



# NEON NIGHTS

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First Edition

Superman had nothing on him.

In his hand, he held the key, the key that unlocked the door to a brave new world—a neon-stripped nugget of hardened powder, with the power to forget the past and obliterate the future.

It was the perfect delivery system for insanity.

It made him insatiable...invincible even.

More money.

More women.

More, more, more.

Excess embedded in his soul.

Greed his constant companion.

The lights around him were manic in their interaction with the sky.

They didn't try to co-exist with the night.

They tried to own it.

Darkness be damned.

Everything here tried to dominate the thing around it.

And the music?

The music was a relentless and uncomfortable assault, not just on the ears but the very fiber of your being—merciless and fulfilling at the same time.

Lyrics flew through the air like verbal arrows, hurled out to the ravenous crowd, and fired back to the demon that lived on the stage from bloodthirsty lungs.

Avery Bass loved every second of it.

With his white t-shirt, pink shorts, and stylish sneakers that cost more than what many of the attendees in the crowd made in a week, it might not have made him look like a gangster, but that's exactly what he was.

A real-life gangster.

He sold because they wanted to buy.

He used because he wanted the madness.

Medleys of beautiful humans compacted like sardines as they danced unencumbered by fear or judgment. Their bodies undulated and slithered across one another's; inhibitions gone the moment they got into their car to start their journey here.

Youth wasn't wasted on the young.

Youth knew exactly what it was doing.

This was the very essence of youth.

It was fiery and destructive, filled with angst and venom.

Woodstock.

Lollapalooza.

Burning Man.

The damn cavemen probably had some guy who figured out how to bang a few rocks together in a rhythm, and the cavewomen around him would throw off their bear skins and dance the night away under a moonlit sky.

This world was sex.

It was drugs.

It was music that left an imprint on the soul, the melodies forever embedded, carrying with them the memories of an uninhibited past, when you were chained by a limited future.

And youth looked good on him.

He had it all...and the Prisms.

And this pill...this pill crept up on your nervous system and zapped you like a cattle prod when it kicked in. Everything about it was so intense, he could barely breathe, and he walked as far out from the crowd as he could to try to take in some more air.

He saw a group of guys he knew from school who slapped him five as he walked by and grabbed his arm like they had been best friends their whole lives, just happy to tell the others they were with that they knew him. Four girls he recognized from a party they had thrown at the house the weekend before followed them up the walkway. One of the girls grinded up next to him, her skintight neon spandex rubbing against his body. She pulled him in for a kiss and

then fluttered away without a care in the world.

Everyone wanted a piece of him, and he was happy to sell them each a slice of his soul.

It wasn't like he needed the money.

His family had plenty of money.

When he turned sixteen, he got a brand-new Corvette, which he promptly wrapped around a telephone pole on the second day. His parents—who immediately after having him realized they hated one another—replaced the car with a brand-new truck, subscribing to the logic that a bigger vehicle was safer for their little boy, no matter how dangerous it was for every other schmo on the road.

That money, though, came with nothing else.



No dudes wanted to be him, and no chicks wanted to be with him just because of it.

The pill though.

That made him special.

It made him unique.

The sweat poured from his temples, and he tore the t-shirt from his body to wipe his face with it. His muscles were still solid, even though he had started to skip the gym over the last few months in favor of any substance that found its way to his door.

He'd go back soon, after the summer. For now, his abs were well enough defined to still get glances from the ladies, and his features were sculpted enough to pass for someone that came from a Hollywood casting call for a rich, good-looking frat boy.

Neon Jungle was his life now, and it wouldn't relent until Labor Day weekend sent it packing. Then another year of frat parties would kick into overdrive, bringing with it hurricane-force winds of stupidity, debauchery, and destruction.

He found a vendor with a cylindrical ice bin branded by a designer bottled water company and plunged his hand deep into the frozen bath, trying to extract the deepest bottle he could find. He pulled a twenty-dollar bill from his shorts with his dry hand and threw it at the man. Avery waved away the change, cracked the bottle, and mainlined it down his throat, looking for a dose of relief from the intense heat he felt welling up inside of him.

Momentarily satiated, he tried to fix his blurry eyes on the scene in front of

him. The bodies in the crowd were hypnotizing, rolling and swaying together in unison to the beat. Two massive fireballs leapt from the corners of the stage jolting him back to reality. He looked around and suddenly felt like he was actually in the jungle; the neon beasts that lined the walkways seemed to be moving into attack position. The man behind the DJ booth on a stage draped in palm fronds moved in wild gyrations, as his fingers seemed to locate the right buttons to hit magically, his intensity fueling the crowd, each giving the other life.

