

“Love is an Anchor”

“Love is an Anchor”

I.

Danika,

What’s up with the email? Who uses email anymore? Why the hell aren’t you answering my texts or my calls?

Fine. What the hell is this list you sent me? You don’t live here anymore. You’re not entitled to anything. If you left it here, you didn’t want it. Simple as that.

How are you fucking paying for the lawyer who sent it anyways?

Your loving husband,

Dave

II.

The email arrives simultaneously with Tom’s text. I check Dave’s email first. The curt, dismissive tone is familiar, the incredulity a delicious new spice. I swipe away the email and read Tom’s text.

On the road. Be there in an hour.

My thumbs fly. I’ll be ready.

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I head into the shower and by the time I finish blow drying my hair my mind is starting to swirl like leaves in a breeze. Checking my joke of a closet, I look at each one of my five shirts for far too long, noticing lint balls on one and a fraying hem on another.

What the hell am I thinking? He's taking me to a freaking hockey game.

I locate the faded Bruins' tee that my mother gifted me for Christmas one year, my skinny jeans, favorite boots, and my leather jacket. Staring at them laid out on the bed, I hesitate. Something's missing. Dave's degrading tone barks in my head.

Digging through my underwear drawer, I locate the white, lacy matching panties and bra Dave gave me for our honeymoon and put them on. They still fit somehow, although my stretch marks sag over the hem of the panties. It feels transgressive - wearing this for Tom. I laugh and get into the rest of my outfit.

The more minutes tick by, the more my stomach flutters. I try breathing through my belly; the oxygen only seems to kick my anxiety into overdrive. Downing a Narragansett does a better job of settling me, the alcohol playing the role of ballast.

This is supposed to be casual. It has to be casual. I'm in trouble if it isn't.

My phone buzzes.

Tom's message is laconic: *Here.*

I set the empty Narragansett can on the couch and head downstairs to the street.

III.

The mug of black coffee radiates into my hands, easing January's ache. I hover one hand over the steam, feeling it coil around my skin.

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“You see, Gabby Girl, heat and love have a lot in common, they’re so full of energy that they cannot be contained. That’s why when you feel love, you feel like you’re going to float away.”

My daughter mimics my movements over her cup of cocoa. A serene smile of satisfaction curls up over her lips.

“Then why don’t you fly away when you see me?”

I smirk. “Oh, I did when I first met you, love. You don’t remember because you had just come out of my belly. The doctor wrapped you in a blanket and set you in my arms. I floated right off the bed, buck naked up through the hospital ceiling. It was a perfect autumn day, crisp and warm with the smell of cinnamon and apples. I held you close, stroking your hair as we flew higher and higher towards the sun.”

My hand rises until my arm is fully extended. Gabby’s eyes grow big. She leans forward on her elbows, knees settling onto the chair.

“How did we get down?”

“Your father flew up to meet us. He was just as excited as I was. He kissed me and you, then wrapped his arms around us and we slowly floated back down. Daddy’s not a little man, is he?”

Gabby giggles and shakes her head.

“You know how when you and I get upset, Daddy likes to hold us? He does the same thing when we’re happy, doesn’t he? He doesn’t want us to float away.”

Gabby’s brows furrow. “Is that what happened to Shawn? He got so happy he flew away?”

I hold my coffee cup tighter, hoping it’s heavy enough to anchor me in a different way.

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I.

Danika,

What the actual fuck. I thought you wanted this to be done and over. Now I get this letter from your lawyer saying she's coming over with some sort of auditor to go through my house. There's nothing of yours here. What do you want? Seriously, tell me.

WHAT DO YOU WANT?

Sincerely,

The husband you're trying to screw over

II.

What's left of my flutters dissolves when Tom's arms envelope me. Every man I've ever known hugs me the same way - afraid they'll snap my toothpick body in half. Not this man. He acts like every hug is going to be his last.

He grins at me. “Ready?”

“And willing.”

We sit together on the train to the TD Garden, his hands resting on his knees. The hard fluorescent light draws my attention to the serrated scar on his face that's mostly hidden by his beard. My finger traces his wedding ring. That and the scar were the first things I noticed the night we met at The Burren and the main reason I kept an eye on him. Rings meant they weren't

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going to glue themselves to me. So when he turned my way when I yelled at the Sox game, flashing a lopsided smile and a quick wit, I was a moth to a bug zapper.

