

## Independence Day

“It’s half a 750,” I said to Joey. “I’ve pounded back more than that before class. Finish and let’s go.” I hopped on my bike, not bothering to look back at the kid. He had to learn sometime, might as well be today.

“Wait up!” I heard him shout over the bottle shattering against the pavement. Damn kid poured out the rest.

“I said let’s go,” I repeated, losing my patience. He was going into his senior year of high school, and I was about to be a sophomore in college. No question I was in charge. The kid was lucky to have someone like me to sit him down with a bottle and put up with his weak-ass gag reflex.

“Where are we even going,” said Joey, trying to hide his panting breath. He had caught up and was now riding annoyingly close.

“None of your business,” I replied. He knew where we were going. His dad owned the Drunken Mermaid down across from the end of the boardwalk. The place was packed from Thursday to Saturday with townies and tourists. If I couldn’t hang with the guys, then I was gonna find a girl or two.

“He’s not going to let you in this time,” said Joey, proving my point about the question. He threatened us with the same thing every time we dragged him along to get by the bouncer. He knew we used him for alcohol and the club. I guess his empty threats made him feel good.

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“ID,” said the bouncer with some stupid red, white, and blue hat that was out of place on his fat head. I pointed to Joey and said nothing. The Drunken Mermaid was known for no-

nonsense bouncers who scanned and refused payoffs. It was the Fourth of July and people were looking to push their limits. “Fine,” he grunted, opening the red ropes to let my 19 year old self in with Joey. I headed straight to the bar. I had the six pack, the biceps, and the experience, just needed the liquid courage to seal the deal.

“Vodka tonic,” I said to the bartender waving a twenty near him as he prepared someone else’s drink. I scanned the club. There was no chance of running into some old girlfriend or ditzzy little beach bitch down here cause all the girls I’d been with in past summers were younger than me. The twenty-one plus chicks would be a nice change.

As I reached for the first sip of my drink, some chick placed her hand on mine around the cool plastic cup. My first instinct was to move the mooch’s hand and get back to scanning. I ignored that urge and looked up first. Perfect ten. No exaggeration. No beer goggles. She had a crop top that revealed a silver belly button ring while showing me cleavage that could keep me hard for days. I made contact with her green-blue eyes and could already feel the blood flow pick up. I wasn’t familiar with this older crowd, but I could tell she wanted it.

“I’m Lauren,” she said, picking up my drink and taking a sip from the small straw with her glossy pursed lips. I hesitated, imaging what those lips could do to me.

“Yo Mike, what you drinking?” said joey, who suddenly decided he had the stomach for alcohol. Just twenty minutes ago he spit out the tequila he swiped from his dad’s liquor cabinet. The kid grows a pair the second I try to put mine to use.

“Not now,” I turn quickly to say to Joey, trying to block him from Lauren’s view. This little shit was gonna screw it up for me.

“Come on Mike—“ he began to say until I shoved him away from the bar. Within seconds I forgot he was even there and went back to eye fucking this girl’s body.

“So I guess you’re Mike,” she said, now touching my arm. Just like that, all early morning lifts paid off. “Touch that thing,” I thought to myself. “There’s more where that came from”.

“Yah, I’m Mike,” I replied as smooth as possible, though I didn’t think there was much I could mess up. I knew I had the face for the game. “You from here?” I was sure she wasn’t. How could I miss real tits like that around here.

“My parents just got a summer home down here,” she said leaning in closer to me, pretending I couldn’t hear her as an excuse. “Cool scene, this place,” she said, nearly done with my drink. God, I hope the bartender made that thing strong.

“I’m just a few blocks away,” I said, thrilled at the opportunity to already bring up my house. “Love to show you around some time.”

“Oh you’re so sweet,” she said, now sitting on the bar stool in front of me. “Give me your phone.”

The chick could have asked for my checkbook and I would have handed it over. I slid my iPhone from my pocket and into her hand. I held on just a little longer to feel her fingers on mine. I pretended to watch her with my phone while instead staring right down her top. What I wouldn’t do to rip that off. Her name was now in my phone. Game over.

“So you want to dance?” I asked, not caring that my alcohol levels were dangerously low.

“Love to,” she said, hopping off the stool and wrapping my arms around her waist. My hands could feel her tight body. Her wavy dirty blonde hair brushed against my face with an alluring scent. I could feel her ass looking for my dick. She wanted results and I was prepared to deliver. Just as I started to move with her, I felt a hand on my back. I turned without disturbing

her routine. The bouncer stood pissed with Joey at his side.

