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A Dangerous Thing

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Author Bio

Jackie McMahon '21 intends to major in English with a writing concentration. She has been in love with storytelling since childhood and aspires to someday become a writer of mystery and suspense. In addition to The Mercury, Jackie writes for The Gettysburgian newspaper and is a member of College Democrats. In her free time, Jackie likes to spend too much time on her literary-centric Tumblr blog, obsess over fictional characters, and pet all the cats she possibly can.

A Dangerous Thing

The first time she shows up at his apartment in the middle of the night, he's awoken from a deep sleep by the sound of fervent knocking at the door, but it's not really a knocking, it's a pounding, a rhythmic slamming of her fists against the wood that screams *let me in, let me in*.

He's suddenly wide awake when he sees her leaning casually against his doorframe, as if she hadn't just been in a frenzy a moment before, and her dark eyes are the color of melted gold under the fluorescent hall lights. She looks thinner, which is hard to believe, considering she was small enough the last time he saw her, her body swallowed whole by the scuffed leather jacket that used to belong to him. Now there's blood on it, despite the fact that she doesn't have a scratch on her.

"Jesus Christ." There are so many things he wants to ask. *Where have you been? Why didn't you call? How can you just show up here after how you broke my heart?* But in the moment his vocabulary escapes him.

"Nope, just me," she says with a smirk, breezing past him to grant herself entry to his apartment. She had a key, once. "Can I use your washing machine?"

He starts to nod, but she's already stripping herself of her clothes, and she drops her jacket and her heavy boots on the floor behind her like breadcrumbs as she makes her way to the washing machine. He turns his head as she slips off her bloodstained tank top, feeling intrusive, but out of the corner of his eye he catches a glimpse of her black bra and panties, of the yin yang tattoo on her skinny shoulder blade that she got illegally when she was sixteen, and of her father's necklace that now dangles between her breasts.

He hasn't seen her since the funeral, the rainy morning when she showed up to the cemetery with sunglasses over her eyes and breath smelling like something forbidden. He stood beside her as the priest said his words, one hand holding onto her sobbing, red-faced little brother, the other waiting for her, but she hadn't looked at him once. Her eyes had remained firmly trained on the hole in the ground they were lowering her father into, a stony expression on her face just like the one she is wearing now, surely trying not to think about how her father's casket had to be kept closed so the guests couldn't see the hole that the shotgun blast left in his face.

He whispers her name just like he did after the funeral, but he hopes this time she won't walk away from him and disappear for six weeks again. "Lou..."

"I hate that nickname," she says as she firmly slams on the start button, and the washing machine roars to life. "Do you have any beer in your fridge?"

"Can you just shut up for a minute? Stop acting like everything's okay! Everything's not okay." He thinks of her bloody clothes whirling around in his washing machine and of her father in the ground and the look on her face that day in the cemetery.

She raises one eyebrow at him and steps towards him so she can look him in the eye. "You think I don't know that, stupid?" She leans up to kiss him without warning, and her hands curl into the fabric of his shirt. Her lips taste the same, like her signature crimson lipstick, and for a moment he forgets that

everything is wrong.

Afterwards, she rolls off of him with a sigh and collapses onto her stomach, the bones in her shoulder blades jutting out of her naked back like wings. He wonders if they have a 30-day treatment program for this because what he just did is definitely *not* an appropriate reaction to the girl you're still in love with showing up at your apartment covered in someone else's blood.

Beside him, he feels her body go suddenly still. "Are you still awake?"

"Yeah."

"You know I don't mean it when I call you stupid, right?"

"But I am, though."

Through the darkness, he sees her shake her head. "Don't say that. Don't ever say that."

* * *

Another six weeks later he's had a particularly awful day, which means he drinks twice as much as he usually would, and he's half expecting her to show up when he turns on the TV and sees the breaking news story. The news anchor stands on the corner of Mulberry and Spring, and in the background of the shot paramedics are carrying a body bag. He curses her name.

When he opens the door for her, her hair is several inches shorter, and she's sporting a nasty gash across her cheek, water soaking through her T-shirt. "Christ, Louisa. Why were you out walking in this rain?"

"I wasn't walking, I was running. Can I use your shower?"