I hadn't bargained on myself becoming glue. How else could I explain being willing to brave crowds for the first time in months?

“Dave emailed me today.”

Tom raises an eyebrow.

“He wondered where I found the money to pay for the lawyer.”

“You tell him it's a gift from a ‘friend’?”

I smile. “I'm gonna let him stew. I'm enjoying having power over him, even if it is via email.”

Tom laughs and his hand flips over to hold mine. “I won't tell if you won't.”

“Right? Why spoil the fun.”

At the game our seats are high up in the nosebleeds and the crowd safely distant far below. I scream and shriek at the grown men pulverizing each other over a vulcanized rubber puck. And laugh - at Tom's jokes, at his eyes lingering on me, that he's yelling just as loud as I am. Unlike Dave, when he disparages the refs he doesn't brood on the slight but waves off his anger as quickly as it rises. It keeps my shoulders loose.

We're waiting in line for another round of overpriced beers during the second intermission when I spot an adorable little boy, maybe six months old, wearing a tiny black and gold toque; his mother's hips rock back and forth in the timeless ritual of comfort. My knees lock, eyes transfixed on the chubby, sleeping face.

Shawn.

The name echoes down through my body and into my fingertips.

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Shawn.

I feel a steady hand on my shoulder. Turning my head, I see a familiar wedding ring. Part of me wants to shrug off Tom’s hand. He doesn’t understand there are times a man’s touch is the last thing I want.

The mother and the baby move off down the concourse and my legs regain mobility.

“Do you wanna get out of here? Take a walk around the harbor or something?”

I shake my head. “I’m good. Let’s get a beer, I’m good.”

III.

I pick up my daughter and carry her over to my bedroom. Resting on my vanity next to a forest green urn is a big picture of Shawn in a yellow onesie staring into the camera with wide gray eyes. Gabby sits on my lap, chewing a lock of her long, wavy hair - her tell of nervousness. I rub her back.

“Shawn did fly away, Gabby Girl. But I didn’t get to see him fly away. I woke up one morning and went to his crib and he was gone.”

Gabby looks at me. Her eyes swim with sudden tears and I stroke the side of her face.

“You’re not gonna fly away, love. See when *you* love, you want to float away. When others love you, it keeps you anchored here on Earth. Remember how your Daddy’s love helped me come down from the sky with you? Well, Daddy and I love you very, very much. We won’t let you fly away.”

Gabby looks at the picture of Shawn, then back at me. Then Shawn again.

“Does that mean Shawn’s daddy didn’t love him?”

I want to laugh, my reflex to discomfort. Instead, I manage a wan smile.

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One day, I think, one day I will tell you everything.

I.

Danika,

Are you fucking happy now? Your lawyer and that auditor were here for three goddamn hours going through my stuff. They even knocked on the walls and floors looking for hollow spots like I was some kind of criminal. What do you think I'm trying to hide? I said whatever you left behind I assumed you didn't want and I threw out.

Now my lawyer says your lawyer wants us all to meet. Fine. Whatever. You better not make me miss work for this.

Sincerely,

The man who supported your lazy ass for years.

II.

Tom and I are in a ten-stool bar somewhere in the North End. ESPN is running through the night's highlights and the bartender is chatting with a beer-bellied patron. My hand finds Tom's again, tracing the prominent veins bulging amongst the forest of blonde hair. His gold ring reflects the red neon light - the flame I could not resist.

“How long are you planning on wearing that?”

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Tom spreads his fingers and attempts to smile, the corners of his mouth weighed down by the ring’s symbolism.

“I almost didn’t wear it tonight. No...that’s not true, I almost forgot it.” He makes a fist. “I ran back into the bedroom because I felt naked without it.”

His eyes narrow in frustration.

I down a swig of my Narragansett and place a hand on his shoulder, fingers sliding along the back side of his collar bone. Tom’s dark blue eyes pour into mine.

“I still feel the urge to text her. Can you believe that? It usually happens when I leave work to see what we’re doing for dinner. I actually did it once. When I got home, I found my own text on her phone and felt like an idiot. I’d plugged the damned thing into the wall after the funeral and never unplugged it, thinking I could notify anyone who tried to text or call her.”

