

# ~ Unspoken Question ~

by A. K. Naten

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**Category:** Uber Alt

**Rating:** R

**Summary:** "...They say that sometimes, 'a girl likes to be asked'. But I don't always find that to be true. Sometimes you don't need to ask. Sometimes you just can't. Sometimes, it's just best if it remains... unspoken. ...Or, is it?"

**Disclaimer(s):** This is a F/F SLASH PIECE that depicts a sexual relationship between consenting adult women. If you are under 18 years of age and/or this type of story is illegal in the state or country in which you reside, consider yourself hereby warned. If depictions of this nature disturb you, then stop reading and bail now. This is an Uber story with characters that are loosely based on two chicks from a now-defunct TV show. Any resemblance to people or characters living, dead, or imagined is purely coincidental and completely unintentional.

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"Wow... Georgie wasn't kidding... this place is atrocious."

I walked through my father's home - the home where I'd spent my teenage years growing up and developing the angst and solitary attitude that would eventually lend itself to my career - carefully taking in all the cobwebs, dirty floors, dirty dishes, and smudged walls, just to name a few things. My sister had told me that the house was badly in need of cleaning, but she hadn't specified just *how* bad.

"Guess I know what I'll be spending my time doing," I murmured aloud. "So much for working on my novel."

I sighed and raked a hand through my dark hair, glancing around the house again, wondering where in the world I would start, and how.

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My father, John Kauffman III, had lived by himself in his small, central- Pennsylvania home for the past 27 years. My mother had divorced him years ago, and even though my sister and I now lived hours away and had lives of our own, we managed to stay in touch and keep tabs on dear old Dad. Georgina only lived two hours away, compared to my eight-hour, North Carolina location, so Georgie was the one who checked in on our 77-year-old father the most. She was the one the neighbor had called when Dad had the heart attack.

I sat in a recliner in the living room, staring at the numerous pictures that littered the walls. There were various candid snapshots and professionally-done poses that featured our little family and spanned many years. Anything from pictures of my father as a young man, living and working on his beloved family farm, to the latest school pictures of Georgie's kids. All the photos

reflected a family that, while damaged, still loved and cared.

When Georgie had called me and told me what'd happened, my heart plummeted. Dad had developed some serious health problems over the past few years - nearly all of them due to his lifelong smoking habit - and now that he was getting older, his body seemed to be slowly failing him little by little, especially his diseased heart. He apparently had the heart attack while working out in his barn, and when a neighbor stopped by to see him, they'd found him face down in the dirt, clutching his chest. Georgie rushed to the hospital right away, then called me, and I dropped everything and flew north immediately.

Dad had survived the heart attack, but he would be hospitalized for quite awhile. Georgie hung around for the first week, but she had a family and a 'real' job, and she needed to return to take care of her own life. I understood. I knew that she was the one who usually looked after Dad, so I offered to stay at the house for awhile and keep her informed of everything that went on. I wasn't like I had anyone waiting for me at home anyway. I hadn't had that in... well, ever. Besides, I reasoned, I was a writer, so I could pretty much do my job from any location.

No longer content to sit and stare at photos, I got up off the chair and headed over to my Dad's TV cabinet to see what movies he had available. Even though society had entered the new millennia several years ago, my father had only gotten himself a VCR within the last year. I opened the cabinet doors and started flipping through his humble movie selection, hoping to find something to entertain me for a little while. A slow smile spread across my lips as I saw 'The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance', 'The Outlaw Josey Wales', 'Rio Bravo', 'True Grit', 'The Cowboys', 'The Shootist', 'Kelly's Heroes', 'A Fistful of Dollars', 'The Sands of Iwo Jima', and 'The Green Berets'. Okay, so, apparently my Dad's tastes are limited to war movies and westerns starring John Wayne and Clint Eastwood. I closed the cabinet doors with a sigh and headed into the kitchen in search of another beer. It was only nine o'clock at night, and although I was pretty beat from cleaning Dad's house all day, I wasn't ready for bed just yet. Finding the last bottle of beer in the very back of the 'fridge, I grabbed it and headed outside for some fresh air.

My father's place, although a messy bachelor pad, was always so peaceful and serene. He had a nice chunk of land, and the property backed up to a huge, state-owned forest. Houses had popped up on either side of him during the past few years, but it was still a pleasant, quiet area. Dad had always been a farm boy at heart, and when he bought the large piece of land all those years ago, his dream was to have his own little working farm. That dream never completely materialized, however, so he'd settled for just having a barn and lots of open space to grow gardens and fruit trees.

I smiled as I stood out back and looked at the big weather-beaten barn. It had always been a favorite arena of mine to play in and around. I'd spent much time there as a youngster and teenager, letting my imagination run wild and hiding from the world while I tried to figure myself out.

Walking out to the barn, I pulled the heavy doors open and was immediately assaulted by its warm, earthy smell. It could sometimes be a scary place when it was dark, like now, but the smell of the barn's interior always soothed me and brought back pleasant memories. I flipped the

interior light switch on and watched as the place became partially illuminated by the weak, yellow light. *It still looks the same, even after all this time*, I thought. My eyes wandered around, seeing, absorbing, remembering. The first time I made out with a girl was in this barn. *Carolyn Williamson... she was hot*, I mused as I took a swig of my beer and smirked to myself.

"Hello?"

The voice made me jump and I whipped around, nearly spewing out my mouthful of drink.

"I'm sorry... didn't mean to scare you!" The voice belonged to a young woman, and she laughed and held her hand up in apology. "I couldn't help but notice the strange car in the driveway earlier today, and then I saw you out here, and....," she paused, but I just stood there like an idiot, my hand unconsciously checking my lips for spewed beer while my brain refused to do anything except make me stare. "Uhm, I'm sorry, but... are you a friend of John's?" She cocked her head and looked at me expectantly, and finally something inside my head clicked.

"Oh, uh, sorry," I muttered, wiping my hand on the back of my jeans quickly before extending it to the woman, "Joanna Kauffman... I'm John's daughter." Her hand was firm, yet soft and warm as I clasped it, and I fancied that I felt a tingle of electricity race up my arm.

Her mouth formed a perfect circle as realization dawned, "Ohhh, okay," she said, nodding. "Geez, I didn't realize he had another daughter... I'm so sorry! You must think I'm so rude!" she laughed and gave an apologetic smile. Little did she know that I was forgiving her already. She was quite cute, rude or not. "I'm Claire Green," she explained, touching her hand to her chest. "I live next door."

I smiled back at her, "Ah, okay. Your over-protectiveness makes sense now," I teased, making her blush and laugh again. "Actually, it's nice to know Dad has someone looking out for him. I should thank you."

She waved a hand, "No need. I'm happy to help your Dad... he's such a nice man." She smiled sweetly and I felt my heart begin to beat faster. "How's he doing, by the way? Much better, I hope?"

