

How to Kill a Frog

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How to Kill a Frog

by [sleebleess](#)

Summary

What if J.D. met someone just as broken as him.
There is no happy ending.

Notes

In this AU the reader has two abusive parents who are divorced.

Chapter 1: Precursor

Everything is complicated and nothing is safe. When you're between custody, parents aren't a constant, they're a choice, and neither option was safe. You chose the lesser of two evils. Still evil, but quiet. At least she knew how to pretend to be nice. She could wear the mask long enough to delay the damage, but it never changed. Hiding places weren't hidden, and nothing was just your business. How could you blame her? She's only a mother, after all.

Her voice was as sweet as sugar. She always woke you up on time and tried her very best to get you to school early. You only lived about five minutes away from the school, but she always insisted on driving you. Don't question her. She would probably recite a memory or two to you before reminding you of how special you are to her. Everyone thinks you're special. Everyone wants you. That's why you need to be protected. You're too good. Too innocent. Outside is dangerous. She can't help it. She's only a mother...

After that she would probably walk you to the entrance, checking her face twice before leaving the car. She would ask you if she looks pretty. It's a trick. If you tell her she is pretty she'll deny it and accuse you of lying to her. If you tell her she's not pretty she'll start crying about how hard she worked on her makeup this morning.

"Yes mother. You look pretty."

But of course, she wouldn't answer in any of the ways you thought she would.

"So I'm 'mother' now? When you were little you used to call me mommy. Why don't you call me mommy anymore?"

Don't answer.

"Don't you love me anymore?..."

You open the doors to the school lobby.

This was the best time of the day; when strangers were watching her. That was when she acted the most normal, if a bit performative. The good part is when you get to walk away. She never talked to anyone, but if someone approached her she would usually tell them how much she loves you. That might be the only truth that ever escapes her mouth. She does love you. Well... her version of you.

Expect a couple assholes to look at you sideways when she shouts goodbye to you in her same baby voice. You've tried to lay low at school to avoid any conflict, but sometimes that wasn't enough. You brace yourself. "They're only teenagers..." you tell yourself.

"Hey baby, does your mommy walk you to the park too," chimes Ram, the linebacker at Westerburg High.

Your mother had already gotten in the car and left. Thank god. There were a few other people around the entrance giggling at you, apart from one.

You've done this before. You continue walking as if his sly comment had barely breezed by. Stay silent and keep your eyes ahead. If your mind is as stone as you look they can't reach you.

Unfortunately for you, Ram's little apostle Kurt doesn't take kindly to this. Kurt is only just as brazen if not a little more confrontational. You bet if you swapped them there would be no discernible difference, just like all the rest of the dogs on the football team. They're only begging for attention. You pity them. That is, until Kurt slid up next to you and started barking his usual nonsense.

"Did daddy pack your lunch today?" he sneered.

Despite all the witty comebacks you could have said, it would never have accomplished anything. You know their games. Instead, your face remains vacant. Let them pretend you're afraid from the reaction they wish they got from you. You turn to stare at Kurt. Don't break eye contact.

"My friend just asked you a question," Ram barked.

...

...

After an uncomfortable two minutes of silence they eventually got bored and scampered off. There is no cheering for the seasoned victim. Only footsteps of a disappointed audience—apart from one singular person clapping. Slowly...

"How did you do that?"

Chapter 2: Strangers

Chapter Summary

You seem to have impressed the new kid.

You turn towards the voice and meet an unfamiliar face. He was taller than you, enough to look up at, but not quite towering. His hair was dark and short, with a slender face that framed a relatively average portrait. His eyes were not exactly sunken, but enough to tell he needed sleep. What was most striking was the black trench coat he wore. Odd, yet tasteful. His staple.

"It's not wise to bark back at wild dogs," you reply.

"And where did you learn that?"

"Isn't it common sense?"

"I've never seen someone scare them off before. Seems like you have a lot more faith in the average high schooler's 'common sense' than I do," he says sarcastically.

"And why not?" you reply.

"Well, any normal person would have fought back. Anyone with any self respect at least," he emoted.

You resign your flattery.

"And what's that supposed to mean?" you remark.

"Ah, so you *do* have a spine."

It was a test. Clever.

"Get to the point," you wage.

"Well, I think you're like me..." He paused, but didn't break eye contact.

"We can always tell them apart."

Them...

His expression shifted to a more genuine one. He looked at you perhaps in the same way you might look in a mirror. Not in heartache, but in understanding. Maybe that's what he wanted.

You shift in your stance. Either he is incredibly astute or incredibly presumptuous, but regardless it was utterly fascinating.

“What if you’re wrong?”

“You tell me,” he smiled and mirrored your posture.

Or maybe it wasn't so complicated after all... How disarming. You lowered your arms to your side.

“I’m sorry, my name is Y/N.”

“No need to apologize,” he holds out his hand. “Jason Dean. JD for short.”

His hands feel worn. Though you didn’t hold on for long, his grip was gentle rather than tight. You felt renewed. In all the years of living in the in-between, you found a solid ground to stand on. It was freeing. Uncomfortable, yet freeing. You finally talked to someone. Perhaps this could be the beginning to a reality you don't have to keep in your head.

Before you have a chance to answer, the bell rings, ending your conversation. You disappointedly look at him, and then look in the direction of your homeroom.

"I'm sorry," you say on instinct.

"For what?"

You hesitate. Meaning to say "Oh, I just meant I'm sorry to have ended this conversation early," you make various gestures that indicate you might be leaving. Unfortunately, JD does not speak sign language, but he eventually catches on. He dawned the same inviting smile as before and replied promptly, noticing you inching in a separate direction.

"Don't be a stranger," he waved as he walked away.

As you walk away, you hope the same thing.

Chapter 3: Trauma Bonding

Chapter Summary

What's the damage?

Chapter Notes

Infantilization

noun

1. The prolonged treatment of someone as if they are much younger than they really are.

Your mother was feeling nice today. You didn't notice until 6:45 she let you sleep in, and when you went downstairs she was quietly waiting on the couch fiddling with something in her hands. Her face lights up as soon as you descend the stairs.

"I got my paycheck early," she delights, "I thought we could go buy some coffee before school! When you were little you used to always beg me for a sip of my coffee, remember?"

You don't remember, nor do you recall ever liking coffee, but you do appreciate the gesture. Too afraid to say no, you nod your head in agreement.

She laughs. "I knew you would. You were so adorable. You would cry and cry no matter how many times I told you it wasn't for kids, but I always gave you some anyways. My mom never let me do that..." she takes a contemplative silence. You have heard this before. You knew everything under the sun about your mother's parents. She loved telling stories about them, like the one time she had her stereo up too loud and her mother turned it up to full volume, pushing it directly against her ears. Or the other time her mom and dad were arguing and her dad stormed out of the house and asked her to help block the door so her mom couldn't get out.

Of course, you would hug her and tell her it's going to be okay. It's not her fault, after all. She would cry and promise to keep you safe and never do those things to you. She promised to take you fun places, promised never to embarrass or hurt you, promised to let you be yourself, promised she would stop drinking, promised she didn't mean it, promised she would never break anything again as long as you promised to never tell your dad. As long as you chose her. She needs you.

You are kind. Sometimes too kind. That's what adults always told you. You would always give up your spot in line for people if they asked, tell people the answers to the homework

and such. It was something you took pride with. Something you could tell someone with confidence if they asked what sort of person you are. It was easy. Hell, even if you didn't like something you could at least try to. So maybe coffee wasn't such a bad idea.

You sat next to your mother on the way there and back, listening to her talk to herself the whole way. Interjecting was too useless not to mention exhausting, but she seemed content just having you there, thinking she was having a conversation with you. You tried sipping at your mocha frappe, but unfortunately it wasn't as you had hoped. Turns out you don't like coffee. Shocking...

When you roll up to the school she seems to talk in a louder, more girlish voice. Due to your little outing, you weren't quite as early to school, so there was a bit of a crowd. You both get out of the car and she walks you to the door like always, only this time there were more eyes. You only cared about one of them though. She would never embarrass you, remember? Stay calm. Stay silent.

