

about 6,500 words

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Rose-Colored Glasses

by Brooke Gardner

The autumn winds were restless in the small town within the borders of Wilcox County, Alabama. The working-class families often walked or biked to their jobs once the gas prices skyrocketed preceding the pandemic. The warm colors of the leaves left satisfying crunches from bicycle wheels flattening them in urgency. The streets were damp from the morning dew as the sun was just now waking up from her slumber. The bricks on the side of the buildings cried out desperately for a power wash, and the cars left abandoned on the side of the roads

suffered from sun damage from the scorching reminiscence of Summer.

"Hey, Jane," a voice echoed in the halls near the timeclock of the Trailways Bus Station.

"Denise! Good mornin'! How was your weekend?"

"It was alright. My kids have been a pain in my ass lately," she said as she folded the lid to her cigarette box and stashed it into her purse.

Jane shook her head and smiled, her curly blonde hair swaying against her thin back. She returned her clock-in card back into its slot and turned to look at her coworker.

"Mr. Matthews wants to have a word with you. He said it's urgent." There was a small hesitation between her words.

"Oh, God. Denise, don't you know what this means?"

"No, why would I?"

"I could finally be gettin' that promotion to Lineman Manager I've been waitin' months for! This could mean I get that big raise and maybe even move outta Mama's trailer and get my own place!" Jane could not hold her excitement. She was practically bouncing up and down as she pulled Denise into a hug. "I couldn't have done it without you, you know."

"Uh, Jane? Stop huggin' me and go see Mr. Boss Man before you buy a ticket to Hollywood or some fancy shit like that. He didn't sound too happy."

Jane's smile immediately ceased. Backing away, she grabbed her purse and held it tight to her bony shoulder, clenching her [jaw].

"Ms. Olsen," Mr. Matthews stood up as Jane entered his small office, the size of a broom closet. "Please, take a seat." He gestured towards an old, rickety computer chair which was obviously purchased from a yard sale about a decade prior. The husky man grunted as he sat back down. Avoiding eye contact with Jane, he rifled through some documents that were scattered on his desk. He cleared his throat. "Do you know why I asked you into my office today?"

"No, sir," she responded in a mousy voice, taking her seat in the beat-up computer chair, the seat creaking from her weight. She tweedled her thumbs, looking down at her bitten nails and overgrown cuticles. *Please, please tell me I got that damn promotion*, she thought.

Commented [BG1]: Add a paragraph or two of what's going on in Jane's head. Yes, this story is in 3rd person, but have it more close 3rd person. Get inside her head more.

"I have been keeping up with your work lately, Ms. Olsen. Denise told me you really wanted to become Lineman Manager, is that correct?"

"Y-yes, sir," she met his gaze.

"Based on the requirements for the job, you meet all of the qualifications- "

"Really?" she interrupted him; her face lit up.

"I'm not finished," he scoffed. "I've also been keeping up with your attendance. You realize your late almost every day?"

"Sir, I don't even own a car. I- "

"Now is not the time to be givin' me excuses, girl. I can't, in good conscience, have someone on my payroll wasting my time and the company's time. Your tardiness shows me that you don't respect me or this company."

Jane's heart felt as if it had fallen to her stomach. Her face grew hot and flushed. *No, please...*

"That is why I have to let you go."

"Are you serious?" she could feel tears blurring her vision. "You're firin' me?"

"Yes. Now, if you want to finish your shift today, you can, but after today, you'll need to find some other place to work. Maybe you can try iHop or Waffle House down the street."

She stood up and took a deep breath. She looked down at her dirty knock-off Converse and gripped the desk. "Please, sir. Reconsider this."

"No."

"I-I can't," her voice broke as she began to sob. "I can't believe this, Mr. Matthews. I'm one of your best workers and you're firin' me over bein' late? You said it yourself. I meet all the qualifications for the management position- "

"Your disrespect is what led you here. I won't have careless bimbos working for me."

She had heard enough. She turned away from him and mumbled under her breath, "you fat bastard."

