

## The Collector

A gruff voice spoke soft and intimately,

*"I'm sorry about before. I care about you so much."*

A second voice, quiet and delicate, almost quivering with emotion, responded,

*"I know, me too. You're everything to me."*

*"I just...I've never felt this way about someone before."*

*"Look at me,"* the delicate voice said, pausing for moment and inhaling deeply, *"I love you."*

*"You do?"* asked the gruff voice.

*"I do."*

The gruff voice sighed and took a moment before almost inaudibly saying, *"I can't tell you how happy that makes me."*

The silence was thick with emotion and the sound of deep, passionate kissing.

*"Tell me again."* the gruff voice whispered.

*"Hm?"*

*"Say it again."* the gruff voice said louder, bordering on a demand.

The delicate voice softly laughs through her nose.

*"I love you."*

The gruff voice inhaled deeply and sighed again in relief.

*"Thank you."*

The gentle voice didn't speak but gasped in shock as a disturbing creaking insulted the air between them. The voice painfully tried to find itself but was cut silent by a wet *snap*.

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Simon's angular hands ran a green cloth over a sort of crystallized rock, polishing it. It's about the size of a warped softball, rounded with a few odd lumps on one side while the other side jutted out like the tail of a comet. It's as if it was pulled from beyond the atmosphere and

frozen in time the moment before it hit the ground. Simon could almost see his reflection in its smoother face, staring at it intensely as if he were trying to read its mind.

The strange rock almost seemed to emanate a soft glow; warm and inviting. Its dark ruby color catching the sunlight stealing through the curtains of Simon's apartment perfectly and reflecting back a deep and penetrating brilliance. As Simon stared into its fiery depths, he felt a true sense of power and purpose building inside him. He felt young and healthy, strong and driven. His concern for the opinions of others melted away, and with it went the pains of his past. He closed his eyes and took a long, deep breath as he soaked in this feeling like he was sitting in a revitalizing mental sauna.

Two tight vibrations cut through the steam, one short burst after the other, invading the moment.

It was Simon's phone sitting on his glass coffee table. Simon's eyes stayed on his treasure for a moment longer before breaking his gaze to look over to the notifications popping up on the device.

Another pair of buzzes.

Simon took a breath and walked over to an elevated and intricately shaped steel riser sitting by the window atop which sat a glass case. He placed his curious red rock in the center of the case and laid it upon a series of small rods of differing length. It held the rock gently and exact as if it were designed specifically for the oddity.

To the right of the single glass case against the wall was another enclosure. This case had multiple shelves which held a number of smaller pieces Simon had collected over the years. Clear quartz crystals and jet black obsidian, chunks of milky selenite and volcanic hoarfrost, iridescent goethite and pieces of galactic blue opal. He even had a handful of bionic-looking bismuth which gave the impression it was some kind of intricate android organ sitting alongside an angular piece of fluorite so radiantly purple one might think it was stolen from the staff of some timeless wizard.

Each piece was labeled accordingly with a laminated card affixed in front of each one. It was in Simon's nature to keep his collection properly categorized. He worked at a local museum and was in charge of handling the rare rocks and new minerals that made their way through the exhibit. His collection may or may not have been the result of certain pieces getting "lost" in transit. A few, however, were of Simon's own discovery. A few dozen dark chunks of differing shades of grey and black occupying the lower shelves which Simon felt a special sentimentality for.

Simon closed the case to the red rock and locked it with a small key. He took the key and placed in within the center pages of a thick encyclopedia sitting next to the case. After closing the heavy hardcover, Simone took a step back and watched as a fading daylight shined straight through the dark ruby. It was as if the sun were trying to pull it back into its warm womb from which it seemed to have been birthed. A single frozen newborn drop of cosmic magma, crying out to be melted back into its mother.

Picking up his phone from the table as he walked, he stared at its screen as he made his way to the other side of the room and returned the book to the top shelf of a tall bookcase. Simon slid the printed categorization of all things having to do with the letter 'S' back into its rightful place, sandwiched between the rants and ravings of 'R' and the tantalizing tales of 'T'.

Simon always liked the letter 'S'. He knew that was partially a natural symptom of ego, but he still loved how the letter looked as if it were half of the symbol for infinity if turned on its side. How appropriate for a hopeless romantic. Half of a whole, becoming the eternal one when in the throes of conjuring carnal chemistry. Simon was well aware of how vomit-inducing it sounded, but he still couldn't help feeling an irrational sense of pride in his leading letter. He turned from the bookshelf and returned his attention to his phone.

It was hope. The literal embodiment of it, it seemed. Who knew that the wonder of the internet could bestow such good fortune upon a man such as him? He felt so lucky to have so easily met such a beautiful prospect through what was essentially a loser's lottery that he wanted to personally thank the developers of the dating app.