“OUT” he muttered, forcing me to listen closely for his one worded command. I looked at Joey who had some stupid smirk on his face. I wanted to knock his brains out.

“Be cool,” I thought to myself. “She lives here. Don’t fuck up your connection into this club. Don’t make some macho scene.”

“Yah whatever,” I said, hoping Lauren saw that I was literally being forced out of the club. Nothing else could have pulled me off that ass. She turned and looked up, putting the pieces together quickly. Tits and brains? Fuck, I want it.

“I’ll text you,” she said as she continued to dance by herself, running those smooth hands through her hair. My balls ached. Two more fucking years with this joke of a kid and I was done. All the guys were at some fancy-smancy internships making bank and had left me here with this shit. Still in fucking high school.

Back into the night air, I needed to take my mind off her until that body was an option for my dick. I heard explosions in the distance: Fireworks. Fuck yes.

“Yo, bitch,” I yelled toward Joey, knowing he’d try hard not to respond to that. What did he expect? When you cock block that hard, you lose respect. “You still got those fireworks?” I knew he’d respond to that. The kid was a fucking pyro. Anything that lit up or went “boom” he was down for.

“Yah, at my place,” he said, letting the entire thing drop.

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We took the backpack of fireworks up to the wooden path that ran parallel to the beach. The Seaside police would be out in full force tonight, looking for drugs, fireworks, and drunk

drivers. With a solid three shots of tequila resting easy in me from just ten minutes ago back at Joey's, I accepted the challenge. Dodging police just took my mind further from Lauren. Drunk fireworks, let's go.

"Over here," said Joey, creeping up a sand dune that was out of sight from any cops on mopeds. Why the fuck would they put cops on mopeds. So if I friggin assault some guy, a cop is going to moped after me? Good luck. I followed Joey to a hole in the wooden plank fence that attempts to keep people from sliding down sand dunes. I peered through the brush and saw a spot away from a crowd of chairs. I couldn't make out anyone's face in the pitch black but could tell there was a decent mix of drunk adults and annoying-ass kids.

We snuck over to the spot and setup for the first launch. We waited a second for the wind to die down. It sucks to lose a good blast to the ocean when a breeze interferes. I could hear the voices of the crowd. I wondered if Lauren had left the club and was nearby with her family. Even more reason not to draw attention to myself. The sound of the ocean is the perfect cover for pre-firework noise. We'd launch a few off and run for it.

I held the first one just above the sand as Joey let the fuse rest in his hand. He had this strange look on his face whenever he was about to light a match. I swear the kid likes fire more than ass.

"Alright, now," I said to Joey once the wind had fully died down. He lit the fuse and we leapt back. The sky above us glowed with yellow sparkles. Time for another. I held up the next one quickly, knowing the cops were probably already on their way. We repeated the process. This time, the sky above us looked more like a large willow tree, threatening to fall on us. "Last one," I thought. I pulled the biggest one from my bag and held it higher this time. Eager for

another, Joey jumped to light the fuse. As he held the flame to the string, I felt a gust sweep over the crowded beach. “Dude, no-“ I began to say.

“Oh well,” I thought to myself. “We’ll lose one to the ocean.” We took the ceremonial step back to clear the area and looked up to catch the explosion. As we stood gazing stupidly at the sky like two small children, I felt something shoot by my leg. I stumbled back confused, partially from the booze, partially from shock. Seconds later, an ear-piercing scream filled the beach, louder than even the constant roar of the ocean. I could see the moped men speeding down the boardwalk area. There were police jeeps navigating the sand with sirens and lights, looking for the source of the commotion. My buzz faded into a throbbing, disorienting headache. “Run!” I shouted.

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I rolled out of bed around 11:00 a.m. still tired as shit. I needed a coffee and a shower. I could hear my mom in the kitchen with the television blaring. Damn noise must have woken me up. I stumbled over to the coffee pot, trying to avoid eye contact with the nagging woman. Maybe if I didn’t speak first, she’d stay quiet.

“Nice of you to join the world today, Mike,” said my mom in her usual “you’re-amounting-to-nothing” tone.

“Mornin, ” I said, reaching for a mug and glancing at the television.

“You see this?” asked my mom though she knew perfectly well I had just gotten up. “Mrs. Jones from two blocks down is in critical. A stray firework hit her square in the face. Poor thing never saw it coming. Shame too, such a nice woman. And those two boys of hers? Such gentlemen.”