The streetlights on the roads lit up towards the Wilcox Trailer Park, leading Jane back to her home. Clouds hid the moon just barely enough for her to see her beat-up shoes, which were now covered in mud. *What am I gonna tell Mama? What about Cain? He'll beat me if he finds out I can't come up with my portion of*

the rent. Her mind was racing, leaving her less alone than she desired.

In front of her, a phonebooth stood on the corner of an intersection. *Praise be*. Looking around for any bystanders, Jane pried open the rusty door and scanned the area. Sighing, she pushed her last few quarters into the change slot and dialed the number. The vibrations from the outgoing tone felt like they lasted an eternity before a disgruntled male voice picked up.

"Hello?"

"Nate? It's Janie. I-I need some help," she looked out the glass of the booth as thunder rolled in. Rain began to trickle down the door as tears began to cascade down her flushed cheeks. "I know it's a longshot, but can I stay with you for a few days?"

"Janie? What happened?" Jane could hear the man on the phone sitting up now, alarmed.

"I'll tell you later. I just can't go home right now. You know how Cain gets when he's angry," she glanced down at a scar on her arm. "My phone died and I'm about 2 miles outside of Mama's trailer. Can you come pick me up? I'll come work for you or somethin'. I just need someplace to go."

"You lost your job at the bus station, didn't you?" a long sigh escaped Nate's mouth. "Alright, I'm comin'. Just don't go nowhere. Gimme 'bout ten minutes."

Jane sighed in relief. She could always count on her big brother to rescue her from her problems, regardless of how she got into them. The two of them have always been close, especially after their mother, Beverly, decided to marry Cain Porter. Cain was an aggressive alcoholic and always picking fights with the women in the trailer park. Some people say that it's because he isn't man enough to pick fights with the men. He is strong but has gone soft after all the years of killing his liver. Misogyny runs through his veins. Beverly is barely home to witness his abuse as she works doubles almost every day at the nursing home down the road. In their childhood, Nate would take the beatings for Jane, protecting her at all costs. In school, he would blame the bruises and cuts on playing football, claiming that football practices were brutal. Laughing it off and joking around with his teammates allowed him to live the life he wanted. He never told any of his friends about his home life for fear of getting made fun of by his peers.

His best friend, Kaybee, was the only one who knew the truth behind his injuries. Nate would sneak out late at night to go over to Kaybee's trailer and sit up on the roof. They would

pack a blunt and talk about the girls at school: who had the highest body count, who had the fattest ass, who had the biggest breasts, and so on. Kaybee graduated a year before Nate and because of his age, he instilled Nate with his wisdom of the "real world." He taught him how to roll a joint and to not give a shit about what other people thought about him. Nate taught Kaybee how to handle himself in a fight. The two were almost inseparable. A few weeks after graduation, Nate gathered all of his belongings and moved out of the trailer park and moved into a two-bedroom house with his best friend. Instead of going to college, he started working with Kaybee on his dealings across town. Nate focused on the easy products, like marijuana, acid, and mushrooms. Kaybee focused on the harder drugs, like heroin and cocaine. After two years of selling, they were able to afford the luxuries they never thought they could obtain. The dealings did not make them rich, but it allowed the men to live in a nicer place than the trailer park they both grew up in.

Jane had the opportunity to move out with Nate after graduating high school, but she desired to be independent. She remained in the trailer park with her mother and Cain, working at the Trailways Bus Station to pay rent and save enough cash to move out on her own. She aspired to move out of town and make a life for herself. Practicing medicine and helping others was a dream of hers, following in her mother's footsteps until she

saved up enough money to attend college. She worked over forty hours a week and when she came home, she had a laundry list of chores that needed to be done. Cain, her stepfather, usually laid out in his old, brown leather recliner, passed out from drinking all day. He couldn't hold a job for more than a couple months at a time. Jane did not want to leave her mother alone with him after noticing a few bruises on her delicate, aging skin.