He watched as two girls approached him, and he tried to pull his shit together.

It was an odd pair.

One was angelic in her beauty and poise, an anachronism to this en-

tire gathering, dressed in white cut-off shorts, a yellow tank top, and white Vans, like she had just left an Abercrombie photo shoot. Her straight blond hair fell gently to the side of her neck, and her face was petite and pretty without a single imperfection. The other looked like someone who had attended every one of these events since their inception and wore a leopard print bikini with green body paint streaked across her midsection, arms, and legs. She wasn't as strikingly beautiful as her friend, but she was dressed to play.

He knew right away that she was a better fit for tonight.

The wild one spoke first.

“Hey, hey, good looking.”

Her smile was wide and welcoming, her teeth not quite perfect, but even enough.

“Your boy J sent us over here to see if you had anything fun to play with.”

He fought the shockwave running through him and tried to focus on business again.

“Did he now?”

The leopard took her place next to him while the angel stayed back at a safe distance.

Avery looked at the angel.

“I won’t bite, you know. In case you didn’t notice, it’s a little loud here.”

The leopard spoke for her.

“It’s her first show, and she’s a little jumpy. I’m trying like crazy to get her to loosen up.” She smiled at him. “That’s where you come in.”

"It's not cheap," he said.

The leopard rolled her eyes.

"How not cheap?" she asked.

"Fifty a pop."

"Is it any good?" she asked.

His lips curled up at the corners and he nodded. The angel tried to reciprocate a smile, but the best she could muster was a timid movement at the corner of her mouth. He could tell she had never been around someone like him or a place like this.

It was called the jungle for a reason.

Maybe she was worth the effort?

The leopard was easy.

She required nothing special.

The angel though...

"Okay, virgin discount," he said.

The angel took offense at the shot to her maturity.

“I’m not a virgin!” she yelled.

His laugh was easy and smooth, and he knew women ate it up. His father, even though he was a piece of shit in every other way, had a great laugh. In fact, it was probably his only redeeming quality.

“I meant your first time at a festival...and just taking a wild guess here, your first time with something like this.”

He slipped his hand into his pocket and pulled out a small, brightly colored hexagonal pill.

The leopard reached into her bikini top, pulled out a fifty-dollar bill from the small stack of bills, and nestled the rest of the money back over her breast.

“Two for fifty?” she asked with a wink.

He sized her up, consumed by the power that he held in his hands.

“Deal.”

He pulled out another pill and handed one to each of them.

The leopard gave him the money and came in to kiss him on the cheek. He could feel the light print that her lip gloss left. She smelled like cherries and sun-screen, a picnic at the beach.

“Where you gonna be later tonight?” she whispered in his ear.

Damn, this girl is sexy.

“At the campground next door. We got the spot right on the water.”

“We...tell me there is another one as cute as you there?”

He smiled at her and felt a stir inside him.

“Two more. We've got the big Airstream. You can't miss it. Come



through when you leave the show, and we'll have a drink."

"It's a date."

The leopard grinned at him, then grabbed the angel by the arm and they waved goodbye.

What a night it was going to be.

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The girls walked down the hill hand in hand to "The Oasis," the festival's Main Street, where vendors of everything from glow sticks to hamburgers sat alongside henna tattoo artists and Fortune 500 companies peddling credit cards. At the end of the street was a massive white tent with hundreds of tables and chairs for attendees to sit down and take a momentary break from the beat. Along the outside ring of tables

sat a wall of animal-shaped couches that contained people in various states of entanglement across them.

The girls found a rhino to sit on and looked at each other.

Blaire Porter with more than a little shake in her voice asked, "You ready for this?"

Kerry Baker shook her head.

"I don't know about this. We don't know that guy at all."

"Not true. He goes to my school. He's in one of the Sigma frats, he's a total screw-up, but he's hot, and, like, a million of my friends buy this stuff from him for shows."

"I can't do it, Blaire. This is like going skiing for the first time and deciding to go down the biggest mountain you can find," Kerry said.

Blaire took a deep breath. Their friendship had been rocky lately, and it made Blaire sad. They had been friends for years, but now with the real world ahead, she started to get the feeling that Kerry was too good for her. She had a real career coming up, and Blaire was stuck in a holding pattern with no idea what to do next.

“Why can’t we just have fun with some more drinks? I’m all about grabbing, like, a dozen more and dancing the rest of the night away.”

Kerry poked her on the arm trying to ease some of the tension.

Blaire pulled away, still upset.

