

Beyond Text

An honors thesis for the Department of English
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*To my family,
who taught me to write my own story
instead of living someone else's.*

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Preface

These stories are all snapshots of what I feel to be thematic representations of the different years of college. Although the stories are all fictionalized accounts, they are based partly on novels that I feel reflected the themes I saw in each year of undergraduate studies, and partly on my own experiences.

Peter Pan is freshman year. We grapple with the desire to grow up, but at the same time, adulthood is only desirable because of the innocence afforded us by our childhoods. Youth masks how sinister the world can be. We pay no mind to red flags in daily interactions, either because we don't see them or we choose to ignore them. We are torn between growing up, usually too quickly, and holding on to youth. Both come at a cost.

Sophomore year is *The Brothers Karamazov*. At this point in college, we feel we start to have things figured out. We have faith in ourselves, and in the identity we have forged. But as a result, we again often ignore what reason tells us. We get a little closer to clarity, though, and things start to fall into place.

Junior year is when everything really starts to come together. As in *Cyrano de Bergerac*, we start to learn who we really are. We develop that identity and defend it. But the friends who knew us from before the changes started can hold us back. Out of loyalty, we'll still do anything for them, until we realize that things need to change. We can keep the friendship, but it needs to grow with us.

But just as we think we have everything all figured out, or at least have a decent plan in mind, senior year comes through and forces us to reevaluate everything. In *This Side of Paradise*, the protagonist must face his identity, or what he thought was his identity. In doing so, he realizes that he still needs to find his place in the world. Similarly, senior year of college is a

time for reaffirmation and reinvention. We determine which parts of ourselves we should hold on to, and which parts of our characters we should grow. We realize that while we may have figured out how to function in college, we still need to figure out how to function in the world. Our identities, which we have spent all of college creating, are now the foundations off of which we must build our adult lives.

Beyond Text is a collection of stories about young women who must learn to live beyond the paths prescribed for them by the novels that inspired them. These girls cannot fall back on the original plots for guidance anymore. Instead, they have to break out into the world of nonfiction and live their own lives. Each story is written in a similarly cyclical fashion: the protagonists rise, fall, and determine to rebuild. But the determination at the end of each story comes from a stronger, clearer place. The storylines spiral up as the women learn to grow from their experiences.

But more importantly, these stories are a reminder to me to live beyond the text of my undergraduate career. I now need to move past the novels I've spent the last four years analyzing. It is time to take what I've learned and apply it to my future.

That being said, I have written this collection while still in the throes of my undergraduate experience. I still don't fully understand everything that is happening to me. So someday, I hope to do what each of my narrators does: look back on what I've done with a little more clarity. When I inevitably return to these stories, I hope to have the perspective necessary to see and appreciate what I've done, and then use my experience to grow.

Pan-

I've been told that, when my parents first found out my mom was pregnant with me, there was some concern about whether or not they would be able to keep me. It wasn't a problem with my mom's health. She's got this perpetual energy that makes some people call her bubbly, and some people call her airheaded. She was fully convinced from the start that a baby wouldn't be too big a strain on the finances.

"George, you worry too much!" she often exclaimed.

"Mary, I need you to think reasonably," my dad would bluster back. "A child is no longer just an eighteen-year contract. It's also college, and probably graduate school, and maybe more if the kid studies art or literature or one of those questionably employable majors that include the word 'studies.'"

They waffled and nickel-and-dimed and self-paralyzed through analysis so much that before they knew it, nine months had gone by, and I plopped into the world.

"We have to keep her," my mom insisted. "She has your eyes, George."

"She's a baby," my dad responded. "She doesn't look like anyone yet." But he was too busy admiring the way I opened and closed my hands to really say anything.

"The Hookers say we can split the nanny cost with them," my mom said. And it was settled.

James Hooker was the boy who lived next door. He was two years older than me. Nana, our babysitter, looked after both of us until Jon, my younger brother, arrived two years later. By then, James was in daycare and only was with us after school.

"Remember, Winnie," my dad started saying to me before he left for work. "I need you to be a big girl and help Nana with Jonny. Can you do that?"

“Yes Daddy,” I would reply gravely. “I’m all grown up now. Don’t worry about Jonny.” The allure of adulthood starts at two.

And so it went until Michael, my youngest brother, showed up. By then, my parents knew what they were doing, but I still insisted on helping take care of him. By the time you hit four, you want in on the action.

The three of us grew up alongside James. We played make-believe in our backyards until it was dark, only to continue the games in the bathtub later. All was well and good until I turned ten and actually had to start growing up. Suddenly, I wasn’t sure how I felt about it anymore.

By my freshman year of college, three things were already campus-famous. The first was the NΦP fraternity. The second was the fraternity president James Hooker. And the third was Peter Pan.

NΦP (Nu Phi Rho) was in Lande House, which had been given to the fraternity several decades ago by the chapter’s founder Finn Lande, who was actually Norwegian. Since the house wasn’t technically school property, the frat was able to throw the most incredible parties. It also meant, though, that they had to be extra careful, since the real police would be called on them instead of the campus Rent-A-Cops. Their party themes usually had something to do with fantasy worlds, really playing to their nickname: Neverland (well, technically it’s Nefferland, if you go by how phi is really pronounced).

James Hooker was campus royalty. He was a double major in business and art history, with a minor in charisma. He also had those dashing, swashbuckling looks straight off of a romance novel cover: thick dark curls, smirking hazel eyes, and a jawline so perfect that it could make a sculptor cry. He and I hadn’t hung out since middle school.

Peter Pan was really a guy named Pete Panus. He was a year older than me, and a year younger than James. And of course, if a guy named Pete Panus joins a frat nicknamed Neverland, where the president is named James Hooker, then the brothers would have to be really stupid not to take advantage of that. So Peter Pan and Captain Hook always played each other in the first round of beer pong at every party, and they always dressed in character for every costume party. By my freshman year, they were already an established tradition.

I'll never forget the first time I met Pete. It was still Freshman Orientation. My parents were helping me move in and hitting it off with the Tiggs, my roommate's family. Lily Tigg and I eyed each other uncertainly as we made our beds and connected to the dorm Wi-Fi. There was a knock on the half-open door, and James appeared.

"George, Mary!" he gushed, striding into the room and shaking hands. "How are you? How are Jon and Mike? I haven't seen those kids in forever!" He half-smiled, as if lost in reminiscence about how we would all play Pirates in his backyard.

"James, it's so good to see you again!" my mom replied. "It's been too long."

"Yes, it has," he agreed. "I came to see if Winnie wanted some help moving in?" He turned to me, and surprise flickered across his face. He laughed softly. "Wow...you've really changed since I last saw you."

"Yeah, people tend to do that," I shrugged. "When was that, again? My seventh grade?" I had indeed changed a lot in five years. I could only have been described as a late bloomer. My feet and arms were the first things to grow; my boobs were the last. I had had a distinctly awkward air about me pretty much until high school graduation, when my body had suddenly decided to pull itself together. But by this point, just a few months shy of nineteen, I could finally leave my room with a certain degree of confidence.

I flicked a couple sandy strands of hair out of my eyes and tried my best to scowl at him, but I'd never been sure of what that word really meant in terms of facial movements. He ignored me and dipped his sailing-strong arms into a box, hefting out my printer and placing it on my desk. Lily stared at him openly, while my parents went on about how nice it was for him to have thought of me.

He smiled graciously, and then turned to me. "My frat's having a party tonight," he said, "to celebrate school starting up again. You should come! You, too," he added casually to Lily. She almost dropped the desk lamp she was holding.

"Yeah, Win," my dad said. "Go make some friends! It'll be fun."

"Yeah, sure," I nodded. "I'm sure it'll be great."

"Cool!" said James. "Tell you what, why don't you text me when you're ready to come over? I'll come get you, so you don't get lost trying to find the house."

"Yeah, sounds good." I turned slightly and busied myself with my pillowcase. Behind me, I heard James say a final goodbye to my parents and leave.

"What a good kid," my dad remarked approvingly, seeming to have forgotten the last five years.

James texted me that evening to tell me that the party started at 10:00. I had a slightly awkward dinner with Lily, though we were warming up to each other. Whether it was out of actual compatibility or necessity, I wasn't sure yet. She told me she was going to an orientation party hosted by the student orchestra. She was a percussionist and wanted to be back in Band.

I texted James at 10:30 telling him I was ready. He showed up fifteen minutes later to walk me over. It was a beautiful New England summer evening, still warm but with a cool

breeze. James draped an arm around my shoulders as we walked. I shifted so that it fell off. He replaced it, and I shrugged it off in earnest.

“What are you doing?” I demanded.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“You can’t ignore me for five years and then suddenly expect everything to be ok again,” I snapped.

“I wasn’t ignoring you,” he said. “I was trying to grow up. I was hoping you would, too.”

“Well,” I said curtly. I paused for a moment before continuing. “Here we are. So now what?”

James slipped his arm around my shoulders again, leaned in, and kissed me. I stumbled backwards and almost tripped over a low brick wall. I recovered by sitting heavily on it, my head whipping from side to side to see who had seen us. The sidewalk was empty, considering that most people weren’t back on campus yet, and anyone who was back was at Neverland.

James sat next to me, but didn’t touch me. “I prefer to be straightforward,” he began.

“I know,” I said. “You were very blunt when you stopped being friends with me.”

“I’m sorry that you felt that’s what I was doing,” he said.

“That is what you did!”

“Win, calm down,” he said. “That all happened five years ago.”

“You were my best friend, James.”

“We can be best friends again,” he said. We sat in silence for a moment, and then he continued. “This is going to sound clichéd, but I’ve grown up a lot since then. I know I must

have come across as really shitty back then. I'm sorry if you felt left behind. You don't have to give me a chance at anything if you don't want to, but I'd like it if you did."

I didn't answer. James leaned back and stretched his legs out, clearly content to wait all night for a response. I glanced at my watch – it was 11:00. I stared at my knees until I grew restless.

I sat up straighter and looked at him. When he looked down at me, I nodded. He grinned and leaned in.

