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LAVENDER AND WANT

Beck is forty-five and Cora is twenty-one. Both of them know this is a cut and dry “I’m fucking you and you’re fucking me so we both feel better” situation, but neither has the stomach to fully treat it that way. Cora needs a way to forget her dead boyfriend. Beck just needs something bright in his life because his ex-wife and the divorce seemed to have sucked the color out of it.

When he’d first brought Cora home with him, Beck was somehow soothed by the way she’d slipped off her white sneakers at the entryway and walked barefoot through the hardwood hallways. It had made it seem like she already lived there and was just coming back from the store or something. It seemed a lot more normal than when he’d first met Cora.

Beck had been coming home for a quick lunch break from the feed and tackle store where he worked when he saw a young woman sunbathing on the roof of her car—bikini, sunglasses and all. *I mean, this is Southern California*, he thought, *but still*. Her hood was popped, but given the circumstances she didn’t seem to be too worried about it. Beck had pulled over anyway, gotten out of his truck and hailed her from about twenty feet away. He didn’t want to seem like he was sneaking up on her. He asked if she needed a hand. She had raised herself up on one elbow. Her forehead had a slight shine to it, and her chest and cheeks were getting rosy.

“Needs a jump,” she said, after watching his six foot something frame appraisingly, noting the slight hitch in his right leg. *Probably a bad knee*, she thought. “I haven’t got the money for a new one yet, and this piece of shit has been giving me trouble for the past fifty miles, so I figured, fuck it,” she said.

She climbed down, her bikini bottom askew on the right, showing off a contrasting strip of white to tan skin. *Girl is asking for it*, Beck thought, and he made an effort to quell his admiration for the length of her smooth stomach. South Sierra really isn’t the town for young women who sunbathe on the roofs of their cars. More like women who shop at TJ Maxx and Dress Barn, who make casseroles topped with potato chips and wear belt buckles.

She’d walked over to him, barefoot on the hot dirt. “I’m Cora,” she said, shaking his hand, satisfied by the firmness, the calluses and the sheer size.

“Beck,” he’d said, his tan face opening in a sincere smile. She noted his thick brown hair and straight teeth. His brown eyes weren’t bad either, no glasses. She gave him an Oh-yeah-I’m-definitely-gonna-nail-you-smile, and he felt worried and like a badass at the same time.

Cora was relieved when she found that Beck’s two-story house smelled like black coffee and bacon and fresh laundry. She’d been hoping that he didn’t smoke, and surreptitiously glanced over at the fireplace in the den, glad that there were no deer heads or any other overtly male taxidermy trophies. No, from what she had seen so

far, Cora had the impression that Beck Davis was just a regular, handsome workingman who asked few questions and was turning out to be quite fuckable. It had been her plan since the moment he'd pulled off to the side of the road and given her car a jump.

Beck and Cora sat at the kitchen table where Beck had eaten alone for the past three years. The same table that Beck used to sit at with his ex-wife, Lauren. Beck slid a glass of ice tea over to Cora, watching her long fingers fold around it, noticing that it was the pint glass that he and Lauren had stolen from that restaurant in El Paso a few months after their honeymoon when they were on their way back from his parents' time share in Myrtle Beach. When he was twenty-five, and when he and Lauren had made love like at any minute the Earth was going to run out of air—ravenous and tender at the same time.

Beck ran a hand through his hair and became aware of Cora watching him, so he made an effort to smile again and began the usual series of questions any respectable forty-five-year-old would ask of a college graduate while trying not to notice the way her auburn hair swung as she undid her ponytail. Beck made sure his brown eyes stayed level with hers. What did you study? Anthropology. Where are you from? San Diego. Going somewhere in particular? Where-the-fuck-ever. As Beck raised his eyebrows at her, Cora shifted her eyes like she realized that she might be coming off as an immature asshole, which up until the past three months had not been her style at all. Beck saw her look down and wondered what she was thinking, how she must feel sitting across the table with a man twenty-four years her senior. He watched her rub the thumb and pointer-finger of her right hand together and was surprised by how much he was starting to like her and how she was so different from Lauren.

