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Alden House

Abstract:

Alden House is a short story in the contemporary romance genre about finding love and connection after a traumatic sexual assault. It blends comedy and political themes to create a dialogue about love, connection and gendered rights in romance genre writing. This document includes the creative work and an accompanying exegetical statement. **Content note:** this story contains discussions and depictions of abortion and sexual assault.

Biographical note:

Kathleen Stanley is currently completing a PhD in English Literature at Flinders University. Her focus is on hope and comfort in small town Christmas romance fiction. She has worked on a popular romance podcast and has several publications in academic fields including Christmas romance and Derridean theory.

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If I could be anything, today, I would be the sunshine. From here where I stand, rag in hand, the smell of the ammonium hydroxide filling my nose, I have a perfect view through the glass of the way the sunshine caresses his cheek. I place my hand on the pane and for just a moment will myself to be the heat as it passes over his face. I can almost feel the way he would lean into my hand, a gentle nuzzle that makes my heart skip several beats. I am lost in the sensation when he turns, as if summoned by my gaze, and our eyes meet through the second storey window.

The heat I feel now is that of the flush that burns my cheeks at being caught ogling my boss and I start, pretending my hand was scrubbing at a stubborn spot on the glass. My face furrowed in pretend frustration, I sneak a glance back down at him as he turns back to the gate and closes it behind him. Excellent, really fucking brilliant. Can't wait for this embarrassment to replay on a loop in my mind for the rest of the week. It's not like I don't have plenty of other horrifying moments already haunting me.

Take for example last Tuesday, when Nico caught me hyperfixating on his biceps as he pulled books off the shelves of his office. Shelves I was meant to be cleaning, but instead I was giving the vase of flowers a thorough bashing with the feather duster. Or the week before, when he dropped his pen in the space between the refrigerator and the bench and I stood in the kitchen walkway just staring at his ass. I have a feature-length film run of highly embarrassing professional pining moments. I grew up in such a strict Protestant household that even with my agnostic mindset I still feel a heady dose of religious guilt. Maybe one day I'll make it through the housekeeping at Alden House without being distracted to mortification by the foundation's handsome widower, Nico Alden.

Being haunted by embarrassment is a welcome relief from what usually burdens my mind, and I never would have thought ...

Bang.

The cedar door slams closed, alerting me that Nico is now in the house and I need to get my shit together. As far as bosses go, Nico is more friend than overlord, but I can't get caught still rhythmically wiping the now very clean office window. I gather up the cleaning supplies and make for a swift exit, only to open the door and find myself nose to nose with the man himself. Damn he can climb a staircase fast.

I'm momentarily overwhelmed by his closeness; the lemon and vanilla scent that clings to his skin envelops my senses in sunshine and sweetness. His dark curls and brown eyes round out his quiet, tender-hearted nature. While many men in his position, being nose to eyeball with a pesky red-headed woman loaded with cleaning supplies and what I assume is a growing pool of drool on her chin, would chastise the aforementioned menace, Nico is all concern.

"Shit, Em. I'm sorry. I wasn't paying attention to where I was going. I've gotten you all wet!"

I start to wonder if I am having a full body hallucination when I follow his gaze down my form to the large amount of window cleaner that is now soaking my shirt. A mixture of horror and relief fight it out in my brain, along with a small, fleeting moment of heat. Despite my attraction to my handsome and bumbling boss, I had long assumed that those kinds of feelings in me had died. Something to examine later, not now covered in chemicals and humiliation.

“No, no, this was my fault.”

Good, good words are coming out of my mouth. Appropriate ones that only sound one beat higher than my usual tone.

“Have you got something else to wear? You will want to get out of that ...”

It seems that Nico is finally starting to hear the accidental innuendo. He takes a step back, his tongue stumbling over his words as his foot misjudges the distance between the doorway and the staircase. His arms flail as he struggles to regain his balance and, operating on pure instinct, I grab his arm, pull him forward and feel gravity betray us both. I find myself pinned to the floor under his body, staring into a face that is mirroring the surprise and fluster that must be on mine. This has started to get a little too Laurel and Hardy for a Thursday afternoon of window cleaning. Especially as I am now effectively feeling far too much of Nico’s very hardy body against the very wet patch of my shirt.

We lie in a stunned, breathless silence for a full minute. His eyes drift to my lips and, if I didn’t know better, I think he might be considering kissing me. My pulse spikes and I feel a wave of panic. Another room, another body, unwanted. I try to keep myself in the present – these eyes aren’t blue, these eyes are brown – and I use that to ground me as I make a desperate attempt to break the tension.