I looked over at the television. It couldn't be this neighborhood. Had to be another. The camera panned the section of the beach, revealing the clearing that Joey and I had stood in.

FUCK! I thought. Did I hit someone?

“Mike?” Mom tried to get my attention, addressing the last part of her comment. “Come on Mike, I know you can be a gentleman too. Dr. Brown says you're just going through that phase...”

My ears began to ring. If Mrs. Jones didn't make it, did that make me a murderer? No, fuck that, I was a college student. Not one of those drug-dealing fuckups from Seaside Heights. I looked down at my Monmouth University t-shirt. I had a solid 2.5 GPA. Not an Einstein, but still. I was doing something. I found my way to the couch and took some deep breaths. Maybe I'm still drunk.

*Buzz* I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket. I read “Lauren” on the screen. “This could be good for me,” I thought, swiping the screen to view the message. I immediately shoved the phone back into the pocket of my shorts, praying to God mom didn't see. There on my phone was a topless pic of Lauren Fields, posing in the mirror. FUCK YES. This is exactly what I needed.

I left the couch without ever filling my mug with coffee and made my way to the bathroom, slamming the door and locking it. I threw my shirt off and posed in the mirror. Still sweating from the news, I had a nice glisten on my body #nofilterneeded. I snapped a picture and sent it back. Done deal. When and where.

She replied immediately: “What's your address...I'm coming over.”

“Mom! I have a friend coming over!” I screamed to her before hopping in the shower. The glisten was good, but the smell was bad. I scrubbed with the best friggin body wash I could find. Relatives always seem to think body wash, axe and gift cards are all I’m into. I towel dried my hair and threw on a pair of cargo shirts and a polo shirt. Ha. Not like it mattered. These would be on the ground shortly.

*Knock Knock Knock* I ran to beat my mom to the door. This wasn’t the first time I’d had a buddy over, but it still wasn’t exactly encouraged. I collected myself before letting her in.

“Oh hello,” said Lauren casually, as if she wasn’t the hottest girl I ever had the chance to stick it in.

“Hello, again,” I said, playing it cool and trying to sound older. I’d done some Tri Delta senior girl once, but she was so blasted it didn’t take much on my part. This would be my first real older girl. Fuck. Yes. “Just follow me.”

I strolled back into my room. The sheets were a little messy, but I doubt she cared. The message was clear: just sex. I sat down on my bed. “Want to watch a movie?” I asked, not giving a shit about the answer. It just sounds better than “alright, let’s fuck”. See mom, I am a gentleman.

She shut the door behind her slowly, paying careful attention to lock it. As I fumbled with the remote, she sat next to me, stroking my arm with the same hands she ran seductively through her hair when I left last night. YES, I thought, let’s stroke something else.

She swung her leg across my body and hopped up on my lap facing me, those full tits in my direct line of vision. All that stood in my way were two pairs of shorts. Not a problem.

“This your first time?” she asked, teasing me. Did she know I was too young? I put my

hands back on her waist, right where we left off last night, and slid her cotton shirt off her. I couldn't help it. I had to stop and just stare. This was happening. This wasn't some fucking glossy picture in a magazine, these tits were inches from my hands.

“You just gonna stare?” She asked, continuing to taunt me. I touched the outside of her lacy bra. She leaned in close to my ear and moaned, biting my ear lobe to let me know that bra needed to go. I reached back and unhooked it in less than a second. I had that maneuver down since middle school. All in preparation for this beautiful rack. I flung the bra off and got my hands on them. She started to move up and down, rubbing against my dick, trapped beneath my shorts. I should have worn fucking basketball shorts. Nice guys finish last. I caught my thought. I wouldn't finish last, just a little later.

As I worked them, one in each palm, she went to take my shirt off. “Be my guest, sweetheart,” I thought to myself. “It just gets better from there.” Pleased with what she saw, she immediately ran her hand from the black hairy patch on my chest down my chiseled front, stopping right before my dick. More teasing.

She threw me down on the bed, pressing herself against me. Now for those shorts. As if she read my mind, she pulled herself off of me just enough to slide her jean shorts off and kick them into my closed door. Without hesitation she hopped back on.

“Let's see what this girl can do,” I thought to myself, now sliding my fingers under her laced thong, hoping for immediate reciprocation. She grabbed the elastic on my shorts and motioned for me to sit up enough for them to slide right off. I would have fucking jumped to the ceiling if she asked. She stared at my pinstriped boxers. “Fuck”, I thought. “Is she a briefs girl?”