“You’re killing my good time here, just so you know. How many more times will there be to do something crazy? You’re off to the big city and your fancy corpo-

rate job, leaving me here in the middle of nowhere."

The bite was there in her voice, and she could tell that Kerry felt it sting.

"I told you to move to the city with me; that's not fair," Kerry said.

Blaire hung her head now, Kerry's blow finding its mark.

"You know what, screw it, let's do it," Kerry said.

"Wait, you just said no?!"

Blaire laughed. "I changed my mind. YOLO and all that nonsense."

Blaire let out an uncomfortable laugh.

"I'm sorry, Ker. I shouldn't have been pushy. I just wanted to do it because Becky told me it was the best she had ever done. It was really dumb of me."

Without another word, Kerry popped the pill in her mouth and washed it down

with the water. She handed the bottle back to Blaire and tapped her watch with a devilish grin.

Blaire's jaw dropped, and she grabbed the water from her friend's hand.

"You bitch!"

Then Blaire swallowed her pill, threw her arms up in the air, and they hugged each other.

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Kerry felt the music race through her bones as the final act of the night, Solitude, burst into his first song, and the crowd of 50,000 strong screamed back at the stage with unbridled ferocity.

The chorus spread throughout the crowd; "One life to live...One life to give...We've only got this one life tonight!" Sweat rolled down Kerry's face

as Blaire's body moved in unison with hers. Boys came up to dance with her, but she wanted no part of it, moving unimpeded to her own beat. She belonged to Logan, and she wasn't going to do anything to jeopardize that, even if the distance between New York and Boston proved to be too much for them at the start. That would be for the universe to decide, not from something stupid she did.

Right now, though, she felt free...and hot.

Too hot.

Colors popped around her as fireworks exploded overhead. Neon-painted people in animal costumes danced by, and the bass—the bass coursed through her, shaking her to her core.

The sweat came faster now.

She asked Blaire for the water and finished it in three gulps.

“I have to go out there,” she said, pointing at nowhere specific beyond the crowd.

Blaire continued to dance, but shouted out, “What’s wrong?!”

“I need some air!” Kerry yelled back.

She clawed her way through the maze of bodies, hands ricocheting off her skin, sending shocks of pleasure through her. She found it harder to breathe and tugged on Blaire’s arm to hurry up. They pushed through the crowd and saw the goal, a pocket of space not constrained by bodies.

“I don’t feel good!” Kerry yelled.

She felt Blaire pull her hand harder and lead the charge until they reached the clearing.

Kerry crashed onto a bench and put her head between her hands. Her brain felt like someone had removed it from its stem and shaken it around inside her skull. Her nose started to bleed, a condition she'd had since childhood when she got stressed out. Panic set in, and she lay down on the bench, her eyes gazing toward the hazy, smoke-filled heavens.

"Kerry, are you okay?!" she heard Blaire yelling.

Kerry tried to speak, but she couldn't. She fought for breath against the pain in her chest, and after giving it all she had, felt her dream of a tiny apartment in a big city, dinners with friends that ended at bars with no closing times, and eight million people trying to find their way through the racket, slip away like a taxi on Madison Avenue.



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Blaire took her phone out of the small backpack slung over her shoulder and tried to call 911.

No signal.

At the bottom of the small hill, she saw the medical tent. She begged two couples walking past to stay with Kerry, and they jumped into action. Blaire took off down the hill as fast as she could. She was a runner in high school and a damn good one. The pill had made her legs unstable and shaky, though, and she tripped on something that sent her rolling down the last section. She dusted herself off, woozy from the tumble, and exploded through the tent, begging anyone around for help.

Three EMTs jumped up from the plastic folding table they had been eating dinner at and sprang into action. They raced up the hill, Blaire trying her best to keep up, willing her legs to move faster.

“What did she take?!” the female EMT shouted at Blaire over the music.

Blaire looked at her shell-shocked as the three strangers went to work on her friend.

I told her to take this. I did this to her.

“Miss, what did she take?” the EMT asked, snapping her fingers in Blaire’s face to get her to focus.

“Uh...uh...some sort of rainbow-colored pill,” Blaire stammered.

“No pulse!” shouted the shorter male EMT.

Blaire burst into tears as her legs caved out from under her.

In the background, she heard a final thunderous chorus across the night sky.

“One life to live...One life to give...We've only got this one life tonight.”

\*\*\*

**M**arc McKinley swung his eleven-foot pintail glider around and stroked into a sheet glass wave on the outer sandbar at Blue House, his home break in East Bay. The moniker came after a lengthy creative process with his best friend Paul Jackson, which entailed looking up the beach at a blue house perched over the dunes. He had surfed here for decades, often defaulting to the wave's consistency in favor of risking a session somewhere he didn't know better. If you caught it at dead low tide—even as small as this morning was—and you had a big enough board,

you would still go home with a smile on your face.

