

A Sip...



A Torquere Press Short

Tequila Angel
By L.F. Blake

In the deep night darkness, stone gargoyles stand silent guard over the yard. I watch them for a minute, waiting to see if they'll move, but they remain stoically oblivious to the voice calling from inside the house.

"Hey," Corey says again. "Hey, Dave."

I shut the front door and turn to face him. He's crouched in the shadows at the bottom of the staircase, his knees drawn into his chest and one hand gripping a bottle of tequila. His nails gleam satiny black against the bottleneck. He looks like an angel, an exotic angel made entirely of golden skin and bright crimson hair.

"Where have you been?"

"Out." I lean back against the door and study him. Corey can be many things -- cocky, flaky, and sometimes downright stupid -- but never sullen. Even when Kerri threw him out last month, he was all shrugs and bravado. So what's he playing at now?

"Out," he slurs, and lifts the tequila with a roll of his eyes. "You're always out. You've been out every night since I got here. Nice of you not to invite me. Not like I need cheering up or anything."

"Right, exactly." I hang my jacket on the rack beside the stairs, trying not to think about how easy it would be to lean down and put an arm around him, tell him to forget about his girlfriend, that he can stay here as long as he needs.

But touching Corey is always a test of willpower. Once I start, will I be able to stop? Just standing this close to him in the darkness, my mind spins with fantasies of sinking my teeth slowly into his neck in a hard kiss while I'm buried inside him, and he's moaning my name.

Christ, I must be delusional. That, or I just love torturing myself.

I'm too fucking tired for this. I need a drink, and I need to sleep.

I leave Corey in the front hall and head into the kitchen, flicking on the light as I enter. My gaze catches and holds for a second too long on the cupboard over the sink. In an old Folgers coffee can inside is a packet full of white-dusted heaven. Just thinking about it makes my insides clench up and my breath stop.

But I've been trying to be good lately, at least until I finish writing songs for the new album. It's hard to write when my fingers keep forgetting they're holding a pen, and all I want to do is stare at the ceiling and drift. It's hard to do anything.

"We need to talk." Corey's cowboy boots stomp on the linoleum tiles behind me. He's been wearing those damn boots since *Brokeback Mountain* came out, trying to torture me with his ambiguousness, I think.

"Talk about what?" I pull my gaze away from the cupboard and open the fridge. My hand freezes halfway to where the Heinekens used to be. That little shit. He drank all my beer and now he's started on my tequila. If he touched the vodka, I'll kill him.

"I'm sick of the way you look at me."

My spine stiffens. I straighten and shut the fridge. Is he serious? It's hard to tell with Corey. He loves to play games, to tease and taunt.

I hate games.

Breathe.

The vodka under the sink is untouched. I uncap the bottle, take a swig, and eye Corey. Sometimes he's so gorgeous he makes my bones hurt, but tonight isn't one of those times. He looks like he's just come off stage after a good set, disheveled, his hair spiking up at crazy angles. His face is flushed, his forehead damp with sweat from the heavy August heat.

"Did you hear me?" He staggers and braces a hand against the doorframe. The tequila dangles dangerously.

"I heard you." I try to stay calm; God knows one of us needs to be. My guess is Corey's more angry than drunk, but that's no guarantee the situation won't go south. Corey's anger is an obnoxious brat that's never been told no. Maybe it goes back to his hippie parents, or maybe it's the price of being young and famous. After all, Queen Jezebel isn't just any rock band; she's a double-platinum magic band. *Slave for Jezebel, and she will grant your every desire. Except the one you want the most.*

"Well, what are you going to do about it?"

I shrug and take another drink.

"Fuck," he sneers, dragging his forearm across his mouth like he's wiping away lipstick that isn't there. "What the hell was I thinking? Too much fucking effort to actually go for it, right? All you're good for is watching. You're such a useless fucking junkie. Are you even listening?"

"Lay off, Cor. You don't know what you're talking about."

"Really? What don't I know? Come on, tell me."