"I love you sweetheart! You'll always be my baby."

She forces you into a hug that you don't reciprocate and pecks you on the cheek.

Look down and keep walking. Ignore the laughter. It will soon transform into inaudible mumbles. Their eyes dart away quickly if you look at them. Except for one. You hear a familiar voice chime over your shoulder.

"Does she always do that?"

JD somehow managed to cut through the mob and arrived right next to you. It was a bit alarming. He seamlessly crept alongside you, making sure to bring his undivided attention.

You sigh. "So you saw that, huh..." I wonder how long he was watching...

Lighten up. "No," you reply, "she was quiet today."

His expression turns bemused. "I'd hate to see what her loud looks like." His eyes narrow as he looks over his shoulder in the direction her car drove off in. There's a distaste in his voice, but not for you. JD wasn't one to disguise his judgements. He shifts his attention back to you, wearing a perplexing expression that you couldn't quite read. It was somewhere between concern and confusion.

You look back down at your coffee as you think. Wait... Coffee. You change the subject.

"Hey do you like coffee?"

"I prefer slushies myself. Why?"

"Just seems a shame to waste it. I don't really care for coffee."

"Then why'd you get one?"

Damn. He's right. Why did you get one? It's not like you wanted one anyways. You practically zoned out the whole trip and forgot you even had coffee. What distracted you? Can you remember?

You might as well tell the truth. "My mom wanted to get coffee."

"And you didn't tell her?"

"No I guess not." Your index finger taps the side of the cold plastic cylinder.

"I suppose it was more of a courtesy to keep her happy."

He descends. "I think that says more about her than it does about you."

You look confused. "I think it's pretty normal."

There was a shift in his tone. "Well if you'll pardon my rudeness, normal families don't stalk your every move..." His eyes drift away for a moment. There was something he understood that you didn't. "Trust me... I know."

An emptiness fills the space between you. So this is what he's been getting at. You hate to make assumptions, but the subtext was difficult to ignore. It wasn't just a comment. It was a warning. Something stirred within him and you couldn't tell what it was. Why his stature was worn. Why his eyes were tired.

"And... what exactly do you know?"

He stared straight ahead. "I know what it feels like to be pushed around. You can't leave but you can't stay, so you bow down to their every command in the meantime and hope they're feeling gracious. There's no winning." His usual unserious tone of voice mellowed. It was almost like he was talking through you. You realize you had unlocked something about him. Something only you had the privilege of knowing. You took pity in him, but also in yourself. It was strangely refreshing. Finally, you relax.

"You too, huh?"

He grinned. "Only the finest from the Dean household."

"So who is it?"

His guard lowered, equipping his amusement again, not in disguise, but in relief. "My dad. You've probably heard of him. Owns a deconstruction company. He loved destroying shit so much he made it his job."

You scoff. "Sounds about right."

"You're telling me," he returns with a melancholy smile. "So what's up with Mother Gothel?"

Here we go.

How did you even end up with her? Well, let's talk about your father. You hadn't spoken to him in years. It was hard to remember between the shouting and disappearing. The worst part was that he wasn't calculated like your mother. He was raw, unmedicated, and merciless. He only hit you when you were little. Now that you're grown he knows he wouldn't get away with it, but the damage was still there. You can still hear his backhanded jokes at the dinner table. You can still feel the tears in your throat at his insults. You know it was nonsense, but part of you still believes him. That that's why you haven't healed. Why your mother hasn't healed. You couldn't imagine what she saw in him other than something weirdly Freudian

"She works in child care, believe it or not. Young kids, not teenagers. People who don't question her."

"Well that explains it."

Nodding, you look back down at your coffee, resigned. His eyes follow your path as he thinks with you.

"My mom used to like coffee," he murmurs.

You reply casually. "Shoot me an address and I'll mail it to her."

His smile ebbs slightly, looking down at his feet. "I would if she were here..."

Shit...

You freeze.

"Oh my god, I'm so sor-"

Interrupting, he blinks. "No need to apologize," he says for the third time since you met, "We have enough sorrows to go around."

Knowing you wouldn't have said anything intentionally, he brightens up. He isn't threatened by your company. Never was.

He continues, "So, if you don't like coffee, what do you like?"

Sigh. When was the last time you made a choice by yourself? What is the "right" answer?

"I think slushies are nice."

Correct. JD looks pleased. "Yeah? Well maybe I'll buy you one."

"She would never let me." You pause to look back at him, slightly disappointed.

He shrugs it off. "She doesn't have to know."

...

...You felt uneasy. The idea had never come to mind. It seemed so simple, but so scandalous. Lying was not your forte, nor were you anxious to reap the consequences if your mother were to find out. But how would she? And why would it matter? There's nothing wrong with this. There's nothing wrong with him.

He stares at you, patiently waiting.
It's only a slushie.

Chapter 4: Safety

Chapter Summary

This one hurt.

Chapter Notes

dissociation

noun

1. a state in which one feels disconnected from themselves and their surrounding.

How do you get an overprotective mother to leave you alone? You can't just disappear. That's how you get the cops called on you. You don't have any friends that she knows, so there goes that excuse. It's impossible to make her trust anyone, even if you did have friends. So how? Name one thing she lets you do alone.

...

School.

She leaves you at school. That must mean she trusts the school teachers. Think... After school activities...

A club. Perfect.

Now the only trouble was finding the time.

The cold metal under you was growing temperate as you awaited her arrival. The buses had already begun their rounds, everyone had left to the comfort of their warm homes. On the contrary, the autumn chill brought comfort to you. It was like a reminder you were still there. Opened your eyes when they were beginning to drift shut. The sharp smell of dead leaves littered the air in a fragrance you wish you could bottle and put in your pocket. It was one of the few things you looked forward to around this time of year. The breeze carried it in and out of your lungs like a heartbeat made of cinnamon and bitter cold. The leaves matched the warm monotony of the concrete school. All was silent apart from the rustle of shivering trees and the occasional car speeding through the suburbs.

This contentment was soon interrupted by a plume of exhaust as your ride pulled up to the curb. It crookedly sped into a halt with an abrupt jolt. Oh no... You seated yourself in the

back-most row as to distance yourself from the impending insanity. Something felt different. Your mother was breathing heavily in the front seat, taking long pauses between her words to make room for gasping. Your heart sank.

"I need... to stop... at... Seven Eleven... for gas," she heaved. It was growing increasingly concerning. Not again...

Timid, you ask, "Did you take your Klonopin today?"

"I'll... be fine..."

That didn't answer your question. You're lucky it wasn't far from the school.

"I don't think you should be driving..." you croak in a false calm.

"I've... done... this before..."

"Please don't."

"It... will... be quick... just be... quiet... I can't let... you go... alone..."

Fasten your seat belt. You're gonna need it. The longer you sit still in the rocking hunk of metal, the more tense your muscles grow. You're shaking. You can feel your heart pounding to the rhythm of her dry, quick breathing. Every stop hoists you further in your seat.

"I don't feel safe..."

...

Her heaving stops.

"JUST SHUT UP! I KNOW WHAT I'M DOING, YOU DON'T GET TO TELL ME HOW TO OPERATE MY OWN VEHICLE, DO YOU UNDERSTAND?! YOU HAVE NO IDEA THE LENGTHS I GO TO MAKE SURE YOU'RE SAFE EVERY DAY! YOU REALIZE HOW ANXIOUS YOU'RE MAKING ME TALKING LIKE THAT?! JUST STOP!"

You stop. She continues breathing.

"I SAID STOP!"

You didn't say anything.

Her false composure returns. "I'm... so... sorry... honey... Mommy is just... very... worried right now..."

She sloppily pulls into the Seven Eleven, arriving at the pump closest to the entrance. A chill wafts through the car as she opens the door, letting in the smell of fresh gasoline. The window hits you with a sharp cold when you lean your head against it, feeling yourself disappear, numbing as you recede further into your head. It happens almost unconsciously the longer you wait. Out of the window, the glare of the white lights inside the store sting your

eyes. Beckoning. Its rays are only separated by the colorful shelves of artificial sweets and the cryptic silhouette of a black trench coat.