Cora leaned back in her chair, stretching her legs, and noticed Beck's eyes momentarily glance at the point where her ankles were crossed. She was getting bored and more and more nervous about not being able to go through with it. She'd never done anything like this before. Never talked to strange men or slept with a boy she hadn't been dating for at least a couple weeks. Hell, she'd never been late to dinner with her parents since high school.

Can she be interested in me? Beck thought, looking at the clock and noticing that they'd been talking for at least forty-five minutes now. Maybe it was a sign, her staying so long. But then he became angry and disgusted with himself and the way eagerness filled his chest so easily these days. He thought of Janna down at the diner, her wrists jangling with copper bracelets. *Is that all it takes? A nice looking woman comes along, and I'm toast? Fuck that.* Beck watched Cora looking out the kitchen window at the field of lavender next to his wide gravel drive, the muscles of her neck held taut at the tilt of her head. She'd smelled it through the open window of his truck as they'd pulled in. Watching the purple and silver stalks wave in the breeze, Cora reminded herself that she'd had enough of boys and their scrawny chests, their weird hobbies, their disapproving, coddling mothers. Cora looked at Beck and his wide chest, his lined mouth, and his worn hands, and felt safe. And for Cora, right now safe meant sexy, it meant escape with a safety line.

"No kids, right?" she said, slowly getting up from her chair and stretching. Beck eyed her like she was going to sprout wings or something.

"Nope," he replied. "Ex-wife never wanted any. Just one of those things I guess."

"One of what things?" she asked, pausing halfway down the table, her hand

moving along the glass of iced tea, leaving a thin trail of water on the wood. She wiped it up.

"Regrets," Beck said and wished immediately that he could take it back, not entirely comfortable with how surprisingly easy it was for him to confess things to her. Or maybe what disturbed Beck was that he wanted to tell her, to tell someone who wouldn't look at him like he'd been abandoned. This girl from out of town was the first person in a while to see him and not see the space that Lauren left as well.

"You're nice," Cora said, almost to the other end of the table, her progress slow and sure now. Beck noticed some yellow paint on the edge of her jean shorts, near the inside of her thigh, and wondered how it got there. He could sense the trouble but did nothing to stop her. "Scoot back," Cora told him, and Beck pushed away from the table, letting Cora straddle him, placing his hands gently, but firmly, on her upper thighs. His mind whirled. *I have to get back to work. She's so young. She's legal. She feels like Lauren. No. Better than Lauren.* They kissed, Cora loving the roughness of his cheek against her neck as he moved his mouth to her shoulder, and Beck found she smelled like sunscreen and sandalwood and sweat. He stood up, Cora still wrapped around him, and took her down the hall to his bedroom. She was the first woman he'd slept with since his wife. He was the first man Cora had been with since Will. They both knew she would stay the night.

"My raw sugar," he called her, the words rumbling in his throat like coffee percolating, rich and smooth, the whispers of his breath tickling her ear as he spoke, leaning in over her, close and slow. She called him her midnight cowboy and kissed the corner of his eye, her lips feeling the years of working under the sun tucked into those fine creases. They fucked all night, and Cora was thrilled by the way he knew how to make her flush and buck, his rough hands gliding over her smooth skin, so much better than any other guy she'd ever been with. They had all been clumsy and blind compared to Beck. She now grasped the 'men from the boys' saying on a whole different level. Beck watched her young body twist and rise beneath him, loving her fluid movements—the way she pressed her hands against his chest, dug her nails in, and felt the aggressive beat of his heart. Afterward, she turned on her side and he fit his knees behind hers, his face close enough to inhale the smell of her shampoo, her hair a rich red-brown in the orange glow of the nightlight in the corner of the room. It felt normal. Both fell asleep hoping that whatever this was, it would continue for a while.

