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Temporary

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Temporary *Laurie Hilburn*

Sex with Andy.

The words stare back at me, foreign. I've rewritten the phrase three times now, shifting its existence from one page to the next. But, it's not real yet—I turn my pencil and erase the gray lines, withdrawing them from duty, from when they were supposed to materialize into action tomorrow.

Andrea takes a seat across from me. "I'm sorry, Victoria. How about Tuesday?"

"You'll be in Atlanta until—"

"Wednesday morning." Andrea sighs. "Okay, how about..."

She chews at the end of her pen—a residual marker from when she quit smoking a year ago. Her teeth marks leave imprints on most of our writing tools, soft little messages of how nerves shiver beneath her composure. She wears tailored blazers, professionally indomitable. But, her mouth betrays her confidence—not her voice, but her teeth, tugging and gnawing for something to bite, to inhale, to unravel the taut rope of tension that snakes down her spine.

"How about Friday?" She glances up at me. "I'll be back by five. We can have dinner and then—"

"I have physical therapy at four. I'll be exhausted."

"Fine."

She's getting frustrated. She used to tell me how much she enjoyed me being such a challenge, difficult, unconquerable. Now, she just says, Victoria, please, be reasonable, please.

"Andy..." I can't reach the words, so I press my hands flat against the table, grounding myself. "Andy, I'm—"

"Trying." She pulls the pen from her lips like a cigarette, barely refraining from puffing out smoky ink. "I know. I'm sorry I'm so busy."

"Don't apologize for that. You like being busy."

But, I don't meet her eyes—I'm so focused on looking down at the table that Andrea's move to sit beside me makes me jump. She catches my hands in hers. "I like being with you more than being busy." A tentative, warm laugh bubbles up from her chest. "I'd love to combine the two and get *busy* with you—I mean, we're both trying, right?"

Her smile, the little tether of connection, the hot ghosts of nicotine along her voice—it flickers more to life in me than I've known in a while and I almost flinch, staggered. But, her grip is impossible to break—even when I'm sure I have.

She peers over at my calendar. "How about Sunday evening? I'll be done with work before lunchtime. We'll have the evening all to ourselves."

She's serious. About Sunday, about planning it then, about devoting her time to me. Like with her touch, I am daunted. I haven't believed lately—in her, but not in me.

Gently, I pull my hands free from hers and reach for her chewed-up pen.

"Sunday, it is."

As she kisses my forehead, I write down the phrase again. I press all my weight into the page, forcing myself to feel each curve and puncture, dedicating each line of the day to the words: *Sex with Andy*, it reads when I'm done, this time immortalized in ink, and I swear I feel its force reach all the way to my toes.

I've been in a wheelchair for the past six months.

But I am not wheelchair-bound. I am wheelchair-often as opposed to wheelchair-assured; I am wheelchair-sporadically, when the pain floods, when I step onto the floor and feel nothing but air rush around me as my knees buckle and I collapse onto the ground. The spinal cord injury came with a car accident, a moment in time that came as fast as it went, but the paraplegia is what continues to swerve, to crash, to burn against my life. The doctors say it is a temporary paralysis; my spinal nerves were not severed, but they were damaged and inflamed, and the surgeries showed how the nerves shut down in order to heal, to give my legs some time to recover from the excruciating pain that likes to scream from below my waist. My mobility assistance mechanism, so official in its declaration of disability, waits at my bedside.

Victoria, you can't walk today, it says to me. Just sit down.

I don't want to, but I do.

In another six months, I won't need wheels anymore. Then, I'll have leg braces and a walking frame—then, I'll just be *mildly* disabled. Then, the doctors say, I'll have my legs back altogether; there will be muscle atrophy, but with continued physical therapy and patience, I'll be back to keeping up with my girlfriend as I was before. *Before.*

I've been having intimacy issues.

Visualize your arousal, my therapist has told me. He's the one who suggested we schedule our intimacy, believing the anticipation would help jumpstart the heat. Like being turned on is just a thing, an actual switch that was shut off the moment I woke up from the accident, and just needs to be pushed up again, with a quick electric click. Like desiring my partner, wanting her close, to be mine again, is something tangible, to be shaped back into normalcy. Like sex isn't as numb to me as my legs, as foreign to me as my ability to walk.

Like it isn't paralyzing to wonder if, without sex, love is crippled too.

I close my eyes and think of the first time Andrea and I kissed.

I had felt so young in her arms; she seemed so mature, wiser, and far more secure in her sexuality. She was a hot blaze against my tepid flicker in the night, laughing at my nervousness, kissing it away. It wasn't until I met Andrea that sex became more than *just* sex. Sex was great, an activity, a primal urge, but sex with Andrea was just a preface to something greater—she didn't just fit with me, but *I* was able to fit too. It wasn't just the touching, or the nakedness, or the orgasm, that I desired for again—it was the completion, now withdrawn and fragmented, as though my wounded nerves also severed the connection between my heart and my body.

It was summer when we met. A friend of a friend was throwing a party, celebrating the Fourth of July. Fireworks streaked across the night sky, shaking the rooftop of the apartment complex, illuminating brief gasps of awed and intoxicated spectators. But, in our dark quiet space, we kissed. Our drunken hands scoured each other's bodies to try and memorize what might be forgotten by the morning. She wore a slinky black dress, decorated with silver sequins that pricked my hands when I tugged her closer, and black heels she kicked off to better meet my height and capture my mouth with hers. She tasted like lemons and strawberries, hiding the bitter taste of alcohol, sweetening my tongue and lips. She pinned me against the bricked corner of the rooftop, hard edges biting into my back; she sucked on my tongue, laughing against my lips as a moan clawed up my throat and echoed between us, and then she breathlessly pulled back.

"My name's Andrea," she whispered, cheeks flushed and eyes magnetic. She

brushed the tip of her nose against mine, a gesture so sweet against our heat that I felt it simmer all the way to my toes. “But you can call me Andy.”

“Victoria?”

Andrea’s voice resonates me back to the present, pulsing my body to life.

“Baby?” She pushes open our bedroom door.

I take a breath and pull off my shirt.