The board felt like an oil tanker as he wrestled it around and paddled into a wave, but once he stood up and got it pointed down the line, it felt close to flying. No matter what kind of shit show awaited him at work, he could count on the ocean to fix his woes. He had let go of heartbreak, found answers to questions that nagged at his soul, and felt a connection with the natural world around him that he couldn't experience anywhere else through the countless hours spent in the water here. And the water in late May felt incredible, a salty kiss on his skin that he was never in a hurry to wash away.

A gray fin breached the surface near him, causing his heart to jump and his

hands and feet to find their way out of the water quickly. Moments later, the same fin crested again, attached to a smooth-bodied creature with a polite bottle-shaped nose.

He exhaled a sigh of relief and sat back on his board.

Gray fins never ceased to get the heart revved up.

After his final wave, he walked back up the beach to his faded black Tacoma, grabbed his towel, and dried off as the sun continued its ascent skyward. He pulled a gallon of water from the back seat and downed a chunk of it in the first few gulps. He strapped the board to the rack over the bed and fired the truck up, the A/C on full blast from the start, whipping cool-ish air into his face.

He grabbed the black trucker cap with the white letters EBSC (East Bay Surf Club) screened onto the foam from the passenger seat and pulled it down over his head. He cruised up the beach for a mile until the next drive-off point, his left arm hanging out the window, then took a right onto Dune Grass Way, the knobby tires finding asphalt again at the top of a rise coming off the sand. At the first stop sign, he fidgeted with several CDs in the center console trying to find something that fit such a beautiful morning.

The King of Country seemed like as good a choice as any.

He slid the disc into the player and laughed at the first track that came through the speakers.

“Cowboy Rides Away.”

He couldn't think of a better song to listen to as he drove to the East Bay Police Department to put in his resignation.

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"What the hell is this?" Chief Matt Rome asked him as he looked down at the letter Marc had placed on his desk.

"My letter of resignation, effective one month from now."

"No, it's not."

"I wrote it. I know what it says," Marc replied.

"Just like that?" Rome asked.

"Not just like that. I said a month from now. I'll get you through these big weekends ahead and wrap some things I'm working on."

Marc looked at the pictures on Rome's wall, not locked on to anything in particular. Rome had spent twenty-five years



in the NYPD before leaving to take the job here in East Bay. There were photos of him graduating from the police academy, on the docks of the Hudson River with a record-breaking seizure of guns and drugs, and with some friends out on a deep-sea charter, beers in hand, shrugging off a day where they got skunked. There were also a few photos of his son Nate at about ten years old. Marc knew the boy was in his late teens now but hadn't seen him in ages.

"I don't get it. Out of the blue, you walk in and resign? Doesn't make any sense."

"Time for a new chapter. There's other stuff I want to do with my life."

Rome stood up and stared through him.

"You sober?"

"As a monk," Marc replied.

"This all from that shit last year with Billy Adams and White Wave?"

"Last year has something to do with it, but it's not all of it. It just feels like a change is in order. I set aside some cash, and I'm going to help Paul out a bit down at Fish Tales, until I figure out what comes next."

Rome pressed him.

"It's over, Marc...done. Leave the past where it is and focus on the present..."

Marc interrupted him.

"Chief, I just don't have it anymore. It...she took something from me."

"Don't you owe it to her to right those wrongs?"

Marc's face tightened.

"Yeah, I owe her...every day. But there's no one left to pay back anything to."

The chief walked around the desk and sat on the front of it.

"I tried to leave once...actually it was like twenty times."

Marc chuckled, and his shoulders relaxed a bit.

"The reason I didn't each time wasn't that I owed it to the people, or the other cops, or some spirit of justice bullshit. The reason I didn't leave was because, in my core, it's what I do. Without that push and pull every day, without the worst that people can do around me, I'm not at my best. That girl needed more people like you in the world. People who took her life to mean something. Her death is not your fault. I know you want it to be, but it's not."

Marc felt like a truck had hit him.

"I'm sorry...I'm not changing..."

Rome cut him off.

"I'll take the letter, but you have to give me another one each week, letting me know that this is going to stick. Deal?"

The room felt smaller, and Marc suddenly felt unsteady and unsure of himself. He looked at the floor, counting the tiles, trying to feign indifference to what his superior officer had told him.

"Deal," Marc said through tight lips.