And to think he almost missed his chance.

The other night, he had been mindlessly swiping through an endless parade of Jane Doe's: the usual combination of amateur photographers who must think men are more interested in seeing up the skirt of a sexy landscape than the open range of their face, wannabe models wearing a desperate amount of makeup as they fish for affirmation and seem to collect compliments like puzzle pieces as if trying to complete the picture of who they really are, the occasional too-cool girl who only shows half of her head as if she's on the hunt for a man with a left ear fetish, and a flood of other faces so nondescript it was difficult to say whether or not they existed at all.

During this thoughtless rifling, Simon's thumb almost automatically rejected his potential prize out of sheer muscle memory. Her picture was on its way out the left side door when Simon looked down and caught himself before taking his thumb off the screen. He felt a wave of nerves as he realized what he almost did and swiped right immediately before his thumb went back into autopilot.

It was a match, and a smirk was sparked.

Her name was Cassidy, and she was perfect.

Brown curls, a soul-melting smile, and a bone structure elegantly shaped like a ship in a bottle; expertly crafted and delicately handled.

Her profile was simple and inviting.

*Bored AF. Plz send help.*

Simon felt the heat rise in his entire body as he thought of the endless ways this could play out. He knew he was often too eager to reach out, so he let the match breathe for a while, letting it settle like the head of a quickly poured beer.

Eventually, he gave in. He couldn't help himself. It must have been the newfound confidence his strange encased shape afforded him. He was always a bit overzealous after acquiring a new piece.

*So, I'm not the only one around here watching paint dry?*

Not his most finely crafted quip, but he hit send anyway. He knew better than to overthink himself and try to sound too perfectly cool, or to mention anything regarding her appearance to avoid looking like he only cares about *one* thing, or bring up the fact that he was already maddeningly in love with the single strand of hair that fell over her cheek in the second photo of her profile. Nah, he was as casual as they come, no pressure at all.

Except, after an hour or so with no response, Simon began to question not only his stupid, shitty, idiot, fucking stupid message (his words), he started questioning his merit as a man at all as so many men irrationally do when catching the scent of rejection. Who did he think he was? Did he think he was somehow different from every other dickhead guy on the app? What made him think that she didn't get that exact same shitty joke from 15 other guys all thinking *they're* the casually clever ones? Why in the absolute fuck would he -

*\*buzz buzz*

Time stopped and Simon looked at his phone.

*Sorry, I've been counting the blades of grass in my yard.*

Simon burned a hole through his phone as he stared at the response. He typed without thinking.

*Been there. Except I always lose count around 7k or so.*

Send.

...

*\*buzz buzz*

Simon thrilled at the sound of such an immediate return.

*That's why you ALWAYS keep track on paper. That way, if anyone ever find your notebook full of tally marks, you'll truly look like a psycho.*

Aahh, banter, the lifeblood of conversational dopamine addiction. Simon could have kept a smile on his face with a knife in his gut at this point.

The next few hours were so full of the elating sort of back and forth texting tennis that by the end of the night, both of them were teetering on the edge of Smitten Cliff, drunk enough on the mystery of potential that even one more perfectly placed emoji would have sent them both sailing over the lip.

Now, less than a week later, he was about to leave for their first date.

Simon felt fantastic. Better than he had in weeks. It was as if he was a new man, revived with a sense of self he felt he had been losing until recently. Sure, he could chalk that up to meeting Cassidy, but it's not like they had even met in person yet. For all he knew, the face-to-face chemistry might not resonate the same as it did through strictly text-messaging. It's happened before, after all.

No, he just felt as if things were going to be okay. Whether it worked out with Cassidy or not, he was resigned to not letting himself get into such a slump again, to have more faith in himself, to walk among the crowd as a fully formed individual, capable and confident in his ability to contribute to society in his own unique way. He vowed to not let whatever transpired on this date to have such an effect on his emotional wellbeing as he's done in the past. He would arrive self-assured, and no matter what happened, would leave the same. It was agreed.

At least, this is what he told himself after voluntarily forgetting the true source of his confidence. The captive blood boulder in the corner of his apartment watched him intently from its glass cell.

Simon sent one last *See you soon:*) and took a deep breath. He grabbed his keys and headed for the door. As he left he looked back into his apartment, back to the clear case holding the red rock. He watched as it caught the last lingering rays of afternoon sunlight and he closed the door.

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Cassidy stood at a long polished bar, swirling a straw around the rim of her glass dragging the ice cubes in circles as if the dizzier she made them, the drunker she could get.