It was 11:30 when we finally made it to the party.

James couldn't stay with me the entire time. He had to make the rounds, check in on any freshman drinkers, welcome brothers back to campus. When he wasn't showing me around and showing me off, I meandered through the house, talking with other kids from my year and ignoring the brothers' knowing smirks.

Although the house wasn't very big, there were enough people in it that I managed to get lost for about five minutes. I suddenly couldn't see any identifying features in the room that might tell me where I was relative to James. I looked around frantically for the door, hoping to retrace my steps out of the throng and at least back towards fresher air, when someone jostled me.

"Sorry," I mumbled, stepping aside.

"No worries, it was my bad," replied a faintly chuckling voice. I looked up to see a lean, redheaded guy with the bluest eyes I'd ever seen and features that could only be described as elfin. He flashed me a smile, put a hand on my shoulder, and shifted me towards him right as a drunken freshman spilled her beer exactly where I'd just been standing. I turned back to thank

him, but he had already disappeared into the crowd, his handprint still warm and tingling on my shoulder.

I jumped as someone slipped an arm around my waist. James steered me through the crowd towards the front room.

“Want some air?” he shouted over the party.

“Yeah,” I called back. “Actually, could you walk me home? I’m pretty tired.”

“Sure thing,” he said, ushering me out the front door.

The walk took ten more minutes than strictly necessary.

About a month later, I was at the NΦP Homecoming party. By that point, I was taking a variety of classes to see what might interest me, looking into different clubs, and making actual friends with Lily. I was really settling in, or as much as you can when a frat president keeps taking up all of your time.

James had decided that we were Officially Together midway through the first week of classes. It was pretty thrilling, to be honest, to go straight from anonymous freshman to campus notable. It was like the grownup version of getting to sit at the cool table in the high school cafeteria. But James also required attendance at all of his frat events, and it was getting exhausting. I had neither the energy nor the interest to spend at least half my weekly allotment of nights in the frat’s beer-sweaty basement, but I didn’t want to disappoint James. And oddly enough, despite the ridiculous amount of time I spent in that frat house, I hadn’t seen Buddy the Elf (as I had poorly nicknamed him) since we collided at the first party.

When I arrived at the Homecoming party, I made the dutiful rounds with James, saying hi to all the brothers and guests. When it was time for the kickoff game of beer pong, I followed

James downstairs like a lost puppy and stood at his end of the table. I leaned on the table's edge as he bent down for a good-luck kiss. As I straightened, I glanced towards the other end of the table, eager for my first glimpse of the elusive Peter Pan. Upon seeing him, I gripped the edge of the table for support, feeling a little like I'd been hit with a wet paper towel.

Of course. My Buddy the Elf was the frat's Peter Pan. He saw me staring at him and shot me an impish smile. He bounced the Ping-Pong ball twice on the table, spun it sharply around one finger, and then sank it squarely in James' cup nearest my hand.

The crowd went nuts, and James genially chugged the beer, ball and all. He stacked the cup at the table edge, spat the ball in his hand, and arced it smoothly into Pete's foremost cup. I pulled back from the table a little. Pete simply laughed and emptied his cup, apparently not at all put off by James' saliva.

I steadily pulled away from the table over the course of the game. The crush of high-energy people, over-drunk from having started their partying at eight o'clock that morning, was too much for me. I eventually extracted myself from the crowd and made my way upstairs to James' room.

I crossed his room quickly and opened the window, then clambered out onto the roof. He and I had sat out here a few times to look at the stars, but never for very long. Now, I scrambled over the rooftop, making sure to stay on the side facing away from the street. I reached a weird little nook in the roof. It was flatter there, and easier to sit. It was right next to a window, but that room always looked dark.

I sat back and looked up at the stars. The night was chilly, but the coolness was a welcome relief from the hot, humid basement. I have no clue how long I sat there – I'm a

horrible judge of time – but I was startled when the window next to me opened, and Peter Pan himself crawled out.

There was the split second of silence that always happens when another person surprises you. We stared at each other, registering what was happening, and then both began apologizing.

“Sorry!” I exclaimed. “I didn’t realize that was your room. I thought I wouldn’t bother anyone over here.”

“Sorry,” he said at the same time. “Didn’t mean to interrupt your reverie.”

I paused. “Did you really just say ‘reverie’?”

He nodded. “Do you mind?” he asked, indicating the empty roof next to me. I shook my head and scooted over a little to give him more space, and then turned to introduce myself. I paused, watching as he sat and leaned back, tilting his chin upwards. He looked at the sky with pure, innocent rapture and seemed perfectly content to stay silent. But he must have sensed me staring.

“I’m Pete,” he said, never taking his eyes from the sky.

“Winnie,” I replied, waiting for the “Like the Pooh?” joke that usually followed.

“Our resident pirate queen,” he murmured.

“What?” I asked.

“That’s what the brothers call you. Because of James. You know, Captain Hook? And I’m Peter Pan?”

“I know that part,” I said. “I wasn’t aware that I got a nickname, too.”

“It’s a sign of acceptance,” he said. “The brothers like you.”

“Even though I’d rather spend parties stargazing than actually inside with James?”

He didn't respond. Feeling my butt start to go numb, I shifted slightly, redistributing my weight, and accidentally brushed shoulders with him. The physical contact seemed to remind him that I was there.

"So," he asked casually, still never taking his eyes from the sky, "what do you think of Astronomy 1?"

"You're in that class, too?" I asked. He nodded, and I continued. "It feels like kind of a joke. I wanted it to be interesting, but it's more just an excuse for the professor to hear himself talk."

Pete laughed. "Especially because we use textbooks that he wrote."

I laughed, too. "It's such a bummer, though," I said. "James and I used to stargaze in the summer when we were younger. I could always find Orion's Belt."

"Could?"

"Surprisingly, I haven't been able to spot it since I hit double-digits."

"Well...is that it?" Pete reached up and pointed at a straight line of three stars. I swallowed hard and then snorted softly.

"That's it," I said.

"You don't seem that thrilled to see it again," Pete remarked. I shrugged.

"Just tired," I said.

"Want me to walk you home?" he replied. I nodded, and we climbed through the window into his room. I paused on my way to the door. His room was a blend of plaid flannel and superhero posters: quirky, cozy, and oddly devoid of personality. I looked over at him. He stood between the door and a neat row of Frisbees on his dresser. He flicked his head towards the door.

“Come on,” he said. “We’ll take the back stairs, so no one sees us leaving together.”

“Why would anyone care?” I asked.

He shrugged. “No accounting for some people’s reactions.”

He steered me lightly down the back stairs and out a side door. The whole walk back to my dorm, we swapped stories about the dumbest stuff we’d done as kids, laughing the whole time. By the time I ID-swiped back into my building, Pete and I both knew we’d found treasure.

I might as well have moved into Lande House after that. I was there almost all the time. I’d go over to watch a movie with James and would bump into Pete in the hallway.

“Hey,” he’d say. “Come with me. You need to see this video I just found online.”

“It’s kind of late,” I’d say. “I should probably get home and go to sleep.”

“Don’t do that,” he’d say. “Don’t be so responsible. This’ll be way more fun!”

After enough needling, I’d cave and end up hanging out with him until almost 3:00 in the morning, watching videos of dogs crashing into couches.

Or I’d go over to do homework with Pete and get stopped by James on my way out.

“Hey!” he’d say. “Working with Pete?”

“Yeah,” I’d respond. “We’re just trying to get through Astronomy 1 without dying of boredom.”

“You heading home?”

Nodding, I’d say, “Yeah, I’m pretty wiped.”

“Oh...I was kind of hoping I’d get to see you today.”

“You see me all the time! Tonight’s not the best for me.”

“Ok,” he’d say, “It’s just, it feels like you’ve been spending a lot of time with Pete lately.”

“James, we’re just studying. We have an exam coming up.”

“Yeah, no, it’s fine, I get it.”

And inevitably, I would end up spending the night at his place.

On the plus side, frat events became much more enjoyable. Pete and I would usually get bored of the party around the same time and would escape upstairs to hang out. We’d stargaze or watch dumb videos or swap silly stories. But one evening in early November made me reconsider this approach to parties.

We were in Pete’s room, sitting on the floor with the lights off so we could see the stars. Suddenly, the thudding bass noise from the party got louder. It took us a minute to realize someone was pounding on the door.

“Come in,” Pete called.

The door opened and the lights flicked on. James stood in the doorway.

“Hey Win,” he said. “Can I talk to you?”

“Sure,” I said, getting up and walking outside with him. He closed the door sharply and walked down the hall a ways. “Hey,” I said, jogging slightly to catch up. “Is everything ok?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Is it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Is there something going on that I should know about?”

“You mean with me and Pete? James, come on, you know there isn’t.”

“And yet,” he said, “I find myself very confused. You’re my girlfriend, and yet you spend almost all of your free time with him. In his room. With the door closed and the lights off. I hope you can see how that looks.”

“I can and I do,” I said. “But you’ve known me since I was born, James. You know I’m not like that.”

“People change, Win. Even us.”

“Especially us.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You tell me,” I snapped. His eyes got wide, and guilt hit me like a cannonball. “Sorry,” I said quickly. “You just never used to get jealous like this before.”

“We weren’t dating before.”

“So now that we are, that means my principles automatically change?”

“It’s not that,” he said. “I just don’t know where you are, sometimes. You spend so much time with him; I have to wonder if he knows you in ways I don’t. And if he does, how can I catch up?” He rubbed his temples and leaned against the wall.

“Don’t shut down on me,” I said. “Please don’t push me away.”

“I feel like you’re the one pushing me away!”

“James,” I said. “Please. Come on. I’m sorry.” I took his hand. “Let’s go back down to the party.”

He squeezed my hand. “Ok,” he said, leading the way.

“I never see you anymore,” Lily remarked to me one evening in early Decembers, as I got ready for yet another NΦP party. I straightened up from our microwave, my dinner of instant

ramen in my hands. She was curled up in her bed, writing a paper. We looked at each other for a moment, and then she sat up and put her laptop aside. I walked over and sat next to her, tangling her blanket around my knees.