When she comes back out, wrapped in a fluffy towel, he's waiting for her on the couch with a pot of hot coffee and a pathetic dinner made out of the detritus left in his fridge. "Do you want me to look at your cheek?"

She waves off his concern and takes a sip of her coffee. She's never liked people to know when she's hurt. "How's work?" It sounds too casual, too normal.

"Same as usual. I'm not up to much these days. Sometimes I go get drinks with Tom and the guys, but usually I just stay home..." He slept with someone else, once when he was drunk, someone who was the exact opposite of her in every way, and it still felt like cheating somehow, even though she told him she didn't care if he saw someone else. In fact, she'd actively *encouraged* it, at the beginning.

She pauses between bites, as if she's scared to say what she's about to say. "Have you seen my mom around?"

He shrugs a single shoulder. "I call to check up on her. She gets out of bed most days. And she misses you. She wants you to come home."

"I will, once this is done."

His mind flashes to the scrolling headline he saw on the news. "That was you, wasn't it? Esposito's guy?"

She doesn't meet his eyes as she sips her coffee. "What about Georgie?"

He thinks about her dimpled, dark-haired little brother, who looks just like how she used to. "He's good. I went to visit him last week, took him out for ice cream. Your mother got him a therapist. He's...adjusting, I think."

"That's good." She wipes away the thin trail of blood that still lingers on her cheek. "Then he won't end up like me."

"You don't have to do this, you know. Your father knew that this could hap-

pen. He knew that he was playing a dangerous game..."

When she turns to look at him, her eyes burn. "That's exactly why he prepared me for this exact situation. I don't enjoy this, you know, constantly looking over my shoulder, constantly running, feeling angry all the time. But this is the only way it can end, and I'm going back for Esposito whether you like it or not."

He collapses back against the couch cushions because he knows he won't be able to dissuade her. They used to fight all the time, about movies and music and where to go for dinner, stuff that seems like such trivial things to argue about now, and he knows when it's best to just give up and let her have her way. He doesn't want to provoke her tonight, because tonight should be good, because in the morning she's just going to get up and walk out of his life again, and then he'll be back to sitting around waiting for her to return.

Maybe he should start that 30-day program himself. *How to get over your beautiful, stubborn, avenging angel of a kinda-sorta-maybe-girlfriend.* But starting a program would mean that he wants to quit her, and he doesn't. He knew what he was getting into when he fell in love with her, but he did it anyway. He's always been a bit of masochist. She stands up, and her red lips form a smile that doesn't quite reach her eyes. "Come on, no more fighting. Let's just go to bed."

"Why?"

"Because the only time I'm not angry is when I'm with you."

They lie together in the dark, his arms wrapped around her small torso, his calloused hands tracing the intricate pattern of half-healed scars that now adorn her stomach. He pauses for a moment on a fresh, red welt near her heart, and she whispers his name.

"When it's all over," she says, "We'll go away--run off and become outlaws. How does that sound?"

"What about Georgie?"

She goes deathly quiet, and for a moment he thinks she's fallen asleep. "I went to visit him at school the other day, you know? Just stood across the street, waiting for him to get out. I saw him walk out of the building, talking to this little girl with blonde pigtails..." He can barely make out the slight smile that adorns her tired features. "I wanted to go talk to him, but...he looked so happy. I didn't want to ruin it."

Instead, she came here. *Because she already ruined me,* he thinks. *And we both know it.*

They're both in so deep that he doesn't know how he'll ever reach the surface again, and so he dives deeper and welcomes the water into his lungs.

* * *

The third time isn't until much later, so much later that he was starting to think she wasn't ever coming back. When he opens the door for her, it's the middle of the day, and she actually looks happy. Her hair is tied back in a neat braid, her skin unmarred, her clothes pristine and unwrinkled. She's holding a brown paper bag in one hand, and when he sees it dripping for a second he thinks it's blood but then realizes it's only grease. "It's almost over."

He wonders what story they will air on the evening news tonight, and if she will still be sitting beside him when they do. They sit on the floor of his apartment even though there are plenty of chairs they could use, their hands

slick with grease as they devour the takeout she brought from the hole-in-the-wall place down the street. She laughs about how he still buys the same brand of cheap beer, and for a moment he can pretend that everything is normal, that everything is the way it was supposed to be. They drink until they can barely see.