She shouldn't be this nervous and it annoyed her that she was. She liked this Simon guy some, sure, but it had only been a week, and this was her seventh first date in two months. She was truly starting to believe that the constant connectivity of the internet and instant messaging she had grown up with had slowly eroded the social skills of her entire generation, leaving behind a dating pool full of people who excelled at the finer points of texting etiquette, the nuances of two syllable sarcasm, and the mastery of curating emoji hieroglyphics, but failed utterly and embarrassingly when trying to connect with an actual living and breathing bag o'bones. Not one of her matches had been able to successfully transfer their digitized charm into anything resembling a real-world personality. She could excuse it as first-date nerves, but after seven first-date failures, she'd be blind to not recognize a pattern. These guys just seemed to want her attention, not the walking and talking *her*. Simon was probably no different.

At this point, it would probably just be easier to gather every match she had on Flame and tell them all to meet her in the same place at the same time and she could hold her own personal version of the Bachelorette. Only instead of handing out roses at a resort, she would make them each buy her a different type of cocktail at a dive bar and she would just choose to keep talking

to whoever bought the tastiest one. What a lucky guy he'd be to win the chance to watch her pretend to pay attention to him talk about what he did for a living while she got sloshed on Blue Razzertitas. She laughed to herself at the thought as one of her dizzy ice cubes slipped over the rim of her glass, escaping from her tipsy fantasies on a slick snail trail and falling to the floor where it would hope to be kicked under a fridge so it could melt in peace.

As Cassidy, in her thoughtful nature, searched the floor for the runaway ice cube so she could knock it out of the way of someone accidentally slipping on it, she heard her name peak through the static of the crowded bar.

"Cassidy?"

Cassidy pulled her head from the underbelly of the bar, eyes wider than they needed to be.

"Oh, hey! It's you! Sorry, I was just – never mind, how are you?"

They hugged in mindful first-date fashion – Simon avoiding the over the shoulders strangle, steering clear of the rear, and awkwardly settling his fingertips on the exact center of her back; Cassidy automatically reaching up to wrap her arms around the back of his head but catching herself and placing one hand on the back on his shoulder and the other just grazing the side of his ribcage; tableau of the modern meet-up. They detached and sat on neighboring barstools.

"I'm good!" Simon said, excitedly, "Really good! I hope you weren't waiting too long."

"Oh, no, it's okay. I've just been people-watching," said Cassidy.

"Cool, cool. Gotta love a solid people-watching sesh," Simon said, dying a little inside at the fact that he just said the word *sesh*.

Cassidy noticed how nervous he seemed and leaned into it.

"Yea, I was just scouting the bar for a potential plan-B just in case you turn out to be a dud."

Strange, for some reason he was having a hard time transferring his text-charm into real life and couldn't tell if she was serious or not. He chuckled nervously, "Oh, okay. That's cool."

Cassidy smiled, "Aw, you just got so sad! You know I'm joking, come on."

Simon tried to shake off the nerves casually, but it came off as flustered, "I know! I'm being stupid. I mean, I pretty much already know everything about you. How long have we been talking? A week? We're basically married already!"

Cassidy tilted her head down and stared at up him, "You don't know *anything*. I'm a mystery. Cassidy might not even be my real name. I could be a serial killer and you're just my next victim and you wouldn't even know. I could be drinking your blood out of a wine glass *tonight*."

Simon smiled wide, “Ha! That’s impossible, though.”

“Oh? And why is me being a cold-blooded killer so impossible?” Cassidy asked.

“Because, I mean, the chances of *two* serial killers matching on Flame and meeting up for a date have to be like, astronomical.”

Cassidy cackled. *Wow*, she thought, *maybe he wasn’t socially inept, after all.*

“Okay, *fine*. I’m not going to kill you. Not yet, anyway,” said Cassidy polishing off the last of her social lubricant.

“What are you drinking?” Simon asked.

“Blue Razziritaaa,” Cassidy said, already starting to feel her blood blur from the tequila.

“A Razzi-what? How much sugar is in that thing?”

Cassidy feigned a gasp, “Watch your mouth! These are actually really strong, I’ll have you know. They’ll put some hair on your chest.”

Simon wrinkled his nose in fake disgust, “Are you sure you should be drinking them then?”

Cassidy laughed and playfully shoved his arm, “Leave me alone! Go get a stupid boy beer or something.”

“And what exactly is a boy beer?” Simon asked.

“You know, like, whichever one is grossest. That what every guy does. Go drink your Triple Hoppy Nitro Oil Thousand Percent Black Death Ale, or whatever.”

Simon laughed, “Black Death Ale?”

“I’m sure it exists somewhere,” said Cassidy.

“Well, screw that,” said Simon, “Death is boring, I’m trying to live.”

Simon got the attention of the bartender and pointed at Cassidy’s empty glass.

“Excuse me? Yea, can I get two, uh, Razzamatazzes?”

“Ritas!” Cassidy laughed, “Stupid...”

“What? I’m tryin’ to sprout some more nipple hairs, like you said.”