“Is this your wet patch now or mine?”

His pupils dilate, brown, brown, brown ... and just like that the tension snaps with his snort of laughter. Nico smoothly slides onto the floor beside me, his shirt now as messy as mine. With a sigh and smile, he sits up.

“I just got a box of new foundation sweatshirts; shall we take this as a sign that we need to try them out?”

Meeting his relaxed grin with one of my own, I continue to joke.

“Well at this point, it would be rude not to.”

Nico reaches for my hand to pull me up and I feel a flutter of butterflies dance up my arm when our skin meets. My hand is sweaty, but I’ve made so much progress from when I first arrived nearly two years ago. I’ve done enough therapy now that I can handle a man’s touch. Nico has

been a gentle friend in helping me recover. He gives it a tiny proud squeeze and then drops my hand and leads me to his room down the hall.

“Sorry about all this, Em. I was so distracted when I came up the stairs. It’s been one of those days,” he explains as I follow along.

“So, the meeting with your parents went south then?” I ask.

He raises his head to the ceiling and groans. “If we are being technical about it, then we would probably say it went more north than south.”

At my quizzical look, he continues. “My parents have announced that they are returning to London permanently in the fall.”

I try and fail to cover my shock. “They are leaving the States? Like, permanently? What about the foundation?”

My heart starts to beat at a rapid pace. I can’t lose this job now; it’s the first time I’ve felt at home somewhere since, well, maybe ever, but at the very least since *before*. I fight to control my panic and pay attention to Nico as he explains.

“Yes, permanently. They stayed to help me when I lost Liza, and I thought they were settled. Turns out they have foundation responsibilities back home that they always planned to resume. I guess I’ve just had my head in the sand about it.”

He stops at his door and glances down at me, a hand diving through his mess of curls in frustration.

“I know I’m lucky to have had the support from them I have, but they want me to carry on the foundation here on my own. Keep it in the family they said, but I can’t run the admin and vetting an outsider will take too much time ...” his voice goes quiet, and he turns into his room.

I can feel his stress and my heart breaks for him. I know his parents have lingered in New York to help him since his wife died, and Liza’s cancer battle was hard on them all. I guess five years is as much time as the Aldens could give their son, more than he would ever ask for. I watch him approach the box of sweaters, hesitant to enter his room. I do a lot around Alden House, but Nico’s private quarters have always remained his personal space. He continues talking as he rummages for our sizes.

“I think they were ready to go back two years ago if I’m being honest. When Roe was overturned, they delayed the conversation, knowing the increased work the foundation would need to do – but time’s up, I guess.” He trails off, bitterness creeping into his tone.

I stiffen at the mention of the abortion laws that almost ruined my life. Nico and Liza had dedicated the New York branch of the Alden Foundation to women's rights, but Liza died before the case was overturned in 2022. The Aldens had always been more progressive in the fight for gender equality, but Liza had been constantly pushing them to do more. Now Alden House was in overdrive, fielding grant applications and trying to help desperate women in any way possible, and Nico was about to lose his closest allies since his wife died.

When I ran from West Virginia to New York, my cousin Sadie was the one who knew the Alden Foundation was looking for a housekeeper. She had worked on several grants with them to protect women in the surrounding states affected by the Roe case. That was how I knew I could trust Nico and the Aldens. They helped me cover my tracks, get the abortion I needed, and gave me employment. Mostly, though, it gave me Nico. I didn't think I would ever be alone in a room with a man again, let alone become such good friends with one. Yet here I am, standing in the doorway of his room, watching him agonise over letting everyone down, and wanting to be the one he turns to. The urge to deflect hits me again, keeping me silent.

"I'm not being very professional, am I?" he says, turning.

He throws a sweater to me and nods towards the ensuite to the left.

"Go ahead and change in there, Em, and I'll let you get back to work. I've burdened you enough today."

I hesitate, feeling like I should reassure him, ask how I can help, make a joke, do anything to clear the tension sitting on his shoulders. I'm silenced by the inner voice that whispers *run* when vulnerability appears. Instead, I step into the bathroom, locking the door behind me. The lemon-sweet scent that is pure Nico clings to the air, reminding me that I just left a man outside this room who seemed desperate for a friend. I pull the sweatshirt over my head and stare intently at the messy but capable woman in the mirror. I practice my therapy breathing and keep eye contact with myself. I'm frightened to lose my job, at what all the change Nico just hinted at might mean and at being out of control of my life again. I can't go home; the choices I had to make *after* went against my parents' beliefs. Or rather their church's. My pattern is to flee – last time it was necessary, but is it this time? I ran before because I was rejected and hurting. I could just go back to my work, hope for the best, set contingencies. I think of the gentle way Nico and his family have helped me. He's never asked me details from *before*, but still has always held out a gentle hand. What will it take for me to hold out one of my own?