"Drop it." Can he really be this oblivious? Of course he can, and that's the whole problem, isn't it? Corey pays no attention to the people around him, no attention to anyone but himself. He's narcissistic, shallow, petty, and immature. He's everything I can't stand, but that doesn't stop me from wanting him like my veins want the dope in my cupboard.

"What are you scared of?" He steps into my path, blocking the way out of the kitchen. "What are you so fucking scared of?"

"Corey..." One look at him and my words slip away, lost in the swimming pool blue of his eyes. His gaze pleads with me to surrender, to open up, to give him something, *something*. My secrets, my soul.

But whatever he thinks I can give him, he's wrong. I'm a shell with nothing inside but exhaustion. And I'm sick to death of playing this game. I just want it to stop. Now.

A last long swallow of vodka, and I set the bottle on the counter without looking at Corey. "Look. You've got the wrong idea about me. I'm not looking for anything from anybody, and especially not from you. You're not my type, okay?"

"Please. I've seen who you bring home. Your type is anything with a dick."

"I'm *gay*." My teeth grind, the sound loud and awful inside my skull. "Not desperate."

He snorts. "Right."

Stupid, arrogant fucker. I want to throttle him for everything he thinks he knows, because it's *shit*. I want to hurt him, bad, so next time he'll think twice before fucking with me.

"Face it, Cor." Behind my back I grip the edge of the counter until pain shoots through my hands. "You're not exactly a prize. Actually, you're kind of a slut."

Corey's jaw goes slack. He stares at me with blank eyes, like a little kid who can't believe he's been kicked, and guilt carves out a hollow where my stomach used to be. But this isn't my fault. He started this fight; I'm just ending it.

At least I thought I was.

The only warning Corey gives is the sudden narrowing of his eyes, and then he's swinging the tequila bottle at my head.

It's the excuse I didn't know I was waiting for. Old instincts flare to life and, without thinking, I spring to meet him, my fingers locking around his wrist. I force his hand back, tequila sloshing over my knuckles. The smell of his breath is sharp and bitter on my face as he snaps, "You fucking *asshole*," and throws his weight against me.

If the feel of his short, solid body pressing against me didn't go straight to my dick, I'd laugh. Does he really think he can take me on?

We lock arms and wrestle; we grunt and shove. I can't believe how good it feels to fight again -- the rush of adrenaline, my pulse pounding, and my senses soaring. It's like old times, before Jezebel hit it big. Bar brawls and inciting riot, running from the cops. Me, the worst of us, on the streets and fighting for my life, fighting for the fucking fun of it.

Except it's hard to concentrate when it's Corey I'm fighting. He almost lands a blow to my jaw; I duck just in time. His smell is ungodly good, tequila and honey and clean sweat slapping me in the face. His hair gives off the scent of lime and coconut shampoo, probably taken from Kerri when he moved out. Corey has no problem stealing, even from people he knows. For years, he's been stealing my sanity with a word, a touch, a secret look I can't interpret.

Now he hates me. I can see it in the hard set of his mouth, in the crazy blue of his eyes as we struggle across the kitchen floor. Put a gun in his hand and he just might shoot me dead. But it's better this way. Safer to be at each other's throats than for me to start wondering if he meant what he said a few minutes ago. If maybe I'm not the only one wanting what I can't have.

He loses his footing, and his boots skid across linoleum. I charge him, slam him into the refrigerator. He cries out as his head hits the steel door, and the tequila falls from his hand, hits the floor and shatters. Glass shards skitter across a flood of amber alcohol. I hold him pinned to the fridge, tensed for him to start struggling. Instead he sags in my grip. He lowers his head, tangles of hair hiding his face, and his breath hitches. He's *crying*.

I stare at him in dumb shock.

"Goddamn it," he says, voice muffled like it's coming through clenched teeth. "Goddamn it, Dave, do you have to be such an asshole?"

I hold onto him for another second, then stumble back as disgust sours on my tongue. His sweat stings my palms, trying to sink past my skin and into my blood where I'll never get rid of it. How can he be crying? I don't know what to do.

"Fuck you..." he moans.