“Gross! I said *chest* hair. Even though I’ve definitely got some tumbleweed nips right now...” Cassidy jokingly said, looking down at her chest. Simon pretended to gag.

They both laughed at how absurd their conversation was already getting but loving it all the same.

The bartender grabbed the pre-made pitcher of blue raspberry margarita and put out two glasses still wet from just being washed. Simon noticed they both still had a few clusters of tiny soap bubbles dripping down the inside and thought he should perhaps speak up about the matter, but before the thought has a chance to register the bartender dumped a slurry of neon liquid into each one. If you were an ant-sized surfer, you could have ridden the miniature blue barrels that formed inside each glass like the perfect Hawaiian wave ready to carry you on salty slurs and dump you on a blissfully drunken shore.

“Well? What should we cheers to?” Simon asked.

“Um, how about me *not* serial killing you?” Cassidy said.

Simon smiled, “And I appreciate that so much, but I’m still going to watch my back. You should too, though. Just a heads up. As one professional psycho to another.”

“Well, duh. I’m not an amateur,” Cassidy said, rolling her eyes.

Simon laughed, “Cheers.”

“Cheers.”

They clinked their glasses and each took a sip.

Simon winced at the strength of the drink, “God damn, you weren’t kidding!”

“I told you!”

Simon pulled the collar of his shirt and looked at his chest.

“Damn, nothing yet. I’ll have to keep trying,” he said as he took another sip and his eyes smiled at her over the rim of his glass.

Cassidy eyed him suspiciously as she always did when things were going too smoothly.

*God, he thinks he’s so perfect.* she thought.

Simon finished his sip and looked at Cassidy watching him.

*God, she is so perfect,* he thought.

A moment hung between them like they had both been dunked underwater and needed to come up for air.

Simon beamed as he tried to hack his attention out of her jungle of comfy curls, Cassidy put her straw to her lips and tracked his eyes. He was so full of illusory hope that he had a hard time directing his energy. She was cautious, hesitant to overly open herself as she had done in the past as it had only ever brought her hurt.

The rest of the night went as blunder-free as any anyone could ask. Cassidy maintained her devotion to sarcasm, but still couldn’t help being a sucker for flattery. She liked Simon. He seemed to genuinely want her to have a good time. All of the attention was on her for once. It



was a nice change of pace for her and she truly appreciated how sweet he was being. Simon could see her hesitancy with opening up too much and made sure to not push his luck with the flirting, adjusting to her sensibilities as the night went on. She seemed to like him, but you never want to jump to conclusions about these things lest you clumsily overstep the situation. However sturdy the ground may seem, you should always tread carefully.

Still, regardless of his deluded self-talk and seemingly honorable intentions, deep down, beyond the banter, past the slick demeanor and aloof charm, buried under an ocean of alcohol like a sunken chest of muffled screaming skeletons, he knew what he was going to have to do when it was all said and done. No matter what he convinced himself of or how genuine his desire for a true connection was, he knew it was only a matter of time. He hated himself for it. But, like any wild animal deprived of food, he wasn't going to be able to help himself.

Despite what he knew the future to hold, however, in the present things felt comfortable between them. Simon did his best to ensure that outcome, but still, they felt they could finally be themselves without having to put on a front to appear more appealing. The alcohol fueled the growing attraction, naturally, until the pair had their feet firmly planted on either side of the line between hammered and enamored. Then, after enough Blue Razzirita to blur an elephant's better judgement, they took a cab back to Simon's apartment.

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The apartment was cold and dark. The sound of keys failing to unlock a door came from the hallway outside, followed by the whimpers of a drunk girl with a full bladder.

"Come on, come ooonnnn," Cassidy whined through the door.

Simon continued to fumble with his many keys while adding his own tuneful hiccups to the jingle-jangle.

"I'm – *hic* – trying. I forgot which one is – *hic* – my house," he managed to articulate.

"Ugh! Dumb-dumb-dumb-dumb-dumb," Cassidy said as she playfully patted Simon's head in succession with each *dumb*. She then turned her attention to the door, knocking impatiently, "Hellooooo? Anybody hooome?"

Simon laughed, "I don't – *hic* – live with anyone."

"Oohh fancy. You must have such a clean bathroom without roommates. I'd love to see it!"

"Alright, alright! I got it! – *hic* – go on! It's to the left, you'll see it."

"Move it or lose it!" Cassidy said as she shoved Simon out of the way.

Simon walked in and closed the door. He made his way to his couch and threw his keys on the coffee table as he plopped onto the cushions, hiccupping all the while.

As he turned himself around, still laying sideways, he looked through the drunken haze in his eyes at the red rock sitting in its case like a magnet for his attention. It didn't seem to glow in the same way as it did before, but Simon hoped that was due to the lack of sunlight. It was too early for it to already start losing its luster. Much too early...