"Now get yourself ready because it's going to be a wild weekend ahead. Last night we ended up with a handful of kids in critical condition from some pill making its way around the Fairgrounds, assaults, and a record number of charges for indecent exposure."

"Kids can't help themselves, can they?" Marc asked.

“No, they can’t. One of the critical condition girls is a local kid too.”

The chief shuffled through a few papers on the top of the desk.

“Kerry Baker,” Rome said.

Marc’s heart skipped a beat, and he felt a wave of anger start its ascent from his core up through his throat—a burn he had come to learn over the course of his life meant that he was about to lose his cool.

“No way. Kerry, for pills?”

“That’s what it says here. How do you know her?”

“She dates my nephew Logan, and worked for Paul at the marina since she was like fourteen. Sweet kid, super smart. I’ll swing through the hospital today to check on her.”

Rome grabbed his cup of coffee from the desk and took a sip.

“You a dance festival guy with the body paint and glow sticks? That’s not what you’re leaving here to do, is it?”

Marc grinned at him.

“DJ Speedo, that’s my stage name.”

The chief nearly spit his coffee out and grabbed a paper towel from the desk to wipe the corners of his mouth.

Marc held out his hand and Rome shook it heartily.

“I appreciate everything you've done for me, Chief. It’s just time for a change is all.”

The older officer nodded and the corner of the left side of his mouth pulled up ever so slightly.

"I look forward to your letter next week."

\*\*\*

Marc walked down the hall to his office, pulled the blinds shut, sat in the black swivel chair in the darkness, and cupped his hands behind his head.

After only a few minutes, he felt trapped in the office; an animal caged up with a recognition that it couldn't leave its pen. Panic raced through his hands, and they shook as beads of sweat formed at his temples. He bolted out of his chair and clamored through the small office for an escape, knocking over some paperwork on the filing cabinet as he reached out to find the door handle. His vision blurred, and his breath was shorter now.

I don't need this right now.

The hallway led to an exit out into the parking lot, and he walked towards it quickly while trying not to draw attention to himself. He slammed into the bar on the exit door with his hip and gulped the first breath of fresh air he could get. Sometimes the anxiety pounced on him like a panther. His phone vibrated in his pocket, and he pretended to have a life-or-death interest in the marketing message about an upcoming sale on running shoes as more cops filtered into the building for the morning shift. Once he had composed himself and felt like no one was staring at him, he walked to his truck.

He cranked up the engine, the whiny V6 revving to life, and felt the cool air hit him. He put his head back against the headrest and closed his eyes again as



he tried some visualization exercises the shrink had told him to do.

But all he could see was the girl and the water.

Her fingers pruned and her nails chipped.

The heel of her shoe broken and black makeup like warpaint against her cheeks.

That's what she had been reduced to.

Was it really so hard to understand why he never wanted to see that again?

He slammed his hands on the steering wheel and screamed at the top of his lungs to an audience of one.

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The drive home was silent and felt ten times as long as normal. He felt like a prizefighter who had gone the entire fight without hitting the canvas, only to

discover he had lost by a punch when the referee held up the winner's hand.

Marc lived down Route 11, a tree-lined corridor thirteen minutes without traffic from the beach. He had been lucky to buy property here when he left the Coast Guard a dozen years ago because he never would have been able to afford it today. The three and a half acres were his salvation from the world. The house was small; a Vietnam-era brick rancher with dark shingles, green shutters, and a front porch with a grey swing. It was just him and his dog, and they didn't need a lot.

The gravel crackled underneath the tires as he pulled down the driveway, and he saw two deer hanging out at the eastern edge of the property. There was an ease out here, a slower pace than

the hectic go, go, go that surrounded the town's main drag. As he walked up to the porch, his shoes crunched the ground beneath him, and on cue, he heard a bark from inside the house.

Creatures of habit.

He fidgeted with the key, trying to get it into the lock as the barking and panting grew louder and more erratic from inside. The dog's tail thumped against the door like the pounding of a headboard in a cheap motel, and Marc knew that once the door was open, he only had a split second to get out of the beast's way. No sooner did he turn the handle than a stiff black nose and bull-like head forced its way around the corner. Marc tried to back up, but he was too slow for the one-eyed pit bull, who leapt onto his midsection looking for any opportunity

to get to his owner's cheeks with his wild tongue. Satisfied that he had given Marc a warm enough greeting, he hurled himself down the steps with such reckless abandon that Marc wondered what the dog would do if he had two good eyes. Clark ran in circles, dizzying himself and smacking the side of his face where he was missing an eye into the porch post. Unfazed, he located his favorite bush and lifted his leg, a ferocious steam of urine escaping him.

