might have been selfish, but she figured Tiger would jump at the chance of a quicky with her and it would be easy to move on with life afterwards.

Lauren waited for forty-five minutes before texting him again. *Hello? Is that a no?*

Twenty-five minutes later, she finally got a reply. *Oh hey, sorry. Mandy and I are at the movies. Maybe another time.*

Lauren read the text three times, but the confusion didn't fade. Miranda and Tiger on a date? She knew they didn't have common taste in movies, so it wasn't like they'd be either's first pick to go see a new flick that was out. She decided to text Kinsey to get the details.

Kinsey called her almost immediately. *"I know. It's so weird, isn't it? I guess he held her hair when she was barfing at the cabin. The next morning, they went for a walk after breakfast and now they're dating. I never would've thought."* Kinsey laughed. She was happy for her friends.

Lauren was happy, too, well for her friends, but it left her without a plan to get over this stranger that she didn't even have sex with! "Yeah, great for them," she added without much enthusiasm in her voice.

"Is everything okay, sweetie? Your foot still bothering you?"

"No, no... the swelling and pain are practically gone. No, I'm fine." Lauren tried to sound like her old self.

"Okay, good. We should do something tomorrow. Greg's coming over tonight to show me some new yoga pose."

The way she said that made it obvious to Lauren that there was more that was going to happen than yoga, but she didn't really want to hear about it, so she didn't ask. "Oh, sounds fun. Well, have fun yoga-ing. And yeah, tomorrow will be great."

"I gotta get going, Ren. Oh! I almost forgot to tell you. I talked to Josh the other day and let him know you said thank you."

And...? Lauren thought. "Good. Thank you for doing that. I'll let you go, okay? I have a date with Netflix tonight." She rolled her eyes at herself.

"Wait, there's one more thing. He asked me to give you his number. He said something like 'So she can thank me herself.' I'll text it to you when we hang up. Did something happen between you two last weekend?"

His number?! Lauren's inner child was doing cartwheels. "Umm.. no, nothing really. We had breakfast after we left the hospital. He's very sweet."

"Mmmhmm, there's definitely more to that story. I want to hear it all tomorrow. Text incoming and then I'll be silent for the night. Love ya, Ren."

"Love you, too, Kins. See you tomorrow."

"And that," Lauren concluded as she lay beside her lover, "was the start of our story. The end."

Joshua linked his fingers with Lauren's and stared at the ceiling. "Hmmm... seems like 'The Beginning' is more fitting than 'The End'. Otherwise, you told a very intriguing story." He turned his head to smile at her.

"For now, it has to be the end. I'm sure I'm already late to Mandy's baby shower. She looks like she's about to pop. Are we going to meet up at Fifth Street later?" Lauren squeezed his hand and leaned close for a kiss.

Joshua remained unmoving as she neared him.

"What is it?" Lauren asked in confusion. It wasn't like him to deny a kiss.

"Nothing. Just trying to recreate that moment before our first kiss," he explained and then claimed her lips for his, kissing her with a passion that was missing from their first kiss.

In Lauren's opinion, everything with Joshua only got better with time. Yes, she was very happy in a relationship for the first time in her thirty-something years of life.

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