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LOOT

IT'S SO COLD I FEEL like I'm shivering. I can even see my breath as I pull down my skirt a little, trying to cover my legs some more. I sort of shimmy and stretch it down. It's always so much colder here, by the water. But really—I know it's only because I'm waiting, and if I think about it, it's actually nice. The water makes this real slow stick and kiss sound under the docks, and the cloud cover is low and sort of glows a pretty violet. It's almost like orange over Riverhead where the city is. And then there's the whole empty harbor, right here like a mirror in the dark. All of it makes me feel like Town is with me, around me, and then I'm warm. But for a second, I worry, like maybe I've come to the wrong dock—I know I haven't though. This is where he said to meet.

I did just what he said. No phone. Tell my parents I'm sleeping at Carrie's and tell Carrie nothing. I said it'd be fine, Carrie would lie for us, but he said 'no,' and the way he said it just made it sure, made it happen.

That's what I like about him, how he really means what he says, like he's known it all along. Not like Carrie. And me too, I guess. Carrie can't go ten seconds without changing the subject or pulling out her lip-gloss. But like I said, I'm the same way.

I feel cold again and look up. Over by the harbor mouth, there's fog hanging and the light tower glares green. I twist around and look up State Street, but I don't see him coming. I know I shouldn't look. I want him to see me just like this, looking out at the harbor, waiting for him. I try to imagine it, try to see what he'll see, and think maybe it'll be one of those things you remember forever.

Carrie comes into my head though and I think of what she said, calling me a dumb bitch. We don't ever really mean anything we say, but still. She just couldn't believe that I said 'no' to Dean Stanton. Everyone was surprised. I guess I was too, with everyone expecting us to get together and him being a senior and all.

But it's that way he walks around—like he was born with a balloon in his chest, and all I can think about is how easy it could pop if you said the right thing. And then I think how sad it would be if that right thing was true and it didn't pop.

Dean got all smug when I said I wasn't interested, like something was funny but he couldn't be bothered to laugh. Thank God too.

I guess I was holding out for something better. Or maybe I was scared, or—I don't know—it just didn't feel right. And now I'm here, waiting. See, the thing is *he's* not like Dean. Sure, he's popular—everybody loves him—he's on the rowing team too and his family lives on the Neck—I mean his dad is like this big important guy—a judge or something, and they belong to the Corinthian and all. God. It was like yesterday: the first time I saw him. He was walking to his car with Serena McKinley, and then he just ripped out of the parking lot in that Z3. But none of that really matters. I mean, he broke up with Serena and everything—like two weeks into the semester—but I guess what I'm trying to say is that he's not a show-off, like Dean. He's quiet—or calm, I guess. He really sees things. He watches. And I know that's where something real is happening. I know because I saw him watching me.

I was being loud and dumb with Carrie and I don't know who we were talking to. It could have been Dean Stanton for all I know because it didn't matter. And I think he saw that. And then I couldn't help but watch him and that's when I knew something real was happening. I knew because I could feel it.

Out there, the water makes that fluttery sound and for a moment I wonder if it's him. I think probably it's just a swell going through the moorings, so I watch the lights. They're stretched out from the far edge, from the yacht clubs, and they move a little like they're on air. But then I hear it again. A squeak comes with it and I start to see a blackness pass over the long lights. It's pretty; the bright lines sort of shiver, splitting up. They wiggle orange on the water and then settle again, the cut ends kissing, all slow and smooth.

No one else is around, no boats in the harbor and no one up State Street. And of course not, at this time of year, this late.

I see the slow flap of oars and the shape of a rowboat with someone in it. Maybe it's not him. I wonder, and then I worry what I might say about being here, so late on the docks.

I move back and kind of tip-toe so my heels don't click and catch in the boards. I go next to the gangway where there's so much shadow and the light from State Street makes it hard to see.

Slowly, it comes bending in from the channel towards the dock. One of the oars pulls hard alone and the little boat swings aside, gliding right up to the dock and I see it's him.

I come out from the shadow, and he looks at me. He saw me of course. He smiles but he doesn't say anything, just winks. I come to the edge of the dock, tucking my hair back and he reaches up for my hand.

My face feels hot when he takes it and I feel stupid for smiling so much. It only makes it worse, him being so calm like he always is. Even with his hand, I have to crouch to get into the boat, because of these heels and my skirt, which is stupid. I should have guessed, meeting at the docks and all. But I felt so sure at home—watching myself in the mirror.

It's okay though, because I hold his hand extra tight—have to—and I lean into him as I balance and push aside some rope with my heels.

I smell him so close and it's like earth, it's bitter and it makes me feel like I know him somehow, like there's something to know and all I do is want it.

The boat rocks a little and I breathe like I'm going to scream, but I smile and look up at him.