I nodded slowly as something suddenly became clear to me, "Are you....," I pointed at her and frowned as I put the pieces together, "You're the one who found him and called the ambulance?"

"Yes," she nodded.

Georgie had said it was a neighbor, but she'd never specified any more than that. I was gonna have to have a serious discussion with my sister and her damned lack of specifics.

"Oh wow," I said, my eyes bulging at the realization that this woman had saved my father's life. "Well, I *really* need to thank you now; you saved his life."

Claire waved a hand again, "No, no. I just did what anyone would do, Joanna."

"Please, call me Jo... everybody does," I said. "And I'm *still* going to thank you. If you hadn't found him... if you hadn't called that ambulance..." I suddenly felt my throat close up, and I just stood there, shaking my head while staring at this stranger.

Claire reached out and rubbed my arm, "It's okay... he's okay now... he's gonna be fine, right?" Her melodic, upbeat voice matched her sweet expression, and I swear I wanted to grab her and kiss her. *What the...?!*

I nodded briskly and jerked my eyes away from her face, "Yeah, yeah... he's doing much better... much better."

"Good... I'm so glad."

She withdrew her hand and we stood there and just looked at each other for a few moments, the atmosphere in the barn suddenly becoming awkward, for some reason.

"Well, I'll leave you alone. I just wanted to... make sure everything was okay." She shrugged and seemed a little nervous as she started to walk back toward the door.

"Uh, yeah... I'm glad you did. Thanks again, really."

"You're welcome," she said, tossing me another little wave as she began to walk through the doorway. Before she disappeared completely, however, she turned back to me, "It was nice to meet you, Jo." The shy smile on her lips pulled at something inside me.

"Yeah... nice to meet you too, Claire."

She smiled at me one last time, then she was gone.

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Two days had passed since I'd met Claire and had begun trying to transform my father's pig-sty of a house back into a clean, more livable dwelling. I had pretty much finished cleaning up the interior, now I needed to start the exterior. Even though Dad was able to mow the grass with his riding tractor, he obviously hadn't trimmed or weeded around his house since the early 1900's. It was a disaster. *Now I know why I live in a condo*, I thought to myself.

The early summer weather had made for beautiful day, so I decided to busy myself with the task of whacking away at the waist-high wads of grass that were growing out of control along the edges of everything, everywhere. The only pair of grass clippers I could find ended up being some old, antique-looking shears, so I oiled and sharpened them up as best I could and got to work.

It was growing quite warm outside, but I was happy with the progress I was making. Thinking I'd work at it just a little while longer, I bent myself over the edge of the flowerbed and got lost

again in perfecting my snipping technique while humming a tune that'd been stuck in my head since that morning.

"Looks nice."

The voice startled me, and I whipped my head around quickly. My eyes were greeted by the lovely vision of a smiling Claire Green, and I idly wondered if she'd perhaps been looking at my ass before she spoke. ...One could always hope.

I straightened up and smiled back at her. "Thanks," I said, squinting my eyes in the bright sunlight. "It's coming along, albeit slowly," I lifted the decrepit shears and wiggled them. "Apparently my father has never heard of gas or electric trimmers," I wise-cracked.

Claire laughed, "I think I have one, if you wanna borrow it?" she offered sincerely.

I waved her off, "Nah, thanks. I'm doing okay." We smiled at each other again. I grabbed the edge of my t-shirt and fluffed it, trying to cool myself off a little.

"So, how's your Dad? Still improving?" Claire asked.

"Yeah, he is. Slowly but surely, y'know?"

"That's great. Tell him I asked about him, okay?"

"Yah, I will." I could feel sweat gathering at my forehead, and I wiped at it with the back of my hand. Claire just watched me, her hands shoved in the pockets of her shorts and a half smile on her lips. "It's hot out here," I finally said. "I was just gonna grab a drink... you want something?" I offered, pointing to the house as I turned to walk toward it.

"Uhm," Claire said, tossing a quick glance over toward her own house, "Sure."

Once we got inside, I poured each of us a tall glass of iced tea, and we made our way out to the little sunroom.

"You've been busy inside too," Claire said, smirking as her eyes looked all around before we sat down. Apparently, she'd been inside my Dad's house enough to know what a mess it normally was.

"Mm-hmm," I hummed as I took a huge swallow of tea. "I love my Dad dearly, but he's an incredible slob when it comes to housekeeping." I was rewarded with a delightful giggle as Claire sipped her tea and continued to look around. It was only then that I allowed myself to really observe her closely.

I'd already noticed that she was slender and petite... at least five or six inches shorter than me. What I hadn't noticed, however, was how beautiful and delicate she really was. She had a flawless, peaches-and-cream complexion, and an open, friendly face with soft, delicate features.

Her hair was a flaxen/light blonde sort of color, and it cascaded freely down around her shoulders, shimmering whenever it caught rays of light. But the part that struck me most were her eyes. As she looked back at me and smiled, I saw that they were the most beautiful shade of blue. Like refreshing, crystal-clear waters surrounding a lush, tropical island. Deep-set and inviting, their brightness was outdone only by the perfect white teeth of her smile. Sitting and looking at her now, I couldn't help but wonder just who this angel-faced beauty was. I made up my mind, then and there, to find out as much as I could about Claire Green.

My chat that day with Claire ended up lasting only about a half hour, but it was enough for me to glean some very vital information.

I found out that she was, amazingly, 35 years old, and had lived next door to my father for the past three years. She was smart and witty, but she wasn't smug or arrogant in any way, and she liked to talk. ...A lot. She had two children, Dalton and Ashleigh, and, most importantly - she was married. To an attorney, no less.

Yeah... well... my short-lived attraction was fun while it lasted.

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By the next week, my father was finally able to sit up in bed and hold real conversations. I'd started visiting him at least twice a day, and we always had a nice time chatting about various things. I told him what I was up to at his house, and he, in turn, gave me little 'instructions' and 'reprimands' on what I should and should not take care of or get into. He made me feel like I was 15 years old again some days, but I didn't mind. I supposed that he needed to feel like he still had some sort of control over his life. And after all, it was his house.

I was just getting ready to go home for the evening when I remembered that I still hadn't told him that Claire had been inquiring after him. "By the way Pop, your life-saving neighbor says, 'hello'." I said as I stood and got ready to leave.

"Hmm? What life saver?" he frowned, not understanding me.

I looked at him expectantly, "Claire Green?"

"Oh yeah, Claire... she's a lovely girl, isn't she?" Dad said. I smiled and nodded, all the while thinking how my definition of *lovely* probably differed quite a bit from my father's.

"Yeah, too bad she's married to such an asshole."

My perverse thoughts ceased abruptly. "What? What do you mean?"

Dad's brows creased again, "Daniel Green... you know him... went to the same school you did."

Why is it that parents always assume you know someone just because they attended the same school you did twenty-some years ago? I was drawing a complete blank on the name and my

brows were now furrowed to match my father's.