*Flush*

“*Finally!*” yelled a freshly emptied and fully tanked Cassidy as she burst from the bathroom. “My *God*, I was gonna die. I would have exploded and got pee everywhere and it woulda been All. Your. Fault,” she said as she poked Simon’s stomach while he lay on the couch.

Simon smiled dopily, “You can pee – *hic* – wherever you want babyyy.”

“You better watch it. I’ll soak you where you stand.”

“I’m not even standing, though. Plan – *hic* – foiled!”

Cassidy laughed and climbed on top of him on the couch, “Shut up.”

The two of them kissed deeply and sloppily. The natural extension of sexual tension. The first exploratory fusion of two multi-celled organisms primed and ready for coupling. First kisses don’t get enough credit. People might say sex is the real firework finale, which is occasionally true, but there’s nothing quite like the first electric shock of lips on lips. It’s like taking the first sip of water after dying of thirst for days and thinking, *finally*, as you continue to drink your fill of that holy life force.

These thoughts floated around the booze pool in Simon’s brain as he soaked up every second of kissing Cassidy. Everything was working out. He had one foot in the door. Now, he just had to be patient...

Cassidy stopped kissing and pulled on Simon’s lower lip with her teeth, growling. She released her bite and his lip snapped back into place.

“I’m hungry,” she said, pushing herself off of Simon’s chest, “What do you got to eat around here? I really want – ooh, what’s that?”

Cassidy saw the rock. Fascinated, she walked over to the case and looked inside. Simon watched carefully as she studied the mysterious chunk.

“It’s just...something I got from work. I get to hold onto it for a while until it’s ready to be curated,” Simon said, unimpeded. Cassidy must have sucked the hiccups right out of him.

“Oh yea! I forgot you said you work at the museum. You’re like a meteor man, or whatever. Is that a real meteor? It’s gorgeous.” Cassidy fawned.

“They’re *minerals*,” Simon laughed, “That one’s a recent find, though, So, you never know, maybe it *is* from space. If that’s the case, maybe I’ll keep it. I like collecting the strange ones.”

Simon wrapped his hands delicately around Cassidy from behind as he said this, kissing her neck.

“It looks like it’s glowing or something, that’s crazy. Is that just the light?” Cassidy asked, looking around her for the light source that it must be reflecting. “Oh, wow. You have all kinds of them,” she said, noticing his larger enclosed shelf of odd rocks, sharp crystals, and rare minerals that look like they held some sort of ancient magic, “Wait, why are some labels normal and some are names?”

A look of concern fluttered through Simon’s inebriated eyes.

“Those just haven’t been categorized yet. I just put the names as placeholders.”

“Why girls names? Are you like a creepy weirdo creep man or something?” Cassidy said, hands on her hips as she swayed in her drunken authority.

Simon thought on his feet.

“No! It’s just, well, okay, so I have this dumb thing about them. I always thought like, since it takes so long for the Earth to make something so beautiful like that, that they were kind of like, the children of Mother Earth? So, I just started giving them girls names, I guess. I dunno, I know it’s stupid. I should change them.”

Cassidy cackled, “Aaww, no way! You’re like a rock daddy, haha! *God*, you’re so sweet and gross.”

Simon smiled, seeing his window to change the subject.

“Now, I told you aaaall about my collection at the bar, but *you* were too busy trying to fold a dove out of a dollar bill, remember?”

“Shut up!” Cassidy said, successfully distracted, “I wanted to give the bartender beautiful art! It was the least I could do.”

“It was *so* beautiful...and wrinkled.”

“Oh, my God. I’ll punch you for that.”

Simon raised his eyebrows, “Oh yea? Is that all you’re gonna do?”

“I’ll punch your whole face off, meteor man.”

Cassidy squeezed Simon’s face and pushed him backwards against his nearby bedroom door. He opened it backwards as they kissed and shuffled their way to his bed, falling onto the messy mattress in a heap of hormones and tequila breath.

After another bout of sloppy face-sucking, they started removing each other's clothes, albeit unsuccessfully. Halfway through, they both realized how tired they actually were and decided they didn't care so much about the grand finale. They resigned to fall asleep in each other's arms with their clothes half off - Cassidy in a bra with one pant leg still on, Simon with his shirt around his neck and his jeans sitting scrunched just below his crotch. An exquisite snore-fest ensued.

In the middle of the night, Simon woke up to use the toilet. He almost tripped over himself as he realized his pants weren't on properly and proceeded to re-button himself, just to again unbutton himself when he got to the bathroom. He held his head in what he knew to be a preliminary hangover. His braincells were merely saying their heartfelt goodbyes on their death beds while they prepared themselves for the devastating morning ahead. Simon knew he needed to drink some water and get back to sleep as fast as possible.

