

Dana snapped her fingers and a young officer with a dog pushed his way through the crowd toward us.

“Nah, I’m good. I’m gonna grab some coffee and hammer away on my laptop for a while.”

“You sure? It’s raining pretty badly out here.”

Thunder crackled again as if to emphasize her point.

“I like rain. I’ll catch you tomorrow,” I said, hopping on my bike again.

I rode across the street, dodging a fireman as he rolled a large white fire hose back onto a fire truck. He gave me a nasty look and spat on the ground, wiping a smudge of black soot across his cheek with the back of his hand as he dried his mouth.

I continued across the street and parked on the sidewalk in front of Satsuki Japanese restaurant, my back facing its large red sign as I took in the devastation unfolding across the street. The air smelled like barbecued pieces of wood and melted plastic.

Overpowered by the fumes, and realizing my laptop was probably wet, I went into the restaurant to see if I could salvage the damned thing. I sat down, taking a window seat. I did a double-take when I saw my reflection in the glass. My hair looked mangy and wet, and

mascara ran down my mocha complexioned cheeks leaving a trail of ink colored tears in its wake.

The laptop beeped. I stared at the blank white screen of my word processor and hammered out a title. As I typed, a young Japanese waitress wandered out of the kitchen to my table. The restaurant was empty, the chaos across the street driving customers away for the night.

“Excuse me, may I take your order?” the waitress asked. She held a tiny notebook in her hand.

The woman was young, all of twenty years-old with big pretty eyes and dark hair pulled into two pony tails. She looked liked a school girl.

“I’ll have some coffee,” I answered.

“I’m sorry. We shut our coffee maker down for the night. We close in an hour. Would you like some tea instead?”

“Tea would be great, thank you.”

I looked away, typing again. A few minutes later the young woman returned, setting the tea on the table before me. She stood for a moment, gazing out the window.

“A shame the rain didn’t put the fire out.”

I looked up and gazed into her soft pale face.

“It was a nice restaurant,” she muttered

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absently. "You look cold. My brother told me to offer you a blanket. Would you like one?"

"I'm almost dry and the tea is keeping me warm... but thank you."

"I'll be in the kitchen if you need anything."

"Maybe some more tea."

The girl nodded.

Lightening lit the sky, revealing a glittering of stars behind dark ominous clouds. My eyes darted to a silhouette outside the window. A woman in a tan trench coat slipped out of a dark car, closing the door behind her. I watched as she raced into Satsuki, wiping rain water out of her eyes. A few seconds later, the door opened and the woman walked inside, an open newspaper covering her damp hair. She took the paper off and shook it, droplets of water falling to the floor.

I drained the liquid in my cup unsweetened, gazing blankly at my computer screen again. Suddenly, a familiar voice called me by name.

"Tai? Is that you?"

I looked up, immediately recognizing the woman.

"Rachel?" I exclaimed. "What are you doing here? How are you? How are the kids?"

I waved her over, wondering what she was doing out so late. She took her wet trench coat

off and shook water onto the floor as she sat down, exhausted.

“Damn rain. I fucking hate it.”

Rachel’s thick brown hair clung to the side of her chubby cheeks. She blinked water from long dark lashes as we hugged across the table, leaning away from my laptop. A drop of snot tickled out of one of her nostrils and her hands looked shriveled and cold.

“I haven’t seen you since...”

“The party,” she answered dryly, trying to light the sopping wet cigarette in her hand.

“I didn’t know you smoked.”

Rachel smiled. “Neither does Richard.”

She flicked ashes into a ceramic tray, covered with packets of sugar and salt.

When Rachel and Richard got married, everyone thought they were the perfect couple. Even their names matched. Rachel dropped out of college and married Richard before his unit deployed to Iraq. She was a twenty-five year old mom of two kids and as much as she loved them, hated the life she’d been dealt. Or rather, the life she chose...

I looked up to find the waitress next to my table. She set a cup of tea before me and took the old one away.

“So... what brings you out on this cold wet

night? Shouldn't you be at home reading the kids a bedtime story?"

Rachel spouted a cloud of smoke into the air, pointing her nose dramatically.

"They're not up this late," she answered, fanning a puff of smoke away from my face. "I was out with my old man. I told him to let me out at the diner."

I almost spat tea out of my mouth. "I hope you're talking about Richard."

"Why would I be talking about Richard? If you must know, I'm having an affair," she answered flippantly.

"Why? What happened?"

Rachel gave me a curious smile and pointed her cigarette at my face accusingly.

"Richard bores the hell out of me, that's what happened."

"What about the kids?"

"What are you, my mother now?"

"I'm your friend," I sighed.

Rachel nodded as she drew from the filter of her ciggie again.

"Good...good. I'm glad I ran into you, actually."

"What's up?"

"I slipped out when Richard went to bed, but he must have realized I was gone because he

called my cell twenty minutes ago, wondering where I went. I told him to pick me up. He's been acting real suspicious lately. So if you don't mind, I'd like to use you as an excuse."

"As long as I don't have to lie to him..." I started.

It wasn't my style to get involved. I liked Richard. I wasn't down with lying to him about his wife. Rachel took a puff of her cigarette again. I inhaled, drawing second hand smoke into my lungs, unable to meet her unrelenting gaze. She must have known by the look in my eyes that deep down inside, I was judging her.

"Don't worry about it. He trusts me. But enough about my shit. How are *you*?"

"I'm fine. But sometimes, I miss Everett so much I feel like I'm losing my mind."

"I know, sweetie..." Rachel softly replied. "Just remember he'll always be with you."

...And what if I didn't want him to '*always be with me?*'. When is it okay to move on? Maybe I wouldn't feel so bad about the accident if I weren't always blaming myself. I met Rachel's pitying gaze.

"When I'm alone in the house I see him as clear as day, standing right there in my bedroom. It's scary as hell but I miss him so much I don't want him to leave. I feel so torn.

Whenever I think about being with someone else, you know, dating again... I feel like I'm betraying Everett. Like I don't deserve to move on and have a life without him. It feels so wrong..."

"Everett would want you to be happy, Tai. Give it some thought."

"Now you're sounding like *my* mother. I know Richard's boring and all but just thank your lucky stars he came back from the war alive."

Rachel sighed.

"I'm sorry. I must sound like a real bitch when I talk about my husband."

"I wouldn't say that..." *Out loud.*

We looked out the window. A green minivan pulled to the curb, right in front of Satsuki's. The door opened and a man jumped out and slammed the door behind him. He gazed at the burnt out diner across the street, a confused look on his face.

"There's Richard. Just a head's up before I leave..." Rachel said.

I gave her a questioning look and she gestured toward the kitchen.

"You might end up with somebody a lot sooner than you think."