"He's as slippery as a snake, that one," Dad said, wagging a finger in the air. "A lawyer, you know... dilly-dallies behind poor Claire's back all the time, and everybody knows it." He shook his head, "Dunno why she stays there with him, except... well... guess 'cos of the kids 'n all."

I was plummeted deep into thought from that revelation. Claire and I had seen each other and had chatted several times, but she'd never said anything or gave any indication that she was unhappily married or anything like that. Still, the information left me stunned and upset for some reason.

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Over the next few weeks, my acquaintance with Claire continued to grow. Every time I was outside, it seemed, Claire would appear, and we'd find some reason to chit chat. If I was working outside, she happened to be outside too. If I was out in the barn, she'd come over, knocking lightly on the door, her shy little smile always there to greet me. Even if I was just out fetching the mail, I almost always caught sight of her. We'd wave to each other, then one of us would walk over, and we'd start talking and talking. We'd often end up having tea or coffee in somebody's kitchen, chatting and laughing and talking about all kinds of things. I figured we were becoming friends. I secretly wished that it was the beginning of something more, but... I knew better than that.

It was a Friday afternoon when Claire appeared at my door asking me if I had plans for the evening. She explained that her husband had gone out of town and her kids were going to their grandparents, so she wanted to invite me over for dinner. Of course, I accepted. I was tired of eating out and trying to cook something for myself anyway, I reasoned.

Claire was a wonderful cook. And her house was lovely. It was large and sprawling, but she had it decorated in a unique and tasteful way. There were a lot of antiques and interesting pictures and paintings on the walls, but it wasn't overdone to the point of being too eclectic or too tacky. It was just... interesting.

As we sat drinking wine in what she called 'her' sitting room, our talk began to veer toward relationships and past loves. This was one area we'd somehow managed to avoid, and I had been glad. Not only was I not relishing having to explain to Claire that I was gay, but I also didn't want to hear her confirm what my father had said about her philandering husband. Call me a coward, but they were subjects I'd just rather avoid, if at all possible.

"So," Claire started, "you said that you aren't currently involved with anyone?"

*Here we go*, I thought inwardly, taking a rather large gulp of wine. "Nope."

"How come?" She sipped her wine and looked at me with innocent eyes.

"Uhhmm," I drawled, flipping through several possible answers in my head before extracting

the best one, "I dunno." *Oh yeah... good answer, genius.*

Claire laughed. "Oh come on, you're an attractive woman... I find it hard to believe that you don't have them lined up at your door."

My eyebrows shot up to my hairline. Not only was I surprised to hear her say that she thought I was attractive, but I also began to wonder if perhaps Claire had an inkling about me already. "Them'?" I returned, pinning her with my gray eyes as I began my own little investigation.

"Yeah, 'them'," she answered, "y'know... 'potential suitors'." She looked back at me in gentle challenge, her eyes softly teasing, her lips wearing a slight smirk.

"Well," I began carefully, "I suppose I just haven't found the right... *person* yet." I shrugged, my mouth twitching into a tiny smile as I continued to play the little no-gender word game.

"And what kind of *person* would be the 'right' kind of *person*?" she was grinning obviously now, our game pleasantly afoot.

"Oh I dunno," I hedged, taking a sip of my wine. "Someonnnne... smart... charming... witty... adorable... interesting..." I kept rambling, "Affectionate, but not overly needy... self-sufficient, but not aloof or too detached... and attractive, but not conceited or arrogant or anything like that." I finished, wagging my finger in the air.

Claire burst out laughing and I couldn't help but smile at her glee. "Well geez, Jo, you don't want much, do you?!" she laughed again and got up, taking our glasses out to the kitchen. I laughed too and hopped up to follow her.

"Seriously though," she began as she poured us more wine, "there must be some *people* out there who pique your 'interest' a little bit, hmm?" She lifted her brows at me as she took a sip of her wine.

An invisible noose slipped around my neck and I hesitated before answering, wanting to be careful that I didn't hang myself... at least not yet.

"Oh there are some out there, for sure." I said noncommittally.

"So... why don't you ask one of them out?"

*Jesus, she just doesn't give up.* I gave a small snort, "It's not always that easy. The people I'm drawn to always seem to have some kind of... strings attached, in some way."

"Well, you never know if you don't ask," she persisted.

"That's true. However, there's really no point in asking if the individual is... unavailable." I felt the noose tighten subtly. I was beginning to run out of synonyms and adjectives.



"Still... how can you be sure they're unavailable if you don't *ask*?"

I finally frowned and stared at her really hard, my mind whirling. "What is it that you think I should 'ask', Claire?"

She hesitated a moment and looked away from me. "I dunno... maybe it doesn't really have to be a spoken question, per se. Maybe it doesn't need to be something that obvious." She was staring at a blank spot on the countertop, twirling her wine glass in her hand as she pondered something, obviously. I scrambled to make heads or tails out of what she was saying. Was she just speaking metaphorically, or was she trying to tell me something?

When she looked back at me, I was watching her. Well, more than 'watching', really. My eyes had unconsciously gravitated to her breasts, and I slowly let them drift down over her body, devouring all the delicious details along the way. When I finally lifted them back up to meet her gaze, she was looking at me with an expression that clearly said I'd been busted. But, I didn't turn away. She obviously knew what I'd been thinking; she had to have seen it on my face and in my eyes, which I knew had turned dark and smoky with desire. I wondered if she saw that unspoken question now... I wondered if she could tell that I was silently asking her if she was 'interested' and/or 'available'.

Her face suddenly flushed red and she blinked several times, breaking the little spell. I gulped at my glass of wine, ashamed to have been so blatant and embarrassed to have been caught.

*Way to go, idiot.*

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Luckily, we somehow skipped past the awkwardness of that moment and salvaged the rest of the night, although Claire seemed to wear a continual blush afterwards. I finally went home around 11 o'clock, figuring that we both needed some space to process - and eventually disregard - everything that had happened.

I didn't know where my audacity had come from, honestly. It had to be the wine. Not only did I nearly cross the line with a very married, straight woman, she was supposedly my *friend*, too! When did I get so stupid? *Geez!*

Claire's disposition with me hadn't really been flirtatious, so why did I go overboard with her? I don't consider myself a bold person. I mean, I know I'm reasonably attractive, and it's never been difficult for me to 'get' women, but I've never been overly brash or aggressive. I've flirted with married women before, and I've flirted with straight women too; but I never actually *fell* for one or actively *pursued* one. It was foolish and pointless. So what the hell was I doing with Claire, and *why*?

Despite what my Dad had told me about her husband, and despite the underlying 'connection' that I now fancied we shared, Claire never indicated that she was interested in anything other than a friendly-neighbor relationship. So I swore that I would leave it at that. But... it was hard.

Every time she smiled at me, or her deep-set eyes sparkled and winked at me, or she licked her lips and quirked them at me just so... I swore I could grab her and kiss her senseless. I often wondered what she'd think if she knew the depth and intensity of what I was *really* feeling when I was around her. She'd probably shit twice and die.