On his way back to his room, he looked over to the red rock. He noticed the moonlight coming through the window and reflecting on its surface. Simon, squinting through his foggy delirium, watched as the light seeming to emanate from within the rock flickered and faded almost imperceptibly. Simon noticed, he always noticed. But he was too tired to worry about it right now. His focus now was Cassidy. He took a deep breath and went back to join her in bed.

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And like a slinky joyfully pushed down the steps, each ensuing month after that blurry first night was more entertaining than the last. But, like any winding set of stairs, the floor inevitably approaches with every tantalizing *slink*.

The pair split ways the morning after that first blue-razz typhoon to each nurse their spilt heads but saw each other each subsequent week to ride the same chemical roller coaster. That bar became their spot, that drink became their drink, and their growing love of tequila paralleled their growing love of each other. That is, until Simon noticed the floor approaching.

Cassidy was fascinated by Simon. For her, that first night had been more than just a drunken romp. She had never felt so comfortable with someone before. She woke up that next morning properly hungover but feeling safe and cared for despite barely knowing this man. Something about him captured her curiosity in a way she'd never known. All she did know was that she wanted to know more.

She knew she liked him, but even after a year together, she still couldn't put her finger on what it was about him exactly. It's not like she'd never been enamored with someone before, but he was just...different. He always seemed to know what to say, how to react. He took her unabating attitude in stride but wouldn't let her get away with acting however she wanted. She liked that - loved it, in fact. Maybe it was as simple as that. Maybe she didn't understand how love felt because it was the first time she was actually starting to feel it.

So many men tried so hard to please and appease without drawing a line and standing up for themselves. They seemed to think they're supposed to merely be tools to be used for her happiness instead of retaining their decisive autonomy as men. Either that, or they would be so hard-headed that instead of just having a respected line in the sand, they'd have fortified steel walls around their core self and would rather die in that metal cage than be vulnerable for a single moment. It would exhaust anyone wading in the dating pool to find yourself fluctuating between finding only those two extremes. It had exhausted Cassidy. But now with Simon, she felt as if she had finally caught her breath after treading water for longer than she cared to think about. She felt heard. She felt seen. More importantly, she felt open to the possibility of a real future together. Something she hadn't experienced previously, but which filled her with a nervous excitement at the prospect.

Simon, however, was arriving in different but familiar territory.

He was a man in a desert, knowing full well the reality of mirages, yet still convincing himself of their salvation with every distant glimmer. He supposed he did this because the reality of his situation was too difficult to truly bear. He knew what he was and what he was ultimately going to have to do, but if he could convince himself, even for a moment, that his initial intentions were pure, perhaps this time he could even get himself to believe that he was still an inherently good person.

Cassidy's love for him had been a feast that filled him beyond measure but, like any addict, his tolerance was outgrowing his source. He didn't want it to be like this. He hated it. She was so sweet and fun, so innocent and full of hope. But he felt like an animal backed into a corner, and he understood that there was only one way forward.

Although, despite his growing disinterest in keeping the façade alive, he never let his smile slip. He couldn't afford to throw away the work he put into this. He needed her to be as entranced with him as she had ever been, and to feel safe and open enough to say so.

And now, after over a year together, something ominous hung in the air as Simon and Cassidy were getting ready to leave for their weekly date night.

As Simon stepped out of his room behind Cassidy, she made a comment about how his prized red rock looked dull, dead even. At the mention of this, Simon shot his eyes to it. He had been so caught up in Cassidy, so distracted in cultivating the relationship he hadn't even noticed its incremental fading. It almost looked infected, with dark patches forming around its edges. It sat in its case, no longer reflecting light, no longer entrancing the eye.

Simon's heart raced as he tried to catch his breath. He hurried to his encyclopedias and quickly slid the key out of its hibernation. He unlocked the case and was about to grab the rock until he noticed how fragile it looked and stopped himself. Cassidy had asked him what's wrong, but he assured her that everything was okay, that he was simply worried about the mineral's quality. He told her he would get someone from work to come look at it as it might be losing its value and he might be blamed. It was the best thing he could come up with on the spot. She never pried too much into what he said about work, so he didn't think she'd inquire further. Plus,

he was too distracted to try and elaborate. He left the key next to the open case and distractedly threw his jacket on.

Cassidy *knew* Simon was a trustworthy man, she could feel it. But, for some reason, she was reluctant to believe him. Something seemed wrong, but he had never lied to her before, so she resigned herself to shrugging it off and following him out the door as they left for dinner.