“Has anyone?”

It’s a dumb question. I feel my head start to tuck into my shoulders, waiting for an explosion. Instead, I see tears well up.

“Why would they? She’s gone. Dead and buried because of my stupidity. They don’t have to live in the apartment with all her stuff. I do. I still do. And I hate that I can’t throw any of it away.”

The scar on the side of his face deepens in the poor light, giving him the look of a patient, suffering saint.

“Fuck,” he mutters and turns his attention back to the television.

Opening my mouth to say something, nothing emerges - not an apology or even an empathetic phrase.

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I gulp down the last of my beer and set the can down with a hollow plunk. “I’m gonna hit the head.”

Staring in the grimy mirror, Tom’s story has irritated an itch. Something about his anger turning inward instead of out; instead of at me. My skin begins to crawl. I can’t help but trace horizontal lines across my thighs.

What I should’ve said in response to his confession is that half the time when I head out I find myself searching for Shawn’s diaper bag.

When I get back to the bar, I run my hand through Tom’s hair. “Hey, let’s get out of here.”

That crooked grin of his reappears.

We end up at the harbor, just as he suggested earlier in the stadium. A six pack of Sam Adams sits between us on a stone bench. The lights of East Boston across the way twinkle on the gentle, lapping water. I hold my empty bottle by the neck, swirling it to try and condense what’s left of the foam.

“Can I tell you something?”

Tom turns to me. “Always.”

“I nagged Dave to take care of Shawn that night. I was pissed off and exhausted. I just needed sleep so bad.”

I feel my throat rattle as I exhale a deep breath.

“He had no freakin’ clue how to lay the kid down. Oh, he wanted a son; guilted me into getting pregnant right away after we were married. Of course he never showed up for the parenting classes his mother signed us up for. Why would he? That’s what he had his darling

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wifey for. So naturally he didn't know that laying an infant down on its belly increases the likelihood of SIDS.”

My teeth clench so hard my ears start to ring. Tom's warm hand rests on my forearm.

“Danika...”

I yank my arm from his touch. “Don't say it. I knew Dave was a selfish asshole, I knew it before he proposed. I knew it when he refused to change diapers, to feed our son, to see him as anything other than a trophy and me a shackle. I knew better than to trust him.”

Without thought, I raise the bottle and smash it on the bricks. Glass flies in every direction. I grab another bottle and smash it, too, my low-pitched shriek echoing across the waves.

“Danika!”

I grab a third bottle. “I'm Shawn's mother! And all I cared about that night was fucking sleep!”

The bottle erupts with a crash. Tom's hand grabs my wrist when I reach for a fourth; his face is twisted like mine was in the mirror back at the bar.

“Just as I knew better than to gun it and try to make the light the night Vicky died.”

I glare at him. “Stop trying to say you get it. You don't. A spouse isn't a child. You'll never get it.”

Tom's eyes skitter back and forth, as if speed reading through a manual to figure out what to do when some weird light illuminates on your dashboard. He settles on a default setting.

“I'm sorry.”

He actually is sorry; I can hear it in his voice. But sorry for what? That he can't understand, or that he can't play his savior role?

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I grab the last beer out of the six pack and hold it out to him. He takes it and places the cap on the edge of the bench and punches down to pop the top off. I take a deep swig.

“Guess we’re both just a pair of idiots,” I say.

“Amen to that.”

The gentleness in his voice, the breathiness of the “amen” washes through me. My hand reaches up and traces the scar on his face. His eyes close at the tenderness. The rage that had moments ago been expansive enough to swallow the world dissipates, replaced by the swelling of my heart.

III.

I’m holding Gabby horizontally in my arms, her limbs fully extended like Peter Pan. My lips blow raspberries as we fly out of my bedroom, through the living room, to the kitchen, and back again.

“Faster, Mommy!”

I pick up the pace, step up onto the couch and spin. Gabby squeals with laughter, her chestnut curls covering her face. I collapse onto the couch.

She clings to me. “I’m glad I didn’t fly away.”

I hold her tight. “Me too, love.”