Sitting in the passenger seat, Jane noticed Nate's veins on his forearms. She could feel the tension in the car. The blue light from the dash stereo illuminated their silent faces. The radio quietly played Sueco's most recent album, *It Was Good While It Lasted*. Jane turned her head towards the window, peering through the glass as the rain trickled down as Sueco sang to her.

Nate reached over to the volume dial and turned down the radio. "We're here." He pulled into his driveway and paused before killing the engine. Resting his hand on the shift knob, he looked over at Jane, studying her. "You know I'm not mad at you, right?"

Meeting his gaze, she wiped a tear from her chin. "You aren't?"

"No. You can stay with me for as long as you need to. I'll sleep on the couch. You can have my bed."

"Thanks, Nate."

The two of them exited the silver Ford Fusion, closing the doors simultaneously. Nate took his black Nike hoodie off, revealing his robust build, and tossed it over the car hood to Jane. She gripped it tightly and held it over her head as they ran to the porch, escaping the heavy rain. Jane held her breath, her heart pounding like a drum, as Nate unlocked the front door.

"Yo, Kaybee. You up?" he called towards his friend's bedroom door. He gestured for Jane to enter before him. She took a few steps into the living room. The dirty tile floor was slightly sticky from leftover party fouls from the night before. Empty Bud Light cans littered the chestnut coffee table in front of a cream leather sofa. The leather was peeling in some places, hinting towards the age of the sofa and the past owners. Xbox and PlayStation controllers sat on the TV stand next to a burgundy bong made of plastic, a psychedelic-colored ashtray beside it. Nuggets of marijuana and ashes sat inside, waiting to be disposed of. Nate tossed his keys onto the messy coffee table and headed towards the kitchen. "Sorry about the mess."

"N-no, it's fine," she stammered and awkwardly took a seat on the sofa. Her fingers traced the torn edges of the leather,

impulsively peeling back a piece. *It's honestly cleaner than Mama's trailer*, she thought. She could imagine the mess of Miller High Life bottles in the kitchen from Cain. He always left them for her to clean up.

"It's a woman's responsibility. I ain't no housewife," she pictured him saying. "Now clean that shit up. I don't wanna live in a barn. If I wanted to do that, I woulda stayed with my cousin, Yvette, on the farm in Elberta."

Nate returned with a large black trash bag and started tossing the cans inside, one after the other. He had a sense of urgency, like Jane would judge him for his messy home or somehow compare him to their stepfather—which she was, subconsciously. He hated him as much as Jane did, probably even more. "It's not all mine."

"What?"

"The beers. I'm not—I don't want you to think I'm turning into Cain."

"I know you're not." She forced a smile on her face and looked up at her brother. She gripped his hoodie, which was resting on her lap. She knew he wasn't working at a factory like Mama said. Nate never tried to hide his lifestyle from Jane; she was trustworthy enough to know the truth. While looking up at

him, she noticed scarring on his arm, opposite side of his elbow. *Track marks*. Her smile slowly faded and the heat from her body rose, her face flushing red with anger.

Nate snatched his hoodie from her lap and slid it over his head. He gripped the trash bag tight and set it beside the trash can in the kitchen. "I'm going back to bed. Here," he grabbed a pillow and quilt from his bedroom and tossed them on the couch. Jane stood up and headed towards his room.

"Goodnight," she muttered and closed the bedroom door.

"Night," he sighed.

The sun peered through the blinds, shining into Jane's eyes. She rolled to the right, and then to the left, trying to remain asleep. Eventually, the sun had won, and she sighed. Slowly, she opened her baby blues and examined the room. There were piles of dirty clothes overflowing from the laundry hamper. Dust clung to the white popcorn ceiling. The sliding closet door was open, revealing a crowded assortment of men's clothing, mostly greys and blacks. Various brands of sneakers lined the back wall inside. She rolled over on her left and noticed the top drawer of the wooden nightstand was left open slightly. Fighting her urge to inspect the drawer, she rolled over onto

her right side. She reached for her phone and unplugged it from the charging cord. 11 missed calls. *Shit.* She tapped on the iMessage app and composed a text to her mom. "Hey. Sorry, I'm staying with Nate for a couple days. Love you, xoxo." She let out a long, exhausted sigh as she sent the message. She dropped the phone down on her chest and looked up at the ceiling. *What am I gonna do?*