I scolded myself for the little slip in my propriety tonight and vowed to behave myself better around the fair Ms. Claire. I just hoped that I hadn't offended her too much.

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The next morning, I decided to get an early start outside planting some new flowers along the side of the house. Dad loved flowers, and I thought it'd be nice to surprise him with a fresh batch. Deeply involved in my digging, I almost didn't hear the soft whimpering noises. I stopped what I was doing and listened closer, unsure of what I was hearing. Indeed, it sounded like someone was crying. Thinking that it might be one of Claire's kids, I put my tools down and headed over to peek into her backyard. Rounding the back of her big yellow house, my eyes fell upon Claire herself. She was sitting in a chair on her patio, her knees drawn up tight against her chest and her arms wrapped around them. She was weeping softly and wasn't even aware that I was walking toward her. That is, until I stepped on a twig, snapping it loudly.

Claire's head jerked up and she found me looking at her, questioning and concerned. She wiped at her eyes quickly, trying to hide her sorrow. "H-Hi... Hi Jo," she managed with a false smile, but she sounded shaky.

I considered saying 'Hi, how are you?' but I knew it was needless. I heard how she was... I could see it quite clearly. I decide instead to ignore doing the polite shit and just get to the point. "What's wrong?" I asked quietly as I walked up to stand in front of her.

She looked at me in panic for a moment, and I could tell she was considering lying to me. She blinked rapidly, shaking her head slightly, "Nothing," she said, as predicted. But I cocked my head and gave her a disbelieving look. She looked away from me, closing her eyes, "...Everything." The tears started again, and I knelt down.

"Tell me?" I whispered, placing a reassuring hand on her knee. I was treading in dangerous, personal, touchy-feely territory, I knew, but I could tell that she needed a friend. And that's what I was, right? ...*Right*.

She turned to look at me again, her eyes red-rimmed and bloodshot as she gave me a half-hearted smile and shook her head. "I can't."

"Sure you can," I returned. "I have pretty broad shoulders, in case you haven't noticed." I smiled at her and she finally gave me a genuine grin in return.

"Oh I've noticed," she whispered, reaching out to touch my cheek. A slow burn began in the pit of my stomach, and I felt a ripple of heat transfer from her hand to my face. I shivered involuntarily from the awakening sensations. "And you're sweet," she added, "but I don't want to

unload all my shit on you." She sighed again.

"You can unload," I insisted, "maybe there's something I can do... some way I can help?" I offered.

She snorted softly and shook her head, "No," she whispered. "If anything, you'd just complicate things even more."

I frowned immediately, wondering if I'd just been insulted, and why. "What-" I started, but she placed a finger over my lips, muting me.

"Don't, okay?" she whispered, moving forward in the chair so that our faces were perilously close. "Just... don't say anything... okay? Please?" she implored, her blue eyes glistening with more tears.

I didn't understand, not at all, but I obeyed her gentle command. We stared at each other for a few silent seconds before she moved her hand to my cheek again and caressed me lightly. "God... you're so beautiful, Jo," she murmured, her eyes roaming all over my stunned face.

My eyes almost popped out of my head, and I was just about to break my code of silence when she suddenly leaned forward and pressed her lips against mine. I was too shocked to react immediately, and Claire quickly sensed my dismay and started to pull away. Luckily, though, I regained control of my faculties and reached out swiftly, slipping one hand around her neck and threading the other into her hair, which was even more amazingly silky than I'd imagined. She released something that was a mixture between a sigh and a moan, and her warm breath filled my mouth. It was instantly intoxicating, and I instinctually pulled her closer and kissed her deeper.

Our intense lip locking lasted but a few fleeting moments. Apparently suffering from an acute fit of morality, Claire suddenly stiffened and put her hands on my chest, breaking our kiss and pushing me away. She bolted up out of her chair and gave me a look of shock, which of course I didn't understand. She kissed me, hello?

"Shit," she hissed, closing her eyes and touching her fingers to her lips as though they were responsible for committing the heinous act. "Shit, Jo... I'm sorry," she said, shaking her head.

Her anguished voice cut into me and I stood up and took a step toward her, reaching my hand out, "You don't-" I began, but she backed away from me quickly, which hurt even more.

She shook her head again, "I'm sorry Jo... I didn't mean... I mean, I shouldn't have..." she struggled with her words, "...I have to go!" she spluttered before turning and dashing into her house, slamming the door loudly.

*'What the fuck?'* became a mantra inside my head.

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I spent the rest of the day in utter confusion, wondering why she'd kissed me, why she'd bolted, and what the hell she meant when she said I'd 'complicate things even more'. As far as I was concerned, I didn't do a damn thing wrong. So, it was her problem.

That conviction didn't last me very long, however.

I was out on the patio firing up my father's dilapidated grill when my eyes betrayed me and wandered over to Claire's back porch. The porch where she'd been crying earlier... the porch where she'd lovingly caressed my face... the porch where she'd told me I was beautiful and kissed me so tenderly.

*Damn... why did she have to kiss me!?* I tore my eyes away and marched inside, determined to grill my dinner and eat in peace and solitude, the memory of Claire's kiss far, far away.

It would have worked too, had she not been standing on the patio when I returned with my raw chicken breasts in hand. It stopped me dead in my tracks.

"Hi." She said simply. Her hands were stuffed in the pockets of her jean shorts and her right foot fidgeted nervously. I didn't say anything for a moment; I just looked at her, determined to be bold for a change as I blatantly stared and surveyed her up and down. She had to realize by now that I was attracted to her, otherwise she wouldn't have felt forward enough to lay one on me the way she did. I had figured this out earlier, you see, when I was pretending to not think about the whole thing. She never did ask me outright if I was gay, so I never offered. But after all our talks, and especially yesterday evening's little 'episode' in her kitchen, she surely had to know.

I broke my stare and darted my eyes away toward my grill, silently hoping she'd get the hint that I was a bit busy.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," she started, successfully picking up my innuendo. "I just... I wanted to... I mean, I..." She was spluttering again. *Great... wonder how quickly she's gonna run away this time?*

Instead, she surprised me by walking right up in front of me, forcing me to look her in the eye.

"I wanted to apologize," she finally said. I looked at her, still not saying anything. I wanted her to work at this apology a little. After driving me nuts all damn day, I thought that was fair.

"I shouldn't have done... what I did, and... I shouldn't have just... run away like that without explaining." She blinked long and looked up at me again, her blue eyes clear and sure this time. All I could think about, however, were her lips. They were staring right at me, calling to me, taunting me... *kiss me kiss me kiss me*, they seemed to scream. *Damn!*

I drew a deep sigh and turned away from her, diverting my attention to the grill and the chicken breasts that I was slapping onto the hot grates. "So... explain it to me now," I finally said, carefully making sure my voice was even and not caustic.