“How are you *doing*?” she asked as I slurped ramen. “Hell, *what* are you doing?”

“I’m good!” I said around the noodles. “James and I are doing really well. He’s so sweet to me. And Pete and I have started to hang out a lot again. He said the funniest thing the other day –”

“Win,” Lily cut me off, “I know that you and your boys are good. If you weren’t, I’d probably see you more. What about you? How are your classes? Are you any closer to deciding a major?” When I didn’t answer right away, she exclaimed, “Goddam, girl! Can you even pass a Bechdel test these days?”

“A what?” I joked. “I’m kidding,” I added quickly when I saw Lily’s face. “Classes are good. I like physics. Like, I *really* like physics. I’d probably date physics if I weren’t...Sorry. Um...yeah, I haven’t been up to much else. I just haven’t had time.”

“That’s because you’re always at that stupid frat,” Lily said.

“I know,” I said. “I wouldn’t be there so much if it were just James or just Pete. I’m still trying to figure out how to balance everything, you know?”

Lily nodded. “I just feel like, it’s December. When we do find time to talk, I don’t hear you in your stories anymore. It’s all James and Pete. I can see they both make you happy, but I just don’t want you to reach June and realize that you lost your freshman year.”

“I’ll be fine,” I said. “I’m still adjusting to everything.”

“Ok,” Lily said slowly. “I trust you. Now tell me what Pete said the other day.”

I started laughing. “Oh yeah,” I began. “He was telling me this story about how he missed a throw in Frisbee and...”

Lily waited for me to continue. “And what?” she prompted when I didn’t.

“Nothing,” I finally said. “It just hit me that the story isn’t actually that funny.”

“Ok, then let me help you pick out your outfit.”

That night was the NΦP “Good Luck on Finals” party. Reading period started the next day. Despite how tired and overworked people were, though, they were eager to blow off steam. I did the rounds with James, cheered during the opening Pan-Hook pong game, and then booked it upstairs. Pete met me outside his room. We lay on his floor in the dark, eating popcorn and looking at the stars through the window while the party thumped below us.

“Bummer that it’s too cold to sit on the roof anymore,” I said. I wrapped a fleecy blanket around my shoulders and lumped some pillows together. Pete made a similar pillow puddle next to mine.

“Yeah,” he said. He paused, and then asked, “How’s James?”

“He’s fine,” I said. “He used to get annoyed at how much you and I hang out, but he knows it’s ok now.” I added, laughing.

“What a goof,” Pete smiled. “He should know there’s nothing here.”

“Nothing but beautiful friendship!” I joked, rolling a little closer and over-smiling. Pete pulled away, grimacing down at me. We dissolved into hyper giggles and rolled back into our original places.

“Seriously, though,” I said. “You and I don’t even hug.”

“Is he going to be annoyed about you dipping on the party?”

“We haven’t done this in a while, so it should be fine.”

“I’m glad you decided to come hang out,” he said. “Those parties get so boring.”

We lapsed into silence for a few minutes, and then I changed topics. “How’s the Frisbee team?”

“It’s ok,” Pete said. “It’s not as much fun as when I first started, though. I might drop.”

“Pete, it’s the middle of the season.”

“So?”

“You can’t just drop!”

He shrugged. “Sure I can. If it’s not fun, why play?” He paused, listening. “Sounds like the party’s winding down.”

I nodded, getting up. “I should get to James’ room before he does.”

I stood and dropped the blanket on Pete’s bed. I walked up to the window and pressed my face on the cold glass, looking intently at the sky. No Orion’s Belt. I peeled my face away, smudged away the face imprint with the palm of my hand, and walked towards the door. I hopped over Pete as I passed him.

“G’night,” I said as I walked out. He didn’t respond.

I walked down the hall a few doors, and then turned left into James’ room. The place looked like a photo from an IKEA catalog. Clean and minimalist and streamlined, done in shades of blue and gray with orange-and-red art posters on the walls. I changed into a T-shirt of James’ that used to be white but had long since turned gray, and a pair of his high school swim team sweatpants. James walked into the room as I was adjusting the drawstring on the sweatpants.

“Hey,” he smiled. “I didn’t see you the second half of the party.”

“Yeah,” I smiled back. “I was tired. And you know I’m not big on parties.”

James looked at me for a moment, and then asked, “You were with Pete, weren’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“Win…”

“What?”

“We talked about this,” said James.

“James, please. I’m fried.”

“You know I don’t like that. People are starting to talk.”

“Is that what this is about?” I demanded. “You’re worried about your reputation? It’s Pete, James. I don’t even know if he has a sex drive.”

“Oh, he’s definitely got a sex drive.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Just because he isn’t seeing anyone now doesn’t mean he never does,” said James.

“Freshman year, he must have hooked up with at least ten girls.”

“And you’re letting people convince you I’m his next target?”

“That’s not my point,” James said. “It’s about his commitment, Win. Yeah, you guys are best friends now, but what about in a month?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You really just met, so there’s no way you could know this,” said James. “But the guy is notorious for dropping things. All those girls ended because he just got bored with them. He joined and quit five different club sports team his freshman year alone. Everyone was shocked he’d stuck with the frat this long.”

My breath stuck in my throat. “You don’t say,” I coughed out.

James nodded. "I'm just getting a little worried that he's so rah-rah about your friendship because you're new. You're like a new toy. I don't want you becoming emotionally dependent on someone who won't be there for you in the long run."

"I would hope that I don't become emotionally dependent on anyone," I said.

"I just think you should ease off Pete for a bit," said James.

"You're probably right," I said slowly. "There are some clubs I've been meaning to try out, anyway."

"Why?"

"What do you mean, why?"

"I just mean," said James, "why bother? You'll just come back here afterwards, anyway."

"Shockingly enough, I don't actually enjoy spending all of my free time in your frat house."

"There's no need to be so curt."

"Sorry," I said. "I'm just really tired. Can we please go to bed?"

James nodded. "Let me just go shower really fast." He grabbed his towel and left the room.

I crawled into bed. I felt drained, but I couldn't explain why. My head felt like it was stuffed with cotton, and my ears were ringing. I leaned over and switched off the bedside lamp, and then lay back and closed my eyes in the semidarkness.

I heard James come back in a few minutes later. I listened to the swish of fabric as he pulled on his pajamas. The bed creaked slightly as he slid in next to me. He pulled me close. Subconsciously, I squirmed against his grasp.

He sat up. "You ok?"

"What?" I asked, coming out of my drowsy stupor. "Oh, yeah. It's just...I'm more of a back sleeper."

"So has cuddling been uncomfortable for you all this time?"

"Kind of," I said sheepishly.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I don't know. Does it really matter?"

"Yes," he said. "Why are you being so closed off with me? I'm your boyfriend; I'm supposed to know these little details. Does Pete know that about you?"

"Ok," I said, getting up. "This has been fun."

"Where are you going?"

I started changing back into my clothes. "I'm really tired," I said. "I think I just need to go home."

"Win, come on. Get back in bed. Let's just go to sleep."

"I don't want to stay if everything is going to boil down to you being jealous of Pete."

"It doesn't have to if –"

"If you just relax?"

"If you stopped giving me reasons to be."

"Yeah, alright," I said. I grabbed my jacket and slung it on. "Good night." I left.

As I walked down the hall towards the stairs, I passed the bathroom. Pete stepped out, damp and wearing only a towel.

"You leaving?" he asked.

"Yeah."

“Why?”

“James and I had a fight.”

“Well, you shouldn’t walk alone at night. Just come crash in my room.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” I said, “considering that that’s the reason he and I are fighting.”

“You know,” said James, coming up behind me, “I don’t think it’s really appropriate to be airing our dirty laundry like that.”

“Not now, James,” I said.

“Hold on a minute,” said Pete. “If you’re going to go home, just let me get dressed and I’ll walk you.”

“No, I’ll be ok,” I said. “I just want to get in bed as quickly as possible.”

“Win,” said James, “it’s not safe. Please let me walk you home.”

“It’s like a ten-minute walk across the best-lit, most populated part of campus,” I said.

“I’ll be fine.” I left before either of them could stop me.

The walk home was quiet and refreshing. I’d been feeling that fuzzyheadedness for a couple weeks, and it was good to be outside. I came to the low brick wall where James and I had first kissed and sat down, stretching my legs out in front of me and shivering slightly. I closed my eyes and breathed deeply.

“Winnie?” someone asked. I opened my eyes. It was Lily.

“Hey,” I smiled. “Where are you coming from?”

“Impromptu band hangout,” she explained, sitting down next to me. We huddled together. “You ok? You seem...”

“Dazed and confused?” I offered. She nodded vigorously. “I kind of am,” I said.

“You want to talk about it?”

I shook my head. “I just need a break. Some time to recharge, you know?”

“Yeah,” she said. “We’re all feeling pretty burnt out.”

“Tell me about it,” I said. I looked up and found myself staring directly at Orion’s Belt.

I snorted.

“What?” asked Lily.

I pointed at the constellation. “I could always find Orion’s Belt when I was younger. I lost it when I was ten. Didn’t find it again until I met Pete.”

“You think it’s a sign?” Lily asked.

“Of what?”

“I have no clue,” she said.

We sat in silence for a moment longer.

“Hey,” said Lily suddenly. “Can we head home? I’m freezing my ass off.”

I laughed. “Yeah, sure, let’s go.”

“So,” said Pete at lunch the next day, “are you friend-dumping me?” I had just gotten through explaining how I needed a break.

“No!” I said. “I just need to take a step back. With James, too. I feel in over my head.”

“Are you and James breaking up?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Why not?”

“Because,” I said, “he makes me happy.”

“Does he?” said Pete asked. “From my perspective, you guys tend to make each other upset.”

“No,” I said. “We’re happy together. And I hang on to what’s important.”

“What’s important is enjoying yourself while you’re still young,” said Pete. “What’s the point of bogging yourself down with emotional drudgery before you’ve even hit 20?”

“That’s how adult relationships work,” I said.

“That sounds awful!” Pete laughed. “Why does your relationship need to be hard?”