While we wait for her father to come home, we make butterscotch oatmeal cookies. Gabby doesn’t like heavy metal but is willing to listen to acoustic covers. I smile ear to ear at her singing along with a child’s sincerity to Black Sabbath’s “N.I.B.”

*“Your love for me has just got to be real,
Before you know the way I’m going to feel.”*

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Gabby spins, cookie batter covered hands spread wide as she chants “I’m going to feel”. I add my voice to hers, helping fill our home with music.

I.

Danika,

I’m going to give you one last chance. Call off the lawyer and this meeting. Fuck, I’ll pay you. That’s what this is about, right? Maintenance? Don’t be a bitch.

Damnit, I supported both of us on my income throughout the pregnancy and paid you to stay home with my son. And you couldn’t even manage that correctly, could you?

I’ll give you a one-time payment to sign the divorce papers. Just call off this meeting. I don’t need your fucking lawyer poking through my life, making me feel like I did something shitty.

Because I didn’t.

Sincerely,

The man stupid enough to put a ring on it.

II.

My musty bedroom is populated by my collection of boots, a derelict dresser from off the street that holds up my picture of Shawn, and my mattress on the floor. Tom isn’t the first man

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I’ve dragged in here, but he’s the only one to see it more than once. I pull him in now, gripping his hoodie as we kiss.

On the train ride home, he had transformed. Gone was the polite comfort of a friend who made me feel safe, secure, self-possessed, replaced by an assertive hand on my thigh, drawing me closer to his solidity. His eyes, while never shy, glowed with anticipation in the subway car’s straw yellow light.

I can’t help but smile at the warmth that tingles my skin whenever he looks at me like that.

He would understand if I said no, that I’m not feeling it; but he would not whine, pout, or manipulate. He’s not Dave. Or the boys that came before him.

Not yet, a voice whispers in my ear.

Experience screams at me to listen to this voice, taunting me that this man sliding my leather jacket off my shoulders will turn sour like Moxie soda. It’s so tempting to ignore that voice when I feel him not rushing, both in the moment and in the big picture.

I float onto the bed as he undresses me - his lips meeting mine in slow, savory kisses that nourish a starving soul. His hands - damn, those hands - don’t fumble. His fingers and lips slide up my calves, past the cutting scars on my thighs (remnants of my high school mental civil war) and settle on my postpartum stomach. Each kiss on the stretch marks feels like an act of worship.

Tears start to trail down my face when he kisses the clavicle that Dave broke the night I left, the night I told him what we both knew to be true.

“Hey, you okay? Do I need to stop?”

I shake my head. “No. Fuck me. Please.”

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His finger lingers at the hem of the panties Dave bought for our honeymoon.

“That’s some fancy underwear you’re wearing, gorgeous.”

He calls me gorgeous. Fuck. He called me gorgeous that first night when I was drunk, sprinting toward the inferno I thought he represented. He called me gorgeous in all my hungover scuzziness the following morning.

I tell him where I got the lingerie and for what occasion.

“Dave bought you these?”

Tom’s sly smile makes my stomach quiver. I nod.

Without hesitation, he tears my panties to shreds. I know he caught the triumphant grin on my face before I let out a squeal of delight. His lips follow his hands, providing a different satisfaction. By the time he’s done, I’m crying; the heat radiating from my core loosening what I cover with beer and bluster.

I want the sex to hurt. Need it. He’s big enough to make it hurt for real. Instead, he kisses me, whispering “easy, gorgeous” when I try to force him in. Only when he knows he won’t hurt me does he begin to move with determination. My eyes catch the photo of Shawn on my dresser. I ask to change positions. I end up screaming into the pillow - screaming my pleasure, screaming my pain. Screaming my grief.

III.

Gabby and I put our cookies in sandwich bags to go along with our lunches, I hold open the baggies while she drops them in. Every time we zip one closed, she sets it into one of three separate piles, making sure we all get the same amount. She’s been obsessed with fairness from

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the very beginning. The click of the front door makes her head snap up and she runs out of the kitchen.

“Daddy!”

I smile and continue dividing up the cookies.

Tom emerges from the hallway carrying Gabby in his arms, his face lit up with the same crooked smile he always gives me.

“...and then we sang in the kitchen while we waited for the cookies to bake,” she says.