I looked down, I was still soft. “Probably just an early morning issue,” I thought. “Shouldn't be a problem.” After a brief pause, she accepted the challenge. Slipping her hand

through the slit of my boxers and stroking it back and forth. I could feel the soft fingers paying careful attention to the tip. She pulled my face toward hers as her hand continued working and playfully bit me. Her lips massaged mine as she slipped her tongue in and out of my mouth as if giving me a preview. Five minutes of heaven and my dick still was limp in her hand. What the fuck was wrong with me; my dick should be eating this shit up like a burger after a blunt.

“Alright.”, I thought. “Be cool, be cool. Just keep her busy.” I adjusted her into a better position for her own pleasure. Now removing the thong that stood in my way, I slid three fingers into her. She refused to let her grip slip from her target. Letting my fingers slide out of her, she straddled me, positioning her lips on the tip just like the straw last night, only more aggressive. She goes up and down for what seems like forever, and nothing.

“What the fuck,” she says, sitting up, no longer using that sexy playful voice.

“One second,” I say, taking matters into my own hands. *Stroke stroke stroke....* but nothing. Not even a half mast.

“You can’t get it up for me? Is this not up to your standards?” she asked, grabbing herself and jiggling the masses. “Well, fuck you!”

She threw her clothes on. I stayed lying down. Without another word, she left the room, slamming the outside door as she stormed down the front steps. I could hear the news still on in the background.

“Police still looking for the ones responsible for this tragic accident. Regina Jones left fighting for her life. Tune in for more at three o’clock.”

Was that it? The fucking firework thing? Is this some psychology bullshit? “Fuck it,” I said out loud, letting my head hit the pillow, still in my boxers. Back to sleep.

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I woke up to my mother banging on the door. “Mike! Get off that girl and come out here!”

“She’s not even here!” I say to my mom, hoping to avoid any questioning. I threw on basketball shorts and unlocked the door. The woman needs a damn hobby.

“The police are here,” she said, pointing to two men in dark blue uniforms at the front door.

“Holy, fucking, shit,” I thought. These men worked fast. Fake-ass CSI television shitheads are slower than this. My pathetic life flashed before my eyes. Nineteen years of fucking around with nothing to show for it but hard jail time. Fuck me. I could feel sweat building under my arms and my muscles begin to tense.

“Hi Mike,” said one of the officers. “No need to worry, son. Just here to ask if you saw anything or knew anything about the firework incident last night.”

“Thank God,” I thought to myself. “Great use of the tax money, boys.”

“I’m sorry officers, can’t say I do,” I said confidently, using everything I had not to let my voice shake. “Me and a friend were down by the boardwalk.”

“If you hear anything, be sure to let us know,” the officers said as they closed the door.

Sighing a temporary breath of relief for dodging the questioning, my body immediately began to stiffen again. They were bound to find somebody who saw us. Every inch of my skin was burning like one of my mom’s friggin hot flashes. It was only a matter of time before somebody came forward. My leg began to tremble. “Calm down Mike,” I thought to myself. “Calm the fuck down. They can’t prove it was you. You’ll be fine. Just calm down.”

DAMN IT! That shithead Joey! Where'd I put that goddam phone. I found the thing shoved underneath my bed, Lauren's perfect rack still plastered on the screen.

"Meet me by the park in 10," I texted Joey. "Don't talk." I ran out the door, hopping down the four front stairs that stood in my way. I grabbed my bike and took off.

"Just one hit," I thought to myself. Just to calm down. But where? I had two dealers back at school but nothing reliable here. Didn't think I'd need to smoke at the goddamn relaxing shore. Maybe Joey has something. High school kids always buy too much.

I pulled up to the park just as Joey arrived. He looked like shit.

"The cops just came to my house!" screamed Joey, panicking as if his pathetic C average at Ocean County High meant something to the world. "We have to turn ourselves in. We'll get less time if we just come clean." Joey was frantic. Part of his muscle tank top was tucked into his boxers. He had one Nike high top and one friggin tennis shoe. The kid looked guilty as fuck. I was screwed.

"Joey, calm down," I said, trying to sound like I actually was the kid's friend. "They've got nothing on us. It was dark. We ran. That's it. Sucks about that old lady but that's life."

"I don't know man," Joey mumbled as he wiped the sweat from his hands on his shorts. "I don't know. Just let me confess, Mike, come on I can't do this."

"You got any weed?" I asked, ignoring his panic.

"No, just Marlboros," said Joey, still pacing the sand.