“Because it’s worth it.”

“Is it?”

“What?”

“Do you love him?”

I paused for what felt like a full minute. “I don’t know,” I said finally.

“So you don’t love him, you admit the relationship is more work than fun, and –”

“But I think he loves me,” I interrupted.

“So?”

“I need to take his feelings into account, too. I’m not the only person in that relationship.”

“But you’re the only person in that relationship who ultimately matters.” Pete smiled at my shocked face. “Be selfish, Winnie. Adulthood is going to be a lot of compromises. Put yourself first before people start asking you to do otherwise.”

“I’m not like you, Pete,” I said.

“Of course you are!” said Pete. “That’s why you’re friend-dumping me. You need to lose some dead weight and clear your mind.” Completely unoffended, he stood up and pulled on his jacket. “Let me know if you wanna hang out again. Good luck on exams!”

I stared at my plate. “Pete,” I said, “you don’t get it.” But he was gone.

I spent most of winter break hiding in my room. I knew the minute I stepped outside, I’d have to contend with the fact that James lived right next door. I kept trying to use the alone time to reflect and figure out what I wanted, but I somehow felt simultaneously ragged and hollow on the inside. It was hard to think clearly. It took every ounce of willpower I had not to pick up my phone and fire off a round of texts to both guys.

I couldn’t even explain why I so desperately needed them both in my life. I spent many hours on Skype with Lily talking about everything except guys. I even told her what brand of toothpaste I used to try and keep my head from getting squirrely.

But by the end of break, I felt marginally calmer. When I headed back to school, I ducked my head and started with the basics. I studied constantly. I talked to one new person every day. I joined the Robotics Club. I went to no NΦP events. And I didn’t constantly feel frazzled. I was starting to feel like the person I was before college.

But then I bumped into James and Pete outside the library in February, the weekend before Valentine’s Day. I had finished with classes for the day and was headed to the campus center for a much needed hot chocolate. Suddenly, I heard the thud-crunch of boots on pavement, and then James caught hold of my shoulder.

“Hey,” he said, “remember me?”

“Did you have a good Christmas?” asked Pete, materializing next to him.

“Hey,” I said, turning to go. “Sorry, but now’s not really a good time.”

“Nope,” said James, holding on to my shoulder. “Winnie, what’s going on?”

“I just need space,” I said.

“I’ve given you two months of it,” said James.

“Why don’t you just break up?” Pete asked casually. “You seem a lot happier.”

“Yeah, you’d love that, wouldn’t you?” James snapped.

“James!” I exclaimed.

“Win,” said James. “I can’t do this. I’m confused about us, and I’m confused about you. I don’t understand why you’re being such a drama queen. I would hope that you could at least tell me why you’ve suddenly decide to push me away.”

“She’s taking my advice,” said Pete.

“What advice?” James demanded.

“I told her to be a little selfish,” said Pete. “I didn’t think she’d actually end things with you.”

“Ok, I didn’t do that,” I said hastily. There was silence, and then James snaked his hand off my one shoulder and around my other, pulling me close. He kissed the top of my head, slowly and deliberately. Pete shrugged.

“Nice seeing you,” he said, walking off.

And just like that, James and I were back together. He said it was a good sign that we’d figured things out in time for Valentine’s Day. But something felt off this time around. That frazzled feeling came rushing back to me, and I suddenly found myself actually pulling away. I threw myself into the Robotics Club, going to all the meetings and events and volunteering extra

help whenever I could. When James teased me about it, I defended it staunchly. He would back off quickly, startled and oddly sulky at my energy.

And I kept reaching out to Pete. He never suggested or agreed to meet up, though he was responsive. But he was also irregular. Sometimes he and I would text for hours while I told him about building robots. His enthusiasm for hearing about the “magic of making things go” made me realize I didn’t even know his major. But sometimes, I’d send him a message and wouldn’t hear back for a couple days. And whenever I was finally dragged to a NΦP event, when I’d escape to the roof for stargazing, his window would always be dark.

Eventually, he stopped responding altogether. Around mid-April, as things were ramping up towards finals, his answer rate dwindled. I went a week straight without getting a response. And in early May, right at the beginning of finals period, he just stopped answering me.

“Well,” said James when I told him, “guess he finally got bored.”

I rubbed my forehead. “Yeah, well, at least now you can stop getting antsy whenever I answer a text message.”

I went home for the summer a couple weeks later, in mid-May. James came home a week after I did, by which point I was already well entrenched in my summer job. I was a camp counselor at the local elementary school’s science camp. The kids were a happy reminder of Pete.

About a week later, James was over on a lazy Saturday evening. We snuggled on the couch in my living room, Nantucket Nectars resting on the coffee table and the Food Network playing softly on the TV.

“Have you heard from Pete lately?” I asked.

James shook his head. “I hope he’s doing better.”

I sat up. “What do you mean ‘better’?” I asked

“Didn’t I tell you?” James asked. “He took a Frisbee to the temple during a pickup game during finals and passed out. He’s pretty concussed, though he should be back at school in the fall.”

I swung my legs out of his lap. “Do you think you maybe could have told me this a little closer to when it actually happened?”

“What difference would it have made, Win?”

“I could have visited him.”

“Win,” said James, “this is the guy who got bored of your friendship and ghosted you.”

“He was my best friend for the better part of a year,” I said. “He made me happy.”

“I thought we were happy.”

“Not so much lately,” I said.

“Excuse me?” James asked.

“I need to think,” I said abruptly, standing up. “I think you should go.”

“Win,” said James, still sitting, “you need to stop doing this. These mood swings are really counter-productive.”

“This isn’t a mood-swing so much as an epiphany.”

James stood up. “If you want me to leave, I will,” he said. “But please explain why you’re acting crazy.”

I forced myself to breathe. “Pete was right,” I said. “I’m happier when I’m not with you. I’m calmer. But I didn’t want to hear that from him. I thought I was being an adult by pushing back against that.”

“So, you’re breaking up with me because of Pete?”

“No,” I said emphatically. “I’m breaking up with you because I’m exhausted. Both with you and with Pete,” I added.

“I take it you won’t be going to visit him, then,” said James.

“It always comes back to keeping me away from Pete, doesn’t it?” I asked bitterly.

“Don’t worry – I don’t even know where he’s from. And I get this feeling that you’re not going to tell me.”

“I don’t even know where he’s from,” said James. “The guy is extraordinarily secretive.”

“He wants everything to be one big magical adventure,” I said. “He wants to be a universal...shit.”

“He wants to be a universal shit?” James asked, attempting a joke.

“Stop,” I said. “He wants to be a universal truth. Pan-magical.”

“That’s maybe the cheesiest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“It’s gross.”

“So you want me to leave because Pete is secretly cheesy?”

“No,” I said. “I want you to leave because I need a break.”

“Winnie,” said James, “come on. You can’t kick people out of your life like that. Be an adult.”

“For once, I am,” I said, “You need to leave.”

James picked up his Nantucket Nectar and walked across my living room to the French doors leading to my backyard. He paused at the door.

“The stars are out,” he remarked. And then he walked out of my house and across the yard. He easily hopped the low fence into his own backyard. I followed his path to the door and

into the middle of my yard. I looked up and scanned the skies. I couldn't find Orion's Belt.
And for the first time, I felt ok with that.

The Bros K

So, I'm all for life reflecting art, but sometimes it gets to be a little much. I think the best example would be the time I met the Brothers K. And I mean that two ways: I met *The Brothers Karamazov*, a thousand-page monstrosity of a novel that I read for my Dostoevsky class and that I enjoyed way more than I feel I should have. But that year, I also met the Bros K. They weren't related, but they might as well have been. They were all juniors when I met the three of them at the beginning of my sophomore year in college, and they were inseparable. I was always confused as to why, since they didn't seem to share any similar interests, and at least two of them were usually fighting over something petty. They were like some kind of rare organism whose appendages functioned completely separately and yet couldn't function without the other two. It was fun to just observe them sometimes. But even though I enjoyed their friendship, I occasionally wished that the universe had left Dostoevsky's characters in his novels. They could feel like more trouble than they were worth in real life.

The Intellectual

I met Evan King first, in my French class during the first week of the semester. My first reaction was, "Aw, he's a hipster! I bet he hates almost everything." I wasn't that far off the mark, either.

Evan was taking French so he could read philosophers like Rousseau and Diderot in their original language, because he didn't want to lose any of the nuances through translation. He was incredibly smart and incredibly cynical. He was double majoring in philosophy and theological studies, so that he could understand, deconstruct, and reconstruct every idea he encountered,

from both a religious and a secular standpoint. He had few fans, and he saw the worst in everything.

We were assigned as partners for a project early in the semester, and we hit it off right away. I think he appreciated that my light, seemingly innocent sarcasm masked a deeply salty, judgmental personality. I just appreciated him. When I wanted him around, which was usually, he'd be there to listen to me rant or cheer me up, albeit sometimes begrudgingly. When I wanted him gone, which was rarely, he always insisted that he had "better things to do anyway." And it didn't hurt that he was adorable, with scruffy brown hair and baby blue eyes magnified by his Warby Parkers.

When it was still nice out, we could usually be found sitting on the quad, copies of Voltaire in hand, surreptitiously watching people walk by.

"See that girl?" he'd ask, indicating a passerby with his chin.

"Yeah, what about her?" I'd say.

"She dated my housemate for awhile."

"You didn't like her?"

"What makes you say that?"

"You had that tone you always use when you've got something up your sleeve," I'd say, smiling.

He'd smirk. "I'm a light sleeper."

"So, what, they'd keep you up at night?"

"Not the two of them. Just her snoring."

I'd drop my copy of Voltaire from laughing.

Within two weeks of friendship, people started telling us we'd be a good couple. The very thought made us gag.

The Sensualist

I met DM Kessler next, in late September. Evan and I were getting lunch after class one day, and up walked this frat bro. He was tall and thickly muscled, making his shaved head look tiny. The windbreaker he wore over his green Delta Upsilon tank declared that he was a crew jock. For most girls, he was sex on legs, which explained the cocky gleam in his hazel eyes.