My insides twist and knot. I have to get out of here. I could kill Corey for this crying bullshit, just wrap my hands around his neck and squeeze. The sound of him sniffing makes me want to throw up. How can he do this to me?

"Fuck *you*." The more I rub my hands against my leathers, the more his sweat stings. Panic tightens my throat, makes my voice come out hoarse. "I want you out of my house by tomorrow night."

"What?" His head jerks up, eyes frantic. "Where am I supposed to go?"

"Stay at a hotel. Stay with one of the other guys. Buy a goddamn house. I don't give a fuck."

I edge back, focus on my breathing. In. Out. Everything will be okay once Corey's gone. No more going out at night to avoid him. The house will be quiet again, just me and my music and my books. Already, I feel calmer.

Calmer until Corey catches my hand and laces his fingers through mine.

A sick ache settles in my stomach. I stare down at our linked hands and can't look away.

"Dave," Corey pleads, his voice cracking. "Dave, please... just..."

It's his voice. It's his fingers sliding through mine. Suddenly my heart is pounding, and I'm

breathing too fast. I know I should walk away before I do something I'll regret. I know it, but my body isn't listening to my mind right now.

Like I'm staring through someone else's eyes, I watch my hand rise, watch my fingers stroke over the bold sweep of Corey's cheekbones. I stare down at his huge, wide eyes. I step in, feel the heat of his body so close to mine. And then I kiss him.

I kiss him, and he tastes like tequila and lime and corn chips. His cheek burns against the palm of my hand; his mouth swallows me down into a secret cavern of silk and twisting velvet. There has never been a kiss like this one.

Corey moans and pushes his mouth against mine. He yanks at coal black fistfuls of my hair, drags his nails down my back and scratches me through the cotton of my T-shirt. Alarms go off in the back of my mind, but I can't stop myself from crushing his body against the fridge while my mouth slants crazily over his. I think I'm losing my mind; I can feel myself dissolving into his mouth with each moment the kiss drags on; soon I won't be able to gather the pieces of myself back together.

"Dave," he gasps, hooking his legs around my waist. I know I'm dreaming, but I'm not ready to wake up yet, not now, not ever. I hold him against the fridge and set my teeth in his shoulder; his flesh hot and salty under my tongue, and I want to taste all of him.

His clothes are in the way. I grab the hem of his shirt -- a flimsy piece of crap he paid too much for at some pseudo-vintage shop -- and yank hard. It tears away in my hands, and I'm left staring at him, at smooth sleek muscles playing under golden flesh. He's beautiful -- beautiful and toxic. I have to touch him. I lay my hands against his flat belly and follow the lines of his body up his chest, thumbs rolling his dark nipples.

He groans and buries his face in my neck. His hips grind against me, letting me feel the hardness of his dick through his jeans. "Oh, Jesus, that's good. Harder. Do it harder."

"Shut up," I rasp. His voice makes me crazy, makes me think about devouring him flesh and bone and all. I twist my head and sink my teeth into the curve of his neck, desperate to mark him, my jaws squeezing tight.

Corey whimpers and jerks his hips impatiently, self-indulgent as ever. I want to hate him for it, but can you really hate someone so desperately without loving them even more? I hate him so much it hurts to breathe.

We strain and push at each other; we shove and rip. Corey drags my shirt over my head, and his hands streak over my body, following the serpentine trails of the emerald and black dragons tattooed across my chest and down my arms.

"Please," he begs raggedly.

I pop open the button on his jeans and shove my hand down the front. His prick fills my fist,

swollen and hot.

"*Jesus--*" He throws back his head and drags in muffled gasps. "Dave. Fuck me. Now. I need you."

Three words -- *I need you* -- three simple words, but they slice through me like burning knives. I need him, too, and if I can have him just this once, maybe I can forget him.

I pull my hand away, lifting Corey and staggering from the kitchen with him. He digs his fingers into my shoulders while he kisses down my neck and along my shoulders, his mouth hot and wet against my skin. My cock is so hard I think I'll explode if he keeps kissing me, but somehow I hold on.

