

Hidden Sacrifices

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Mikaighla remembers when Kaidon was nine and she was eight. Their next door neighbour had two boys, just a year older than her brother and their favourite game was to pick on him. One day, Kaidon came home with scrapes on his knees and his bike a little mangled. He told their parents that it was an accident but the next day, Mikaighla noticed how her brother kept checking the window before going back outside.

The next time the boys were in their front yard to play, Mikaighla marched out there with her favourite Barbie. It was a princess one but the dress had been long lost and replaced by a doctor's one. She still had a tiara on, even though it was now black from a poor paint job with a Sharpie. Losing her was worth it for Kaidon.

The boys had stopped and looked at her in confusion but she only smiled before wrenching the Barbie's head off and throwing it onto the ground. Its matted blonde hair was splayed out and sticker blue eyes looked up at her. Crocodile tears started running down her cheeks as she started screaming and wailing for her mother. Immediately, the boys' mother came out and demanded an explanation. Mikaighla pointed at the Barbie's head and then at the two boys, who finally realised what she was doing. Just when they were trying to defend themselves, her own mother came out and started scolding the boys.

Mikaighla knew she'd won when her mother picked her up with placating words to quieten her feigned sorrow whereas the boys were dragged back to their house by their ears and useless apologies. She especially remembered Kaidon's small smile when he learnt that the boys were grounded for a whole week.

Now, he's seventeen and she's sixteen. Dinner has been ready for ten minutes and they're all present, save for one. Mikaighla's father keeps talking about The Game and her mother is setting the table while nodding along, clearly not interested in anything her father is saying.

Plain plates and steel cutlery. The ones with colourful patterns around the rim had been thrown out a long time ago. A typical Tuesday then.

Her mother's yells for Kaidon have done nothing to bring him downstairs. Her father grumbles like it's their fault her brother isn't down here. She wants to argue but once she starts, her voice inevitably gets louder and her tears start falling faster, creating the perfect opportunity for her father to laugh at her. Tears are more like gasoline when it comes to him so she figures it's better to keep pretending she hasn't already cut off the thread from her once sewn lips. She wonders if her mother has, too.

He orders Mikaighla to get Kaidon and she doesn't fight back.

The lights are off in his room and there's a tension in the air that skitters its way around her ankles. She wants to stomp on it with the same cruelty of flooding ant hills and temper tantrums in supermarkets. Kaidon is sitting on his bed with a bowed head and his hands are surprisingly still. His blond hair looks too messy and Mikaighla knows he's been tugging on it. She places a hand on his shoulder as she checks his open hands. Skin without imprinted crescents mean he's been sitting here for at least an hour, his body likely sore and the white wall as entertaining as a kaleidoscope.

She calls out his name, shaking his shoulder slightly. When she starts to lift her hand, his head jerks up, eyes frantically meeting hers and he grasps her wrist tightly. "I'm not leaving," she says quietly. Mikaighla hopes there's no bruises for her to lie about afterwards. Maybe a scowl and a dismissive glare could ward off most. Some makeup might be able to cover it. Hell, a ditzy laugh and blank eyes would probably be suffi—"I'm gay."

Oh.

Mikaighla has never been good with words. Talking feels more like an inevitable waterfall and she figures the best way to avoid a flood is by building a dam.

"Okay, cool." She replies, internally wincing. She should jump out the window at this point. She should be saying something about how she still loves him, about how he's normal and

not a freak like their parents say at every chance they get. But she didn't.

There's a pause where he just stares at her and Mikaighla's so sure that he's going to cry. Instead, he lets go of her wrist and pulls her down for a hug. Her eyes widen in surprise, but she slowly wraps her arms around him. It feels suffocating in the best way possible and there's a warmth she doesn't want to feel in this house.

She wonders how long 'gay' has been lodged in his throat in the same type of ache she gets when she's trying not to cry in front of her father. She wonders if it's been cutting into the insides of his cheek, forcing him to taste the metallic tang of his own blood. Kaidon pulls away after an agonizing few seconds and she almost sighs in relief. He smiles at her and she notices how it actually reaches his eyes. She doesn't remember when he'd stopped doing that.

"I'm dating Jiranathan," he blurts, like coming out was the earthquake and this was an aftershock. At her furrowed brows, he tacks on, "You haven't met him before." She opens her mouth to respond but before she can figure out what to say, he deflates with a frown. "It's probably not going to work out. Can you even imagine a gay couple lasting at our school?" She couldn't.

"How long?" she asks, sitting next to him on the bed. Mikaighla needs to solve this for him.

"A few months now. He sat next to me in English," Kaidon starts tugging on his hair again, "and I thought he was weird because he was way too into Greek mythology. He never shut up about it but I guess," there's a small quirk of his lips, "I started getting into them too."

"How have you been hiding it so far?"

"I've been lying to Mom and Dad about going to hang out with Jaesyn and the rest of them."

A small smile comes back, but it's different this time. There's more than just happiness to it.

"We go to the edge of town, where no one would expect us to be. There's still a risk of running into someone, but we've been lucky so far."

"Tell me about him?" Mikaighla has never seen her brother hold so much hope in a small smile.

He gives a deep tired sigh as he leans into her. "They say that a boy who likes boys is a dead boy," Kaidon murmurs, a far away look in his eyes. "He said that if we died, he'd make sure we had wings better than Icarus'. That Apollo would never dare to melt our wax and we'd be able to soar even higher." His voice sounds so soft, like it's meant to curl around anyone he speaks to. She thinks of the soft voice in her own head. "He likes to say that before Zeus had unleashed his fear onto us, we'd been a whole being with four arms, four legs and a head with two faces and that our eons of endless searching have finally led us back to each other." He sighs and looks back at Mikaighla. "I really like him."

"I can tell," is the first thing that comes out of her mouth. One of these days, she's going to say the right thing. Mikaighla can feel her own hands starting to fidget. She doesn't want Kaidon to lose his newly regained gentility. "I'll help."

He tilts his head at her. "What?"

"I'll help," she repeats, her back straightening. "I'll come up with something."

A week later, Mikaighla tells her parents that she and Jiranathan are dating. This way, they could hide themselves indoors and her parents would finally get off her back about not being 'into boys' enough.

Mikaighla doesn't tell Kaidon about Sofiyah, the girl who sits next to her in English. She doesn't tell him about Sofiyah's sunshine grins and starlight filled eyes that paint her ceiling at 3am or about Sofiyah's many pens that perfectly make a rainbow and how she always arranges them as such. Losing her is worth it for Kaidon.