"Hey man," he said, clapping a hand on Evan's shoulder. His palm was as big as Evan's face. "If you see Alex, tell him he owes me thirty bucks. I'd tell him myself, but he's being an ass lately, so...*hello*." He finally noticed me. He bent his elbow slightly, twisting his wrist a little as he did, and the bulge of his triceps showed clearly through the navy nylon of his jacket.

Evan delicately placed his hand over my face. "My eyes are over here," he remarked drily. "As is my mouth, which tells you to do your own dirty work."

"Bro, it's not dirty work!" the guy laughed. "It's duty work! Alex borrowed thirty from me last week, and now it's his duty to pay up. I'm DM, by the way." I felt him take my hand and shake it. His palm was rock hard with calluses.

"Nick," I introduced myself over the sound of Evan groaning at the "duty" pun. I angled my neck awkwardly to get my face away from Evan's hand.

"Oh, you're Nick?" DM asked. "Nice to meet you! I think it's so impressive how you and Ev text in French."

I turned to Evan. "He's seen your texts? I don't even know what your background is!" I teased.

“Nah, he doesn’t show me,” DM grinned. “We live together, so I can steal it just to mess with him.”

“I don’t know why you keep doing it,” Evan remarked. “You never get the result you want. Look, if I see Alex, I’ll tell him. But his room is next to yours, so I don’t see why...”

“I haven’t seen him since he borrowed the cash,” DM cut in. “He’s probably off on some charitable errand, but he could also be avoiding paying me back because he thinks I’ll use it to buy booze for pledges. Which, you know...not wrong. Well, catch ya later. Pleasure to meet you, Nick,” he added with a winning smile.

“Don’t,” Evan said sharply. DM winked and strode off.

“I’m smarter than you’re giving me credit for here,” I said. I tugged my braid over my right shoulder and then promptly dropped it, lest playing with my hair come across as ditzy.

“You don’t need to big brother me.”

“I’m preempting your hormones,” Evan replied. “It’s this week, isn’t it?”

“The fact that you know when my time of the month is kinda grosses me out,” I said, pulling out my phone and checking the calendar. He was right.

And so that was my first introduction to DM. Whatever the guy did, he was in it for the pleasure. He was a film major because he liked movies and hated reading. He rowed because he loved the adrenaline rush and the “positive pain” of working out. He never dated exclusively. But he wasn’t a bad person. Beneath the layers of frat and swagger was a total sweetheart. I still remember how I couldn’t go home for fall break that year, because I’d caught Evan’s cold after borrowing his water bottle.

“At least it’s not mono, you little dweebs,” DM said before he parked me on their couch. He spent that week shuttling between the living room and Evan’s room right next door, plying us with fluids, books, and a tin can telephone he’d made himself.

Granted, he told us the line was for phone sex, but I think the gesture came from a good place.

The Spiritualist

It wasn’t until that sick fall break in early November that I met Alex Kramer, the final member of the trio. I was awoken early Thursday morning by soft footsteps coming up the main stairwell from the front door. I had been sleeping fitfully, unable to really breathe through my nose, and the creaking floorboards jolted me awake. I struggled into a sitting position and then promptly fell back down for two reasons. First, the massive brown couch was so squishy that it was basically eating me whole. Second, the slightest movement set off a round of fireworks in my skull, and the pain shocked the strength from my body. I lay back and turned my head slowly.

A short, stocky guy stood in the middle of the room, staring back at me just as confusedly. He sported an auburn buzz cut and a puffy orange vest. There was a long moment where we just stared at each other.

“Who are you?” I asked, my voice low and phlegmy. A wave of understanding and sympathy washed over his face.

“You must be Nick,” he said softly, walking over to me. “DM told me you and Evan were sick, although I honestly assumed you’d be a guy. I’m Alex.” He held out his hand, and I noticed a strip of leather wrapped around his wrist. The leather was tooled with symbols similar

to the ones I saw on Thai takeout menus. Through my hazy eyes, the characters appeared to float and wiggle. I accepted his proffered hand, but he didn't shake it. He pumped it once, firmly, held it, bowed his head briefly over it, and then looked at me with bright brown eyes.

“Go back to sleep,” he murmured, releasing my hand and placing his own on my forehead. It was cool and dry, and calmness radiated from it, extinguishing the fireworks in my brain.

“I'm dreaming,” I mumbled groggily. “You're like...frickin'...Dalai Lama...magic.”

“Shh,” he soothed, and I dropped back to sleep.

I woke up to Evan plopping unceremoniously onto the couch by my feet. Sunlight streamed through the blinds, and DM appeared with mugs of tea. Alex followed him out of the kitchen.

“I'm making breakfast,” Alex said. He was wearing one of DM's rowing tanks, and the thing almost reached his knees. It wasn't that he was especially short, though – DM was just massive. His arms and back were dotted with tattoos of Buddhist symbols. The most impressive one was a watercolor mandala on his shoulder, an intricate blue-and-orange maze that resembled a stained glass window.

And so I came to know Alex, the biggest teddy bear I've ever met in my life. He was studying child development and spent all his free time volunteering in the nearby towns, teaching New England kids about community service and karma. Raised Jewish for the first eight years of his life, he discovered Buddhism in an elementary school world religion class and never looked back. Over the years, he had adapted it into his own form of spirituality, making it less about suffering and more about wisdom and ethics. He also always wore something orange. He was like a flame to moths: you couldn't help but adore and trust him.

At twenty-one, I don't think the guy had dated anyone, and that would probably remain the case for the rest of his life. And yet, you got the feeling that it didn't matter to him in the slightest.

The Odd Man Out

If you've stuck with my thus far plot-less tale and me for this long, I suppose I owe you an introduction. My name is Veronica Leigh – that's my first and middle names; it's what my parents call me. Aside from that, I go exclusively by Nick. Of all the friends I made at college, I think only the Bros K knew that Nick isn't on my birth certificate. If I ever reconcile my personality to such a fluffy name, I'll probably go as Veronica from the *Archie* comics for Halloween for the rest of my life. We look similar enough.

I studied French and communications because they're fun. For a while, I wasn't sure how all that would translate to a job. I once told that to a sweet little grandma on a plane, and she very seriously said, "Well, I think that'll have to be a job in translation." I wanted to snap, "Lady, you have no imagination," but the bubbly Christian-school schoolgirl overtook the snarky college coed, and I just smiled and said, "Maybe."

The Bros K kept me around for different reasons. Like I've said, Evan saw me as his sardonic equal and a decently competent intellectual partner. DM kind of wanted to get in my pants, but I think he knew he'd never get there and had more fun just teasing me. Alex would never turn anyone away, but he was intrigued by my agnosticism. He, Evan, and I would talk for hours until DM interrupted with a dick joke.

"Stop flirting!" Evan would always snap.

“I’d only flirt with you, man!” DM would laugh back. He’d try and pull Evan into a wrestling match, but Evan would always bolt, dragging me with him “for my own safety.”

He shouldn’t have been so worried. I’d never have let anything happen. Those three weren’t just my Bros; they were my brothers. As an only child, I jumped at the chance to have older siblings who’d tease and overprotect me, but I guess I never really figured out how to appropriately fit them into my life. In my enthusiasm, I ended up adapting myself to fit theirs.

I say they kept me around because, well, they did. In the grand scheme of their friendship, I was a great addition, but I wasn’t really essential. Remember how I called them appendages of an organism? Well, let’s say they were the stomach, big intestine, and small intestine. I was the appendix. Fine to have, but when it fills with gunk, you have to cut it out before it explodes and ruins everything. We were all attached to and adored each other, but if they ever decided they didn’t need me, then that would be it. I was always vaguely terrified of the day I filled with gunk.

My relationship with those three was simultaneously the best and worst thing to happen that year. I had my own extracurriculars and my own friends, but I spent most of my time with those boys. They became a part of my identity. We ate together at least once a day, had group study parties on their couch and floor, and had movie marathons every Friday night. I had a drawer in their bathroom, a shelf in their pantry, and I even started doing laundry at their house because it was free there and totally worth the schlep. A lot of boundaries went out the window, and it was common for me to get back to my dorm wearing DM’s t-shirt, Alex’s hoodie, and an old pair of Evan’s glasses (he and I had the same prescription – terrible).

That is, if I got back at all. Their couch was really comfy.

Looking back, it all got too close too fast. There were too many puzzle pieces that didn't fit quite right. We just forced them together and said it worked.

The Troublemaker

I officially met Teddy Klessman at a DU charity event in April. I had seen him around before, and every time I saw him, I felt a little thrum in the pit of my stomach. He was another DU brother, and he looked like John Smith from the Disney version of *Pocahontas*. Every time his name came up, my ears actually perked up, like Scooby-Doo or something. DM didn't know him very well, so he and Alex decided to reserve judgment until they did, but that also meant that they didn't really trust him. Evan hated the guy, though he wouldn't explain why. "There's something in the way he smiles," was his vague reason.

DM had only one thing to add: "He's the pledge class below me, Nicky, so I know him more by reputation than anything else. But it sounds like he's a pretty smooth operator."

Anyway, it was the annual Pong for Dongs event, one of multiple DU charity events held during the year. It was only slightly more popular than their Oktoberfest Beirut for Boobs event, and only because the name rhymed. Brothers and guests paid to play, drink, and dance, and all proceeds went to testicular cancer research. The brother who brought the most guests got a Costco pack of condoms as a prize. DM informed Evan, Alex, and myself the day of the event that we'd be his guests.

The inside of the frat was patchily lit, and by 10:30, thirty minutes in, the floor and air were already damp with sweat and spilled beer. DM had gone early to help set up, and he was at the top of his game. Surrounded by girls and guys alike, he proudly poured beers and officiated games of pong. He wore the tightest pants he owned and no shirt, instead choosing to wear body

paint markers on a string around his neck and let people write drunken pro-cancer research slogans and witticisms all over his massive torso. The minute he saw us, he waded through the crowd and perched Evan on his shoulders.

“Nice, man!” he roared. “I can feel it through your pants. This night is to protect gifted people like you!”