After the first week of similar nights, Beck cleared half of his drawers and closet, making space for Cora's clothes and shoes. Both of them knew how desperate they would seem to anyone else. Barely better than strangers and yet they both clung to this unreal hiatus, finding comfort in the strangeness of each other's bodies—skins of different generations. For the first couple nights Beck could barely sleep, unsettled by the sound of someone else's breathing. He woke up exhausted, his shoulders lowered a few inches, but he found Cora was worth the trouble when she followed him into the shower and ran her hands down his back, over the slight paunch at his middle. Beck wasn't fat, but his frame was definitely filled and solid. Cora couldn't get enough of

how his protruding stomach was still so firm.

They wrapped her suitcases in black trash bags and put them in the garage. They started to split the groceries. Cora went out to the field in front of the house and picked some lavender for the chicken she was roasting. Beck learned that Cora used to ride horses, that she knew how to shoot a gun thanks to her ex-military father, and that she could run for fifteen miles along the side of the road to the town water tower before turning around and coming back. And she always came back.

For the first few days, Beck went to work worried that when he came home, she wouldn't be there, and he'd have to face that damn field of lavender Lauren had insisted on planting, alone. He'd come to resent the way it seemed to still flourish in her absence and how as the sharp, sweet scent rose in the air at the end of the day, so did the memories of Lauren and the feeling of her cool hands on his face. She'd been his first real love. The first person he'd told almost everything to, like how his mother had just up and left one day, saying she was better than this, the bracelets clinking on her arm as she swung it wide. He'd wondered if that arc had included him. His father had done his best after that, but Beck knew his mother would be the last woman to walk through the front door, and he'd been right. His daddy had died five years ago from lung cancer, and it had been just Beck who'd stood by and held his hand. He had shared all this with Lauren, and she'd shared things with him, but it just hadn't been enough. The "passion" had slipped out around year ten, they had run out of things to say around year fifteen, and by the time Lauren set the divorce papers on the table, he'd barely made an effort to change her mind. But damn if he didn't still miss her a lot of the time. And when he woke up in the morning by himself, Beck felt ashamed for feeling something way too close to fear at how much he didn't want to spend the rest of his life alone.

So when he went to work, answering the phone and taking down bulk orders from local cattle farms, talking shop with Ed and the rest of the married guys about which ranch had the best livestock, he could barely wait to go home at lunch, where Cora would be waiting with a sandwich, iced tea, and lace underwear. Just the lace underwear. It scared him, how much he wanted to see her, that he was finding that it was more than just fucking, which he could justify or at least be angry about. *I mean*, he thought, *the way she'd come on to me*. But he wasn't about to objectify her or pretend that he hadn't felt in her the same ache and need to fill a space that had been empty for too long. No, Beck liked talking to her, listening to the theories of Malinowski and Rabinow that Cora would still recite just for the sake of reciting them. He even liked watching her throat's smooth movements as she drank water. She was young and loud and slightly vulgar, where Lauren had been quiet and composed. Cora came back from runs, drenched in sweat, and would tell him about a red tailed hawk she'd seen and how its wing tips had turned an opaque brown when it flew beneath the sun. She gave him something he'd needed for a long time.

He was surprised when one evening, he came home from work and found her dancing in the living room. The couch and Lazy Boy recliner were pushed to the sides, his stereo blasting a CD she'd made from her laptop with today's top forties. She laughed when she saw him and dragged him, his boots still on, into the room with her and turned the lights down low. He impressed her when he took off his shirt and swiveled his hips with hers. They went out to the front porch when they got too hot, Beck still with his shirt off and Cora barefoot as usual. They drank water from mason

jars that filled an entire cabinet in Beck's kitchen, and as Cora turned the jar in her hand, she thought that they might have something to do with Lauren. So she turned to him, the moonlight coming through the branches of an overhanging oak tree in slats, making the hair on Beck's chest look silver, and she experienced one of those odd moments where she remembered his age. He was staring out at the lavender, his hands clenching the white railing, and when he looked at her there was a ghost of something shadowing his kind, brown eyes. "Why so many of these?" she asked carefully, tapping the mouth of her jar with a slim finger. Beck sighed, beginning to feel the cool of evening, and felt stupid without his shirt.

