

# This Is What Lovers Do

## *The Realization of Lust*

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The train screeches to a halt. Two hours of sleep, but it felt like five seconds. I gather my sweater I used as a pillow and the bag I hastily packed. The only other passenger—a handsome man in his early thirties—avoids my eyes. I do the same.

It is 7:00 and crisp; I can taste the frost hanging in the air. The birds chirp, but I have to fight the yawns. The walk to my parents house is a quick one: only fifteen minutes long. The man and I part ways. (Where is he going? Who is he going to meet? His beard is too long and too thick to be meeting for business, but it seems like something a woman might like. James, I remember, hadn't shaved for a couple days.)

I shake the thought out of my head.

The doorbell rings. There is a scuffling inside, and the door swings open. Ma stands at the other end, bathed by the white morning sun dripping through the crystal windows behind her. Ethereal is a word she taught me. "Thomas," her eyes soften at the sight of me. When she smiles, her crow's feet become distinct lines pressed into her temples. She draws me into her arms and squeezes me tightly. I pray she can't smell the alcohol on my clothes. "I've missed you." She releases me, but she keeps a hand on my arm.

"It's only been a few weeks, Ma." I give her the strongest smile that I can muster, which isn't very strong at all.

"I know," she keeps her hands clutched at her chest. "But what becomes of a mother when her child leaves?"

"I didn't leave."

"I know," She sounds sad when she says this. I don't know why. "How are you?"

"I'm fine."

"You didn't call."

"I... I wanted to surprise you."

"Thomas..." she touches my arm again, lightly. Full of waiting sympathy. If I knew my mother, the kettle was on the stove and boiling. There was always tea with her.

"I might just go to bed. Long train ride, and all that." I point inside.

"Of course. Tea can always wait." She steps aside. I mumble a thanks. She squeezes my arm as I walk past. She watches me as I climb the stairs. Even when I can't see her eyes, I can feel the worry in them, pushing its way into my head.

My room—my childhood home—is the same as I left it. I wasn't sure what I was expecting. But the curtains are the same thick blood red. I close one, and my room splits between light and dark. There's the same tall mahogany frame and the same king's bed. I collapse into it, and my body sinks into the feathered mattress. The same velvet pillows my ma insisted on buying for my sixteenth birthday. I rub the fabric against my cheek and clutch it to my chest. The pillows match the curtains. And the walls. The bloody walls.

There's something different about being in your childhood home when you're no longer a child. I can't sense the feeling of... Comfort? Safety? Wonder? What was I feeling as a child when I lied here? I can't remember. All I can feel now is this... This *feeling*. This feeling of something trying to claw its way into my chest as it bites and scratches and screams. Maybe it's coming from inside me. I can't tell. But it looms. It bleeds into the rest of the room.

Above me are the glow in the dark stars Alice gave me. On my sixteenth birthday. Right after I got the pillows. She stayed the night then. She slept on the floor. I kept wanting to reach out for her. To hold her hand. But I never did. I kept my arms stiffly at my sides all night. In the morning, I remember they were sore.

Alice...

I left her. She let me sleep at her place, and I left her. I couldn't sleep, so I left her. I couldn't stop thinking, so I couldn't sleep. She called me. She called me dozens of times, but I didn't pick up. She'll be calling again. I know I won't answer. I don't know what I'll say. I'll have to say something. I don't know what to say. How could I say it?

Alice's stars glow a faded blue; they're just bright enough to burn holes through your skull if you look closely enough. I count them.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Five.

Six.

Seven.

James...

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Five.

Six.

His lips were on mine.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Five.

I kissed him back.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

And I kissed him.

One.

Two.

Three.

And I kissed him.

One.

Two.

James...

One.

I want to kiss him more.

*More.*

I want to kiss him more.

I let the words hang in front of me. I can see each stroke of the letters. His name in italics, lingering at the front of my mind. The words did nothing except look back, peering with the mask I made it.

My stomach fills with a familiar dread.

I've fantasized about kissing other people before. In the late night, I would caress my chest and imagine a lover was doing it. She would draw me in and lay my head against her robed chest. I would hear the beating of her heart; it was slow and harmonious with mine. She would kiss me softly, slowly against all the places I kept private. We would hang onto each other and touch the other's skin and even exchange saliva. We did all the things lovers did. It was always such an intimate thing.

I could never see who was kissing me...

Her face was always hidden in the shadows. The same shadows of youthful memory. Always blurry. The shadows never left her face. Not even when she tilted her head to kiss me. Fantasies are fickle like that.

I do this now. I imagine Alice when I do. I envision her blonde bob framing her heart-shaped face. I envision her plum lips kissing me against the mouth and other places. I envision her voice whispering in my ear. (Has her voice always been that low?)

I envision her tongue tracing the outline of my jaw. I envision her hair knotted in my hands. I envision her round chest pressed against mine. I envision her gold-brown eyes...

Her blue eyes. Her eyes are blue. His eyes are bronze.

I keep losing her face. Her chest becomes smooth and flat. Her hair becomes his thick, black hair. Her hands become his gentle ones. He cups my face, bringing me to meet his eyes. I want to get lost in those eyes. I want to find where they take me. He kisses me, and I can feel the phantom softness of his lips on mine. His mouth finds its way down to all the places he couldn't get to last night. Warmth spreads across my stomach and pulses down my legs. I can feel myself melting to fit his body. I reach for his hand, but he disappears.

Heat sits at the bottom of my stomach, burning... Not unpleasantly. I go to wash my skin in the shower. I don't bother to turn on the heat. The water drips off my back, but I can barely feel the cold biting its way to my core.

James...

He might see me as more than a friend. He might want to kiss me. He might want to do more than that; it's why he took me upstairs. How long has he wanted that? How long have I? Do I? I'm supposed to want to be him, not... Not want to be *with* him. That's not the narrative. That's not how things are meant to go. I'm meant to find a lady that will teach me the language of touch. I never met such a lady, so he took that responsibility. He guided me upstairs. He chose to kiss me. He chose to touch me before any girl could. He's to blame.

Except...

I can't say I didn't stop him. I can't deny that I didn't want to be kissed. I can't deny that kissing him felt good. Lord forgive me, but it felt better than any kiss I could have imagined with a girl. It felt better than the one kiss I did have with Alice. And... I wanted him to kiss me. Him, of all the girls at that party.

I admit this. I allow myself to admit all the things I kept private since I met him. I wanted him to kiss me. I wanted to kiss him back, so that's what I chose to do. I want to kiss a boy. A man. I want to do more than kiss a man. I want to kiss James.

I wasn't sure what to make of it. Or what it made of me.