She gave a small, nervous laugh and leaned against the patio table. "I'm not sure how to explain it," she started, "I guess... it was just impulsive and stupid of me," She said, watching me as I stabbed at the sizzling chicken a little too forcefully. "I was upset, and... you were there... being so nice... looking so sweet..."

This was her idea of an explanation? *God, kill me now.*

"And I guess I just... overreacted. I let my emotions get the better of me... and I took my frustration out on you."

*Frustration? ...Her frustration!?*

She pushed away from the table and walked up to me again, and I had to turn and look at her.

She laid her hand on my forearm, and I nearly dropped my fork into the fire. "I'm sorry, Jo. It was really stupid and selfish of me." Her eyes were so blue and so apologetic. Her soft face was contrite and hopeful, and she chewed on her bottom lip as she waited for my reaction. I should have been hurt and a bit pissed off by what she was saying, but who could remain angry with a face that looked like that?

"Forget about it," I finally mumbled, shaking my head slightly and looking back to my badly fork-mutilated chicken.

We were silent for a few seconds until Claire spoke again, "I think you've successfully killed it," she said, her voice tinged with amusement.

I shot her a dirty look, "Very funny." I speared the two cooked breasts and plopped them onto my plate. "Shouldn't you be over at your own house, performing your own feats of cooking perfection, Emeril?" I said with mock snideness before reaching down to turn the grill off.

"Nope," Claire said, her hands going back into her pockets - a sign I now recognized as a nervous gesture on her part. I gave her a quizzical look.

"I'm all by my lonesome for the evening. Dan's still in Baltimore, Dalton is sleeping over at a friend's house, and Ashleigh is staying at her grandma's again."

"Oh." It was all I could manage to say at first... my brain had begun whirling. "Well, uhm... have you eaten?" I finally asked.

She pursed her lips, "Uhm, no, but that's okay. I was just getting something ready when I saw you out here, and I decided I should come talk to you first..."

She certainly could talk fast when she wanted to. "Why don't you join me?"

"Oh no, no. Really, Jo, that's okay. I mean, thank you, but..."

And she sure could look really cute when she was trying to be polite. "I insist." I interrupted and smiled at her; I couldn't help it. She was fucking a-*dor*-able. ...And I was still in trouble. "Come on," I said, tipping my head toward the door.

++++++

Dinner was wonderful. It wasn't my cooking that made it so, mind you, it was just her. The mere pleasure of her company. Our little bump in the road seemed to just disappear, and all our near-awkwardness melted away instantly. We talked like we always did, eating our simple meal and drinking a few glasses of wine while chatting away.

Claire seemed different tonight, I thought. Whether it was because we'd gotten over our little misunderstanding or whether it was because her family wasn't around and we were at my place, I don't know. I just know that she seemed different. She smiled even more and her body language was relaxed and calm. She exuded sensuousness and innocent sexuality as we sat on the couch and talked and laughed and drank. By ten o'clock, I was pretty pleasantly buzzed, and I was pretty sure that Claire was too, although she acted fine. Still, I reminded myself of my vow to behave.

Our talk soon took a more serious turn as Claire began to tell me how she got married too young. I immediately felt awkward and was about to tell her that she really didn't need to give me the details, but something about the way she sat there, looking so burdened and mournful, told me that she needed to get this out, for some reason. So I let her talk.

She explained how Dan became her first really serious boyfriend after they'd met at the college she was attending near her hometown. Naïve and a virgin, the apparently charismatic Dan charmed his way into her life and remained her one and only love experience to this day. My mind instantly began boggling.

They got married when she was just 20 years old. Dan had been going to law school, and when he graduated, he persuaded Claire to move away and start a life with him rather than wait until she finished with her schooling and got her art degree. They ended up moving to Dan's hometown, which also happened to be my hometown.

...*Coincidence? or destinyyy?* My mind taunted me in the background while Claire continued on.

She got pregnant a month after they were married, and six months after the birth of her son, she got pregnant again - a virtual baby machine, if she had allowed it. But she didn't. It wasn't what she'd planned. But Dan refused to get a vasectomy, so Claire decided to get her tubes tied. She was thankful for her children, but she didn't want any more. I could understand that.

So now, after 15 years of marriage, Claire said that she'd begun to realize that she really wasn't happy, and that her life wasn't turning out to be anything like she'd planned. Again, I could totally relate.

She said she felt like she wasn't really living, she was just... existing. Dan hadn't been a horrible

husband, but he hadn't been great either. They had fallen into a rut some time ago, and she was bored, but she had denied it. She'd told herself that this was her lot in life, and she resolved to just do the best and be the best she could be. Now, however, she was beyond bored - she was empty, unsatisfied, and miserable. Granted, she loved her kids more than anything, but they were all she had to focus her energy on. She wanted her life to be defined by something other than just being a Mom and a wife. She had talents... she was an artist. She had given that up long ago so that she could devote herself to her children, and now that they were getting older, she found herself feeling strangely empty. It wasn't that she resented anything about her kids or the time she'd spent on them - she absolutely didn't - but since they no longer needed her so much, she wanted some of her life back. She wanted to return some of her attention and energy to herself. But Dan didn't want her to do anything. He didn't want her to work, and he didn't want her to get involved in anything else, like volunteer or charity work. He didn't even like it when she'd started taking exercise classes with some of her friends. The only thing that he seemed to want her to do was to look good on his arm when they attended social events. She'd become a token trophy wife and a 'kept' woman, and she hated it.

Dan seemed to get more possessive and jealous the more Claire bristled at being held under his thumb, so she pushed the issues further and further while pulling away from him. She knew he screwed around too. He'd never totally denied any of the accusations she threw at him when she'd begun hearing rumors. He just told her that she was crazy and overreacting. The reason she was crying this morning was because one of her friends had called to say they'd seen Dan kissing some woman in the parking lot of a popular, well-known restaurant. It was as though he hardly cared anymore if he was caught. He could run around and do whatever he pleased, but he carefully kept Claire at home, all alone and miserable.

I felt for her, I really did. I couldn't really relate to her predicament, but I felt her misery.

She admitted that she thought about leaving many times. But she had no job and therefore no way of supporting herself. And then, of course, there were her kids. She was sure Dan would get them. He was an attorney, after all. Maybe not a divorce lawyer, but he certainly would be able to get himself the best divorce lawyer to represent his side if they were to go to court. And they most certainly would. He'd already made that clear during one of their more heated arguments. So he had her over a barrel. She was pretty much trapped, and there was nothing she could do.

She started to cry after telling me this last part, and I really felt bad for her. I tried to comfort her, telling her that there were lawyers out there who had experience with cases like hers and certainly could see to it that she would get the kids and alimony so she could reasonably support herself, even if she couldn't find a job right away. If she could just get evidence or testimony that proved Dan cheated on her, I didn't see how she could lose.