I've fantasized about spreading Corey out on my bed, seeing him writhing naked on black quilts, but after a few steps, my knees are already threatening to give out. I stumble into the dark living room instead, knowing this is a mistake. If I let this happen, Corey will tear me open and steal my soul. But would that really be so bad?

I trip, and we go down on the sofa. My weight pins Corey to the black leather cushions, but he won't be still. He twists and arches and presses himself to me in the most obscene ways. His fingers and tongue explore wicked hidden places that make me shudder and groan deep in my throat. I rip his jeans the rest of the way open and drag them down over his hips. He's not wearing any underwear.

"Do you know how long I've wanted to do this?" he says, tearing at the laces of my pants. My cock springs free from leather only to be imprisoned in his eager hands. "It's been forever. Ever since we met."

"*Fuck.*" I grind my teeth and squeeze my eyes shut. One move, and it's all over. I try to think about baseball, football, anything but the fact that Corey -- the love of my miserable fucking life -- is spread out and willing under me.

"Fuck me, Dave." He licks into the tunnel of my ear while his thumb rolls over the swollen head of my cock. "Do it *now.*"

"I don't..." I swallow hard. "I don't have anything to..."

"In my room." He kisses my jaw. I don't bother to remind him that it's the guest room. "Top drawer in the nightstand."

He releases my cock, but I don't move, captivated by the way our bodies mold together, like one was made for the other.

He plants a hand on my chest and pushes. "Go, Dave."

I stumble to my feet, dazed. Go, yes. Before I blink and the dream disappears. I take the stairs

two at a time. If I don't hurry, I'll come back and find Corey swigging a beer and watching football while he tries to tell me about the chick he banged last night.

But in the guest bedroom, I'm stopped cold by the shocking array of tubes Corey has stashed in the drawer. He has oils, gels. Cherry-flavored lubricants, lemon, lime, pineapple, and one that says it tastes like cheesecake. I shake my head in disbelief. Only Corey.

Only Corey...

My stomach ties into a cold knot. These can't be for women. They can't be, and maybe Corey isn't who I thought he was at all.

I grab a tube without looking and get the hell out of the room before I come across any more of Corey's secrets. Another man touching him, kissing him, fucking him... Who was it? One guy, lots of guys, guys I know? I want to find them and rip their lungs out.

I go down the stairs slower than I came up them, a headache settling in behind my eyes, beginning to pound. When I reach the living room and see Corey, I stop and stare.

He's sprawled across the couch like my best dream and worst nightmare, entirely naked. His arms are crossed behind his head, flaming hair falling away from his face, his legs spread. One foot's propped on the armrest; the other dangles over the edge of the sofa so his toes brush the carpet. Silver moonlight pours through the open curtains and kisses every inch of his body.

"You know what I don't get?" he murmurs, eyes heavy-lidded. "How come you act like such a motherfucking know-it-all, when you don't know shit? Like all this time you've been watching me, how come you never noticed how I've been throwing myself at you? Why do you think I wanted to stay here?"

This should be what I want to hear. It should be, but I can't get rid of the sour taste in the back of my mouth. I can't stop thinking about that drawer upstairs.

"Throwing yourself at me...?" I kick off my boots, peel away my socks and my leathers and stand naked with the darkness gathered around me. My hands shake with need, with a crazy desperation that makes my ears ring. I want to tear Corey open from the inside out. I want to leave him bloody and bruised. I want to ruin him so completely that no one will ever want him again, and he'll be mine forever.

He watches me through lust-hooded eyes as I come nearer, as I lean over and slid a knee between his thighs. "You throw yourself at everybody, Cor." My voice is soft, but anger burns in my belly. "I used to think... I used to think you were just a fucking tease. But you mean it, don't you? You really do want everybody."

He flinches, but his dick stays stiff against his belly. He avoids my gaze. Can he feel the danger? It's there, the darkness so close to the surface I can feel it shifting under my skin.

"You," I whisper, crawling over him, fingertips grazing soft skin, "are just -- a greedy -- fucking -- slut."

His eyes narrow to slits, just the way they did before he swung the tequila at me. This time, I don't wait. I drop down and bite down hard on his left nipple.