Wait...

JD?..

You locked eyes. It felt like you were gazing across a millennium. You could make out a wavering expression, lonely yet patient. His eyes followed you, only breaking contact once to look upon your caretaker who was fumbling with the hose. An odd smile crept through the glass. His eyebrows raised, exchanging glances between you and her, as if it were a suggestion. You itched to leave your seat and cross the road separating you, but a quick glance at your mother confirmed your resolve. Could you bear to take another scolding? You were running out of time. This was your last chance. You closed your eyes and gathered yourself just enough to say something.

"Hey, could I head inside?"

She heaved. "...why?"

"I have \$5. I'd like to get something."

You braced yourself. After a long pause, she huffed an answer.

"...not....without me..."

What a relief.

Consider it an apology. She finished filling the tank. Still trembling, you got out of the car, helping her return the hose to its original position before heading towards the entrance. She tried her best to compose herself, losing her balance a few times on the way. Her hands felt limp and cold as she held onto you. Crossing the threshold, you enter the corporate glow of the store. Your eyes go back to the window you saw JD from, and there he was, still as a statue, casually leaning against the ledge. His stare never left your face from the moment you exited the car.

... Now what? You've entered a new predicament. You can't just go up to him with your frail mother clinging to you for dear life, and it would be too much of a waste to just leave. You steer yourself to an isle across the store where you can look through your options. Think... What next?

The shelves stare back at you like a jury awaiting a verdict. The leftover heartbeat in your head didn't help. Your muscles hadn't relaxed since the moment you entered that car, and it was getting draining. It felt like you were watching yourself in third person.

Across the store you met his eyes again. Defeated, you return his gaze. The anticipation in his face began to wane. Above all it was plain embarrassing. It wasn't the first time he had seen your mother, nor would it be the last, but you had hoped to spare him the trouble of meeting

her head on. Not like this. Finally, he stood upright, adopting a convicted expression. He had an idea. Your thoughts ricochet across your mind trying to figure out what to do.

"Please don't do what I think you're gonna do..."

...

He took a step.

Your heart stopped.

Then another. And another. And another. And about five more until he stood directly in front of you.

"Greetings and salutations."

Frozen like a deer in headlights. There's no way he's doing this. Your eyes dart from your mother to him in rapid succession, not knowing what to do. To your dismay, your mother enters the conversation.

Slightly frightened, she chirps "Do you know him?"

You open your mouth to say something, but nothing comes out.

"Yes," he interrupts, holding out his hand to her, "Jason Dean, head of the AV club."

He looks at you. "I was wondering when you'd show up."

You look back at him and blink, confused.

"You're late. The meeting starts in 5 minutes. Wouldn't want to keep Ms. Fleming waiting now, would we?"

...

My god he's a genius...

You take the hint and turn towards your mother. "Oh, I was just about to tell you. I'm part of the AV club, they have meetings every day after school."

"Every day? For how long?" She postures. Her face was confused, masking a deeper anxiety, but it was obscured. It had to be. There was a stranger.

You attempt to interject but are interrupted by JD once again. "It's right after school until 4:30. The buses come by a second round for us, so no need to waste money on gas."

She hunches towards you. "Oh honey, the bus?" she sighs, moving her eyes to JD. "I've driven them to and from school since their very first day," she touches your shoulder in a sickening tenderness, "it's like our little ritual. I'd hate for them to miss out on our family

time." She looks at you. "Wouldn't you? The bus gets so crowded. You know how lonely Mommy gets."

"You can still drive me to school," you remark reassuringly.

"Well what about the club? Are you sure you want to do this?"

JD backs you up. "Would be a shame to loose them. Never seen a newbie catch on so fast, you must be very proud."

She perks up. "Oh of course! I'm always proud of my baby."

"We'll make sure they're safe, no worries. I can tell you care a lot about them. You oughta take some time for yourself too, you know. Its good for the soul."

Flattered, a sweet toothed smile curls her lips. "Hah, I suppose I should, shouldn't I..." she fiddles with her fingers as the cogs turn in her head. She puts on a pout turning to you, exaggerating her disappointment for her new audience. A stiff pair of arms wrap around you in a comical squeeze. Her heart was still pounding like a snare drum, only mediated by JD's presence. You knew she wouldn't let this go, not after her stunt in the car. Your mind was racing just as fast as hers. The shrill ringing of her voice still echoed in your head, reviving every jolt and gasp. It wasn't until about ten seconds later you realized you missed something she said, as she was now stumbling back to the door, waving back in a nervous slump. The car stuttered and stopped in a loud parade of pistons. Everything went in one ear and out the other, still in shock. It was over. She was gone. Now all you could hear was your own breathing, quick and shallow. Part of you still didn't believe it. That she wasn't really gone. Her eyes still peered over your shoulder after every word, searching for mistakes. It was never over. Nothing was safe. Suddenly a firm voice snapped you back to reality.

"What a bitch..."

The arbitrary point in space you were staring at fades back into vision. Your wide eyed gaze snaps back to JD.

"How did you do that?"

"Practice," he smirks, "Lots of practice."

You are dumbfounded. Why hadn't you thought of it sooner? It was like he read your mind.

Your breathing slows with a long exhale. "You couldn't have pushed for 5:30?" you say, trying to smile.

"I was improvising," he says proudly, "If more time is what you want, I'm sure I could find some excuse."

The open air between you thickens, but not in a bad way. It wasn't suffocating. Rather, it wrapped you in like a compression blanket. There was something about him that seemed almost magnetic. His voice had a melancholy humour to it that seemed so quaint yet so seasoned. Your shaking slowly began to fade away.

"So, how am I actually getting home?"

"What, thinking about leaving already?" he laughs, "How far do you live?"

"Only five minutes walking."

"And she still drives you? Wow." He leans against the shelf, looking back out of the dismal window he first saw you through.

"If it makes you feel any better I could come with. The longer I can stay out the better."

That's right. His dad.

"I'll hide in the bushes, just in case," he muses.

His voice washed away your discomfort. The ringing in your head quieted in a dull echo. This was new. After all the shouting and stuttering there was a faint hum of music. At last, an unfamiliar feeling.

Safety.

Between your laughter and his disarming smiles, there was an itch in the back of your head. An itch to cut through all the charm and flattery and see what was behind it. It was no accident he spoke in a language of undertones. Almost like a distraction. Or maybe that was just his personality. That's the issue. The question that begged to be answered. One he left blank with quiet intention. It was deliberate. He had a plan. Because the truth is, he craved the same thing:

A safe space...

And he desperately wanted that to be you.

"Come. Let me buy you something, on the house," he nudged.

With a nod, you followed, now nervous for a new reason.

"You're safe here. I promise."

Chapter 5: A Walk

Chapter Summary

Just a five minute walk.

A word about JD.

Nobody quite knows what goes on inside that boy's head. He's been cautious to make sure things are kept that way, but allow me to indulge you.

No question he was intelligent, but above all observant. He had keen eyes. Eyes, fine tuned by years of abuse to see through subtext. There was never a point he so much as nodded at another person unless he was certain of their character, and too often the answer to that was no. Not because he was unsure, but because he was too wise. He never cared to know. Perhaps he never had the time. No, he was too afraid. Between the afternoons of disappearing into worlds of paper and pen, and getting lost in wandering sidewalks, he was learning. Preparing for a world he was severed from, not by engaging in it, but from watching. Very... Very... Closely...

And that's how he noticed you.

He knew from the very beginning. There are simply some things you can't learn in a classroom, and one of them was endurance. The ability to withstand an aggressor without taking it to heart. To keep everything behind lock and key. To nod your head, and still know they're wrong.

Not even JD was that strong. Headstrong maybe, but not complacent. He dealt with it differently. His walls weren't thick enough to shut in his hatred, but he made up for it in bravery. Unafraid of his anger, it became his shield. His righteousness. So the next time he was mistreated, he could stare it in the face and say no. Use the threats to fuel his temper, and make it his weapon.