She cried even more when I said that. That's when she admitted that she was scared of Dan. I cringed as soon as she said it. She insisted that he'd never hit her or anything, but apparently, he threatened her plenty during their fights, and he told her that she would get nothing if she challenged him. There was no way she'd win, and there was no way she'd get anything from him, including her kids. Bastard.

Claire completely dissolved into tears after that, and all I could do was hold her close and try to comfort her. I don't know how many hours passed with the two of us reclined there on the sofa like that. It was sad and frustrating, but despite it all, it was so wonderful to be able to hold her so close. I totally reveled in the feel of Claire's warm, petite body in my arms. Her hot breath puffed against my neck and I kept my nose pressed against her silky hair, the flowery scent filling my senses. I could feel the rise and fall of her chest, punctuated by little hiccups as her crying slowed and she began to calm down. I could have stayed there like that, on that couch, forever.

I don't really remember who kissed who first. All I remember is that all of a sudden, glistening, water-colored eyes were looking up at me, and the want and silent begging that was written all over that tear-stained face was too much for me to bear.

We began the kisses delicately, softly, each of us treading carefully in territory that we already knew was treacherous. I had some experience with what I was doing, but according to what Claire had said earlier, she didn't. I knew that we definitely should *not* be doing what we were doing, but, hey... sometimes you just can't help it, y'know? Even though your mind knows better, your heart manages to wrest control, and it just forges blindly ahead. Sometimes emotions just take over. Sometimes your wants override your sensibilities. Sometimes you don't need to ask questions, because you already know the answers. This was definitely one of those times.

The kisses soon grew stronger and more urgent as our hunger grew in leaps in bounds. I maneuvered us so that I was lying down on the sofa and Claire was on top of me... a truly heavenly feeling, I must say. We continued to devour each other's mouths while Claire started grinding herself against me, gently undulating her hips and driving me thoroughly insane. I reached down to grasp her ass, alternating between squeezing her firm cheeks and sliding my fingers along the crease of her shorts, teasing and urging her at the same time. In response, she ground herself against me harder, causing both our heartbeats and our pace to increase as we veered closer to the point of no return.

That's when the moment of clarity decided to hit me.

What were we doing? We could not do this. Nothing good would come of it, only bad. Claire was upset and emotional, and probably confused, and I was... well, I guess I was just horny and stupid.

I stopped my ministrations and placed my hands on her shoulders, gently trying to stop her movements. "Claire," I whispered, "Claire... sweetie, wait a minute." She finally stopped and looked up at me, some unclear but desperate emotion in her eyes. "We can't do this," I whispered very softly. Goddammit, I hate good conscience.

She closed her eyes and let her head fall down onto my chest. I brought my hands up and pushed them into her hair, stroking her in apology.

"I'm sorry," Claire murmured against my chest before sitting up. "You're right... of course, you're right... I don't know what I was thinking." She got up off of me and walked right over to fetch her purse. I scrambled up off the couch, worried that I'd upset her even more.



"I'm really sorry, Jo," she said as she slung her purse over her shoulder, "once *again*," she rolled her blue eyes skyward, laughing hollowly and giving me an embarrassed smile. "God, you must think I'm such a tramp." Her eyes welled with tears again.

"No, no," I said, walking up to her. "I think no such thing." I reached up and caressed her cheek. "It's not your fault. I was more than willing, if you recall." I said, trying to smile.

She closed her eyes and shook her head. "I just don't want to...," she hesitated, "I mean, I don't want you to think that I'm...," she looked up at me, her eyes boring deeply into mine, "that I'm using you, or anything."

I frowned and stared at her.

"I don't want you to think that I'm just making you into a... substitute, or that I'm 'experimenting' with you and don't know what the hell I want, or... or anything like that." She reached up to touch my face and stared at me even deeper, her head shaking slowly. "It's not that, Jo."

Unable, and unwilling, to say anything, I dropped my eyes. Those exact thoughts had indeed entered my mind, and to hear her voice them made me feel both apprehensive and elated at the same time.

Hearing my silent statement, Claire dropped her hand to her side. "I should go." she said quietly as she turned away.

"Uh, you really don't have to," I called after her. "I mean, we could just... talk, or... watch TV...?" Goddd... was I as pathetic as I sounded?!

She had her hand on the doorknob as she turned back to me and curved her lips into a half-hearted smile. "I'd love to... but I don't think it'd be a good idea." Her voice was so sad.

I pursed my lips tightly, wanting to beg her, wanting to promise her that we could keep our hands to ourselves. But I knew it wasn't true. If she were to stay, we would end up making love, and that would be as terrible as it would be wonderful.

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She left and I watched out the window as she walked across my yard and into hers. I continued watching as she entered her house and turned a few lights on. I couldn't see her, but I could imagine her movements as lights went on and off throughout her empty home, and when all of them finally turned off some time later, then and only then did I turn away.

I laid on my bed, trying to sleep but failing miserably. I was dead tired, but unconsciousness would not come. My mind was overflowing with thoughts of Claire. The feel of her body, the smell of her skin and hair, the taste of her lips and mouth. God, she was so incredible. ...And I was in such deep trouble.

I finally gave up the fight and got up, throwing on a pair of shorts and a t-shirt. I got a glass of water in the kitchen and stood staring out the window, my mind lost in confusion. Out of my peripheral vision, I noticed that the barn door had been left open. Plopping my glass down on the counter, I slipped on some shoes and headed out.

My dad's barn had always been equal parts eerie and comforting to me. Sounds weird, I know, but it's true. It was empty and dark, and it always gave off strange creaks and groans, as though the ancient, weathered boards were trying to talk and say something to me. But, on the other hand, it was homey and peaceful too. It was always slightly stuffy and warm, and the air inside smelled of dirt and straw and wood. Its earthiness and unpolished interior grounded me and gave me a feeling of calm and serenity some how. The old building was used primarily as storage and as a playground for my father's numerous backyard building projects, and despite the fact that he had no animals or anything, my Dad always kept part of it filled with straw. He used the golden-colored stuff in his many gardens, he claimed, although I always thought it was just because he missed the feel and function of having a real farm. My Dad would always have a bit of country-bumpkin in him... it was one of the things I loved about the man.

Just as my thoughts had begun to turn back to Claire and how much I wished I could march right over to her house and ravage her, I heard soft footsteps behind me.

I knew who it was. I knew it was her. I knew this because I knew why she'd come, you see. She'd come for the same reason I was contemplating going. I turned around and our eyes locked together instantly. She took a step toward me, the weak overhead light casting a shadowy glow over her darkened features. Another few steps and she was right in front of me.

"I...", she hesitated as her eyes ran all over my face. "I'm not drunk," she whispered.

My eyes devoured hers and I shook my head, "Neither am I."

"I know what I want," she added.

I stared at her hard, "Do you?"

"Yes," she whispered as she leaned up and kissed me, wrapping her arms around my shoulders and pulling me in once again.