Corey squalls like a scalded cat. He bucks sharply upward, and I have to cross an arm over his throat to hold him down. I growl, teeth pinching tighter. My head spins; my senses are full of Corey, his heat, his smell, his touch, his hiss of pain.

Just before the skin breaks, I let go. I cover him and seal my mouth over his, tongue thrusting deep as he stops struggling and melts into me. My hands streak across hard flesh, desperate to discover every inch of him at once, to lock away the knowledge of his body deep inside myself. His skin is burning satin over rippling muscle, and I don't think I can stop even if he begs me.

He moans a word into my mouth; it sounds like my name. Jesus, Jesus. What am I doing? Neither of us is ready for this. Corey probably thinks it's just a quick fuck. He has no idea how deep my obsession runs, how thoughts of him are cut through me like a river through a canyon. Stop? I can never stop.

While ours lips move frantically, bruising, I slick lube onto two fingers and move them between his legs. He jerks when I cup his balls with slippery cold fingers, moans when I roll them in my hand. I find his entrance, hot and puckered. The smell of coconut rises as flesh warms the lube. My tropical fucking angel.

"God--" Corey breaks the kiss to gasp for air, his eyes squeezed shut and his lips trembling apart. "That's amazing. I want you inside me."

He presses his ass against my hand, and my index finger sinks in up to the first joint. The heat is intense, washing up my hand, my arm, folding me in a suffocating wave of heat. Sweat trickles into my eyes. I can't see, can't breathe, can't do anything but *feel*, and it feels like fucking heaven as I add a second finger and plunge deeper.

"Fuck!" His teeth click shut, and his breath hisses out between them while his body tightens around me. "Not that-- not that fast."

Fuck. Fuck, fuck. I press my forehead against his shoulder and groan. I want him bloody, but I don't want to hurt him. I want to ruin him, but I don't want to see him cry again. I don't fucking know what I want anymore.

I shift and press my lips to his ear, force my breath in, out, grind my teeth. "I won't hurt you. I promise."

It's the only promise I'll ever make him, and lifting my head, looking into the clear blue of his eyes, I know I'll keep it even if it kills me.

But because I have to know, because I *have* to, I ask the question that isn't really a question. "I'm not the first. Am I?"

He stares straight back at me, some nameless emotion glimmering in his gaze. "No."

Disappointment swells, regret and loss. I should have known all along, but it was part of the fantasy. To be his first, the one he'd never forget.

"It was different." He touches my face, smooths a strand of hair behind my ear. His breath is warm and sweet on my lips. "*This* is different."

It's not different. It's cheap and dirty, and Corey is no angel. It's like he's ripped my heart out; it's like I'm dying and he can't even see it.

"Dave. *Dave*."

"Yeah. Different." I stare down at him. He's so beautiful, every inch of him. His eyes and his hair, his mouth and his skin and his cock. He's no angel, but Christ help me, I can't live without having him.

I hold his eyes, reach down and take his cock in my hand. I stroke him while I draw my fingers slowly out of his body, ease them back in. I kiss his mouth, his jaw, his throat. "Relax," I murmur against his skin. "Just let it happen."

Slowly, he begins to respond, begins to make soft sounds of need. When he's groaning again, angling his hips to meet my thrusting fingers, I slide down. My hair falls over my shoulders in a black mane, brushing his navel. While my fingers fuck him, I cradle his balls and lean down to lick from the base of his cock to the dusky head.

"Oh, sweet *fuck*." He moans and pushes his hips up, trying to follow my tongue as I draw away.

He won't forget me. I won't let him forget me.

I tease him like he's been teasing me for years. I swirl my tongue around the head of his cock, dip my tongue into his slit while lust and power rush through my veins. He may have fucked a hundred guys, he may fuck a thousand more, but not one of them will worship him the way I do. Not one of them will live and breathe for him and only him.

With a last slow lick, I swallow him deep. He fills my mouth like he belongs there, his flesh musky, salty with weeping pre-come. I rub my tongue along his thick length, letting him feel the edge of my teeth.