She looked over at the open drawer. It was calling her to look inside. She scooted closer to the left side of the bed and touched the handle. She paused. *I shouldn't,* she thought. *I can't just snoop through his stuff. He could walk in any minute. But his arm...he had to have noticed I saw the marks.* She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and pulled open the drawer. A singed spoon, an empty needle, a blue rubber band, and a miniature plastic bag with white powder were hiding under a handful of black socks. She stared at the contents of the drawer in shock. She couldn't move a muscle. All she could do was stare. The heat returned to her cheeks. Tears puddled in her tear ducts. It felt as if a dozen textbooks were piled onto her chest.

Suddenly, the doorknob began to turn. Jane frantically returned the socks to their original position and shut the drawer, rolled over onto her right side, and closed her eyes.

"Hey, Janie," a deep voice called out. "You hungry?"

She sat up then, recognizing that the voice didn't belong to her brother's. "Kaybee?"

"Hey, sleepyhead. I made you some breakfast."

"Oh...uh, thanks," she pulled the blanket over her chest, hiding her navy-blue sports bra. She studied his wiry frame. He was still thin and pale from the last time she saw him a few years prior. She noticed he grew out his dark Brunette hair; it almost covered his eyes. He sported a baggy white t-shirt with black ripped denim. His paper-white skin was tattooed from his knuckles to his neck. She inspected his arms and couldn't find any track marks. Perhaps the tattoos hid them, or he wasn't participating in the drug fest like Nate.

Kaybee raised his arms in surrender. "I ain't lookin'. Come eat these waffles before they get cold."

"Okay, I'm comin'. Just don't look at me." she threw one of the pillows at him and laughed. Kaybee rolled his eyes and walked towards the kitchen. Jane stood up and slid on sweatpants the color of the autumn leaves. Digging through Nate's dresser, she found an old team shirt from his football days. She smiled at it and pulled it on over her head. She pulled her blonde

curls out of the collar and pulled them into a messy top knot.

"Where's Nate?" she called out to her brother's friend.

"He's runnin' a job for me. He'll be back later. Hurry up and get in here."

She rolled her eyes, sighed, and walked into the kitchen. The smell of butter, toasted waffles, and maple syrup filled her nostrils. A round, paper plate and a solo cup filled with orange juice waited for her on the dining table. Kaybee set a silver fork and butter knife on a napkin next to the plate as Jane took a seat. "Thanks. Where's yours?"

"Oh, I already ate earlier. I made this for you," he looked at her with his hazel, heartbreaker eyes. He chewed on his plump, bottom lip. "Eat up, kiddo."

"Kiddo? You're only three years older than me, Keith."

"Yo, don't use my government name," he laughed and took a bite of one of her slices of bacon. "I'll knock you a clean one," he said with his mouth full and softly touched her jaw with his fist.

Kaybee's full name was Keith Mitchell Bowers. Everyone that knew him knew that he went by Kaybee, a nickname formed from his initials. The only people that called him Keith were the law or his mother. He hated the name Keith because it reminded him of

his father. He walked out on him and his mom when he was still in diapers. Deadbeat dads is just one of the many things he and Nate bonded over when they became friends many years ago.

Kaybee and his mom moved to the trailer park when he was in 4th grade. A small, gap-toothed Nate was shooting a basketball into an old hoop outside. Orange clay covered his thrifted Nikes. Sweat coated his curly blonde hair and his face was flushed red from the heat. Young Kaybee heard the ball hitting the backboard from across the park. He biked over to Nate's trailer and asked if he could join him in a one-on-one game. The two have been best friends ever since.

Jane finished her breakfast and stood up to clean up the mess. she put the paper plate in the trash and the rest in the crowded sink. She sighed in disappointment and began loading the dishwasher. "You guys are slob."

"That's on Nate. Don't blame me," he scoffed.