Cigs and alcohol, all this kid pulled through for. Little shit.

"You got a light?" I asked. He shook his head, still trying to stop the sweaty palms.

“Alright, you stay here,” I said, still trying that fake-as-shit calm tone. “I’ll go buy a lighter.” I began to ride away when he grabbed my handle bars.

“Mike,” he said dead-ass serious. “That hole in the fence is in front of JW Licks.”

“Big fucking deal,” I said, pushing his hand off my bike.

“They have cameras.”

Another hot flash came on. I wiped the sweat off my head with my shirt. “Calm down Mike,” I told myself once again. “Calm down. It was dark. Maybe they won’t even think to check the camera from that night. Maybe the old bag will pull through. Come on Mike, just be cool.” I peddled off to the store, hoping Joey didn’t see my nerves.

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I held the lighter in my hand, standing in line at the mart. Just one hit and I’d be back on top.

“You hear about Mrs. Jones,” said the tall man in front of me to the cashier.

“Yes, sir,” he replied. “Awful someone would just run away like that.”

“Yah,” said the man, fumbling through his wallet. “Friend down at the station said they’ve got the damn kids on tape. Just a matter of time before they identify them.”

“Really?” asked the cashier. “Well good. Justice served.”

“Yah,” said the man. “Said they were just teenagers messing around. Damn kids have no sense of responsibility. Hope they lock ‘em up.”

I felt the lighter slip out of my hand. This time the hot flash took over. I couldn't think straight. The noise of the lighter broke up the conversation in front of me.

"You okay, kid?" asked the cashier. I could hardly hear him speak over the ringing in my ears. I had to run. I pivoted quickly, darting for the door. Instead of ocean air, I felt glass against my face and a sharp pain in my knee. The hot flash masked the pain. My mouth was dry. I couldn't find words.

"Kid, what's the matter," asked the tall man in front of me. "You want me to call someone?"

I felt for the door handle and pulled myself up. Without making eye contact, I swung open the door and ran. I left my bike leaning against the outside wall at the shop. I didn't think I could balance on that thing. I ran back to the park, dripping in sweat, but Joey was gone.

"Wait, Joey," I began to think to myself. "That was it. If I turned myself in first, I had to get less time. I'd rat Joey out and plea down a sentence. Kid's got no future anyway."

I ran past Chestnut Street toward Seabreeze. I'd say some bullshit about how Joey dragged me to the beach and I went along to make sure he stayed safe. I'd talk about how he had been drinking before and I was concerned for his health. Officers love that shit. I stopped outside the station to catch my breath. I pieced together a nice sob story about how Joey always needed an older figure in his life and after the firework got loose, I just wanted to protect him, give him his fair shot. "Alright, some bullshit," I encouraged myself. "I could do this." Just as I went to walk up the stairs, Joey came strolling out of the station with that same stupid smirk on his face. "No fucking way," I thought to myself. "Bitch ratted me out!"

I stepped toward him to throw a punch. My ass was done for anyway. I'd go down

swinging.

“We’re off the hook,” said Joey, sensing he was about to get nailed. “It wasn’t even our firework. Some tourists from Pennsylvania.”

“You’ve got to be shitting me,” I mumbled more to myself than to him. “All this and it wasn’t even my damn fault.” I readjusted my sweat stained shirt and leaned down to dust off my white Nikes. The weekend was still young, bet I could hit the gym and head right back to the club. Didn’t take long to get my heart rate back down. Whatever happened to Mrs. Jones, I was a free man. Happy fucking fourth! Just as I came back up from cleaning off the morning off my shoes, I felt a hand on my shoulder.

“Mike Rollands,” said the owner of the hand. “Please come with me into the station.”

“What? Why?,” I asked without much worry, had to be a mistake. “I did nothing. Ask Joey.” I said pointing towards the kid.

“Sir, I don’t want to make a scene. Come with me or I will cuff you.”

“Whatever,” I thought. “Must just be some dramatic formality they do to stay occupied. Must have been a slow drug day. I’ll just please these fuckers.” I followed him into the station and took a seat across from him at the table.

“Sir,” he said yet again in his stern, pretentious tone. “You are being charged by Lauren Fields with statutory rape. At this time, you are under arrest. Anything you say can and will be held against you—“

“Rape!?” I shouted, not giving a fuck who heard. “No fucking way. She wanted it to happen. She wanted me! I couldn’t even--”

“Sir,” he said calmly, ignoring my statement. “Ms. Fields is 16.”