Evan turned bright red. He scrambled down from DM’s shoulders, casually and strategically placing himself just behind me.

DM laughed. “I know you three hate playing pong, so you all have duties tonight. Alex, you’re helping to run games. Evan, you’re in charge of Nick. Nick, just stay pretty and witty.”

“Easier done than said. But I don’t need a babysitter, guys,” I smiled as DM and Alex walked off. A white t-shirt, unusually bright in the fratty gloom, caught my eye. I swallowed hard. Teddy smiled at me from by the drinks. Evan wrapped a wiry arm around my shoulders.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s go dance.”

“You hate dancing.”

“But you like it,” Evan said as he steered me into the depths of the frat house.

Evan skillfully kept me occupied for the next three hours. Between dancing, strategically timed drinks, and cheering as Alex and DM faced off in a round of pong, Evan managed to keep me sheltered for most of the night. Around 1:00, I finally broke away to find the bathroom. As I walked back towards where I had last left the guys, I felt someone tap me on the shoulder. I turned and almost smacked my forehead on a chest. I looked up and found Teddy smiling down at me.

“Hey,” he said. “I don’t think we’ve officially met. I’m Teddy.”

I swallowed and attempted to sound like a normal human. “Nick,” I said.

“I see you hanging out with DM a lot. You guys close?”

“Yeah.” I shrugged a little. “He’s a great guy. And a really good friend,” I backtracked quickly.

Teddy laughed. “Nice save,” he said. Suddenly, a random partygoer jostled him from behind, and he bumped into me. Dumb as it sounds, I swear I felt an electric crackle where his arm brushed mine. I then realized he hadn’t fully straightened up.

“You...want to get out of here?” he asked, speaking almost directly into my ear. But before I could respond, I felt a hand clamp down on my shoulder, and I was propelled into the next room.

“No,” Evan snapped at me. “That is a very bad idea.”

“I’m not stupid,” I shot back. “Of course I know he just wants to hook up. And there’s a large part of me that agrees with you. But then there’s a part of me that’s flattered and like, well, he clearly *wants* it...and then there’s a part of me that’s like, *damn*, pizza sounds really good right now.”

Evan’s face relaxed. “You want a pizza?” he asked. “Let me get my jacket. We can split a buffalo chicken calzone or something. Wait for me here.” He walked off. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw DM and Alex grab his shoulders and start to interrogate him. From the way they all kept checking back on me, I knew exactly what they were talking about. I felt someone brush up against my shoulder – Teddy.

“You never answered my question,” he said. “You look bored. Let me at least walk you home?”

“Uh...yeah, sure, ok,” I said, very glad I hadn’t brought a jacket. He slipped an arm around my shoulders and guided me towards the door. I glanced over my shoulder and saw the

Bros staring at me, hurt and disappointment and mistrust scribbled all over their faces. I pulled one corner of my mouth to the side and up, half apologizing and half signaling, “What did you really expect me to do?”

Teddy walked me all the way home. We talked about inane things the whole time, but it was one of the most satisfying conversations I’d ever had. It was magnetic in a way that my talks with the Bros never were. When we got back to my dorm, I invited him up to hang out, very glad I had a single.

I woke up the next morning groggy and dry-eyed. I hadn’t taken out my contacts before going to sleep, nor had I closed the shade, so the eight a.m. sun streaming in the window was blinding. I checked my phone. It was full of texts from the Bros. On my desk was a Plan B packet and a note: “It broke. Sorry ☹” No phone number.

Turns out, Post-it note dumpings are not just in *Sex and the City*.

The Mess

I remember very clearly the day it all went to shit. I was tense after that very bad weekend. Sunday consisted of a lot of calendar checking and praying for cramps to set in. I spent Sunday evening curled in a ball on my bed, massaging my stomach and assuring myself it would be ok. I spent the rest week battling breakouts of stress acne and avoiding the guys as much as possible, just trying to pull myself back together.

“Hey,” Alex texted me the morning after the party. “You get home ok last night?”

“Yeah,” I texted back. “Thanks for checking on me.”

That Monday, Evan stopped me outside of French class. “You ok?” he asked. “You were really quiet today.”

I nodded. “Just tired. I’m still recovering from Saturday night.” I swallowed hard as I spoke and coughed to hide the catch in my voice.

Evan’s eyebrows hit his hairline. “Did something happen Saturday night?”

“You saw who I left with,” I joked, waggling my own eyebrows back at him. I checked my watch. “Oh, sorry, I’ve got to go. I have a meeting with a professor.” I booked it out of the building.

On Tuesday, DM caught me in the library. “Everything good, girl?” he asked.

“Of course!” I answered brightly. Heads swiveled towards me, and I lowered my voice considerably. “Why do you ask?”

“You haven’t been in my house in over 48 hours.”

He had a point. Seeing as it was mid-April, the temperature kept spiking and dropping on its steady upward climb, so it was especially weird that I wasn’t taking advantage of the free air conditioning at their house. Instead, I chose to sleep fitfully all week, as my dorm room grew more and more sweltering. I told myself that the fits of hot chills I kept experiencing were the result of the weird cold humidity in the air.

Eventually, though, I couldn’t hide from them anymore. There’s only so much conversation ducking a person can do. So when Evan texted and asked me if I was still going to Friday Movie Night, I knew that if I said no, they’d know something was wrong and track me down.

Friday night, I showed up at 6:45, on the dot, and handed over ten bucks for pizza and ice cream. It was a cooler night, and I wore jeans with too much spandex in them, so the waistband and butt kept sagging a little as the elastic stretched out, and a really big, loose t-shirt. I loved that shirt. It was this massive, soft, gray thing, with fake leather sleeves and a fake leather patch

pocket, and because I thought I was so cool and artsy I always put in a pocket square. That day it was a pale blue lace one that, now that I think about it, probably looked more like underwear than a handkerchief.

I followed Alex up the narrow staircase to the living room. I kicked off my flats and padded across the carpet into the kitchen. The tile floor was faintly sticky under my bare feet. I guessed it was DM's week to clean the kitchen. He and Evan were at the small table in the corner, drinking beers and deciding what movie to watch. They both looked up when I walked in.

"Hey!" DM grinned. "Long time no see. Want a drink? I think we have some UV Blue somewhere." He got up to look for the bottle.

I didn't doubt that they had UV Blue. They all hated it, but they always made a big show of just "happening" to have some whenever I came over.

"Thanks," I said. I paused, but then added, "Are any of the shot glasses clean?" They all looked at me in surprise. DM seemed to have forgotten to extract himself from the fridge, the frosty plastic bottle of unnaturally blue booze hanging limply in his hand.

"Are you sure?" Alex asked, worried. "You're not very good at taking shots."

"Yeah, I'm sure!" I laughed. "It's just been a shitty week, you know?" I could feel Evan's eyes burning holes in my side, melting the fake leather on my shirt. Then, he abruptly stood up.

"I'll take one, too." He spoke as if this were the most normal thing in the world. "No fun taking shots alone, right?" His voice didn't imply he was in it for the fun.

Alex fished two shot glasses from the pile in the sink and rinsed them. DM poured out the vodka. Evan and I steeled ourselves, and then tossed the shots back. We both grimaced, but I relished the burning feeling in my gut.

“Ok,” I said. “Have you decided on pizza toppings yet?”

“We ordered already,” said DM. “We know you want chicken and pineapple. But we need to talk.”

“Are you three breaking up with me?” I joked.

“Of course not!” Alex replied, completely serious. “We just haven’t seen much of you since the party and want to make sure things are ok.”

“I’m fine,” I said quickly. It sounded snippier than I’d intended. “I’ve just been really busy this week. A lot’s been happening lately.”

“You should have told us,” DM said. “We were worried. We could have helped you out.”

“Well, I’m telling you now,” I snapped. “I just needed some space this week to get stuff done, but that also meant I didn’t have a lot of time to text and explain. I’m fine.” I wondered how much of that last sentence was for their benefit.

“Jeez, no need to be so cranky,” DM said. “What, you PMSing or something?”

“No, she’s late.” Evan’s voice was even and assured. He hadn’t taken his eyes off me since I’d gotten there.

“Excuse me?” I turned to stare at him.

“Look, we all know when it’s your time of the month,” he said. “You go straight to my shelf in the pantry, because I always have Cheezits and mint Milanos, which you crave and yet

never keep stocked. If I'm right about your schedule, which I always am, you should have started over the weekend. You'd be well into Eating Mode by now."

"It was light this time," I said curtly.

"No, it hasn't started yet, has it?"

I paused, and then turned to DM. He and Alex were staring at me, confused. "I think I need another shot," I said.

Realization dawned on Evan's face as the depth of my paranoia and desperation occurred to him. "Oh shit," he said. "Nick, you idiot!" He grabbed my wrist and dragged me to the bathroom. Alex and DM followed. Evan yanked open my drawer and dug out a pregnancy test, still in its box, purchased in case of an emergency. He thrust it into my hands.

"Use it," he ordered, but then softened slightly. "I can drive you to Planned Parenthood."

My jaw hit my chest. There was a moment of shocked silence, and then everyone started talking at once.

"Dude, boundaries!" I yelled. "I don't need your help."

"Don't need or don't want?" he snapped back. "Don't be so proud."

"Whose is it?" DM demanded.

"You wouldn't really get an abortion, would you?" Alex's voice was quiet and concerned.

"Hell yeah, I would," I said, staring him right in the eye. "I'm in no kind of position to have a kid."

"But you'd be taking away a life," said Alex.

“Then I guess that’s why I need to go soon,” I said coldly, “while I don’t need to use gendered pronouns and can still refer to the thing like it’s a plant. Besides, it’s my body, Alex. I decide what stays in it.”

“Was that your justification when you told the guy he didn’t need a condom?” Evan asked lightly. I gaped at him. “What?” he asked. “I know you’re not on birth control.”

“Wait, you’re not?” DM asked, incredulous. “Nick, what the hell!”

“Oh, come on!” I yelled. “Do you really think I’m that big of an idiot? The stupid thing broke! But it’ll be ok. I already took a Plan B.”