You had something he didn't. Restraint. And he was absolutely crazy about it. It was something he couldn't understand. Something his books never taught him. Books are predictable. You can look ahead and find out what is next before it happens. Read a couple of reviews before you pick it up. Everyone sticks to the script. They're removed from reality, but you brought him back. No, you created a new reality. One he was free to exist in just as he is. With you. The last ounce of good faith he had in humanity was entirely at your mercy.

The only thing that deterred him was your reserve. That, and his own shyness. He needed to be careful. Though, that didn't stop you from noticing the glances he shot you out of the corner of his eye. Walking home, the sidewalks were crooked and overgrown, starting and

ending at odd places. This is America, after all. Your town was quaint, littered with rolling hills and gloomy old houses that hadn't seen a renovation since World War II. Though, the glum industrial streets and tattered telephone poles had a charm to them. There was a nostalgia in the uneven bushes that filled the gap in between each sickly house. It looked better when it rained. The sun was distracting, like it was trying too hard to be something it wasn't. Rather, the dull clouds complimented its loneliness. It might have been the only thing JD admired about this town, other than the Seven Eleven. On your little excursion, you found out he was a regular there. Mentioned something about brain-freeze.

You should be honoured. He shared his sanctuary with you.

Among the outskirts of the wealthy side of town, you could see the silhouette of picket fences and lavish gardens the popular kids liked to terrorize. In the center of the field, there was a fountain with the stone statue of a woman in the middle, hands clasped in prayer.

In the distance, a group of kids walk up to the fountain. It was difficult to make out, but it looked like it was comprised of three girls and two boys wearing varsity jackets. For the most part, they looked typical, if not for the Prada. They shared the same crude gestures, laughed at the same jokes, and ate the same junk food. Exhaustingly normal, but secure.

"Do you ever wish you were there?" you ask him.

"Never."

"Why not?"

One of the boys in the group pulled out what looked like a spray can while the other trudged into the fountain, reaching up to place his hands on the breasts of the statue. They all laughed.

"I'd rather tank a few blows than spend the rest of my life an asshole."

"They can't all be assholes," you tell yourself.

"The ratio isn't pretty."

"I guess that's true..." you agree without thinking.

There wasn't one popular kid you could name that shared a shred of human decency. They had nothing important to worry about. Bored out of their minds, they pick trivial issues to complain about and found some way to make it into a superiority complex. Not unlike their parents no doubt. Knowing the why was easy, dealing with it was harder. So, you repeat the same thing you always say in your head.

"They're only teenagers. They'll grow up eventually."

JD stops to look at you. "Tell me something. Has your mother ever changed?"

"No." You tilt your head.

"Can you imagine her ever changing?"

You can't bring yourself to answer.

"Then what makes you think they will?" He gestures to the group of kids on the other side, noticing a pair of red hand prints on the statue. "It all starts somewhere."

Gazing out at the clique, you feel confused. What if he's right? Mother always said you were too naive. Had too much faith in people. No. You must be overthinking again. With a wave, you brush it to the side. They're not worth your energy anyways.

"Let's go," you sigh, continuing along your side of town. Kindly, JD follows close beside you.

"You know, as a kid I used to toss coins in that fountain," he recites.

"And what did you wish for?"

"Wouldn't you like to know," he teases. "No, I only did it cause my mom did. She'd take me there on her cigarette breaks to get me out of the house and drop in a penny. Gave me one too so I could feel included. My dad always yelled at her for never having money to use the pay phone."

"I'll remember that next time I have spare change," you offer with a sentimental smile.

"And what would you wish for?"

You stop in your tracks, seeing you have arrived at a familiar rugged driveway, where a car was crookedly parked outside of the house.

"To get home a little later."

The lights were on inside your house, meaning she hadn't taken her melatonin yet. All six locks on the door were not latched. That's odd. JD checks his watch.

"Wish granted. It's 4:45."

Your blood ran cold.

"Oh shit..." you whisper, running your hands through your hair. "That's not good."

Quickly, you hurried up the porch and gripped the door handle. Before you can open it, you feel a hand brush against your arm.

"Wait," he blurts, hastily following after you. "Is it safe?"

"Just leave, I'll be fine"

"I can't leave unless you promise it's safe in there. Are you sure you'll be okay?"

You hesitate. Nobody ever asked you that before.

"Yes, I will. I'm sorry, I'll see you some other time."

You hustle inside and shut the door. A shrill gasp escapes from somewhere below you. Your eyes lower to the floor where lies a sobbing heap of matted hair and flesh. In its right appendage, a shattered bottle of whiskey, leaving a puddle in the carpet. Eyes peeled open, it stares up at you, red faced and bloodshot.

Fuck...

Chapter 6: Friends

Chapter Summary

You are friends... right?

Chapter Notes

parentification

noun

1. when a child is forced to take on the role of a supportive adult within their family.

"Honey... I'm.... so.... sorry..." your mother cries.

Red hot blood rushes to your face. The pulse in your chest quickens as you try to react, but you are unable to move. Why won't you move? Do something. What can you do? Don't speak. The spill. Clean up the spill. Yes. You go to the kitchen to grab some paper towels. A voice sobs behind you.

"No baby please don't leave... please.... please..." she trails off in a slur.

You stop. Think. Come back quickly. Hurry up now. Don't give her anything more to use. You kneel down to sop up the puddle of booze and broken glass. She grabs your wrist.

"Don't..."

"Let me help you," you offer, forcing your voice to be stable.

"Don't..... the glass.... don't... cut..."

"I'll be careful."

She moans a choir of hiccups and heaves, melting onto your shoulder. You are trapped in her arms. Struggling to keep her balance, she falls over, bringing you down with her, just barely missing the pile of glass.

"Please... baby... don't go..." she chants.

You're trapped. Don't make any sudden movements. You need to get up. No. Don't get up. Don't move. Just go with it. Comfort her. God why does this always happen. Don't cry. Not now. What are you going to do? Did you forget? Fuck. Think. Remember. You were cleaning

the spill. And then.... and then... what? Say something. No, don't. But then she'll think you're ignoring her. Then what do you say? Can't say anything. Just. Breathe. But not too fast. Don't let her notice you breathing. Don't look nervous.

"You... left me.... why.... why did.... you... leave..."

You place your trembling hand on her head, holding it close to you. She sobs harder. Ignore it. Shut it out.

"I can't... live.... without you..." she mumbles.

Remember that.

Please get up. You need to get up. Clean the spill. Put her to sleep. Go to your room. Remember. You've done this before.

"It's going to be okay."

"NO IT'S NOT," she barks.

You flinch.

You slowly prop yourself up, holding her forearms to keep her steady. You reach for the paper towels. Starting to clean up the puddle, you pick up the glass first. Her weight against your side nearly knocks you over, catching yourself on your spare hand. You notice a dot of blood on your palm.

You'll be fine.

The spill can wait. "Come with me," you say, half whispering. Taking her by the arms, you slowly walk her to her bed. She trips and stumbles over your feet. As you lay her down, she clings tighter.

"Stay..." she orders. By now the sobbing had mostly subsided, thankfully. You patiently sit next to her, holding her hands as she drifts off.

And you wait...

And wait...

And wait...

And wait...

Until her eyes close, and her grip slowly loosens. Her eyes were heavy and wet with tears, looking as if she had been crying for hours. A shiver tremors through your spine. You very gently remove your hands. The dot of blood on your palm had grown into a slightly bigger dot, but that was none of your concern. Making sure there was no accidental transfer to her hands, you carefully get up.

Now clean up the mess.

You quietly slink back to the living room where the fiasco had started. Breathe. You slump to your knees and stare off into space. A small pulse emerges beneath the skin of your palm where the dot was. The repetitive sensation lulls you into a trance, trapped in your own mind, where the white noise infects your ears, swimming against the current of your thoughts.

Then you feel a hand slip onto your shoulder.

You jump, eyes shooting behind you. The hand jolts back.