"You know somethin' funny? He said the exact same thing," she tapped his nose with the smooth end of a fork and smirked.

He shook his head and retreated to the living room. As he plopped his body on the couch, he grabbed the TV remote and switched the input to the Xbox. He leaned forward towards the TV console table and grabbed the bong and a lighter. He proceeded

to look down at the bowl and dipped the tip of his torch lighter to the ground flower. The milky white smoke filled the pipe with a quickness and ease. He lifted the small, encrusted bowl after a few moments. Just as quickly as it filled, it was then gone. He leaned back and sat still for what seemed like an eternity. A large cloud quickly appeared from his lips into the fan above him.

Jane watched him from the kitchen. Her eyes followed the cloud of smoke up to the ceiling. She wondered what it was like, to feel nothing and everything all at once. To feel the air of her lungs pass through her respiratory system. To feel empty and whole, like gravity had paused. She had never tried to smoke with her brother and his friend before. She knew Cain would disapprove of her actions, telling her that smoking with the boys was 'unladylike'. Mama would have grounded her from all outside activities. Nate wouldn't allow her to hang out with the two of them much, regardless of how much she asked. The little sister got left out of pretty much everything. In this moment, she stood craving a sense of rebellion. A sense of risk. A sense of living.

She sighed, knowing that she would regret this. She entered the living room quickly, shuffling her feet in excitement, and plopped onto the couch next to Kaybee. "Can I join you?"

"Uh," he coughed. "You ever smoke before?"

"No, but I know how it works." She crossed her arms in defiance.

"You sure you wanna do this? You'll cough like crazy," he said, lifting the bong and pointing the tip towards her.

"Yeah. I mean, what the Hell?"

"Alright. Just don't snitch on me to Nate. He'll beat my ass," he laughed. He repacked the bowl and handed over the bong and the torch lighter.

The two of them relaxed on the couch, Jane's head resting slightly on Kaybee's shoulder. Their eyes were glued to the TV screen as animated flower petals sang and swayed at their stems. They were in a trance, breathing with their mouths open, only making noise when they giggled quietly at the appearances of the mysterious striped cat.

A loud bang from the front door alerted them. "What's goin' on?" a confused Nate questioned the room.

Kaybee immediately broke his trance and scooted away from Jane. He grabbed his phone and pretended to not notice his

friend's entrance. "Oh, hey," he said without looking up from the screen.

"Jane? You good?" Nate snapped his fingers in front of her face.

Jolting in her seat, she looked at him. "I'm fine," she managed to stammer. *Shit, I didn't think it had been that long,* she thought. She blinked her eyes slowly and forced a yawn. "I'm just really tired. I think I'll go take a nap." She stood up slowly and dragged her feet to Nate's bedroom.

"What's up with her?" Nate asked Kaybee.

"We were just watching a movie," he said, still staring at his phone. He couldn't let Nate know that he got his little sister high out of her mind. He had gone behind Nate's words to keep Jane away from their vices.

Nate rolled his eyes and sat on the couch. "You know I don't want her doing that kinda thing, especially with you."

"Especially with me? What do you mean by that?"

"You're older than her. You're my friend. You're a drug dealer for cryin' out loud."

"So are you, asshole," he scoffed and stood up and walked into his bedroom, closing the door behind him.

A few weeks went by. The autumn leaves littered the front lawn of the rental house. The sun had just gone down; the moon rose to take her place. Nate had just left to go on another drug run across town. Kaybee and Jane were sitting five feet apart from each other on the couch in the newly cleaned living room. After Nate's outburst a few weeks ago, they kept their distance, only speaking to each other when Nate was out of earshot.

Kaybee was barely talking to Nate these days, still vexed about what he had said to him. Kaybee believed that Nate got everything he had ever wanted: the popularity, the girls, the power. It wasn't fair. He recognized that Nate had a tough childhood, but so did everyone in that damn town. Jane was just another thing that Nate had that Kaybee couldn't have.