“Well, that bush is good as dead, buddy.”

The four-year-old dog had warmed immediately to the job of “man's best friend” after Marc had broken up a dog fighting ring in the northwest corner of the county a few years earlier. Clark had been used as a bait dog because he

wasn't mean enough to fight with the others. When Marc found him, he was buried in the back corner of the barn, terrified of anyone who came near him. Marc had sat down on the ground and waited until the dog came up to him. After thirty minutes, the dog limped over and sniffed him up and down. Satisfied that this man smelled nothing like the pigs who had kept him so far, he plopped down at Marc's side and put his head on his knee. Marc petted him for another half hour and didn't even have to carry him to the truck. The dog attached to his side and followed him step for step. He had lost an eye, had permanently broken ear cartilage on one side, and had numerous scars on his stocky frame, but the men and the beasts had not broken his spirit. The dog's tempera-

ment was undeterred by the cruelty of the world, and there was not a sweeter, gentler animal around.

Marc sat on the swing and rocked back and forth as he watched the dog unsuccessfully try to make friends with a rabbit that had wandered into the yard. He needed a whole lot of nothing right now; tranquility, some animals running around, and maybe a cup of coffee. That required getting up though, and the thought was simply too much to bear, so he opted for the sweet serenity of a squeaky swing.

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“I got married last weekend in the Islands. I thought you should know,” Kyle Lane said.

Detective Carly Hill stared at the phone confused, a cascade of emotions running through her body, each jockeying for pole position.

Shock, amusement, jealousy.

Her ex-husband was the same guy who couldn't commit to a choice at the drive-thru, sometimes holding up the line for three or four minutes while he went back and forth through the brightly colored menu board. Now thirty days into dating this girl, he has the clarity of

a freshly cleaned window, and he gets married to her?

All she could muster back was, "Okay."

"Can you bring April to the house on Saturday night for our party?"

No please...never a please.

"Okay," she said.

She could picture him out on the deck of their old house, sitting back in a lounge chair by the pool with a putrid-smelling cigar in his hand, like a tycoon from the twenties. The image in her head made her sick to her stomach.

"April will love Tiara so much. Tiara can't have kids, so she's really excited to spend more time with her."

Tiara. What a name.

Carly bit down on her tongue.



“I hope you’re happy that I’m happy, Carly. I want the same thing for you so bad.”

Such a gross lack of self-awareness was a terrible quality to have as a person.

What was worse, though, was a sociopath who knew precisely how to leverage their manipulative tendencies. She fought the urge to smash the phone against the wall and stayed quiet.

He didn't let up.

He never did.

“You’re welcome to come too. Tons of our old friends will be there. I’m sure they would love to see you,” he said.

She said nothing.

“Party starts at seven. If you can have April here by then, that would be amazing. Oh, I need to take this call. Talk soon, Car.”

No, thank you.

Never a thank you.

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Carly sat down at the kitchen island to finish her coffee. Her blood boiled as she sipped from the #1 MOM cup that April had given her for Christmas last year. She looked out her back window at a flurry of activity in the trees, a gang of blackbirds assaulting the leaves with their wings like they owed them money.

Why is this getting to me?

She heard footsteps behind her and looked up to see her nine-year-old daughter April wearing a t-shirt with a cartoon dolphin holding a shovel that read, I dig dolphins. The girl took to just about anything she touched, but she loved the piano and the ocean more than anything else in the world. She was

sweet to strangers and kind beyond her years, and hardly a day went by that someone didn't pay Carly that compliment.

How she had come from him was beyond her.

A moment of fear seized her at the thought of April spending time with him, unlocking some hidden evil buried deep inside her.

What if April started to act like him?

Would it change the way she felt about her only light in the world?

"Good morning, Mommy!" she said, giving Carly a hug that melted away the morning's start on contact.

"Hi, sweetie."

She hugged the girl back tighter than she needed to.

April sat on the barstool across from her mother and put a book down on the countertop. Never anything electronic. It was always a physical book or magazine...and she read all the time. She said she loved the way the pages felt, and she couldn't connect to a story the same way if she couldn't touch it.

"Could I have some toast and fruit for breakfast, please?"

Carly smiled and moved to the pantry to get the girl's breakfast started.

"I've got some news for you, honey," Carly said.

"Good or bad?"

"Ummm."

"Bad it is," April said.

Nine-year-olds picked up on shit quick.

"I don't know how to classify it."

The girl smiled.

“Is it about dad?”

She’s like a damn shrink.

“He got married again,” Carly said.

“To who, Tiara?” April asked.