"Lauren. I had this whole field planted for her," he said with a flick of his wrist in the direction of the half-acre. "Lauren's Lavender was her idea. She made lavender everything. Extract for cooking, soaps, oils, the works. And she did pretty well for herself. Started off with a booth at the farmers market, then she got some space in a couple local stores." He shifted his weight off his right knee, an old football injury, and looked down the driveway, past the field, past the two lane road, and out into the hills, wishing that he could forget how Lauren used to smile, how she'd always go out into her lavender at midnight in her cream colored dressing gown when there was a full moon and pick a huge handful and say that a little ceremony never hurt. Beck stood at the top of the steps where he always stood when she did this, and he could almost feel her fingers light against his lips, smelling of freshly crushed lavender and earth. Cora came up behind him and wrapped her arms around his stomach, lacing her fingers together, and kissed the middle of his back. Beck felt better with her there, but there were parts of him that her kind of comfort could never quite reach.

"I know what it's like," she said quietly, listening to the hush of his lungs filling as he breathed.

"You dream about him," Beck said, placing his hands on her arms. A while ago, Beck had asked Cora why she hadn't just stayed near home in San Diego where she would have had a pretty good chance of getting a job. Cora had told him she'd been in a car accident. She'd said it had been bad; she'd broken her collarbone and had to stay in the hospital for a week. She'd told him that she'd been trapped in the passenger seat, her body pinned in three places by the collapsed dashboard, while her boyfriend Will Atkinson died next to her.

"Yes." Cora hugged him a little tighter. Beck imagined what Will might have looked like, his blonde hair a bit too short from the haircut he'd gotten just that morning. He pictured them on their way home from dinner at a nicer restaurant, one on the beach. It was their one year anniversary, and Cora had worn a short black dress with white polka dots that Beck had seen hanging in the closet next to his shirts, and Will had shown up at her house with a white rose and in a black button down to match her. Beck knew it sounded a bit sappy, but when he pictured Cora with someone else, some boy her own age, she seemed to shrink and soften in front of him. He worried what sleeping with him might be doing to her. Yes, what was he, Beck Davis, doing for her? It was here, at these moments of doubt, that Beck wished Cora was older, because often times with age and experience came strength. He returned to his stored memories of Janna, owner of the South Sierra Diner, and her voice that was simultaneously rough and smooth, like the rocks at the bottom of creek beds. She'd been one of the first in town to smile at him after the divorce. And she'd smiled not out of pity, but sheer like.

Cora slid her hands up his stomach, and he shivered at the cool of the ring on her thumb. Had she been wearing the ring that night? Cora seemed comfortable and hadn't said anything for a while, and Beck was aware of his desire to finish out the scene, Cora's scene, as if he could find the place where she suddenly stopped caring, and started driving, and cursing, and wanting to fuck an older man. He found the tiny corona of a distant streetlight and listened to the wind chime sway.

They'd been holding hands, and Will had looked over at Cora every other streetlight, their skin momentarily tinged orange as they passed beneath. They were finishing up their last year together at UCSD and were planning to move somewhere and get jobs, whatever they could find while they figured out what they wanted to do. It had seemed so easy then. They could still put things off. It didn't matter, because of course, they had each other. Of course. And of course, around the curve, as Will's eyes met Cora's beneath the glow of orange, the Ford truck, like a yellow flash of fate or irony or just plain cruelty, was driving on the wrong side of the road and hit them head on.