He makes a choking sound and hooks his legs over my shoulders, his flesh burning against mine. Every breath I draw is hot and damp with his scent. His hands twist in my hair, and he sobs incoherently. "Jesus, fuck, Dave, please, just -- please--"

For a single moment, Corey is mine, and no one can take him away.

He pants and moans and pushes to the back of my throat with each stroke. I fight my gag until I feel him tensing, then draw away. He gasps as I push his legs up, fitting my cock to the loosened ring of muscle and pausing, dazed. This isn't a dream. It's really happening and, God, I've never wanted him more.

I push. He wails.

Halfway in, I ease up, pinpricks of light dancing in front of my eyes. The passage of his ass is all tight heat, slicked in lube and sucking me deeper. My breath rasps in and out of my lungs; my lips peel back from my teeth in a soundless snarl like a goddamn animal. I am an animal. Raw-edged and wild, every muscle straining against the urge to force my way in and just *fuck*.

Time slows, or seems to. The lights of a passing car flash through the window and take forever to slide away. The brightness illuminates Corey's face, his closed eyes and tightly sealed lips. His beauty steals my breath. It's not his sulky looks, or his perfect body. It's the impossible innocence in his eyes. It's the contradiction: an angel, a fallen angel.

Time moves forward again as Corey sucks in a deep breath and moves his hips, sheathing me a little deeper in his heat. Pleasure uncurls at the base of my spine and flows upward, closes my throat as my neck arches back and I grind my teeth from the sheer fucking intensity. Jesus, Jesus, is this what dying feels like? My fingers dig into Corey's hips. I know I'm bruising him, breaking my promise not to hurt him, but this is how claims are staked, with blood and bruises. No matter how careful we both are, someone is going to get hurt before this is over.

Corey sets the pace, steady, easy, but on the fifth stroke, his body jerks. His teeth catch in his bottom lip, while a strangled groan escapes his throat. I take control, holding the position and driving into him so that his muscles string tight with each thrust.

Heat unfolds through my body, and the heat is made of insanity. I see Corey in flashes of gold and scarlet. His mouth is obscene, lips gaping and red around his gasps and groans. Staring in at the soft pink flesh of his tongue makes me dizzy, makes me think about falling into his mouth and tumbling down his throat.

He opens his eyes and looks at me, his eyes blue, blue, so blue I can't breathe. So blue I know he can see into my soul where all the tortured shadows of obsession lurk. Love and hate rip at my insides until I can't stand it.

Urgency crawls along my skin. I force the pace, burying myself with each thrust. Corey's head twists right and left against the armrest, and he pants, "*Dave*," over and over.

"Cor-- Jesus--" My pulse roars in my ears; sweat drips from every inch of me. My mouth is dry. My hands are bone white against Corey's skin, the dragons on my arms hissing and breathing fire into my veins. I'm as sober as I've ever been; I'm as high as I've ever been.

He stops saying my name and lapses into wordless moans. I pound into him, terrified of hurting him, desperate to hurt him. His keening fills the darkness, his moans and my gasps, and the crude slide and slap of flesh-on-flesh. He's almost bent in two, but he locks his arms around me and tries to pull me even closer, until we're one.

All the air in the room seems to gather around our sweating, straining bodies. Each thrust is hell. I'm mad from the friction, the heat, the knowledge that I've lived my entire life for this one moment. I'm around the bend insane, pounding into him, and I can't stop, can't stop. Pleasure becomes so bright it's pain.

I curl my fingers around Corey's cock and stroke him in all the right ways to send him to the edge. He chokes on a cry and throws his head back as his body stiffens and he comes in hot spurts over my fingers.

And I'm right there with him, coming so hard it feels like I'm shattering. Hot white light explodes and crunches into my skin like chips of broken glass. I'm falling through the shards of a million hopes, a million dreams. Falling and grinding my teeth and wanting to scream, scream, scream. It's too good, it's awful, how can I live without this?

Slowly, ecstasy dissolves into a warm glow, pleasure slicking my insides. My muscles go weak, and I collapse over Corey.

The moment passes.