It was JD.

A long exhale escapes your lips. Closing your eyes, you hunch over, anxious and confused. You should have known.

"You said you would leave," you say, cupping your hands to your temple.

"You said it was safe," he combats, trying to keep his voice soft.

His hand glided back onto your shoulder, laying lightly on top of your skin in an attempt to soothe. You shudder. A gentle, rhythmic sweep of his thumb slows your breathing. It was startling, but the soft pattern of his hand relaxes your heartbeat in a way you'd never felt before. Normally you'd reel at the thought of novelty, but strangely, you didn't hate this.

Focus. You have bigger issues to worry about. Once again, you resume dabbing the paper towels on the floor, leaving small prints of blood where you held them. Did you really think he wouldn't notice?

He takes your wrist and flips your palm to face him. In the center, a shard of glass about the size of a beetle had wedged itself inside your skin. As he holds it you notice something. Wait... why was he shaking?

"Go take care of that. I can pick up the glass," he insists. His tone was cold and guarded. There was something in his blank expression that was trying to find its way out. You obliged and started off into the kitchen. Plucking out the glass, you run your hands under the warm water. The soap stung as it hit your palm, waking you up from your numbness. For a moment you wondered if it was even worth putting a band aid on it, but JD would never let that slide. You hastily cover the wound, but your hands were too sweaty for it to stick for long. Looking at the floor, you slowly wander back to the living room.

JD stood up to approach you. "Come with me."

That phrase never meant anything good. That's the sort of thing adults say when you're in trouble. That's what the school counsellors said when they found the bruises on your arm from back when you lived with your dad. Ask you to spill your guts, tell you some bullshit about being open with your feelings, then snitch back to your parents. Some "trusted adults" they were... You avoid his eyes and follow closely behind him. Holding the door for you, he walks outside and shuts it.

He walks down from the porch, following the pathway to the side of the house. The evening sky hadn't quite set, but it was getting dark. The clouds covered the sunset, teasing the idea of rain but never committing. Your house was difficult to walk around, as it was shrouded in trees that threatened to blow over every winter. However, they effectively shielded you from view. There was one dim light on the side of your house that tried to turn on whenever someone was near it. The orange glow gave him a warm silhouette against the bricks.

When he turned to face you, your eyes never left the ground. Your mind was almost as fogged as the sky. Nervous, but for what? What could he possibly do. It wasn't him you were afraid of. It was not knowing.

Finally, he speaks.

"You're not okay."

Here we go... You barely manage to raise your voice above a whisper. "How much did you see?"

"Everything," he murmurs, matching your tone. His face was sad and expressionless. For the first time he was at a loss for words.

"I'm so sorry..." you say, hushing your voice.

"Don't say that."

You felt like a lost bird, cold and afraid. His concern hurt almost as much as his comfort. That's all you knew how to do. Apologize.

"Then what should I say?" you ask. "What am I supposed to do?"

You weren't just asking him, you were asking yourself. Because in truth, you didn't know the answer. You never knew, no matter how many times it happened.

A long exhale escapes him as he brings his hand to his neck. He takes a long look at you, clearly trying to think of what to say. There was so much yet so little. He searched your eyes for answers but all they did was reflect back up at him. For a moment he got lost in it. All that surfaced in his ocean of intellect came three words he almost couldn't bring himself to say.

"Stay with me."

It was like time froze. You brought your eyes back up to his. They spoke a different language than before.

"I know what she is, and I need you to understand you are worth more than that," he urges.

He grabs your injured hand. "This is her fault. She can't keep getting away with this."

A solemn grief washes over you. You couldn't leave her. She was too unstable. And where would you go? This was all you knew.

"I have nowhere else."

"Yes you do," he pleads. For once his face awakened into a bereft hopefulness. It was like reliving it all over again. Like your mom reminded him of someone. The same revelations and the same pain of understanding that brought you together at last opened a door that was forever shut to him. He finally had a chance to mend something.

"I would never let this happen to you."

He ached like the dying trees behind him. Something you had never seen from him, but something you needed.

"That hurt," he says, low and broken. "That right there..." he paused.

"That scared me."

For the first time he had the strength to admit it. No matter how distantly he isolated himself, he couldn't stand the familiarity of it all. To see the only beautiful thing in his life be vandalized so crudely. He was afraid of her. You were the last person to hear those words escape his lips.

You wanted to say sorry, but you held your tongue. You are also scared. Certainly of your mother, and a little bit of him too, but at least with her you knew why. It wasn't the same feeling. That was even more terrifying. You are scared, yet you don't fear him. So, what is it? You didn't want to answer that question. Possibly because you were afraid he would change. Afraid of something you never wanted to put to words. All of the signals you had shoved to the back of your head came floating to the surface all at once, when you realized... you don't know how to mean something to someone. And you cared about him too much to admit it. You couldn't leave her, but it was impossible to leave him, because he meant everything to you. He wasn't just your safety, you were also his.

"Well I'm here now," you said in a quiet voice. His eyes soften in the same gloomy way you always admired. "And thank you. I feel like I've never told you that."

For once, you acknowledge what you've spent so long running from in your head..

"I've never felt safe with anyone else."

The words hung in the air like the fog above you. The tension blows in and out of your lungs in a heavy warmth that matched the dim light against the dismal bricks of your home.

"You're my only—"

...

Wait. Why did you stop? That wasn't the right choice of words. A surge of panic sweeps over you, trying to think of how to fix this. It was too close. Too late.

You sit in the awkwardness for what felt like a century. The crickets didn't help.

Before you can correct yourself, he chimes in.

"...Your only... what?"

Your face turns red. "Oh, I meant— I didn't— I wasn't—"

"Say what you were going to say," he requests.

"Well..." There's no going back. Words be damned.

"I was going to say... you're my only friend."

You withdrew. That word didn't sit right on your tongue. But why not? A small paranoia sat upon you that prevented you from putting any label to it at all. You tried to shut it out, but it was exceedingly difficult when he was so close to you.

He looked down in somewhat of a daze and you feel an ache in your stomach. Then, you see a small, almost invisible smile appear from the corner of his lips, like he was waiting for it. He brought his eyes back up to yours.

"Are we friends?" he asks.

Your head goes stiff. The fear of disappointment outweighed the uncertainty that radiated from that question. You gather what little logic was left in your head to puzzle together what he meant to you. You were at least friends... Right?

"Yes," you answer in a faint perplexion.

His face confirmed your worst fear. The dead leaves rustled as he took one step closer to you. Something stirred behind his eyes, and you had a sickening feeling you knew what it was.

"I don't believe that."

Your heart drops to your stomach.

"Friends don't do this."

His smile slowly disappears, as if he was admitting it to himself. He was right... Friends don't do this. Friends aren't this vulnerable. "Friends" implies he wasn't the only one. Friends know that they're friends, and you didn't. The suffocating suspense that hung in the air wrapped around your neck. He was like oxygen, and you were holding your breath.

He had everything to say, but no words to communicate it. Trying to remember how to go about this, he resorted to the last way he could possibly think to tell you. Gently, he placed a warm hand against your arm. His dreary eyes locked onto yours, searching for your answer with the same loneliness as before, only he looked more shy. You were drawn to him like a moth to a lamp, but the light seemed too hot to touch. It was something you admired from a distance, but now, as you stood there within inches of him, the air grew heavier the longer you inhaled its silence. That distance was closing.

So, fan the flame.

Almost unknowingly, you had drifted within inches of him. You take a deep breath before having one last look at him. The moment you laid hands on him, he melted into your touch like it was a part of him. Slowly, he pulled you in until you could feel his heart beating against yours, when you closed your eyes.

And he kissed you.

The world stopped spinning the moment your lips met. All the pressure pent up inside your head was released in an instant. Before you could compose yourself he grasped you tightly against him as if you would slip away. You almost couldn't believe he was real. Fully dazed, you stayed there for as long as he would let you. The electricity seemed to drone on, hitting you in waves whenever he leaned closer. He was completely trapped in the adrenaline, more nervous than he's ever been, but for what? Nobody had ever cared about him like you. Nobody was ever this close to him, and he absolutely loved it. He needed it. Your hands were his gravity. The longer you held him the more he weakened, until painfully he slowly began to pull away, catching his breath.