Beck shifted his weight, and a floorboard beneath them creaked softly. Cora hooked her fingers into the belt loops of his jeans. "What would make you forget, Beck?" she asked, and he knew she was still thinking of Will. "What do you want?" Beck knew that he could say, "You," or "I'm all right." But he'd never been much of a liar, so instead he stroked the points of her knuckles, and told her that he didn't know, not yet at least.

It was at night though that Cora couldn't escape Will's face, the way his eyes had darted from side to side, not seeing her. And it was the sounds he'd made, thick and wet, as he'd fought for air. She heard those noises behind her in her dreams. Everything was pitch black and once again she couldn't move. She was pleading out loud with that God who doesn't exist until you need him to, begging him to let Will live, to fix it, to take it back, because she loved him. She had loved him. And then she was awake and Beck was holding her tight, whispering her name and kissing the back of her head. Some nights she cried, turning and burying her face in his chest, inhaling his smell like it was a cure. Other nights she could pull herself together, think of how at least Will's mom and dad were still very much in love, able to lean on each other. That made her feel better. But always, Beck was there, awake and solid and sure.

It was a few hours after Beck went back to work, that Cora, coming back from a late afternoon run, saw a silver mini-van pull in to Beck's driveway. The side panel had the words *Lauren's Lavender* scripted on the door, and through the tinted windows, Cora could make out shapes, linear and solid, possibly suitcases and some furniture. She slowed her pace to a walk. Cora stayed on the other side of the road under the pretense of stretching, watching as a slight woman in jeans and a white blouse got out of the driver's side and walked slowly up to the door. Cora contemplated possibly crossing the street and confronting her, letting the older woman see everything that she no longer had: a toned body, hair that didn't need the roots touched up, twenty extra years, and of course Beck. But it was more likely that, as Cora continued to watch Lauren, she couldn't help but notice her beauty. Lauren had light blonde hair that fluffed around

the sharp contours of her face. The lines that Cora could see surrounding her mouth and eyes gave her the dignity of a life well lived. Lauren bent and set down a card on the doormat, placing a small deep blue bottle on top of it. She then turned, still not noticing Cora, and touched a finger to the wind chime Cora had made with some beach glass and driftwood she'd found in the garage, smiling as the green and blue and white pieces knocked lightly against each other. She leaned on the edge of the porch railing for a little while. Lauren wore her hay-colored hair, the lines on her face, and the collected years on her shoulders with grace. Cora felt something shift inside as she realized that Lauren fit more than she did. By the time Lauren got back into her van and drove away, Cora was crossing the road, thinking about where she'd last seen her suitcases, tucked away in the garage.

At least, that's how Beck figured it happened, as he stood in the middle of his burned and blackened lavender field, dried and skeletal stalks crumbling at his feet. His hands deep in the pockets of his jeans, he pressed the fingers of his right hand against the note Cora had left him.

Beck came up to the register through the door to the back store room, having just finished helping Kevin, the new kid they'd hired just last week, clean up the millet seed he'd spilled. The pellets had gone everywhere, and the god damn kid had just been making it worse by stepping all over the crumbled pieces as he tried to sweep it up. There was a woman waiting behind the counter. It was Janna. On the occasions that Beck had eaten at the diner, since he and Lauren had gotten divorced, she'd come over and taken his order herself. Beck liked the way her steps sounded as she walked, a little heavier despite her lean frame, and the way he could tell from her hands and her slim forearms that she worked hard. He looked down at the red bridle and metal hoof pick lying on the counter. "This everything?" he asked her, smiling and scanning them in.

"Yep, thanks," Janna said, handing him her card. "Got a race coming up next week in Bakersfield, and I just thought I'd refresh my stock." Beck knew Janna was an excellent barrel racer and had seen a couple of the belt buckles that she'd won over the years hanging around her hips as she refilled his coffee.

"Well, good luck." Beck hesitated, and Janna leaned back on her heels. "Maybe I'll stop by and watch you?" He blushed. "I mean, Bakersfield is only forty-five minutes out, and they have some good barbecue places..." Janna laughed, all blue eyes and crinkled corners.