During the meal, however, as the waiter was reciting the specials, Simon was sweating through his shirt. He looked pale and nauseous. As he tried to pull his phone out of his pocket to distract himself, his thumbnail caught his pocket and peeled off easily as if it were just waiting for an excuse to slide from his thumb. Simon stared at the cracked spot where his nail used to be as Cassidy's voice tried to get his attention. She noticed how sick he was looking and was asked if he was alright. He ignored her as he stood up and walked out of the restaurant. Cassidy following him, concerned. Simon did his best to abate her questioning and insisting he go to the hospital as they walked home in a growing drizzle of rain. He knew what was happening, and he needed to get home. He should have never left, it was obvious it was time. He needed to be near his treasure. He needed to hold it, to feel it...

They rushed home and as they stepped through the door to his apartment, Cassidy ran to the kitchen to grab some ice for Simon's head, while Simon stepped directly towards the glass case. Cassidy quickly filled a stray grocery bag with a handful of ice cubes and in her hurry, slammed the freezer door closed. The vibration of the slammed door caused a small chunk of the red rock to break off and shatter like a clump of sand inside the case just as Simon was approaching. He immediately passed out and fell to the floor.

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“Sy? Simon? Are you okay? Look at me.”

Simon could feel Cassidy's soft fingers nudging his cheek. For a moment he almost believed that they were in bed together and she was merely grazing his face back into waking life after an afternoon nap. He wanted to habitually reach over and pull her into his arms, until the next words out of her mouth snapped him back into urgency.

“Simon. Baby, open your eyes. I'm calling an ambulance.”

Simon's eyes shot open as his hand shot forward to grab the phone out of hers. He snatched it from her and threw it to the other side of the room.

“What the hell? Why'd you do that? You need help!”

“Shut up!” Simon screamed. His voice was starting to get hoarse.

Cassidy was taken aback, concerned. He had never shouted at her like that before. Something was wrong. He looked sick, frail even, like he had been malnourished for weeks. She didn't understand what was happening.

Simon lifted himself up to his hands and knees and stared at the ground, breathing heavily. He couldn't think straight and was starting to sweat profusely. His arms were shaking as he tried to hold himself up.

"Give me the heart," he managed to rasp.

"The what?" Cassidy asked.

"The rock! Give it to me."

"I don't...Simon, I don't understand. Tell me what's wrong."

Simon was clenching his jaw so tight that his teeth were starting to loosen. He tried to keep his composure as he spoke through his vice-grip jaw.

"Open...the case. Give me...the rock."

Tears were starting to form in Cassidy's eyes. Simon was acting so unnaturally it was starting to truly frighten her. She cautiously walked to the case holding the now dusty and dead rock and reached in to grab it. As she went to pick it up, her fingers pressed right through its outer crust like it had been sculpted out of the ash that hangs off of a nodding addict's forgotten cigarette. Her hand found itself grasping something at the center of the crumbling dust. She pulled it back, curious, and held it in her palm. It looked like mishappen coal, but strangely iridescent. Something about it felt sinister. It felt dark and final, as if she had stumbled upon the lost eye of some shrouded reaper. She turned back to Simon.

"What is this, Simon?"

Still on his hands and knees, Simon's arm extended up to her.

"Please," his throat managed to croak.

Cassidy's lips quivered like a poorly made dam holding back a river of tears. She placed the black bit in his palm and watched his fingers wrap weakly around it.

Simon's shaking stopped and he took a deep breath. Slowly and steadily, he got to his feet with the last shred of energy he could muster.

"Thank you," he said, looking at her glistening eyes, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

"What's happening? Are you okay?" Cassidy asked, on the verge of sobbing.

Simon walked over to the shelf that held his numerous other collectables. He found an empty space and placed the black lump in the vacant spot. He opened a small drawer on the side of the shelf and pulled out a roll of masking tape and black permanent marker. He wrote

something on a piece of tape, ripped it from the roll, and stuck it in front of the lump. As he closed the glass door, Cassidy noticed that the shiny black piece now looked like an ordinary piece of coal, as dusty and dead as the once red rock. It looked like a few other similar pieces on the lower shelves of the large case.

On the tape read a name: *Audrey*. Something about the name struck a chord in Cassidy. She stared at the letters, and although a part of her deep down remembered that Simon had casually spoken of an Ex of the same name not too long ago, she was too emotional and distracted by the present moment to see the connection.

“I’m fine,” Simon said, “I’m sorry. Everything’s going to be fine.”

Simon put his hand on the shelf to steady himself as he became unstable again. His breath deepened as he chuckled a bit, “I almost didn’t make it, you really saved me there,” he said, still not turning around.

“Simon...” Cassidy said, tears starting to trickle.

“This past year with you has been the best one of my life. You know that, right?”

Cassidy cried softly, “Of course, baby. Me too.”

Simon could feel his body deteriorating again. His eyes started to blur and skin started to burn. He could feel a growing weakness taking over the splintering skeletal scaffolding holding his dilapidating shell upright.

“It’s just, I’ve never felt this way about anyone before.”