“Then why are you still so freaked out?” DM asked.

I ducked my head and clumsily tried to open the test box.

“It’s not 100% effective,” said Evan.

“I know that,” I said, my head snapping up again.

“All the more reason to have double-checked, then,” said Evan.

“I’m sure it’s fine. I’m just being paranoid,” I said, forcing my breath steady. “And in the rare case it didn’t work, then the nearest Planned Parenthood is right on a bus route.”

“You’ll need someone to pick you up,” said Evan.

“Is the asshole going to pay for half?” DM asked. “It’s the least he could do.”

“Stop!” I could feel the pressure of tears building behind my eyes. “I can take care of this myself. I’m an adult; I can handle this.”

“Clearly not,” said Evan, “if you haven’t even taken a pregnancy test yet.”

“Because what do I do if it’s positive?” I mumbled, my eyes growing hot.

“You *call me*, and I drive you to Planned Parenthood.”

“That’s disgusting,” Alex said. We all turned, surprised by the anger in his voice. “I’m serious!” he said. “I mean, you’d really throw away a human life like that?”

“Yes,” I said firmly. “Going through with a pregnancy would be a mistake. It wouldn’t end well for anyone involved.”

“But you don’t have to keep the kid,” said Alex. “You could give it up for adoption.”

I shook my head. “It’s not about keeping it. It’s that I need to be selfish right now. It’s not even like this is the better decision, or the lesser of two evils. This would be my only option.” I started to open the pregnancy test. I realized my hands were shaking. Alex left the bathroom and went upstairs. I heard his door slam. I winced.

“Whose is it?” DM asked again.

“It doesn’t matter,” I replied, fumbling with the box top.

“It’s what’s-his-face...Teddy,” Evan offered.

“Don’t do anything.” My voice was tight, and I spoke fast. “DM, I swear to God, don’t hurt the guy. It was just a stupid accident. Don’t blame him for it.”

DM stared at me like I was from Mars. “You know what you just said about being selfish?” he asked. “Be that now.”

I looked up from the box.

“I do blame him,” DM continued. “I blame him a lot. He thought he could pull his suave dick moves on you; and when it went wrong, he dropped you. He dragged you into this shit storm, and he’s not helping to clean up, which clearly has a bad effect on you, considering it’s been almost *five minutes* and you haven’t opened that goddam box yet!”

I dropped the box, startled by his shout, and my knees followed it. My face felt hot, and I heaved dry sobs. Evan crouched beside me and tore open the box. He placed the plastic stick in

my hand. DM was already gone; I shuddered, praying he wasn't crazy enough to incur an assault charge.

"Come on," Evan urged gently. "It's just a double-check, ok? I'm sure the Plan B worked. And if not, then whatever's wrong can be fixed." I nodded and hoisted myself up. I fumbled for the button on my jeans, but then paused and looked at Evan. He walked out of the bathroom and shut the door. I heard him lean against it.

I sat down on the toilet. I read the directions twice, just in case. I even read the fine print. I uncapped the test and looked at it, figuring out how to proceed.

Actually taking the test is simultaneously the most underwhelming and overwhelming thing ever.

Evan came back in when he heard me washing my hands. He glanced casually at his watch. I just kept staring at the thing, waiting for the telltale blue lines to appear, my eyes growing hotter and blurrier by the second. The next two minutes were the longest of my life.

Slowly, painfully, one blue line faded into view. I waited another thirty seconds, but when a second one didn't appear, I exhaled.

Not pregnant.

I sank onto the toilet again. Every single terrified tear that I'd bottled up all week suddenly flowed out of me. I felt Evan's hand squeeze my shoulder tightly, and then he hugged me hard. My head jerked up and back, and I almost knocked his glasses off his face.

"Well," I tried awkwardly. "This is new."

"I'm just glad you're ok," he said simply.

I grinned gratefully, but my smile stopped halfway across my face. "Oh fuck," I said. "DM."

“I’ll call him,” said Evan. “You should go talk to Alex.”

“Oh *fuck*.”

“Yeah.”

The problem with divisive issues is that they really live up to their name.

The Break

I walked up the narrow staircase to the second level of their apartment. I could hear Evan calling DM downstairs. I approached the landing. There were two rooms on the second floor. If you tripped on the top stair, you’d fall directly into Alex’s room. If you faced Alex’s door, DM’s room was to the right.

I tripped on the top stair. The phrase “Are you fucking *kidding* me?” ran through my mind as I managed to twist in midair. My left shoulder slammed against the door. Alex opened his door to see me standing there, massaging my shoulder. I took one look at his face and instantly wanted to cry.

“Hey,” I began. “So...remember that time I thought I was pregnant?” The silence was painful. “Well, point being,” I continued quickly, “that I’m not. So, no abortion.”

“Small consolation,” he replied.

“Alex, come on,” I pleaded. “No way could I have gone nine months like that. Everything would have been a mess.”

“We would have helped you,” he said.

“It’s not about doing it on my own,” I said. “It’s about doing it at all. Even with help, everything would have gone wrong.”

Alex leaned against the doorjamb and massaged the bridge of his nose. “What my problem is,” he said, “is that you had no qualms about getting an abortion. It was your go-to response.”

“Because it was the only logical res-”

“Nick,” Alex cut in. “A human life is a deeply powerful thing. How can you have no respect for one?”

“Alex,” I said. My eyes were growing hot again. I struggled to find words. “It’s just...I can’t...I won’t...my body, my choice,” I finally finished, lamely.

Alex paused. “I see,” he said finally. “Goodbye.” He started to close the door.

“Wait!” I shoved the door open again. “What the hell do you mean?”

“I mean, I can’t see you right now. I need to reevaluate some things.”

“What the actual fuck, Alex? We’ve been friends all year, and you’re going to just throw that away?”

“Yes, the same way you would throw away a baby.”

“Alex!”

“Nick, you made a decision that runs completely counter to my beliefs, and you did it without batting an eye. I need to decide if that changes anything about our relationship.”

“What happened to being tolerant of other people’s ideologies?”

“I thought we were on the same moral plane.”

“Why are you punishing me and not Evan or DM?”

“I know them. And I’m not punishing you – I’m just realizing that some of my perspectives on you need to change.”

I felt like I’d been slapped. “So, this is it?”

“Just for the time being.”

Footsteps pounded up the stairs before I could answer. Evan stuck his head around the corner in the stairwell. “Nick, we’ve got to go. Like, yesterday.”

I nodded and turned back to Alex. “See you.” I choked on the words. He closed the door.

I inhaled; I exhaled. I turned and ran down the steps after Evan.

“DM located your gentleman friend,” Evan explained as we got in his car. “He’s with campus police right now.”

“Alex friend-dumped me because abortions are ‘completely counter’ to his beliefs,” I replied, attempting to hide my hurt with air quotes.

“God-dammit!” Evan whacked the steering wheel, hard. Startled, I didn’t say anything until we got to the police station.

Inside, DM lounged calmly in a chair that looked about half the size of his butt. “Hey,” he said.

“What the hell were you thinking?” Evan demanded.

“Retribution,” DM replied.

“Dude, I’m not pregnant!” I said softly.

“Congrats.”

“No, what I’m saying is that you didn’t need to do this.”

“No one messes with my friends. No one *touches* them. He needed to know that.”

“DM, you don’t get to control that.”

“What’s going to happen to you?” Evan asked, cutting off DM’s answer to me.

“I’ll probably get suspended,” said DM, turning to him. “At least. If he presses assault charges, then who knows? I might go to jail.”

“How are you so calm about this?” I asked.

“I did the right thing.”

“You’re such an idiot!” I yelled. “You might go to jail, and nothing is wrong with me.”

“Everything is wrong with you,” said DM, “if you can call sheer terror ‘nothing’ and a friend an ‘idiot’ for having your back.”

There was nothing to say to that. I turned and walked out of the station.

Evan caught up with me at the crosswalk at the end of the block. “They’re only suspending him,” he said. “Teddy decided not to press charges.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because he knows that anyone who hears the story would back DM.”

“Except, you know, the law.”

“Guess he decided his reputation was worth more.”

“Great,” I snapped.

“What now?”

“Everything’s destroyed. Alex hates me.”

“He doesn’t believe in hate.”

“Well, he’s pretty close to it. And DM’s pissed because of how I reacted.”

“You did react pretty badly.”

“And you’re pissing me off!” I yelled.

I saw something in Evan’s face snap. I realize now that, startled as I was by his outburst in the car, I should have known more was possible.

His hand shot out. I recoiled instinctively, but he just grabbed my shoulder. “Nick,” he said icily, “think very carefully about what just happened. We, your friends, warned you about this asshole. You not only ignored those warnings, but also defended him and lashed out at us when he betrayed you and we tried to help. How many people will care about your unborn hypothetical kids, beat up the jerks who hurt you, and just plain be there for you?” He grabbed my other shoulder and yanked me closer, yelling now. “Come *on*, Nicky! You’re just another notch in his belt, and we are the only people who will ever have your back the way you need. Not just now, but always!” In his voice, I could hear all the hurt and betrayal that the Bros had probably felt since I left the party.

I wanted to cry. I felt strangely lost. Then I noticed that, in his fervor, Evan’s glasses had slipped down the bridge of his nose. I reached up and gently pushed them back into place.

“But I don’t need you,” I said softly.

Evan paused and weighed every implication of what I’d just said. We stood there, in silence, for a full minute. My mouth was dry, and my breath tasted bitter at the back of my throat. Finally, he let his hands drop, looked me right in the eyes, and shrugged.

“Been nice knowing you, kid,” he said, and then he walked back into the police station.

The Rediscovery

Evan found me again a couple months later, interning for the international section (well, page) of a local newsrag in Roslyn, Virginia. He came into the office and fought to close the door against a hot, humid gust of July wind. It was a Friday evening, and the office was conveniently empty. All of the other editors had gone home to their families or out to the bars. I had volunteered to stay late and close up. I sat curled up on my swivel chair, in the back corner

of the bullpen, the gray felt half-walls of my cubicle covered in thumbtacked Post-its, sheets of notebook paper, and photos. Among the various writing style guides on my desk was my copy of *The Brothers Karamazov*. I was furiously scribbling red ink all over a printout of an article when a hand reached down and scooped up the book. I looked up to see Evan leafing through it casually. I immediately felt self-conscious; I looked like I'd just stepped out of a J. Crew catalog. I worried about what he thought, but only for a moment.

