

Katie DePasquale  
**Penance**

**Y**ou go upstairs with him because you're buzzed, because you think he's full of shit and want to see how far he'll take it, because he's told you he wants to show you his tattoo "but not in front of the whole party." You are secretly delighted by the idea that he thinks that's all he needs to do to entice you, when all you feel is a pleasantly blunted curiosity. Together you walk up a set of stairs with ratty red carpeting and little insets in the dirty white walls filled with lit candles. It's like stepping through an altar. The noise of the party raging below is gone, and as you blink, his shirt is gone too. You take a step back. He's not that tall, so his chest isn't big, but it's ripped, hairless, the color of maple syrup. On his left pec, a gray alien head with elongated eyes in neon green challenges you not to laugh. He tells you, "It's about alienation, see, my alienation from myself and my culture and the whole world. Because I'm not always me, y'know, my true self, it's too complex for the world. I got to represent . . ." And he goes on, slipping in a flex so that his pecs jump as he's spitting out his personal creed, black eyes hard on your face to gauge how much he's impressing you. You nod, try to keep from looking skeptical or amused. After all, you were raised to be a nice girl.

At the first pause in his monologue, you can tell he's going to make his move. You suddenly realize just how removed you are up here, and your survival instincts shake off the booze and scream at you for going away from the crowd with a guy you've just met. If this were a made-for-TV movie, he'd be holding you down on the couch right now, trying to rip open his pants and worm down your jeans at the same time. You'd be a public service announcement to girls everywhere about the dangers of having three martinis with your friends and following a guy whose opening is to walk up, plop a cowboy hat on your head, and pull you, resisting, into a dance. His arms are around you and his face against yours as you gasp a little and turn away, feeling desperate at the thought that this guy could be the first one since your last boyfriend to kiss you.

"What's up?" It's a purr, not a question, and he doesn't let go, as if he doesn't quite believe that you mean it though you're straining against his grip. He smells bitter and spicy, like warm beer and half a bottle of cologne. "You ok?" You can't explain that you're thinking of your ex and how horribly things ended between the two of you last month. The wounds still rip at the edges when you replay what happened, how you were deceived, how you were deceitful.

"Fine."

"You sure?"

"Yeah," you say, struggling not to tear up. He stares and you conclude vaguely, "Just, you know, bad memories." He misunderstands and says, "A bad experience? Did something happen to you, in your past?" His eyebrows rise, and his tongue flicks his lower lip, shining it. Apparently he is intrigued as well as sorry about this awful thing you must have gone through that keeps you from giving in to him now. His expression loses its predatory edge, and he backs off a little although he continues to rub your

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arm. You find yourself nodding, letting this guy invent whatever trauma he wants to for you because you don't know how to give him the truth.

He insists on a hug but then stops petting you, lets you walk away and back down the candlelit stairs alone, as you argue with yourself, knowing that it's weird and wrong to let him see you as a victim, even if that's the only thing stopping him now from making you one. But then you remember how insistent he was that you come up here even in the face of your polite but obvious reluctance; how he immediately took off half his clothing; how many girls you know who've been raped; how you're always too busy being pleasant to come right out and say no and what that's done to you in relationships; and you think, Fuck it. Let him feel guilty. Let him feel guilty for all the things he hasn't done.