We kissed and kissed until our legs grew weak. I backed us up to the straw pile where I carefully knelt and urged Claire to lay down with me. I positioned myself over her, trailing my fingers along her face and neck, down the valley between her breasts, and across her quivering stomach. I looked up at her, asking the unspoken question as I touched her. I could tell she was nervous, but she reached up and pulled me to her, claiming my lips again. She squirmed and moaned into my mouth as my hands slipped under her shirt and began massaging her breasts. When I moved downward and started unbuttoning her shorts, her hands clutched me tighter. She wiggled and helped me get them off, and my fingers immediately relished the newly-exposed skin. Her shirt came next, and I pulled it up and over her head, tossing it aside as I took a moment to look at her.

She was more than beautiful... she was exquisite. Her skin was smooth and fair... her abdomen firm and taut... her eyes dark and wide. I leaned down and began kissing all over her stomach and chest, literally able to feel the pounding of her heart. She sunk her fingers into my thick, dark hair, massaging my scalp as I continued to feast on her delectable flesh.

Bringing my fingers to the elastic waistband of her panties, I kissed her deeply, "Take these off," I rasped against her lips. "And this," I added, reaching up to tug at her bra.

She hesitated for a second and I immediately feared the worst. When I looked into her eyes, all I saw was uncertainty.

"I'm, I'm...", she sputtered in a hushed voice, "I dunno what... I mean, I've never done anything like this, Jo... I'm-"

I cut her off with a finger on her lips, "Shh... it's okay." I whispered as I reassured her with a gentle kiss. "We don't have to do anything... or we can do *everything*," I said, secretly hoping for the latter. "Whatever... I'll do whatever you want, Claire."

Her eyes immediately began to tear-up and she cupped my face and kissed me long and passionately. When we finally broke, she pulled me down against her and hugged me, burying her face into the crook of my neck and squeezing me tight.

"Oh Jo," she whispered tremulously, "I just want you... so much!" She began to stroke my face as she touched our lips together. "Please don't make me fall in love with you... please, just... just make me feel good! Make me feel *alive... please?!'*" Her hushed voice was anguished and choked. I was going insane.

I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to block out the words that I'd already heard and processed. *Why did she have to say that? Why was she doing this to me? Why was I allowing it?! Dammit!*

I promptly began to attack her lips with my own. I had become savage now, my resolve to let her set the pace and dictate the speed shattered by her words and the realization that this wasn't going to be anything more than just sex. So I decided that I would take what I could. Hard and fast, I would possess her and consume her and drown the both of us in the lustful misery that we'd created together. I was angry and upset and confused and frustrated and consumed by such ravenous desire.

I was pissed off at myself because I hungered for something I shouldn't hunger for; and I craved someone I shouldn't crave. Claire couldn't have feelings for me... and I couldn't have feelings for her. We could never have anything more than this... just raw, carnal desire.

So... why was I letting it happen?

I didn't know. I'm not a shrink - I'm a writer. I *wrote* about shit like this for a *living*, for fuckssake! All I knew was, she wanted me, and god help me, I desperately wanted her.

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I could go into great detail here, I suppose. Tell you how the earth moved, how I saw stars, how time stood still... all that crap. But the truth of the matter was, our joining was both incredibly beautiful and incredibly agonizing. How romantic, huh? Well it wasn't romantic... not at all. And really, that was okay with me. I don't necessarily need romance, I just need to be connected. And oh my god... were we ever connected. Physically, mentally, emotionally, karmically... I felt every thought and feeling that coursed through Claire's body, I swear. She was positively breathtaking... innocent and passionate at the same time. Our coupling was slow and frantic, and tender and erotic in its own, unique way. I took her gently and harshly. I caressed her lovingly, and I devoured her greedily as she moaned and writhed beneath me and all around me. I can't remember ever feeling the things I felt, the *way* I felt them, with Claire. It was so unbelievably sensual and overwhelming. When our naked bodies touched for the first time, I thought I was going to black out. When my tongue finally tasted the core of her being, I thought someone had doused me with gasoline and set me on fire. And when she started crying while she climaxed in a landslide of passion, I thought I'd die.

I knew why she cried... I knew what she was feeling... I was feeling it too. It was so amazing, and yet so painful.

I just held her afterwards, both of us drenched in sweat and tears and breathing raggedly as our hearts pounded and our minds tried to wrap themselves around what was happening. I had no idea what time it was when we finally moved out of each other's arms, the straw finally beginning to irritate our naked bodies.

"It sounds really romantic when you read about stuff like this, but the reality of a 'roll in the hay' is that it's *very* itchy." I cracked, trying to bring a little levity to the heavy atmosphere of the situation. "Why don't we go inside?" I offered, tilting my head toward the house.

Claire just smiled her smile at me.

++++++

I didn't see Claire the whole next week. Not at all. I didn't even catch a glimpse of her coming or going in her car or anything like that. She just seemed to vanish. I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised. I mean, what was I expecting? I knew why she did what she did. I knew what she'd wanted, and I knew why I gave it to her. So why was I upset?

I spent more time hanging out with my Dad at the hospital. He was actually doing a lot better, and the doctors said they were hopeful that he'd be able to come home soon. I returned my attentions to his home, continuing my cleaning and rejuvenation of his house and gardens.

When the second week passed with no word from Claire, I concluded that whatever it was that we shared - or imagined, as the case seemed to be - was clearly over with. She'd taken what she'd wanted, and now I was no longer necessary. It was official... I was a complete and utter idiot. Well, at least I had more fodder for writing now. Stupidity and heartbreak are great for that, you

know.

My Dad came home at the beginning of the next week. I stayed for a few days to help him out and see that he got back into the swing of things. By the weekend, I decided I should go home. So, quite unceremoniously, I left.

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Over the course of the next few months, and eventually years, I thought about Claire Green a lot. I even wrote about her, specifically. It was nothing I ever published, of course... I just wrote it for me. It made me feel a little better, though only a little. I always had trouble reconciling with myself that someone I knew for such a little time could affect me so deeply. I'd been involved with my share of women... it's not like I'm some kind of connoisseur or anything, but I've had my share of experiences. I even thought that I loved some of those experiences, and some of those women. But none of them left me with the lingering thoughts and feelings that Claire Green did. I just could not forget her. Not completely, anyway.

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It was almost exactly two years later when my father passed away. He'd had another heart attack, only this one proved fatal. He was 79 years old.

I was hesitant to come home and stay at my Dad's place, but when I thought about how much I had enjoyed staying there before, I decided to go. And no, it had nothing to do with hoping that I'd run into Claire. The Greens, as I soon discovered, had moved awhile ago. My sister said that she thought Dad had mentioned that they split up and sold the house, but she wasn't sure. Still, that was enough information for me. If Claire did indeed split from her husband, why hadn't she looked me up? It just seemed to confirm what I already knew in my heart. She'd never felt anything 'real' for me. I was just a fling... a distraction... an experiment... a catalyst to help convince her that she needed to get away from her husband, maybe... whatever. Who knows.