My breath steadies. I become aware again of my body, heavy and spent, pressing Corey into the sofa. I push my face into the side of his neck, where his pulse still thunders, and wish we could stay like this forever.

Sweat dries. Contentment fades.

Just like I knew it would, regret creeps over me. What happens to a dream once it comes true? Reality is always so much... less.

Corey's legs slide away from my waist, his skin whispering guilty secrets against mine. "So..." He runs his fingers through my hair, sighing. "Are you still going to make me move out?"

I shut my eyes to block out the sight of golden skin draped over black leather. "Yes."

"You're such a dick."

"Oh... fuck you..." My throat clicks dryly when I swallow. I can't find the strength for anger. I'm boneless, my insides hollow. Corey's lost a place to live. I've lost my last dream.

I slide free of his body and untangle my limbs from his. Standing, my head spins, and everything feels wrong.

"Dave?" The sofa creaks as Corey sits up. "What's wrong?"

He'll never guess, and I'll never tell. I love him.

I love him.

He stands and lays a hand on my arm. "Dave."

I meet his gaze. A few minutes ago he was the most beautiful thing in the world. Now he's just another used-up piece of crap, his face flushed and sweaty, damp hair plastered to his forehead and cheeks. I've ruined him.

He pulls his hand back, eyes widening. Can he see the thoughts shifting behind my eyes? Disgust tastes like sour milk on my tongue.

I turn my back on him and stare in silence out the window. The moon hides behind a cloud bank. I wait.

After a moment, feet shuffle against the carpet. I hear footsteps beside me, now fading as Corey leaves the room. The stairs in the hallway creak, and then everything is quiet.

I tell myself I got what I wanted, but the air still goes flat without him. Emptiness aches in the pit of my stomach, and it's my own fault. For too long I've let this infatuation ruin my life. I knew it would never work out with Corey. Monogamy is not a word in his vocabulary, one of the many things that drove his girlfriend away. I'd never be as patient as Kerri. The first time I saw him with someone else, I'd split his skull open.

But it would have been nice to touch him whenever I wanted.

Nothing changes. The moon still hides; the gargoyles stand fast. Shaking off thoughts of things that aren't meant to be, I pull my pants back on and head for the kitchen.

The old Folgers can is right where I left it, second cabinet over the sink, behind a bag of stale Doritos. I pluck the packet out from inside. White powder shifts, separated from my fingers by the thinnest layer of paper. Pure, so fucking pure it could stop my heart. If I'm lucky.

Old habits die hard, and when you've lost everything you thought you wanted, why bother fighting them at all?

I carry the bag upstairs and shut myself in my room. Part of me expects Corey to be waiting there, but the room is cold and lonely. I sit on the edge of the black-quilted bed and open the nightstand. There are no condoms in my drawer, no lube or toys. The things inside are much more valuable to me.

There's a ten karat gold locket my mother gave me when I was seven, the only thing she had time to press into my hand before the cops cuffed her and shoved her into the back of a patrol car for

prostitution. Then there's a rusty coiled string from my first bass. From one of Jezebel's early gigs, a photo of Corey, sweaty, drunk, and laughing. Cotton swabs. A lighter. A spoon. A sterile needle.

I take what I need and shut the drawer on its memories. I knew the second I kissed Corey it wouldn't end well. He could never really be mine.

The familiar sight of a flame burning under a spoon comforts me even while it draws a nervous anticipation out from my bones. In a few minutes, everything will be better.

I tie off and slide the silver fang into my skin at the inside of my elbow, inches from slithering red dragon tongues. I count the seconds.

Eight. It takes eight seconds for the high to hit. Then it rushes up so fast and strong, such stunning bright light, it's like coming inside of Corey, better than that, it's nirvana, erasing a thousand agonies.

Outside my window, the gargoyles creep across the lawn, their wings pressed tight against their fat gray bodies, their claws digging into the grass. One stops and looks over his shoulder at me, smiles with a mouthful of jagged bloody teeth.

When the room starts to darken and my eyes roll back in my head, I know it was too much. And I know I wanted it to be this way. Corey can survive without me. So can Jezebel. She was the greatest bitch of all, that band with all her fucking expectations and obligations.