He gently rested his head next to your cheek, flushed a vibrant red in disbelief. In an attempt to calm him, you brought your other hand onto his shoulder, where he held it close.

"Have you ever kissed anyone before?" he whispers to you, his voice soft and anxious.

Opening your eyes, you slowly regain your senses. You almost hadn't realized you were clutching the collar of his trench coat.

"No," you manage back to him.

A long exhale of relief escapes him. "Neither have I," he elates.

A small smile crept onto your face, remembering you are still young. It felt like you had a chance at being normal for once. You were his first love, and could finally acknowledge it. He stripped away the fear of change and replaced it with a new feeling of security, right there between his arms, where you wondered how you'd stand to part from him.

Then you remembered what lay behind that brick wall, and your smile vanishes.

"I can't leave..." you wedge your face into his neck.

"Then I'll stay," he reassures you.

"What if she sees you?"

"I'll be gone before morning," he says, placing his hand on your head.

By now the autumn sun had fully set, and only what was left of the low orange light illuminating his face remained. A chill swept between you, in a sobering wonder of what was to come. It was impossible to say no to him.

He brought his gaze back to your eyes, when you gave a slight nod to his proposal. Bringing his hand back to your cheek, he kissed you once more.

"We'll show her..."

Chapter 7: Normal

Chapter Summary

This is normal.

The rest of that night was a lucid dream. There was little said before you went to sleep, but you remember the smell of cigarettes on his coat lingering in your room. As promised, when you woke up, he was gone. It was almost hard to believe. Your room felt like a shell in his absence, repeating conversations in your head to keep yourself company. It was strange having something to miss all of a sudden. You readied yourself for school and left your hollow room, glancing into your mother's bed. There you find her in a sad slump under the unkempt covers, deep in an intoxicated coma.

I guess we're walking today.

But would it be worth it to vanish again? She most certainly should not be driving, so there isn't much else to do. His defiance has certainly left an impression on you. Carefully, you turn the cold handle of the front door, keeping it cocked until it shut, assuring a silent exit. The cold autumn wind murmured to you, almost reminding you of a familiar voice. It seemed he was everywhere now. But where were you? With every step the world looked so distant. Each house glanced at you with foreign curiosity that escaped your barren stare. How could you go back after experiencing the other side? There was only one answer.

"Surprise."

You jumped. This was the second time now. He really is everywhere, isn't he.

"Mind if I join you?" a faint voice chimes from behind you.

You turn around. "How long have you been there?"

"So we're walking today?" he interrupts, avoiding your question.

"That's not an answer."

"You're no fun," he mocks, sobering his expression down to a blunt disappointment.

Wait, is he serious? Your face flushes. You said something wrong. Maybe it's not that big of a deal, just drop it. It was probably nothing, right?... You're not making eye contact. He looks down to see your perplexity and quickly diverts the conversation.

"I'm only kidding," he says, trying to lighten up. He brings his arm around your shoulder, snapping you back to reality. It wasn't worth the risk of questioning him. What matters is that

he's here. That's what you wanted, right? Perhaps it's just something to get used to. You weren't exactly acquainted with normalcy yet, so who are you to decide what is acceptable. This is normal.

You change the subject. "She's still hungover, so there wasn't much else I could do."

"Serves her right."

You contemplate his statement. Her situation was a pitiful one that she wasn't entirely at fault for. You just happened to be dealt the wrong cards. As much as you hate it, you can kind of see yourself in her. No matter his effort you couldn't bring yourself to hate her. Even if you did, there wasn't much it could do.

"I wouldn't say that."

"Why not?"

"Well she's still my mom. I'm not exactly eager for her to flip out again."

"And when she does?"

...

What if she does? Never mind that, what about him? What's the right answer. Is there a right answer?

"I guess I'll have to endure it," you say.

"You don't understand," he sighs.

Where is he going with this?

"Where would I go?"

"With me."

This sounds... familiar. Did we not have this conversation just the other day? I thought it was resolved. And, strangely, that same conversation happened the next day. And the next week. You know JD. His unfortunate stubbornness couldn't be helped, but it seems the longer it waded on your mind, the more unclear your response. It was part of his charm, that striking severity was what drew you to him. It was a perfect compliment to your caution. He danced through the tangles of your life like it was easy. His presence was addictive, and before you knew it he was walking with you to school every day. Walking you to class every day. Taking you out every day. Walking you home every day. And it was heaven. Mostly. If not for the same questions.

And those were the questions that dawned your mind this evening. The sky was setting earlier, and you were staying out later. Your mom only got worse. She's defected to overdosing now. Though, the darkness of the garden seemed to calm your nerves. Against the ripples of the fountain, a breeze flicked a gentle mist across your gaze, where for once the

suburbs were nearly silent, and the lights of the wealthy flickered on and off in the distance. The woman in the fountain stood hunched over her hands, where just below the handprints left by the kids still shone bold. You wonder if perhaps she had a mind, she would take pity on them. JD certainly wouldn't.

He looked at your reflection in the water like it was real. Like it begged to leap out and perch upon his hand if only you would let it. It was times like these you wished to never leave. But wishes are fantastical. Adjusting takes time and patience, something JD lacked. Something you hoped maybe you could show him.

His gaze redirected to your face, bringing himself beside you.

"How much longer could you stand my company?" he asks. His voice was softer than before, like a gentle lullaby worn from years of singing.

"As long as you want," you reply. Surely he isn't imagining you would leave. Was it something you said?

"You don't mean that," he insists.

"No, I do," you prevail, reaching for his palm. "There's just someone else who also needs it."

"I know..." he murmurs, laying his head on your shoulder. Somehow you don't quite believe him, but you desperately want to. Being with him was like escaping into a different universe where nothing else existed. Where each of you could play god in your shared world and empty your heart without shattering, creating new worlds to spend eternity in. There was no life or death in this world. He was the only thing that mattered. He gave you everything that had been missing from both your lives. He loved you. He rescued you. He gave you paradise, and yet in his mind he still can't get you to be his.

But I must have been mistaken. I thought you had already given him that.

"If she were gone, would you come with me?"

Scoffing, you decide to entertain him. "Only if you ask really nicely."

"Say less," he perks up.

Is he serious? Why is it so hard to tell whether or not he is joking? You don't like this. You know he may be clever, but he is no liar. Unless he is joking after all. "You're not serious, are you?"

"Only if you want me to be." His tone was scarily genuine.

That settles it.

"No," you retract bluntly.

"Suit yourself..." he sighs. A twinge floated within him that felt like eating him alive. He felt... guilty. Perhaps he went too far. That's how it usually went, but this especially hurt. He

thought you were different. No, he knows you're different. He cares about you too much. Maybe that's what's bothering him. He hates having something to lose. Gradually, his tone sobers in order to match you. As he stared off into space his thoughts were redirecting, reaching for what was left of you. He knew exactly what to say.

And for the first time, he apologized.

Now you feel guilty. That means it's your fault. This was what you were afraid of. Though, JD had thought ahead. He knows your anxieties personally now, and there was only one person to mellow them. Partners are supposed to be there for you, and that was something neither of you could afford to lose. He was obsessed with the refuge you gave him, and he couldn't imagine living without it. He needed you to want it just as much as him, and almost automatically, you obliged. You felt like a completely different person around him. That person was selfless. That person was praised and adored. Isn't that what you wanted? In one sweep of his hand across your shoulder the world was steady again. Nightfall was the perfect compliment to his warmth, and you couldn't help but gravitate towards it. You felt whole again. Minutes turned into what felt like decades before you were brought back to your senses.

"Hey, what time is it?" you whisper.

He pauses for a moment. "5:00. We still have time, I'll talk to her."

It was better than the alternative. There was nothing he couldn't talk his way out of.

"Okay..."

He looked pleased. "You're so complacent."