Kaybee stood up from the couch and walked towards the kitchen. Jane looked up at him and watched as he took a bottle of Captain Morgan White Rum and poured himself a shot. He squeezed his eyes closed as he slung back the liquid courage. Gripping the neck of the bottle, he began to pour himself another shot when Jane stood up.

"You want one?" he asked, not looking at her.

"Sure," she sat down on the barstool in the kitchen in front of Kaybee. "You have a chaser?"

"Chaser?" he laughed and opened the refrigerator door. "We have water, Sprite- "

"Sprite"

He handed her a 12oz green can. She placed her thumb under the tab and popped it open. As she took a sip of the Sprite, Kaybee poured her a shot of rum. She locked eyes with him as they wrapped their pointer fingers and thumbs around their respective shot glasses and clinked their glasses together. After tapping the bottoms of the glasses on the counter, they threw the liquid into the back of their throats. Wincing, Jane immediately chased the burn with Sprite.

"You good?"

"Yeah," she choked. "Another."

As the two of them drank, they talked about life. Reminiscing of childhood memories, their most embarrassing moments, their love-lives, and anything else they could think of.

"So, what was the most embarrassing thing you can remember from high school?" Jane giggled.

"Most embarrassing? Jeez, Jane. Gettin' a little intrusive."

"C'mon. I wanna know!"

Kaybee sighed as he rolled his chocolate-colored eyes.
"Junior year. Your brother was a year behind me. We both tried out for the basketball team."

"Yeah? Keep going."

"Well, long story short, he made the cut. I didn't. Ever since then, I've had this heavy weight on my chest. I don't know. It's stupid."

"It's not."

"It's just...Nate always seems to get what he wants. He was popular, he made the sports teams, he had the girls. He's younger than me so I'm supposed to be his mentor, but he didn't need me."

"So you needed him..."

"In a sense, yeah. I want what he has. I never got shit when I was a kid."

"Is that why you deal?"

"To make money doing something I'm good at? Hell yeah," he chuckled. "I'm finally the boss."

Five shots later, Jane wobbled as she stood. She laughed and steadied herself on the barstool. Being intoxicated wasn't necessarily a new thing for her. She's been to a few bonfires while she was in high school. But hard liquor? This was new territory for her.

Kaybee placed his hand on her lower back, helping her stand. "Okay," he sighed. "Let's get you to bed." He guided her to his bedroom and helped her get under the dark grey blanket.

"Are youuu drunk?" she slurred.

"No, I'm not a lightweight like you," he teased.

"I-I'm not drunk. You are." She pointed her finger at him, accusingly. Her eyelids felt heavy, like gravity was pulling them down by her eyelashes. Her vision was glossy, and she could barely make out what the room around her looked like. Her mouth hung slack and smiled broadly. Her face felt warm and tingly. Her body felt numb as she sunk into the mattress. Barely conscious, she raised her arms up over her head and fondled the pillow underneath her. She kicked the blanket off onto the

floor. "It's hot," she whined. "I don't want these." She slid her socks off with her toes, revealing dark indigo nail polish.

"What are you--"

Jane gripped the waistband of her sweatpants and pulled them down, kicking them off the bed onto the floor, with the blanket and her socks. She had on a lacy turquoise thong, specs of glitter illuminated by the dim lamp from the bedside table. Kaybee looked for a split second and quickly turned his head.

"Jane," he breathed. "You're--"

"I'm what, Kaybee?"

"You can't just--"

"Am I making you- Hic! weak?"

Kaybee looked at her and took a deep breath. He could feel every beat his heart drummed. "Yes."

"Good," she giggled and sloppily pulled her shirt over her head and tossed it off the side of the bed. Her perky breasts flashed into Kaybee's sight.

His eyes darted to the window across the room. "No bra?" He chewed on his bottom lip. Everything he has fantasized about is right in front of him, but the moment doesn't feel that simple. *What if she's too drunk? Will she remember anything tomorrow? On*

the other hand, they say drunk words are sober thoughts. The inner turmoil caused him to zone out in silence for a moment.