“Yes, to the crown girl.”

The little girl smacked her hand to her head.

“Do people usually get married that fast?”

Carly set a medley of fresh blueberries, strawberries, and bananas in front of her daughter.

“Sometimes, but it usually has to do with Las Vegas.”

The girl attacked the fruit as if it had been weeks since she ate.

“He wants you to go to the wedding party this weekend at his house.”

April stared at the bowl of fruit as if it contained the answer to a riddle she needed to solve.

“Oh, okay...do I have to?”

“No, but it would make him feel good if you did.”

The little girl took a deep breath and poked at her fruit this time, seemingly less enamored by it.

“Okay then.”

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Carly stood in front of the mirror naked and looked herself over.

Maybe she wasn't as taut as she was in her college tennis career, but she didn't think she was doing bad. Everything was staying up, more or less, and police work kept her stomach flat and her ass elevated. She got closer to the mirror,

smacked her lips, and opened her teeth like she was checking a horse's gum line.

Maybe she was trying to protect herself and overlook some glaring flaw, but she honestly felt pretty good about how she looked.

Yet she had struggled to scare up a date in the last five years.

Kyle had been married now two more times.

It wasn't that men didn't have any interest, but she had a few strikes against her. One, she had a nine-year-old, and most men her age still had the maturity of a nine-year-old. Two, she had a badge and gun, and most men were too insecure to be with a woman who could take care of herself.

She sighed and came to the same decision she made every time she felt this

way. April needed her one hundred percent focus, and any relationship that she took on could steal time from her daughter. Unlike most fathers, mothers, with the very rare exception of those that made their way onto tabloid TV, contained a built-in self-destruct button when anything concerning their kids was threatened.

Carly opted to stop the self-pity train in the middle of the tracks and walked into the closet to put on her khakis and black polo. She tied her hair back in a ponytail and grabbed the Glock 19 and her holster from the gun safe. She heard the phone ring in the kitchen and hurried down the stairs to answer it.

She smiled at the name on the screen as she hit accept.



“Coffee?” Marc asked before she could speak.

“No hello?”

“I think coffee is actually hello in Icelandic.”

The laugh that escaped felt like freshman year, and she tried to tone down some of the teenager in it.

She heard music floating through the house from April’s room and recognized a number from Mozart her daughter had been working on.

The day was on the way up.

“Okay, well, I’ve had quite a morning and coffee sounds great,” she said.

“Everything okay?” Marc asked.

“Eh.”

He laughed.

“That good, huh? April okay?”

“She’s great, more ‘me’ stuff.”

“Well, I’m ready to listen. I need to run by the marina to talk to Paul, meet the chief at the station, and then head to the hospital if you want to join.”

Few phrases had the same impact on the human species as “the hospital.” It had the power to uproot a conversation and veer it off in a much different direction.

“Who’s in the hospital?” she asked.

“Kerry Baker,” Marc said.

“No! What’s wrong?”

“Looks like she took a pill last night at that Neon Jungle festival and is in critical condition. She’s not the only one it happened to.”

“Why would we bring in a festival with 50,000 kids on a week where we are al-

ready understaffed?" she asked, frustration seeping into her voice.

"Don't get me started on that idiot Larry."

"You and me both. I'm ready. I just need to drop April at my mom's place. Sandbar for coffee in an hour?"

"Perfect," he said.

Then his voice broke just the slightest bit as if he were trying to bite the words back before they could leave his mouth.

"Oh...one more thing I need to tell you."

This was headed nowhere good.

"Okay," she said, trepidation in her voice.

"I put in my resignation effective one month from today."

Then he hung up the phone before she could start yelling at him.

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She steamed as she drove down Route 1 toward her mother's condo, April blissfully unaware in the backseat, her head buried in a book on shipwrecks.

How could he just quit and not tell me? I thought we were closer than that. Maybe we aren't as close as I thought or hoped?

Horns and music blared over each other on roads that up until twenty-four hours ago were relatively stress-free to drive down. The six-lane highway ran through the heart of an army of hotels, condos, and restaurants, interspersed with ice cream stands, t-shirt shops, and miniature golf courses that tried to outdo one another with every new opening, upping the average spend for a family of four to unprecedented levels for the

thrill of a sticky-handled putter and a brightly colored golf ball.

It was already crazy...and it was only Thursday.

By tonight, the entire road would become a parking lot, and traffic on the two bridges would be at a standstill. The dreams of elaborate nights out at one of the hotspots on the Wharf would be extinguished by the gridlock and force the occupants to start drinking in their cars long before their hotels and vacation rentals came into view.

Life in a beach town.