I'm finally free.

I collapse across the bed and fall into the heaven of oblivion.

But I don't die.

Slowly, I wake up. I'm cold, clammy, and my bones feel like they're made of ice. I blink my eyes open past sleep-grit, momentarily blinded by the sunlight pouring in through the open curtains. Bright beams fall across my face, but I don't feel the heat; the only warmth comes from the body pressed against my side.

Corey sleeps with his arms around my waist and his cheek on my bare shoulder. A string of drool runs from his open mouth to my skin.

"Corey." I push at him, and he stirs, moans a protest. "Get off me."

"Huh--?" He opens his eyes and blinks rapidly. "You're alive."

"Why aren't you packing your shit?"

"Oh, Jesus, Dave." He sits up and rubs his eyes like a little kid. He's dressed again, in jeans and a T-shirt that reads, *I'd rather be on Brokeback Mountain*.

"I want you out by noon." I struggle to untangle the bed sheets from my legs. What the hell is wrong with him,

sneaking in here while I was passed out cold?

"No," he says.

I lurch to my feet and look around for a shirt. "Don't leave any of your crap behind, and don't steal any of mine."

"I said no, Dave."

I straighten to my full height and stare down at him where he sits cross-legged on the bed. "What the fuck do you mean, no?"

He rests his elbows on his knees and cups his chin in his hands. Blue eyes blink again, just once this time. "I'm not leaving."

I clench my jaw until my teeth ache. "You can pack your shit, or I can throw it out with the trash. I can throw *you* out with the trash."

"You need somebody to take care of you."

"I don't need you."

"Well, who else is going to do it? You make sure you're such an asshole that none of your friends give a fuck whether you live or die." He frowns. "Do you even have any friends?"

"Fuck you." If I didn't feel like I'd been run over by a tank, I'd wring his neck. "Fuck your maternal fucking instincts, and get the fuck out of my house."

"Another thing," Corey says, like I never spoke at all. "I'm sick of being treated like I'm stupid. Just because I've got different ideas about what's important doesn't mean I'm dumb. I want to be treated like your equal, for fuck's sake, or this is never going to work."

"What?" My knees buckle, and I sit hard on the edge of the bed. "What's going to work? What are you talking about?"

"And the drugs have got to stop." He scoots over and puts a hand on my shoulder. Bright hair tumbles over his forehead. "I don't want to come in here again and have to look for a pulse to know if you're alive. I cried, do you know that? I fucking cried."

"Shut up." How does he manage to do this to me every time? I'm spinning in hopeless circles, watching all my plans fall apart again. After last night, I should be dead, or at least miserable. The goddamn love of my life should not be sitting here promising to take care of me.

He sighs heavily and scoots close to hook his chin over my shoulder from behind. "Look. Maybe it's stupid, and maybe it won't work, but don't we owe it to ourselves to at least give this thing between us a try?"

I twist to get a better look at him. He's a mess, with circles under his eyes and wild hair. Angels are like falling stars, after all. Once one hits the earth, it's just another ugly chunk of rock. So why does my heart feel like it's cracking in two?

"Come on, Dave. What have we got to lose?"

You can always lose something. Corey is still the same irresponsible tease he always was. He's no angel, and who knows if he can change? Who knows if *I* can? I've been hiding in shadows for so long, I think I've forgotten how to be alive.

Or I had, until last night.

Corey wraps his arms around my waist, his breath fluttering against my neck. His crazy tequila-coconut scent washes over me. I turn my face to rest my forehead against his, eyes closing, and just for a minute, I let myself relax into his body.

Can I do this? I don't know. But for the first time in ages, I let myself imagine being with Corey, really being with him. No more dreams, just life. I don't know if I can do it. But I think... I think I want to try.

Slowly, I lift my hands to cover Corey's. He twists his fingers through mine and squeezes tight. A cautious sort of feeling unfolds in my chest. I think: *Maybe...*

This is not happily ever after. There are no angels here.

But maybe men are better than angels.

Tequila Angel

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