"I'm sorry," you answer, half smiling at how stupid that sounds.

"Exactly my point."

"You know I can't say no to you."

He smiles back at you. "I know."

When you started to head back, you couldn't help but notice his stolen glances, and it was like the first night all over again. It seemed he looked more beautiful every day you spent together. His face had a comforting shyness to it whenever it met yours. Everything about him was disarming and free of threat, from the softness of his hands to his eyes dulled from dozens of sleepless nights. They made you wonder if he spent them thinking of you. That was a charming thought you soothed yourself with, knowing there was someone to remember you, especially when nobody else would, because you were certain he was the only one capable of it. You were too dull for anyone else, making his company all the more cherished. Nobody else would settle for you.

JD enjoyed the evenings he got to spend by your side. They were a distraction from everything he hated about himself and his family, even though that's all he seemed to talk

about. You weren't the only person vulnerability was new to, and this was the only time his walls could come down without consequence. It was a difficult adjustment, always worried about overflowing, but one he eventually overcame, and it was all because of you. He loved your assurance because it was his only reminder that he existed for something other than being a punching bag. And like you, he was addicted. So even if it meant sacrifice, you wanted to be there for him, because that's all you're good at. You know how it feels to be alone, and surely he would do the same for you.

As you arrived back at your door you heard an almost invisible sigh escape JD. You turn to see him somewhat forlorn at your departure. Feeling responsible to cheer him up, you wrap your arms around him, to which he returns your touch. Bringing his face to your cheek, he lands a gentle kiss against it, whispering something you almost didn't catch.

"I would never hurt you."

Inside your head those words replayed over and over again when you finally made it into your house. Your mother had fallen asleep on the couch. It was a new habit she had adapted ever since you became preoccupied. In fact, she seemed to be asleep each night you got home. It certainly saved you some trouble, but it made you uncomfortable. It wasn't like her. Weirdly, you didn't feel like you either. As you stood awake in the silent living room you couldn't bring yourself to feel anything actually. It felt... empty. Completely alone with your thoughts for once, yet you couldn't bring yourself to think when there was nothing needed of you. Perhaps now you understand why she's been sleeping more often. However, it was too early to sleep just yet. It's only 5:00 after all.

Just to make sure, you look up at the old analog clock that hung just above the sofa.

6:30PM.

"That's odd..." you think to yourself. Maybe it was broken. You walk yourself over to your room where there was a digital alarm clock on the nightstand, only to be faced with the same confusion.

It was 6:30...

He lied.

Chapter 8: Killing Frogs

Chapter Summary

Who are you?

Chapter Notes

Sorry for breaking character in the notes but hi. Fully did not expect this to take so long but AP classes are no joke. I'd like to start off with why I made this in the first place. It was mostly because I wanted to experiment with JD as a character, but also because we get so lost in romanticizing bad people that we forget they're dangerous and laugh it off saying "I can fix him." You can't. Stop trying. You'll save hundreds of dollars in therapy.

But I know a fanfiction isn't going to change your mind about that. Some things can only be learned the hard way.

A lot has changed since I started this fic and to be honest I was in a completely different headspace then. I think it's better for me to stick to light hearted parodies from now on. Something that makes me smile.

Enjoy with caution

Anyone ever tell you how to kill a frog? You could try and boil it, but placing it immediately into boiling water would cause it to panic and hop away. Instead, you set out a pot with luke-warm water, and it will willingly jump in. Then, you would slowly increase the heat, letting it get accustomed to the temperature before you raise it. It will not move, because the water was safe when it jumped in. Soon, the water will be boiling, and the frog will burn to death because of its own accord.

Who am I? More importantly, who are you? What are you thinking about right now? Well, you're probably thinking about JD. When are you not? Surely there's something else in there.

You wake up. What a strange dream, if you can even call it that. The rhythm of the morning hits you like a damp towel. Things move slower when he's not there. For the last month the space next to you had always been filled, and you find yourself missing what it felt like to be okay alone. But you missed him more. You'd be a terrible partner if you didn't. But why? Who are you trying to justify yourself to?

Confused yet?

You never used to be this distracted in the mornings. You hurriedly put on your day clothes and meet your mother in the living room, where she was surprisingly awake, sipping away at her coffee. It was a mocha-frappe, just like the one you ordered last time. Either she was pretending not to notice you or she was genuinely distracted, but when you walked into the room her eyes didn't snap towards you like usual. Instead, she gave a slow nod in your general direction. You feel uneasy. You thought you knew the extent of her unpredictability, but that would be contradictory wouldn't it. Your eyes wander up and down her peculiar figure, when you notice her pat a seat on the couch next to her. She wants you to sit down.

You take a breath.

As she puts down her coffee, she exhales. You are too tense to think clearly. It was like a reflex whenever she wanted to talk to you, yet nothing could have prepared you for what she said.

"I'd like to thank you."

What? It wasn't the sentence that confused you, it was her tone of voice. She sounded... real. It wasn't high pitched or loud, she wasn't crying or anything. Rather, her voice was completely relaxed, and somehow that scared you even more.

"And I'd also like to apologize for my behaviour recently. None of this should have ever been your responsibility," she muttered. "I know I've failed, and I know this probably doesn't mean anything to you but I promise I'm always trying to be better."

For the first time, she didn't even try to touch you. She just sat there, looking down at her hands like a little kid. Where the hell did this come from? You know it doesn't mean anything. Everything up to this point in your life has proven that. You feel sick to your stomach trying to process what she could possibly want from all of this when it hits you. She's wrong. It does mean something to you. That part pissed you off more than anything. You do care. This is what you wanted to hear all your life, so why does it make you angry? Where was this 10 years ago? And why now? For a second you believed that maybe after so long she finally woke up. More than anything you wished she was always like this. Every once in a blue moon there were moments of genuine connection between you where she wasn't drunk or too busy pretending to be a good mother. Despite all your rage, it gave you hope.

You're just afraid of change. Maybe you didn't want it to stop in the first place, because who would you be without it? Or maybe it was your hope. Maybe you thought one day she would finally look at you like a normal person, or thank you, or apologize for real, because you know she can. She just did. There were very few things you knew for certain about her, and one was that she was absolutely trying her best to do what she thinks is good for you. For the first time, you didn't even have to respond. You just sat there, soaking in the silence. You hate it when she does the right thing.

Before you can finish your thought she chimes something that you didn't quite catch, but she got up from the couch and began to grab her car keys, signaling that you were about to head

off. It felt like ages since she's driven you to school. The car ride was completely silent. The only thing you heard was your own internal monologue the whole way. Briefly after you had left the driveway, you noticed JD from across the street staring. Embarrassed, you looked down and pretended not to notice him. When you arrived at the school entrance, she didn't even walk up with you.

As you left, she blurted a quick "I love you" before driving off. As much as you try to brush off your interaction, you felt on edge from it all day. Especially around him.

"If you didn't want me to walk with you, all you had to do was ask," JD remarked with his usual ambiguity. Was it though? You had a sickening feeling he would have said the same thing either way. You're not supposed to contest with him. I don't know. Maybe you should have asked first. It's the proper thing to do. "So she lets you walk alone now?"

You didn't know what to say.

"I suppose," you puzzled.

"What's the catch?" he prompts. "There's always a catch."

Your mind goes blank. You don't want to believe that. Everything feels so slow all of a sudden. He notices you staring off into space and immediately matches your tone.

"Hey, are you okay?" he worries, taking your hand in his.

You try to be honest with him. "I don't know..."

He paused trying to think of what to say. He always had an answer for situations like this.

"If you did, would you tell me?" he questioned, trying to be as gentle as possible.

You didn't want to think about this right now. What's the honest answer? Don't you know? Does saying what he wants to hear make you a dishonest person? What even does he want to hear? You want to confide in him. Of course, you love him. You wish he could just take the thoughts out of your head and see for himself, that way there's no misunderstanding. It's good to be open with people. You should tell him. But what if you change your mind? Then you're the liar. Now you have a new thing to worry about; what is right, and what is safe. You didn't want to worry him.