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My father's viewing and funeral were horrible. I had to be the one to stay strong and calm because Georgie couldn't stop weeping uncontrollably. I felt like a zombie the whole time, pretending to be in control when in fact I was reeling inside.

When the funeral service concluded, my sister and I stood at the graveside, patiently shaking hands and receiving hugs of consolation. By the time it was over, I was so sick of saying 'thank you' and hearing everyone's thoughts and wishes. I knew that people meant well by saying the things they said, but instead of being reassuring, it just depressed me more. I could barely handle standing there trying to talk and be gracious, but I did it anyway.

Finally, most of the people scattered, and I was just bidding some old woman farewell when I

turned around to talk to the stranger I could feel hovering at my side.

"Hello Joanna."

My eyes flew open wide. Holy shit... what was she doing here? *Ohmygod...*

Claire hesitated and looked around nervously, "I uhm... I hope you don't mind that I came."

I shook my head a little, "No... no, I don't mind." My voice sounded small. She must've been able to tell how surprised I was.

"I always liked your father. He was a very kind man... a good neighbor." She said, quirking a small, uneasy smile.

"Yes... he was." I murmured, finally letting my eyes roam over her as I took in all of Claire Green. She looked wonderful. A little weary, perhaps, but wonderful nonetheless. Her hair was cut a little shorter and she looked a bit thin, but she still had those same bottomless blue eyes and that perfect, heart-shaped mouth that just begged for-

"So... how have you been?" Her polite question jerked me back to reality.

*How have I been?* I thought to myself, *...lonely... miserable... haunted mercilessly by the ghost of you...*

"Uhm, fine... I've been fine. You?" I forced indifference into my voice.

"Pretty good, uhm...," she darted her eyes away. "I uh, I work at the museum downtown now," she managed to look at me again, "and I have my own little place close by. It's not much, but, it serves the purpose." She shrugged her shoulders a little and gave me a thin smile.

I nodded at her, digesting all that she'd said and wondering what she expected me to do with the information. I drew a deep breath and gave her a polite grimace in return, "Well... that's sounds nice. I'm happy for you." ...Was I? I should've been... so why didn't I feel it?

She smiled again, but it was strained and didn't reach her eyes. She began blinking her eyes and glanced away, her tongue peeking out to touch her upper lip a little. She looked like she was going to cry.

"Well," I began, feeling the need to escape before I did something stupid or said something idiotic. "It was nice seeing you again, Claire." She looked back at me, her eyes now watery and clouded. "Thank you for coming." I reached out to take her hand, squeezing it as I turned and prepared to walk away from her. But she didn't release me. She held my hand tight and wouldn't let me go. I stopped, but I wouldn't turn back and look at her. I couldn't. Didn't she understand that? What was she doing?

"Jo," her tremulous voice called out to me, but I still wouldn't look at her. "Jo, I... I'd really like

to talk to you." I could feel her take a step closer to me. "So much has happened... there are so many things I need to explain to you."

*Goddd.* I closed my eyes, feeling them burn as I let my head drop down.

She stepped even closer, "Can we go somewhere? To talk? Maybe... have a cup of coffee or something?" My lower lip began to tremble and I bit down on it painfully and slowly shook my head.

But Claire didn't give up. "Please, Jo... I have so much that I need to say to you... so much that I've wanted to say but haven't been able to."

I could feel her breath against my face; she was standing right beside me now, her body brushing against mine. I kept my eyes closed, unable to say anything or do anything.

Georgie picked that particular moment to touch me on the shoulder. I looked up at her with cloudy, watery eyes. "Are you ready to go?" she asked softly.

"Yeah... I'll be right there," I answered, my voice raspy and strained. Georgie nodded and shot a small, confused look at Claire before turning away.

I drew a deep breath, still unsure what to say to Claire. Luckily, she spoke first. "Listen, I'll be at the little coffee shop at the corner of Hill and Fifth Streets tomorrow, around 9 a.m." she said, squeezing my hand. "If you want, you can meet me there. If not... well... I'll understand."

I finally turned my woeful eyes to her, but I still couldn't say anything. There were too many thoughts running through my head and too many emotions coursing through my veins. What the hell could I say anyway? That she was mad if she thought I was stupid enough to get involved with her again? That she was out of her mind if she thought I was going to set myself up for another miserable fall? Was I supposed to admit that I wanted to see her and talk to her too, just because she was admitting it?

She listened to my silence only for a moment or two, then she finally dropped my hand. "Goodbye Jo." And she was gone.

I watched her as she walked away, and I wished that I had told her that she should just leave well enough alone. Let sleeping dogs lie, don't rock the boat... shit like that. We had a fling. It was nice, but it was over. Maybe at one time I thought it was something more... maybe I *wished* that it had been something more... maybe I wished that *she* wanted something more, but... no, no. It was just a fling. It was wonderful and beautiful and exhilarating, but it happened a long time ago.

Game over.

Lesson learned.

End of saga.

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So I guess that's pretty much my tale. It's not very climactic, and it's not really romantic, or tear-jerking, or epic, or anything like that. It's really just a story of how pathetic I am. How I foolishly fell in love, lost my heart, and never quite managed to get it back.

I think I realized, in the end, that it was all just another life lesson that, while valuable, was very painful to learn. But then again, aren't they usually?

But wait... I didn't say it was *over* yet, did I? No, I couldn't have. I couldn't have, because the conclusion to my tale of woe is coming through the doors of the coffee house as I sit here and scribble away in my notebook, writing all these thoughts down at this very moment.

She floats into the shop like a warm, refreshing breeze and the whole place seems to brighten somehow. I see her eyes scanning around, looking for me, perhaps. I purposely chose a table in the far corner so that she wouldn't see me when she showed up... so that I could watch her for a few unguarded moments. She's breathtaking. Still so very lovely, even after all this time. A ray of unfiltered sunshine in my otherwise dull and cloudy world. She finally turns my way and spots me. I can't tell if she's surprised or not, but the slow, shy little smile that creeps across her face makes me grin like a damned fool and brings back a flood of memories.

What I would not and could not accept yesterday in the graveyard, I am now fully acknowledging.

She does have feelings for me... and I still have feelings for her. I've always had them, and I think she has to, she just couldn't voice them or act on them. Or, maybe she was just scared of the intensity, like I was. Yeah, see, I can admit that now.

I want to try to rekindle those feelings. I want to try again.

Am I crazy? ...Probably. But it doesn't matter anymore. Actually, nothing matters right now as I watch her walk toward me, smiling the whole way, piercing my heart and melting my insides with that sweet, sweet face and those sparkling, deep-set eyes of blue.

She's asking me the unspoken question this time.

And I'm answering ... *yes*.

+++++

End.

+++++

A. K. Naten

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