That night, they go to bed early, the rhythmic beat of their movements just more white noise added to the cacophony of the city, and he can see the outline of her ribs, threatening to pop out of her skin. He counts them in his head. He stares at her afterwards and she pries open one tired eye, looking at him. “What are you gawking at, stupid?”

And because he’s stupid, he reaches over for his nightstand, and her eyes go wide when she sees the little velvet box in his hand, the little velvet box he had wanted to present to her months ago before all this shit happened. “Louisa, I lo —”

She clamps a cold hand over his mouth. “Please stop talking. Please, just stop...”

His hands fall limp to his sides, and there’s a soft *thud* against the hardwood as the box falls. All he can hear is his own breathing.

When he looks at her, there’s remorse in her eyes, and it looks like she might cry. “I know you don’t understand, that you *can’t* understand, but...this is something I need to do. If you love me, then just trust me. And after this all over, after I’m done...then you can ask. And I’ll give my answer.”

He presses a feathery light kiss to the sensitive skin above her eyebrow, and because he’s stupid and in love he says ‘okay’.

* * *

The last time, he wipes the sleep from his eyes at three a.m. as he answers the door in a daze. She looks as exhausted as he feels, like she might collapse at any moment, and she practically falls into his awaiting arms. “It’s done,” she whispers into his collarbone. “It’s finally done...” He reaches out to steady her, and his hand brushes across her abdomen, which is burning hot. He pulls his hand away and finds it sticky and slick, dripping, dripping, dripping.

No.

Before he can move her knees buckle, and his arms reach out to grab her before she can hit the floor. Frantically, he presses down on her wound with one hand while reaching for his phone with the other. “Louisa? Louisa, please...”

“It’s done,” she says again, her voice sounding soft and far away, repeating the phrase like it’s all she knows. “Esposito...he’s gone. They’re all gone. It’s done.”

“It’s not done,” he finds himself saying. “You and me. Just because you’ve done everything you promised...that doesn’t mean it’s over, okay?”

She smiles faintly, no color on her lips, and shakes her head. “You’re so stupid.”

He doesn’t remember exactly what he says to the 911 operator, all his words lost to the hazy fog of memory. All he remembers is the operator’s soothing voice and the pounding of his own heart in his ears. As soon as he hangs up the phone slips from his grasp.

“I should’ve let you ask,” she says as both his arms wrap around her. “I’m sorry. I thought...I thought I had to do this first, so I could move on. So I could finally be worthy of you.”

“Don’t say that,” he whispers fiercely. “Oh Lou, don’t ever say that...”

For once, she doesn’t remind him how much she hates that nickname, just smiles, only smiles. “I never deserved you. You were so good, and kind, and selfless, and I...” Her breath comes out in ragged whispers. “I was so selfish, I kept coming back, kept hurting you. Can you forgive me?”

He shakes his head. “There’s nothing to forgive.” He was the selfish one, he thinks. She told him what she did, what she was, she warned him--but he didn’t listen. He never listened. “I love you.”

Her eyes are focused on something far away, something he cannot see. “I love you, too. Can you...can you talk to my mom? And Georgie? Can you tell them I’m sorry? Can you protect them, like I couldn’t?”

“You protected them, Lou. You protected them.”

She lifts up one of her bloody hands and pressed something hard and metallic in his palm. His fingers grip the medallion of her father’s necklace tightly, so tight it presses an indentation into his skin. “I’m sorry.”

And just like that she leaves him again.

He supposes that, deep down, he always knew she would.

* * *

This time, Georgie holds his hand while they’re at the cemetery. “Lou told me she had to go away.”

His eyes don’t peel away from the hole in the ground, right beside her father’s. “And what did you say?”

Georgie’s eyes burn gold. “I said that sometimes we don’t decide whether we stay or go. Sometimes we just have to.”

He wonders how a fourth-grader ended up being a million times smarter than he ever was. His free hand clutches the necklace of her father’s that now rests above his heart, and silently, he decides that Georgie will never have it. Lou wouldn’t have wanted him to.