Her mother's condo sat at the end of Seashell Street in the development of Sandcastle Cove, a bizarre name for a subdivision given sandcastles' propensity for washing away. Manicured grass and hedges lined the road, and a net-

work of sidewalks that would have made the designers of Central Park envious weaved along the sides. There were thirty-foot tall water features on each side of the security booth, and the name of the development stood proudly in a radiant silver and blue, that looked like it was leaping from the stone wall behind it. Once through the gate, the neighborhood was a mix of sprawling single-family homes, condos, and townhomes featuring the latest and greatest in appliances, finishes, and colors. If a buyer loved HGTV—and they all did here—they would love this neighborhood.

The front of her mother's townhome was striking, with bold purple globes of alliums lining the walkway and a wooden sign from a big box store that was like

catnip to women over the age of fifty. In white cursive paint, it read: "The 4 S's of Summer; Seashells, Shorts, Sunsets, and Sangria." The front porch had two rocking chairs, ivory white railings without a chip in the paint, and bright yellow daffodils in thick bundles next to the steps.

This side of the development felt like a Golden Girls episode, but everyone was much more active. Carly's mother thrived on it. Sandra Hill moved a million miles an hour, and anyone around her was bound to get caught up in the whirlwind. Though she had been a widow for nearly twenty years, she had never found the desire to remarry or date. Her husband had been the gold standard for her, a medal she didn't need to validate again. A shrinking violet she was not, flitting her way into everyone's business,

a gossip merchant that made her presence felt at every community event. It also made her a fixture in East Bay's real estate community, and she had been responsible for thirteen percent of the sales inside The Cove.

Carly rapped on the door with the gold knocker that had the word "Welcome" scrawled in cursive, to announce their arrival. A striking woman with a face that had maintained a youthful glow through a two-pronged diet of salt air and Dr. Beverly, the town's pre-eminent plastic surgeon, answered the door with an excitement reserved only for visiting grandchildren.

"Hello, my dear!" she said as she pulled her granddaughter close.

The little girl smiled warmly at the hug. Carly knew her mother was over the top,



but April always seemed to love coming to see her.

Then she looked at Carly after releasing April from her squeeze, offering up her arms in a gesture of peace.

"You still mad at me?" her mother asked.

Carly shook her head and gave her mother a shallow hug, long enough to have some authenticity and short enough to express her continued dissatisfaction with some of her antics.

"No, I'm good. Thank you for watching April. It's a busy weekend ahead."

"I'll take every minute I can get with my granddaughter."

Carly went to give April a bear hug and fought back a tear in the corner of her left eye. She hated leaving her daughter. It stripped something in her soul away.

She felt guilty every day that she had chosen the police force with its unpredictable hours and danger, but it had been her dream since she was a little girl.

She was good at it, and she loved it.

The apple doesn't fall far.

Her mother glanced down at her holster, her face a mask of perpetual disappointment.

"Something's wrong with you," Sandra said.

"Daddy got married again," April said.

"To who?!" her grandmother asked.

"The crown lady," April replied.

Carly couldn't contain the laugh that burst from her lips.

"Kyle told me they dated for a month," Carly said.

Her mother's face hinted at the slightest surprise in the announcement but also seemed to acknowledge that this wasn't out of the realm of possibility.

"Oh, my."

"Can I go play, Mimi?" April asked, eager to extricate herself from the grown-up conversation that was about to follow.

"Of course, you can. I put an iced tea on the counter for you, and the piano seat is all warmed up."

The girl's smile beamed, and she gave one last hug to her mother before running inside.

Sandra didn't hesitate to speak now that April was out of earshot.

"You have to keep doing this job, huh? I'll bet it's why Kyle left. It's certainly why

your father isn't here anymore. I just don't get it."

Always her job.

Always her marriage.

Always her father.

"I'm not getting into Dad or the job today, and as far as the sperm donor goes... If he weren't so busy screwing everything that walked near him during our marriage, he wouldn't have cared that I was a cop. Good luck to the crown princess. She's in for a real surprise."

Her mother composed herself and looked past Carly to her neighbor two doors down, who had walked out onto her front porch.

They exchanged a wave and an inane pleasantry.

Appearances were important at The Cove.

"I've gotta go. Thank you again," Carly said without another moment's hesitation.

A soft melody floated out the doors with clean, precise notes that had a haunting feel.

How could her daughter be this good at nine?

Sandra looked hard at her daughter and took her final shot.

"I'm done nagging for the day, but find yourself another nice man. You don't have to prove how tough you are to your father."

Carly turned, walked down the steps, and drove off without another word.

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