"Brave thoughts, Emily Miller," I mutter and march out of the bathroom.

It's only once I reemerge into his bedroom that I realise that he also needed to change, and common courtesy would have been to announce my entrance back into the room rather than to storm into it like a battering ram. Nico just about jumps out of his delicious skin, a lot of which I am seeing right now, as he tries to pull his head through an arm hole in an attempt to not be half-naked in front of me. The interested simmer that took me by surprise before is back, feeling

like a purr building up my spine as if I am a cat waking up from a very long nap. Maybe it's the shock of seeing him half-dressed, or the fact he just tried to send me back to a job I don't even know if I will be keeping ... but for the first time in a long time, my fear takes a backseat. The boldness feels freeing in more ways than one. Might as well fucking use it whilst it lasts.

I step forward as he finally finds the correct hole for his head to poke through, an adorable pink spreading over his cheeks. His hair is now so ruffled it may never lay flat again. If this could be it for all of us, then there is no use in me holding back, and something about the urgency of now, the closeness of him, the reality of it all feels like it must be this moment.

"You don't burden me," I begin.

Surprise replaces his embarrassment, and I surge on.

"I know I'm technically your housekeeper, and maybe this isn't very professional, but for a long time now you've felt a lot more, well, like ... a friend?"

Friends is undershooting but this vulnerability is new, so it comes out like a question. Nico seems to feel the weight of the moment and moves in closer to me.

"Of course we are friends, Emily," he begins, but I cut him off.

"No, I know, but Nico, you have become my *best* friend," I emphasise softly, and my eyes fill with tears.

He grabs my hands, concerned, but I don't give him a chance to interrupt.

"I know you have a lot happening right now and I want to help. I need to help you. I have the experience, and you can trust me. Two years ago, I was a career PA when my life suddenly went to shit. What happened to me, in that office"

His tone is gentle as he interjects. "You don't have to tell me, if you don't want to."

He leads me to sit on the bench seat at the end of his bed.

"I'm here, you are safe, and you can share as much or as little as you like."

And so I do. I tell him about Ben. The blue-eyed associate I had rejected for drinks three times over the three months since he joined the law firm. About the night Ben found me doing last-minute photocopying, the smell of the beer oozing from him as I tried to get past. The way he held my neck and stared into my eyes, how his rough hands ripped the buttons from my shirt. The story pours out of me, like it needed to be purged from my very skin.

“Being here has healed me in ways I didn’t think I could be. I don’t think I’ll ever be who I was before, but I can do more than clean and tidy this house. I want to reclaim some of what was stolen and working for you could do that. Let me give back a little of what you gave me.”

He is quiet for a long time. He had been rubbing the back of my hand, quietly soothing me as I told my story and made my plea.

“That’s a beautiful offer, Em, but you don’t owe me or this family anything. If you want to make that change, then I would be honoured to have your help. I’m grateful for the trust you put in me just now, and I’m terrified to break it. But if cards are all out on the table today, I must be honest with you.”

My stomach clenches and I begin to feel light-headed.

“For a long time now, I’ve felt things shift in my heart. I don’t usually help shift books or look for pens in the kitchen, but I found myself making up excuses to just show up in the room you were in. I think I’ve embarrassed myself more times than I can count in the last six months trying to get your attention.”

I blink, stunned by his words. Trying to get *my* attention? *Holy shit.*

“You have just shared an incredibly vulnerable part of yourself with me, and I can’t in good conscience let you continue here, let you establish yourself further here, without telling you how I feel. I have fallen in love with you, Emily Miller. You can stay here and work in whatever way you choose, but I don’t want you to fear being put in a position like you were before. My feelings for you are not something I would ever abuse but I want to give you the full picture, so you know that you are safe to go, and I’ll help you move on if that is what you want too.”

Nico Alden just told me he loves me. And he is willing to throw it away to make me feel safe. A man who lost love once before, willing to lose it again if that is what I need.

