

# Romantic's killer

By Nikita Pakal

Leaning over her stomach Erin's vision blurred with tears. As her throat choked up she wanted nothing more but for the agonizing burning on her arms to stop. Still, even after the burning had gone Erin was still gasping for air, her body trembling as she had no one to hold her but herself. The romantic's killer was a disease which served as a reminder of one's emotional pain with physical by inducing a series of burns across the skin because of loving someone and not having those feelings returned.

To most, it was heartbreaking. To Erin it was pathetic. She told herself she was entirely dedicated to her father's market stall and school, knowing he needed her. But when Kai had first arrived in the market with his partner of a brother and outgoing yet familiar demeanor Erin felt drawn to him, allowing herself to feel what she was so long as she didn't act on those emotions believing no harm could come from that. The scars along her arms proved her wrong.

Getting up, she pulled on a jacket and walked back to the market, lacking the energy to even look in front of her.

"Ow!" she yelled crashing against someone and falling backwards.

"Sorry I wasn't- "the man stopped as they both look at each other with horror stricken eyes. Erin's throat tightened. Before her was the person who she had been hopelessly in love with, Kai, staring back at her. Noticing her jacket had slipped off she panicked, when she realized he had seen the burns. Not wanting to explain herself to Kai of all people she stood wordlessly walking away when she felt a hand hold onto hers.

"What are you- "

"What is that?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." Erin grunted attempting to pull away when Kai only tightened his grip.

"Kai what do you want?" she groaned, anxiety building inside of her. She attempted pulling away again, when he pulled back grabbing onto the cuff of her sleeve to reveal a series of scars across her arm. His eyes widened.

"How?"

She froze. It wasn't that he didn't know her well enough to confide in him like that. They talked occasionally whenever there was a slow flow of customers, but only ever small talk. It seemed like too much if she unloaded on him at once. But his stare remained unwavering.

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“Is it Lucas?” Kai asked, crouching next to her on the ground. It had to be by some cruel twist of fate, but ever since bumping into her he hadn’t left her side saying he wanted her to have someone to turn to since she hadn’t told anyone.

“What your brother?” she replied already knowing what he was referring to. The image of Kai cheerily conversing with customers while his brother just made sure nothing ever got stolen in the background appearing in her mind.

“Yeah, he’s not the nicest, and he mostly keeps to himself. I get why you wouldn’t be able to tell him how you felt.” She just shook her head, wishing for him to drop the topic.

“Or the guy with the stall across from you. Or maybe the guy who visits your stall every week- “

“Drop it.”

“But I can’t help you unless you tell me- “

“Kai just leave it.” She snapped, turning to see the hurt expression across his face.

“My pride wouldn’t let me tell them as it is and this thing’s going to kill me anyways.” She was frustrated, frustrated with the oblivious boy in front of her and frustrated with the hopelessness of her situation that she almost didn’t notice the sharp burns shooting up her arms.

“Erin, I only wanted to- “

“Oh no,” she cried out, hunching over and grabbing her arms. Not now, she pleaded to herself.

“Erin!” Kai yelled reaching out to her.

“Let go!” she cried pushing him away. It hurt her too much to see him care for her but never in the way she needed him to. The searing pain grew as her breathing became ragged and she struggled to breathe. It won’t stay, she thought. It’ll go away. He’ll go away. Looking up, her eyes Kai’s, filled with fear. Stumbling backwards, he ran off and a part of her felt like it broke all over again as his sprinting figure became smaller in the distance. She didn’t even realize when the burning had stopped. Only collapsing, as heavy sobs left her frail frame. Why she had to suffer so much, for someone who until two weeks ago hadn’t even looked her way was something, she thought she’d never know.

Suddenly a soft hand rested itself on her back, and a soft whisper came out.

“I’m sorry.” Erin stiffened as an icepack was pressed against her arms.

“I’m sorry I can’t do anything about it.” Looking up, she saw a boy who was supposed to be Kai but looked nothing like him. With soft tears rolling down his cheeks. He never left, she thought, as Kai’s arms wrapped around her. His lanky frame shaking uncontrollably against her as his rolling tears grew into uncontrollable sobs. Too tired to even respond she relaxed against him, until she fell asleep.

It had been a week since then and it seemed to have been the last of the attacks. Erin didn’t want to believe they were gone altogether, lest they did return, but with every fading scar she felt more hopeful than the day before. This morning, she jumped out of bed more than ready to head off to the market. It wasn’t the prospect of selling her art that excited her but rather the fact that she felt surer than ever that she had finally ridded herself of the disease. It confused her, at first, as to how it would’ve disappeared out of nowhere, but as she had time to think about it she came to the realization that Kai, was nothing if not a good friend. To herself included. Her feelings had gone from a hopeless crush to a genuine friendship after getting to know him which to Erin seemed like the best way for it to end. As she arrived at the market that day, she skipped down the aisles, earning a few odd glances, but she was too giddy to care.

“Where’s Kai?” she asked, stopping at his stall and turning to his brother instead.

“Getting some stuff from the car, you need to talk to him?”

“It can wait,” she sighed. “Mind if I give a hand?” Lucas only grunted motioning to a few boxes to unpack.

To anyone else, it would appear as two friends in normal conversation, but to Kai as he watched from a distance it meant Erin could finally breathe again, being set free from the pain his brother had caused her for so long.

Kai grimaced, pulling his sleeves down to cover the burns along his arms. It may have been his own brother, but it was a price he didn’t mind having to pay if she could smile again.