“What’d you sing? ‘Baby Shark’?”

Gabby’s face screws up in disgust. “Ewwww, Daddy, don’t be silly.”

“But that’s what Daddy is, Gabby Girl,” I say. “He’s our silly goose.”

Tom’s honking makes our daughter laugh.

I greet him as he sets Gabby down.

“Hey, gorgeous,” he said. “How was your day?”

He still calls me gorgeous.

I.

Danika,

My lawyer says I shouldn’t email you, says the “e” in “email” stands for “evidence”. He also told me you gave me the rope and I hung myself with it. I’m guessing your lawyer told you I would. Yeah, yeah, I’ve always had a temper. You and I both know that. Not my fault. I do try, I know you’ve seen me try. I’m honestly wondering why I’m even bothering to write now. You’ve taken half of everything.

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You think I don't feel sad about Shawn? I still think about him every day. He was my son and it hurts. That's why I kept his ashes in the closet. I couldn't stand to look at them. It never crossed my mind that you'd want them. I thought you left them behind on purpose.

Happy now?

Dave

II.

My head rests on Tom's chest, the steady thump thump of his heart rocking my emotions to stillness. My fingers pull lightly on his chest hair, looking through the individual strands to the top of the dresser. Even obscured, I can feel Shawn's Atlantic gray eyes searching me out.

“Does this ever get easier?” I ask.

Tom's hand moves slow across my back, fingers counting the bumps of my spine. “Life creeps in this petty pace, from day to day, until the last syllable of recorded time.”

“The hell?”

With my ear on his chest, his chuckle sounds like it's coming up from a well.

“Shakespeare.”

I roll my eyes and tug hard on his chest hair. He's aware of how much it annoys me when he knows I won't get a reference. He laughs at the pain and then sighs.

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“No, gorgeous. It never truly gets easier. But one day you’ll suddenly realize you haven’t thought of Shawn all day. Years down the road you’ll think to yourself, ‘when did I last think of him?’ You’re gonna hate it.”

I roll on my side to face the wall. He moves into the spooning position and holds me tight against his body. His warmth seeps into my muscles.

“I hate it now,” I say.

“I fucking hate it, too.”

He squeezes me tighter and I hear a telling sniff. I squeeze his hand on my breast. My eyes close, his heart rocking me to sleep.

I wake in the middle of the night. Tom has turned over and is facing the dresser. I prop myself up on my elbow and start to rub his back. In the moonlight I can see Shawn’s photo and feel my son smiling at me.

Tom stirs. I lean down and lick his ear. Before he can laugh or say anything, I kiss him. His groan makes my heart float.

“Wanna know something stupid?” I say.

“Always.”

“The first time I let you stay the night I didn’t feel like I was betraying Dave; I felt like I was betraying Shawn.”

Tom turns to face me. My hand rests on his chest.

“Why do you think I haven’t had you in my bed?” he says.

I cock my head.

“Well, when you’re ready, I’d be happy to go mattress shopping with you.”

He reaches out and cups my face.

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“That’s the sexiest goddamn thing you’ve ever said to me, gorgeous.”

The shy smile I respond with is matched by one from him.

“Come here,” he whispers.

I climb on top of him and pull the sheet over us.

III.

My head rests on Tom’s chest, the steady thump thump of his heart matching the relaxed rhythm of mine. My finger swirls his chest hair.

“Gabby asked why steam rises today.”

Tom doesn’t respond, continuing to massage the back of my neck.

“I told her steam and love are the same - they’re so excited to exist they fly into the air.”

His chest vibrates as he hums in agreement.

“When she asked why I don’t fly away when I see her, know what I said.” I lift my head and meet his sleepy blue eyes. “I told her your love for us keeps us both from flying away.”

Tom runs his fingers through my curly hair. “The same goes for you two when it comes to me.”

I hold out my free hand. His fingers interlock with mine.

“She asked about Shawn. I haven’t thought about Shawn in months.” I squeeze his hand.

“The ache is still there, but it’s a part of me now, a puzzle piece. And when I examine it, it makes me want to fly still.”

He lifts his head off the pillow and kisses my forehead. “Gabby and I will be here when you return, gorgeous.”

I know you will. You two are the reason I come back down.