"Hi," I say, but it sounds so stupid.

He just smiles, watching me sit. I look down at my legs all bunched up and my knees high. I tug at my skirt, but really I want to say something else to make the silence right again. But I know I'll just make it worse.

He pushes us off the dock, out into the harbor. As we drift, he puts his rubber boots up against my seat on either side of me to get a hold for rowing and I have to make myself small, tilt my knees so he has room to push out with the oars.

He swings us around like it's nothing and I think of all the times I watched him at school, imagining things. I'd catch him doing the same and wonder what he saw.

We point up the channel towards the mouth of the harbor and he just rows. I watch the skin of his arms tighten over and around muscle with each pull. He's not saying anything. I try to, but he's too calm—it sort of swallows up all my thoughts. There's so much I want to say, but at the same time,

it's kind of perfect and the quiet is so nice because it's never like that when someone's around. I think about how Carrie would never understand and catch myself smiling.

He folds in his smile like he might laugh and I almost ask. But I don't want to sound stupid again, so I tell myself maybe he's just happy, like me.

The oars push in the water and the swirls they make glint orange light from the buildings. Slowly, we pass the Atlantic Yacht Club. I was there once, when Daddy's boss took us sailing. We didn't have dinner or anything. We just met him there and took the little ferry out to his boat. I remember I didn't want to go and I feel bad, thinking about how I yelled at Daddy. I was so angry because I was supposed to meet Carrie, but when we were finally in the car on the way to the club, I looked at Daddy and I saw how tired he looked. I thought maybe he was just tired of me, but now, when I think about it, I think maybe he didn't want to go either.

It ended up being so much fun though. Daddy's boss gave me wine and let me drive the boat, which was amazing. There was a lot of wind and it was late in the day and the sun was turning that sort of old gold it does.

I guess it's pretty funny how you end up liking some things you thought you'd hate.

When we got home I asked Daddy if his boss could take us again. He kind of laughed, but he still looked tired and said, 'sure.' I kept asking the whole summer, but he just looked more tired every time I asked and it was the only time we ever went.

I tell myself to try and forget about it and then I remember where I am. I look at him and I start to think about dinners at the Corinthian.

He stops rowing. He's looking at me. I try to smile like I always do in the mirror, but my face goes hot as we drift. He just smiles, pulling on one of the oars. He starts up again and as he does I hear Carrie's voice—that time I mentioned his name to see what she thought.

'Him?' she said. She gave this sort of strange look like she was remembering something.

Then all she said is that he's hot and started talking about sex, which is all she talks about now that we're in High School. She's already on Yaz. But it's not like she's done it either. She said it's for the parties—so she can get drunk and not have to worry.

"I've wanted to do this for a long time," he says.

It almost scares me when he says it and I shiver, not expecting it. But of course I smile like a dumbass. He sees it all and smiles. It's like the commercials—that smile—his dimples and those teeth: just perfect.

“Anyone know where you are?”

I shake my head quick, no. His eyes slant down at his hands as they row and I see his dimples again—that smile.

“Feels nice, doesn't it? Just us,” he says. He watches me nod and then looks back to his hands, gripping and pulling. I wait for him to say something else, but he doesn't and I have to look away I'm smiling so much.

It's all like something I never knew, like a simple secret that he tells me without saying anything at all. And just like that, I'm happy.

We pass The Clipper restaurant, and the harbor dips into the land and fills in behind some big rocks, making a little beach before the old war fort.

“Do you know which street that is?” he asks, slowing with the oars and nodding towards the beach.

“It just leads up to the Fort, doesn't it?”

“Up there it turns into Fort Lane, but here it's still Front Street.”

I make a sound like it's interesting. Past the beach where the street curves up towards the Fort look-out, the fog is getting bigger and already I can't see the big tree on the far end of the Fort.

“A few winters ago,” he says, “me and a buddy were walking along that street, late at night, when it was quiet, just like this.”

He stops and pushes on the oars some, slowing the boat, turning us so I can see the beach more. He looks at me and then all that quietness is in his eyes somehow.

“We were walking back from a party and then we heard this screaming.”

He touches the water with the oars, dabbing it, playing with the surface and it keeps us where we are.

“The tide was high like it is now and the screaming came from the water, like a woman was being attacked out here.”

“What'd you do?” I ask.

He shakes his head slowly, says, “When you hear something like that, at first you just freeze.”

He looks at me, says, “They were raping her.”

“Oh my God, “ I hear myself say. “What did you do? Did you call someone?”

“Yeah, but for a few minutes, I couldn’t help it.”

And for a second I feel cold. But I think of how people tense up like he said, and I think about how we all slow down to look at the car wrecks on the side of the road. I mean, it’s sad, but we all do it.