Cassidy approached him from behind, his back still to her. She placed a hand on his shoulder, still sniffing.

“You know I feel the same, Simon. I just want to help you. Please, just tell me what you need.”

Simon took another deep breath, going through the motions once again, saying what he knew he needed to say, “I just need you. I love you. I just need to know you love me too.”

Cassidy couldn’t stop the outpouring of emotion. The heightened stress of the night was making her so desperate for things to go back to how they were that all reason eluded her.

“Of course, I do, baby. Of course, I love you, too,” she said as she stroked the back of his head. As she ran her fingers through his hair, clumps of it began to come off in her fingers and fall to the ground. She pulled her hand back leaving a sickly bald patch behind. Simon straightened his stance and turned towards her. His skin looked charred and loose, like melted wax starting to hang off his skull. His eyes were clouded and grey but still staring at her feverishly like a freshly reanimated corpse. She could only stare at him, frozen and unable to process what she was seeing.

“Say it again,” Simon said, his voice sounding like an empty ghost echo.



Cassidy's eyes looked on in utter terror, but something inside her felt compelled to succumb to him; to give herself to this man, to this thing. She responded as if the words themselves were being pulled out of her lungs.

"I... I love you."

Simon reached a decrepit hand to her face and pulled her toward him. He spoke into her ear as she shivered uncontrollably in a volatile combination of love and fear.

"Thank you," he said, placing his other hand on her chest over her heart, "I'm... I'm so sorry."

Cassidy gasped as her rib cage split open and what looked like a glowing red rock hovered out of her body and into Simon's weathered hand. She started to shake violently as the rest of her body began to split and shrink. She looked as if she were aging 100 years in ten seconds. Her skin turned to ash and flaked away into nothing. The majority of her body and head began to wrinkle ever smaller and seemed to be slowly absorbed into the rock itself, giving it a glowing power and a bright luminescence. After the extremities dissolved away and the chaos of the process was complete, Simon was left holding what looked like a kind of alien gemstone once again.

He raised it to his face and closed his eyes. In a matter of moments, he began to regenerate the bits and pieces of himself that had just been abandoning his unnatural coil.

His hair returned full and healthy. His skin looked young and vibrant. His chest filled out as he took a breath and felt strong and youthful again.

Simon felt awash in a newfound strength and confidence. He felt intelligent and capable, able to see his potential and the steps he needed to take to become the person he knew he could be. As many mistakes he had made and missteps he had taken in his life, he felt ready and willing to give up his past for a better future. There was no use in lingering on things that he had no control over. He knew that now, and it almost seemed funny to him he couldn't see that before. He had been so caught up in the desperate clinging to approval and attention that he had completely forgotten to keep his focus on the one thing that mattered, his survival. Cassidy had been great and it was truly a shame that things couldn't have ended differently, but it was obvious now that it was never going to work. He should have known better. He always let his emotions get the better of him. Next time would be different, he vowed. No more distracting feelings getting in the way of what mattered.

His collection looked nice, and Cassidy was going to be an excellent addition, but he really needed to give up all of this sentimentality. He just hated the idea of throwing it all away. He always thought it was like a photo album; nothing wrong with holding onto a few memories, he figured.

He stood there, looking and feeling better by the second, staring at the red chunk in his hands. He gazed into its seemingly infinite core, where he felt he could lose himself in the fiery splendor of its eternal furnace, trying to forget the very real fact that the warmth wouldn't last. It

never did, and he started to wonder if it ever would. He supposed it was something he could worry about later. He had plenty of time, he thought.

Simon sighed and walked over to the glass case. He brushed away the dusty pieces from its previous inhabitant and placed his new treasure on the vacant rods.

They held it perfectly.

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*\*ding*

Vanessa's emerald eyes glanced to her phone. Another match.

Using a black velvet rag, she finished her polishing and straightened the small silver base in front of her.

She neatly folded her rag, grabbed her phone, and started walking down a long line of similar mounts. Her tight-fitting black dress took shape around her figure with effortless elegance. She walked with such intense direction she could step straight through a person without so much as a fluttered eyelash. Her heels clicked on the tile as she passed the individually engraved plaques:

*Jeremy...Patrick...Devon...Michael...Sam...*

Before she passed through the doorway to the large room, Vanessa turned to look at her work. Rows upon rows of small, black rocks lined the walls. Hundreds of them perfectly polished and reflecting the room's artificial light in a way that made them look like a swarm of black eyes. As if each one was fixated on her every movement, watching her, worshipping her.

Vanessa smiled almost imperceptibly. She turned off the light to the room and closed the door, locking it with a digital code.

She pulled her phone out and looked at her match again.

Average meat for hungry teeth.

He looked like a nice enough guy.

Kind eyes, innocent smile.

His name was Simon.