"I'd like that," she said, nodding. "What about that young girl I've heard you've got at your place though? She's your niece? That's what Alice from down the street told me." Beck rolled his eyes inwardly. *God damn nosy Alice Hanson. Always trying to stir the pot.* He'd been feeling so much better lately, gotten used to the idea of Cora being there, that he'd forgotten about what people in town might think. He hadn't been hiding her, there just wasn't much to do in town, and Beck had even felt a little afraid of Cora finding him boring. She'd never really seemed to care that much anyway, comfortable to go running or hiking through the nearby hills instead.

"Guess I have to talk to her," Beck said. They'd have to straighten things out, see what was really going on. Janna took her bag and started heading for the door.

"Well, let me know in the next few days," she said with a little wave. "You know where to find me." As he watched her truck pull out of the parking lot, her strong hands gripping the steering wheel, Beck began to know what he might want.

They turned off the sirens on the fire trucks finally, though Beck could still hear Tucker, the local sheriff, yelling across to either Howe or Greg, firefighters, about what they thought happened. Beck had been told that the fire had started from the middle of the field, somewhere closer to the road, and burned outward from there. A passing car, Bud Hollis from Hollis' Hardware, had been driving home and seen the flames and the smoke and called it in. The fire department had responded within fifteen minutes, but that was after who-knows how long after the field had started burning. The flames was almost entirely gone, contained to just the field and half a tree. Beck nudged the remains of a bush with the toe of his shoe, watching as it fell like grey snow. *She must have showered*, he thought. Cora always showered after a run. Then she packed, and then he could see her as she loaded up her car, knowing that she'd had about an hour before he got home. She made her way back up the driveway, feeling the gravel shift beneath her shoes, and wondered if she was making the right decision. She fingered the edges of the card that Lauren had left.

When she'd picked up the blue bottle, which turned out to be lavender extract, he could see her debating whether or not she should read the letter, whether she should just throw it away, or leave it for him to read on his own. In the end, Beck decided, Cora had sat on the top step, the sun soaking into her bare shoulders, and slipped a finger beneath the envelope edge and read the note. It hadn't been very long, and the printing was the same looping script as the logo on the van. Cora would have found it slightly annoying and frilly. Lauren had written that she hoped that Beck was doing all right and that her own business was doing really great. Lauren then gave her new home address and said that if Beck was anywhere in the neighborhood that he should look her up. She had ended with a simple: —Lauren.

As Cora tucked the letter into the back pocket of her jeans, Beck wondered what she'd been thinking. He hoped that she didn't feel hurt and then chided himself, because Cora was better than that. She more likely brushed herself off and thought that she couldn't stay. Which was true. Beck imagined that it was the image of Lauren, leaning over the white railing, in her white blouse, her blonde hair waving in the wind. It was how Christmas-card-picturesque Lauren must have looked—the gracefully aging, middle class woman, waiting on a wraparound porch—that had clued Cora in about the role she had been trying to fill. The quietness of the town, of his house, had lulled her, and comforted her like the murmur of familiar voices in the next room at night. And Beck, with his broad chest and soft eyes, well, he had given her a place to land and rest. But watching Lauren, Cora recognized the danger of settling too soon.

Beck then had Cora take the letter out and roll it so that it fit in the mouth of the bottle, tipping it a couple of times so that the extract soaked into the paper and the looping print. Cora would have known from a cooking recipe that lavender extract is made by fermenting the heads of lavender in one-hundred-proof vodka. She then took a match from the box she'd found in the drawer to the left of the kitchen sink, lit it, and watched the edges of Lauren's new address curl and blacken, before winding up and arching the bottle, its dark blue flashing in the late afternoon sun, out into the middle of the field. Cora then calmly walked to her car and pulled out of the driveway. As she began to head north, Beck watched her roll down her windows, smiling as she smelled smoke, and lavender, and the last remnants of something both she and Beck were better off letting go of.