“They started to kill her then.”

He remembers the sound. He’s somewhere I’ve never been, and it’s always like that when someone tells you something so big and terrible and important. You’re never ready for it, and you think about the reaction you should have, but really, inside, you’re blank.

“And then you called?”

“I didn’t have my phone and my buddy’s was dead. Someone else came walking along though. They called.”

“And the police came?”

“No.”

“What?”

“The dispatcher said they don’t respond to that sort of call anymore.”

He turns from the beach to look at me, goes on before I can say anything.

“You see, back in the sixteen hundreds, that beach wasn’t there. The land came out past where we are now. Ever since, the harbor has slowly eaten the land. That’s why Town built that big cement wall where Front Street is.”

He keeps touching the water with the oars, kneading it this way and that so we stay still far from the rocks. It turns us some and I see the harbor swallowing fog, the Fort gone and the light tower just a green haze.

“Back then Town was just a poor fishing colony. Nothing like what it is now.”

He stops and I watch him wet his lips, folding them against one another, slowly. In the sharp light from Front street, I see the red shine of a day-old split.

“The men would sail out to the Grand Banks to fish. They’d be gone for weeks, maybe months and the women would band together in a couple houses for safety.”

“From what?” I ask, but he smiles looking down, his hands still on the oars. He trembles and I think maybe he’s cold too, but he’s smiling so much and I lean in to listen.

“One night back then—while the men were far away, fishing on the Banks—a Spanish ship passing Town was attacked. The raiders killed everyone aboard and brought the ship here into the harbor to loot and scrap it. They were still high from all the killing. And you see, when they got here they found one house alone on the shore with the lights still burning. All the other women were together in houses up on the hills, but the woman who lived here, she wasn’t afraid.”

He looks at me, says, “They came ashore and raped her, murdered her in her own house.”

“That really happened here?”

He nods. “Long time ago.”

“Wait,” I say, “were you hearing *her*?” But he looks off at the fog sliding on the water, coming in around us, dulling and spreading the light from Front street.

“The dispatcher said they don’t answer those calls anymore. People hear it so often, sometimes she’ll get three, four calls at the same time.”

He takes a big breath and lets it out slow.

“You see, every time they sent someone to look, there was never anything to find.”

He looks at me now and it’s different.

“On nights like this,” he says, “if a woman is screaming, no one ever comes.”

I laugh a little, try to smile like him. He just stares at me though, smiling until I look away. Then his hands clap together and he starts to laugh.

“Fuck, you should’ve seen the look on your face,” he says, laughing.

I breathe and try to laugh again and think I probably did look kind of funny. He quiets down, looking at me like I’m cute or something.

A joke, I tell myself, because of course it is. I guess I just didn’t expect it, you know? Something like that. From someone like him. I look back at him though and those dimples start to make me smile again, but I hear something as I do. In the fog there’s the sound like dipped water, flurried. It settles and rustles again. I turn, looking for the sound.

And in the fog I see a dark shape of someone rowing. I think maybe it’s not real, but it comes closer and I see someone turn to look at us.

I see Dean Stanton. He pulls one last time on the oars and his boat glides right up next to ours.

“Fancy seeing YOU here,” he says to me.

“Glad you could make it,” I hear.

Dean laughs. “Of course,” he says, still looking at me. He lifts a bottle of Grey Goose and drinks from it. “Wouldn’t miss this for the world,” he says, wiping his wet mouth.

“Oh, I guess you didn’t know, Dean and I go way back. And actually—funny enough—I was with Dean when I heard that screaming.”

Dean throws him the bottle, says, “Oh yea, she was a real moaner.” I see those dimples again. The vodka bottle swings up and Dean slaps his shoulder. “Like that first time you dumped it in Serena’s ass.”

Dean looks to me then, his smile slipping. Staring, he says, “Sure learned her lesson.” Then he laughs. They laugh a long time.

The water moves between the boats, making that lazy sound like drops and I try to get a little more comfortable, pushing this rope around with my heels, wishing I were smaller. Dean takes the vodka back, swigs it and swallows, looking at my legs, looking lower. I tug at my skirt, knowing what he can see. He turns his head slowly, staring the whole time, and spits.

They tie the boats together and I look back towards the beach, but I can only hear it: the water on the rocks, and then somewhere past it, faint against the wall of Front street. I feel cold and it’s like I can only breathe a little bit, and now I can’t stop blinking.

The street lamps are fading in the fog and they bring up the oars, the paddle edges coming up on either side of me, dripping so cold. I feel them staring and I hear Dean drink some more. I hear that dull slosh and then the splash of a little liquor falling back.

He passes the bottle. He starts to move towards me and I try to make myself small. He reaches out and everything starts to blur.