“What if that isn’t what I want? What if I want to stay, I want to work here, grow here, change the world from here? By your side Nico Alden, because I love you too.”

His smile cracks me open, joy flowing through the fissures chasing away the dark fears that have ruled my heart for so long. I tentatively reach for his cheek, marvelling at how just hours ago I was envious of a sunbeam and now here I am emulating it.

He leans forward and whispers against my lips, “Would it be okay if I kissed you?”

“Yes,” I whisper back, and feel aglow with hope as his mouth meets mine.

Fuck the sunshine, today, I’ll stay being me.

Exegetical statement

Romance stories have a long history with ideas around consent, rape and sexual assault (Modleski, 1990; Toscano, 2012). While inspired by the current political climate in the USA, “Alden House” is in no way original in the concept of including rape as a trauma for its heroine, or its inclusion of complex power dynamics, gendered body issues and the discussion of sexual assault. In different subsects of the romance genre, and different times in history, conversations around rape and sexual assault have been commonplace (Toscano, 2012).

Take for example *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded*, a 1740 epistolary by Samuel Richardson, which is widely accepted as the first romance novel. Like “Alden House”, it explores the power dynamics of a maid and employer and includes the topic of sexual assault. However, unlike hero in “Alden House”, Nico, Mr B is “an alpha male: wealthy, powerful and dangerous” (Regis, 2007, p. 126) and the assaults in this story are not removed from the romance couple. Rape and consent have appeared continuously within the romance genre from the 1919 E. M. Hull novel *The Sheik*, a romance so subjective it spurred an entire special issue in the *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* in 2020, to the first modern bodice ripper published in 1972, Katherine Woodiwiss’s *The Flame and the Flower*. While the presence of rape is often perpetuated by the romantic heroes, it exists, particularly from the 1970s onwards, as part of a bigger cultural dialogue. The gendered power dynamics being negotiated during second wave feminism are reflected in the tone and explored in ideologies, that also include rape narratives, in the bodice ripping romances that come from this moment in history (Lyons & Sellinger, 2016).

While this story was written before the results of the 2024 USA Presidential election were known, its initial purpose was to continue the ongoing work of the romance genre in doing, as Catherine Roach claims, “deep and complicated work for the (mostly) women who read them” (2010, p. 2), in particular focusing on Roach’s ideas of reparation for relationships between men and women in patriarchal rape culture within the fantasy space of romance storytelling. Emily’s story of rape, recovery and hope in finding love again is heavily shadowed by the realities of life. It is only in the story world that we can so easily play out Roach’s reparation, her ideas that the happily ever after provides “imagined healing” (2010, p. 11). In real life, it is much more complicated. The overturning of Roe vs Wade was a catalyst event that created a huge conversation over the right women have to their own bodies. This conversation is one that formed part of the 2024 US electoral race and, in the light of Donald Trump’s re-election, is far from the hopeful ending Emily and Nico find in my story. Trump, a man convicted of sexual abuse (Neumister et al, 2023) is now, again, President of the United States. The cultural conversation around women’s safety and bodily autonomy is reminiscent of second wave feminist ideals and is reflected in power imbalances that start right at the very top – with the very leader of the USA a known and convicted abuser of women.

Rape has been a conversation woman have been having with each other in the space of the romance genre for decades. In their chapter “Sex and Sexuality”, Hannah McCann and

Catherine Roach discuss the reparative work the romance genre does by creating a safe fantasy space to think through sex, sexuality and issues such as consent and rape (2020). They claim that “romance can be understood to offer a particular *type* of fantasy space, a space of imagination in which to negotiate the conundrum of living in patriarchal rape culture as a heterosexual woman” (2020, p. 417). It does not mean that narratives like “Alden House” create answers to wider real life political issues around rape and consent, but instead they offer “reparative reading ... an imperfect and messy space to experiment with all manner of imagined storylines, character types, power dynamics” (2020, p. 420), including a happy ending for a woman living in the real-life nightmare of being a victim of rape. As McCann and Roach succinctly put it:

These storylines about consenting and not consenting and sort of consenting to love and sex represent an important appeal of the romance genre for its largely women readers who live in what is still a rape culture. The genre may need the latitude of staging force in various forms as a way to think through the problem of rape and the bedrock importance of consent. (2020, p.422)

Whether it is in a short story published in an online journal, or in the historical bodice rippers of the past, the exploration of sexual abuse and gendered violence continues to mesh with the optimism of the romance genre and its happy endings, and it appears that it will continue to need to for some time.

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