Still, you picked the answer you thought was safest.

"I don't know."

You're not lying. You're too conflicted right now. However, this answer concerned JD. Turns out neither were correct.

He sighed with a puzzled expression, his dark eyes conjuring up ideas you wish you understood. Though, it never ceased to charm you how much he cared. The moment he pulled you into an embrace, you felt drunk on his kindness. This was what you missed. His warmth was hypnotizing and reminded you of all the reasons you chose him.

"It'll be okay," he coos. It was like he read your mind. He knows you too well.

Loosening you from his arms, his eyes lock onto yours as if he had decided something.

"Meet me after school, okay?" he insisted.

"Where?" you asked.

"Just go home. I'll meet you there." He pecked you on the cheek and hurried away. In your daze, the billows of his coat reminded you of a raven's feathers. You were always drawn to how inquisitive he was, always thinking and asking questions. Always planning. You hated surprises but loved the adrenaline when they came from him. Despite your fears it never failed to keep you coming back.

The rest of the day dragged and dragged until finally the last bell of the day rang. You walked home alone today, an experience that would have been quite peaceful on any other occasion. What are you thinking about? Who are you when I'm not here to tell you what to think?

As you approached your dreary doorstep, as promised, JD was waiting for you in the driveway.

"I figured she'd be less mad if you got home a little earlier," he considered.

"What if she sees you?" you pose.

"She won't," he concludes. Behind him, the window had an orange glow behind the broken blinds. She was awake. At least I think she is. JD glanced back and moved out of view just in case when he turned his attention back to you, still thinking about this morning.

"How are you feeling?" he remembered.

Not much has changed, but you thought you'd give him a chance. "Confused," you answer.

"Why?"

I suppose there's no point in hiding. "She thanked me."

"What?"

"She thanked me this morning. No strings attached," you confess.

"And you believed her?"

"Yes..." you pause, noticing his quizzical expression. You correct yourself. "I suppose... I don't know."

He looked at you for a long while, constructing his response, always so careful with his words. They surprised you. "I would too," he agreed. That's odd. "You do a lot for her. If she never thanked you, you wouldn't stay now would you?"

You're at a loss. Would you? Did you forget all of the damage she did to you? Did you forget every time she went back on her word? "I don't know," you reply, defeated. Is that all you can say anymore?

"Then what's keeping you?" he waxes, careful not to upset his tone of voice. Why must he always answer with more questions? You know what's keeping you, but he'd probably have an equally witty comeback for that as well. He's too smart. You both loved and hated that about him.

He sobs. "Letting go doesn't make you a bad person you know. Poison is always sweet." You avoid his eyes. You know he's right. At this point you're just delaying the inevitable. It was difficult to withstand his gentleness when he spoke. It was so hard to tell if you were uncomfortable from the novelty or if you were reliving the same thing. Fear feels the same from all angles, so you never know what's real. Nobody else cared for you like he did, and you figured it was just something to get used to. This is normal, not whatever was inside that house. Isn't that really all you wanted? To be normal? Have a boyfriend, go out, and enjoy the world with someone? He was all you had.

You decided to try something you'd never done before. In your tired daze, you drift yourself into his arms and lay your head on his shoulder. Maybe this would help you think. Things always seemed to be clearer when you were close to him. You never thought you'd enjoy the smell of cigarettes until you met him. Like a charm, he brings his hand to your head, feeling your turmoil. This is what you needed. For the first time all day your inner monologue silences and you can just breathe. You wished every day were like this, and JD wished the same. After your mind clears, you lean yourself away slowly. "You can go inside if you want. I'll be here," he breathed, knowing you need time.

Nodding slowly, you maneuver yourself into the house where your mother was sitting on the couch. She flinched upright at your arrival as if she had been sleeping, almost spilling the mug of coffee in her hands.

"Hi honey, how was your day?" she said rubbing her eyes.

"Good," you respond robotically.

"That's good," she smiles. "Thank you for leaving this out for me by the way. I was beginning to drift off." Before you can say anything she takes a sip from the mug. You are puzzled.

"I didn't though," you perplex. You only just got home.

"There's no need to be shy sweetie," she reasoned. Perhaps you forgot? Or maybe she forgot. Sometimes her medication makes her forget things, so it wouldn't be out of the ordinary. Or maybe there was just some left in the Keurig from this morning. You wander into the kitchen to check, when you notice an empty pill bottle on the counter. That's strange. Usually she takes them at night, and the sun was still high in the sky. The clarity you got from earlier was beginning to wear off and you could hear yourself think again. As you make your way back into the living room you end up standing still in a stalemate, incredibly distracted. It always seems to happen when she's around. But she's not even doing anything.

She interrupts. "What kind of drinks do you like?" she asks. You blink at the question. "I realized I don't think I've asked you."

That's right. She's never asked. You're so used to being told what to like that you'd never even considered. Even more shocking coming from her of all people. Why though? What does she gain from this? Trust? Is that what she's trying to do? Remember what JD said. But there's no way she would have kept it up this long if it was a ruse. Even if she is pretending, does it matter? She still asked, after all. Who cares if it's fake if it's the right thing to do? How do you know? What do you think? Not JD, not her, you. Remember you? What would you say?

"Slushies," you default.

It was like an instinct. You couldn't think of anything else.

Do you even remember who you used to be?

Was that person even you?

Before you can think your mother replies. "Maybe we could get slushies sometime."

She considered you for the first time and you didn't even give your own answer.

Smiling as she sips her coffee, you gaze off into space. You have so many questions. Would she really change? Is JD right about her? Where did the coffee come from? Why did he ask to meet you at your own house? Why was there an empty pill bottle on the counter? How did he get here before you?

As you head towards the door to meet JD, you hear her set her coffee on the table before a dull thud stops you in your tracks.

Was she drunk?

You turn back to your mother to find her passed out crooked on the couch. To make sure she's okay, you head back and start calling to her.

"Are you okay?" you stirred.

...

...

...

...

She didn't reply.

...

...

...

"Hello?"

...

...

She didn't reply.

...

"Are you awake?"

She didn't reply.

"Mom?"

She didn't reply.

You try poking her.

...

...

She is stiff.

Your face goes red hot. Suppressing the ball forming in your throat, you try to pinch yourself awake.

But you are awake.

There's no way.

You keep poking.

And calling.

And poking.

And calling.

And poking.

And shaking.

And pinching.

...

...

...

You're crying.

The door opens behind you.

It's JD.

"What happened?" he asks, strangely calm.

Trying to stand was useless. You try to lay yourself neatly onto the floor but by this point you had lost feeling in your legs. He catches you. You can barely breathe.

JD looks up at her in disbelief, reaching for her wrist. There was no pulse. His face was pale and frozen in the same blank position. An almost indistinguishable gasp escapes him. Slowly he brings his arms back to you, holding you tightly against him. His eyes never left her. He was like a statue holding you firmly in reality as you cried for answers. You attempted to mirror his slow, controlled breathing but nothing seemed to work. He was a lifeboat, and you were sinking.

"You're okay," he whispers affectionately.

No you're not. You are very visibly not okay, but you have no breath to respond, desperate that he tell you it isn't real.

He brings you closer. "Just breathe."

You're trying. Focus. Stop trying to answer what you don't know and breathe.

Breathe.

After what seemed like thirty minutes of heaves, your sobbing subsides.

"She's gone," he mumbles, trying to lighten the blow. The tears come back. You can barely peep your reply.

"How?"

He remains composed. "She said she could never live without you, remember?" he smooths the hair out of your eyes. "An overdose."

The pills. How did he know? You look up at him confounded.

He drags his hand sweetly across your cheek, lulling you into a dense fog. "She can't hurt you anymore."

"What are you saying?" you manage.

"I would never hurt you," he persuades. "You are the only good thing in my life. You always will be."

Where are you?

"You're safe now."

Think. Please.

Wake up.

The longer you stay in his arms the farther you melt into him. Suddenly your heart slows.

Snap out of it.

"I promise you'll never be alone again."

...Isn't that what you wanted?

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