He looked back at her body. *Fuck it*, he thought. He swiftly pulled his shirt off from behind his head and tossed it across the room. He crawled on top of her, trailing kisses up her body.

Jane couldn't move her limbs. It felt as if she was floating outside of her body, watching the scene from above. Her eyes closed and she submitted her body to him. She barely felt the act, reducing her role to an observer.

The next morning, Jane jerked up from the sound of a car door slamming outside. Her head pounded, as if someone was hammering her brain into her skull. The room was spinning, and she could feel her mouth beginning to salivate from the nausea. There was a sharp pain between her legs. Peering down at her thighs, she lightly touched the source of the pain and winced. *What happened last night?* She slung her legs over the side of the bed and gripped the edge of the mattress. She took a deep breath and stood up, wobbling from lack of balance. She could hear the sound of the front door opening and shutting from the living room. Footsteps entered the kitchen. *Shit*, she thought. Carefully turning the doorknob, Jane opened the door of Kaybee's

room and tiptoed towards the shared bathroom. In a smooth motion, she silently closed the door and flipped the lock.

Heavy footsteps padded down the hall, getting louder with each step. Jane held herself up over the sink, struggling to keep her breath hushed. Her cheeks burned red as her body turned up the heat, her heart drumming rampantly.

A loud knock on the door forced Jane to flinch and suck in her breath. "Jane? You in there?"

"Y-yeah," she stammered. "What's up?"

"Just checkin'. Can we talk?" Nate attempted to turn the doorknob.

"Yeah. Just gimme a minute." Jane ran the sink water and splashed water onto her face. Sighing, she opened the bathroom door.

Nate dissected her appearance with his eyes, noticing the mauve bags under her eyes and the damp mixture of sweat and water on the perimeter of her tired face, her hand holding her stomach. "You're hungover, ain't you?"

"What?" she asked in defiance.

"You know what I'm talkin' about. You look awful."

"Wow. Thanks, Nate." She tried to walk past him, but his arm blocked the hallway.

"Don't walk away from me. We're not done. You're hungover. Who were you drinking with last night?"

"What does it matter to you, Nate?"

"Excuse me? Whose house are you living in rent free right now? Look, I'm not mad. Just talk to me."

She sighed and peered down at her feet. "Can we go to your room and talk about this?"

Nate took ahold of her arm gently and pulled her to his bedroom. He closed the door quietly and sat next to her on his bed. "Talk," he ordered.

"Kaybee and I were just hanging out last night. We had a few shots but nothing crazy. Then, I guess I wandered into his room instead of yours on accident. I woke up when you got home. Kaybee wasn't here when I woke up, but I don't know where he went."

"Don't lie to me."

"I'm not lying, Nate. I swear," she chewed on her bottom lip and held up her pinky finger. "I promise."

Nate sighed and locked his pinky around hers. Without letting go, he asked, "Did Kaybee sleep on the couch?"

Gulping her saliva, she shook her head and avoided eye contact. Nate stood up and balled his fists, his jaw clenched.

"He slept with you?" he seethed.

"Yeah, but--"

"I've heard enough," he turned to leave the room.

"No! Nate, stop!" Jane grabbed his arm. "Don't. Everything's fine. We didn't do nothin'."

"Bullshit. I know how Kaybee sees women." He shrugged her arm off and walked out of the room, slamming the door.

A few hours later, Kaybee walked into the living room and was stunned to see Nate waiting on the couch. Jane heard the front door shut; her ear pressed up against Nate's bedroom wall.

"Hey, Kaybee."

"Sup," he dropped his grungy backpack down on the sofa next to his friend.

"So what'd you do last night?"

"Drank and went to bed."

"With Jane?"

"I mean yeah," he looked towards his bedroom door. Scenes of the night before flashed through his mind.

"Yeah?" Nate stood up and moved closer to Kaybee, establishing his dominance. "You slept with my fuckin' sister, Kay?"

Kaybee took a step back, his hands raised in defense. "Yo, chill."

"I trusted you to keep her safe. I trusted that you wouldn't get her into all the twisted shit we do. First, you get her high. Then, you get her drunk and sleep with her? Did she even consent?" He pressed his hands on Kaybee's chest and pushed him backwards.

Kaybee lost his balance, falling backwards into the couch. He thought for a moment, calculating his next move. *She didn't*, he thought. But his ego got the best of him. He jumped up and pushed Nate away from him, knocking him into the coffee table.

"Answer me, Kay." He took a fistful of Kaybee's shirt and held him close to his face. "You answer me right now, dammit."

"What does it matter?"

"What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"I can name a few things."

"Don't be a fucking smartass." Nate swung his fist into Kaybee's jaw, the sound of bone knocking echoed in the room.

Kaybee fell hard onto the ground and held his hand up to his jaw, blood seeping from his lips. "Fuck you." He winced as he stood up. "You never cared about her 'til now. Where were you when Cain was beating on her?"

"You don't know shit about that, Kay. I was there. You weren't," Nate shouted.

"You left."

"I had to."

"You left her in that house with him."

"And you abused her here."

Kaybee shoved Nate against the wall. "Don't blame shit on me. What does it matter if we had a little fun?" He smirked.

Nate gripped Kaybee's throat and pulled him close to his face. "Say some shit like that to me again," he hissed. He pushed him away, his force stronger than Kaybee's.

Kaybee swung hard, hitting Nate straight in the nose. Blood trickled down, dripping onto his white T-shirt. "You left her alone with that abusive bastard. He coulda molested her, you don't know. You couldn't know. Because you left. She called you

cryin' sayin' she needed a place to stay because she can't handle livin' without you. You shoulda brought her with you, took her outta school, gotten her away from that Hellhole we lived in, Nate. But your selfish ass only thought about yourself. You only care about the money and the drugs. You don't give a shit about anybody but yourself. That's why you let her see those fucking track marks on your arms. You're her big brother, her role-model, right? Very good job, dude."

Nate grabbed the glass bong off the table under the TV, flipped it in his hand, and smashed it over Kaybee's head. Glass shattered onto the floor alongside droplets of blood.

"WHAT DID YOU DO?" Jane cried as she ran over to Kaybee's unconscious body. She held his bloody head in her lap, stroking his hair. "What did you do?" she repeated through her sobs.

"Jane, get away from him." Nate tried to drag Jane away from the scene, but Jane pushed him off.

"He didn't do nothin'!"

"Jane--"

"You're a monster!"

"Jane, let's go."

"What is wrong with you?"

"HE RAPED YOU," Nate bellowed.

"W-what?" she asked softly, her watery eyes open wide.

Nate sighed and fell to the floor, resting his head on the wall. "He raped you, Jane."

"N-no, he didn't."

She could not believe the words that exited her brother's mouth. Kaybee was nice. He wouldn't do that...would he? He listened to her as she spoke about her problems. He laughed at her jokes. He consoled her when she was upset. He was Nate's best friend. How could he do something so vile, so inhumane? As his body lay almost lifeless on the cold living room floor, Jane put pressure on his head. Blood flooded the floor.

"You coulda killed him."

"He hurt you, Jane. You're my little sister. He fuckin' assaulted you. He took advantage of you while you were blasted out of your mind. Why were you even drinkin' with him in the first place? You know he's not a good guy."

"Oh, so now you're blaming me?"

"No," he sighed. "No, I'm not blamin' you. I'm just tryin' to figure this shit out. You got a crush on him or somethin'?"

"What? No!"

"Seems like it. You two are getting too close. I thought I could trust y'all alone together while I make the runs across town, but I guess not."

"So what if we like each other?"

"He's not a good guy, Jane. Why do you think this shit is happening in the first place? He RAPED you."

"Stop saying that word."

"Rape? It's an ugly word for an ugly deed."

"We have to take him to the hospital," Jane stuttered through sobs, trying to change the subject. "He's gonna bleed out."

"He'll be fine."

"Nate, he could die."

With a long sigh, Nate stood up and grabbed his car keys. "You stay here."