“Totally DM, what an asshole,” Evan read from the marginalia I'd written over the months of rereading. He smirked. “Tell me what you really think, Nicky. Or do you prefer Veronica now that you're an intern in a professional environment?”

I shook my head. “Nope. Can't do it. Even my byline is Nick L. Kay.”

Evan continued to thumb through the pages, reading my notes. “How many times have you read this thing?” he asked.

“Too many.”

“And you keep making notes each time?”

“Yeah.”

“Ivan, don't be such a dipshit. Dmitry, CONTROL YOUR URGES.’ Well, never heard those before.”

I shrugged. “I saw a lot of similarities between you three and those three.”

“Why do you keep reading this book?”

“For the good memories.”

“What about making new ones?”

“Not with those brothers,” I said, lifting my chin slightly in his direction.

“I take it you’re still mad after these past few months?” He put the book back on my desk.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t think I was ever mad. I think I was just too shaken then to think clearly.”

“We all really regretted how that went down,” he said. “Alex and I decided to take off next semester with DM, so we’ll all graduate at the same time. And we’ve talked a lot about what happened with you. I think we were all in love with you in different ways, and seeing you pull away like that was too much, so we all overreacted.”

“No,” I said. “You all just wanted to believe that I could work perfectly as an addition. Hell, I wanted to believe that. But I was an optional piece, and when things didn’t work anymore...it was probably best that I stopped hanging out with you guys. I got lost in the group, and I think Teddy was my trying to differentiate myself a little. To strike a happy medium, you know? When it came to the four of us, I should have swapped faith out for reason a long time ago.”

Evan chuckled. “How Dostoevskian.”

“Most life-applicable class I ever took.”

“We all thought you were great, you know,” Evan said. “We still do. But I guess we just tried to make a stool into a chair.”

“Which is a pretty dumb concept, I guess.”

“Well, we’ve felt down a leg ever since you left.”

“I don’t think this metaphor is working out the way you wanted.”

“It’s not, but we’re moving into the area. The three of us got an internship to make documentaries, and we need a fourth person for the apartment we want. And despite everything that happened, the only other person we could think of was you.”

“That sounds like a terrible idea for many reasons.”

“Oh, it is,” Evan agreed. “And I’m sure you’re very happy to be back home with your family. But there are some redeeming qualities, so, you know, if you’re at all interested...?”

“Evan, this has to be the worst offer I’ve ever heard of.”

He nodded. “Ok. Well, I’ll text you sometime. The four of us should get dinner or something, while we’re here.”

“Yeah, sure,” I nodded. “I’d love that.”

“Cool,” he said. “I guess I’ll see you around, then.” He smiled at me once more, and turned to go.

“Evan!” I called suddenly, without thinking. He paused, the both of us startled by my gut reaction, but not surprised. I smiled shyly and shrugged hopelessly.

That night, after work, I started over with my Brothers K.

Cyrus Bergeron

When I started college, I was hiding behind a fresh, secret nose job and the new veneer of confidence it created. I was convinced this would be the solution to all my problems, though the only person I told this was Cyrus Bergeron. When I told him, he just nodded.

“If you’re happy, then I’m happy,” he said.

Cyrus had been my best friend since childhood. He might as well have been my older brother – caring and teasing and protective to a fault. He had the nose of my nightmares and the confidence of my dreams. I adored him. His quick mind and easy air served as the perfect counterpoint to my awkward energy.

By the time I got to college, he already had a year there under his belt, and he was already a superstar on the fencing team. So his senior year promised to be a true swan song. He was captain of the fencing team, DJ of a popular campus radio talk show, cruising high on stellar grades, and itching to work abroad after graduation. I was a junior that year, and though I’d never have admitted it, I was childishly desperate for a Big Adventure. I used to blame my eagerness on Cyrus, who was definitely responsible for my love for the grandiose. But looking back, it was more that I was tired of always needing Cy’s backup. I wanted a story that could be all mine, and I was looking for it every chance I got.

Like the summer leading up to that year: I spent July hiking around the Hudson River Valley, doing a photo-documentary project on the Hudson River Valley School. I had planned the trip for all of June and was certain that I could handle anything that happened. The first couple weeks of my trip were amazing. The sun was out every day, and I ran on trails and rock-scrambled and filled an entire memory card with photos. But then, halfway through the month,

the weather turned. Cy drove out to check on me and found me wet, bedraggled, and disheartened.

He gave me a patch kit for my tent, extra supplies, and a hug before leaving. I spent the rest of my time there mildly annoyed with both Cy and myself. When he picked me up at the end of the month, I crankily told him not to say, “I told you so,” and then begrudgingly thanked him for saving my butt. I sulked for the next couple days, but before another week had passed, we were inseparable once more.

Cy and I both moved back to school that fall during freshman orientation. Fencing practices started that week, and since he and I were living in apartments on the same block, I went back at the same time so we could help each other move in.

“Really?” I asked, holding up his poster of *The Three Musketeers*.

He shrugged. “I am many things,” he said. “Predictable may well be one of them.”

“Nice choice, Rosie,” he commented later as we unpacked my room. He unfurled my collection of Poussin’s mythological Roman lovers: *Venus and Adonis*, *Cephalus and Aurora*, *Acis and Galatea*.

“You like?” I asked, pressing half-dried Sticky-Tac onto the corners of *Diana and Endymion*.

He nodded. “It’s a good indication of your mindscape: romantic, artistic, vanilla...”

“Hey!”

He laughed. “True,” he conceded. “At least it’s *French* vanilla.”

I threw a pillow at him.

After he'd left for fencing practice, I got an email from the Sports section editor for *The Cadet*, the campus newspaper. I contribute regularly to the paper, but as an art history major, my wheelhouse trends more towards museum exhibit reviews than sports write-ups.

"Hey," the email read, "I want to do a sort of 'Who's Who' on the sports teams, so freshmen know who to talk to if they're interested in a certain team. I know you don't normally write for Sports, but since you're one of the few writers back on campus, would you mind covering Cyrus? I know you guys are close."

I sent back a response agreeing to help out. It's not like I had anything else to do, and I always enjoyed watching fencing practices.

I glanced at my watch. If I left in about twenty minutes, I could catch the end of the first half of practice. That'd give me an opportunity to observe team morale and camaraderie, plus I could interview people during their break. I typed up a quick outline and sent it in for review. While I waited for approval, I sketched a bio of Cy for the piece and noted some of the team's recent accomplishments. Once my plan had been given the go-ahead, I chucked my notebook and pen into my bag, along with the usual phone-wallet-keys combination, slipped on my sunglasses, and headed over to the gym.

The gym was freezing in comparison to the hot, slightly humid August afternoon. Though it was probably enjoyable to the athletes, I shivered, as goosebumps stood up starkly on my legs. I dragged a hand through my hair but then shook the blond waves forward, wondering if hair could replace a sweater.

I found my way easily to the fencing practice. I did not relish sitting down on the cold wooden bleachers, but I did so quickly, tripping over my own feet a little, when I saw who was standing at the other end of them.

Val Gixon, the student government treasurer, scowled at the practice. His main duty was to oversee club sport spending. Cy was always pushing for the team to go to extra tournaments. Even if they could only send a few members, he insisted that the extra competitive practice would only help the team. His co-captain, best friend, and housemate Brett backed him up. So far, they'd proven to be right: the team was on a serious winning streak.

The problem was, the funding to go to these extra tournaments came from the club fund. The athletic department backed the fencing club wholeheartedly, since their success reflected well on the school, so Val had to approve the expenses. The team wasn't extravagant, but Val made it no secret that he hated having his power curbed like that.

Once seated, I hunched forward, briefly pinching the tip of my nose with one hand as I grabbed for my notebook with the other, but the stupid bleachers creaked when I stepped on them. Val looked up and, seeing me, immediately moved towards me. He awkwardly side-shuffled between the benches until he plopped down right next to me. The bleachers rattled loudly, and Cy looked up momentarily from his match with Brett. He glowered at Val and landed a particularly sharp jab on Brett's right shoulder. Brett followed the jab's momentum, pivoting gracefully, and spotted Val and me.

Brett has a better poker face than Cy does. He simply completed his pirouette and thrust hard at Cy, the two of them sparring with increased energy.

Val snorted softly next to me. "How typical," he remarked. "Playing up their machismo because they know you're here."

"I highly doubt they're acting like that because of me," I responded, keeping my voice level.

“No need to be modest,” Val smiled at me. You could hear my subtext whistle as it flew over his head.

“Mm.” I forced a smile at him and then bowed my head over my notebook, hoping he’d leave me alone. I scribbled notes about the team. They were certainly working well together, though by this point they all had also noticed Val’s presence. Their attacks were getting sharper and harder with irritation, which, if anything, underscored the fact that the team was already pulling together nicely. They were in perfect sync, and the enthusiasm on the floor was palpable.

“What’re you writing?” Val asked.

I didn’t have it in me to flat-out ignore him, so I answered. “I got asked to do a write-up of the fencing team for the *Cadet*.”

“I thought you covered arts?” Val asked.

“Normally, yeah,” I said, still not looking up at him.

“Be sure to add that any new players better get used to swallowing their pride,” Val grinned.

My head snapped up. “Really?” I asked.

“Come on, Rosie, lighten up,” Val said. When I ignored him and looked back at my notebook, he tried again. “It was just a joke!” he added. I didn’t react.

“And that’s just a hint. Maybe you should take it,” came Cy’s voice. I looked up. The team was on break, and Cy and Brett had walked over. Up close, it was easy to see how intimidating they were: lean and wiry, but tall. Cy’s impressive nostrils flared slightly, emphasizing his displeasure.

Val stood up and stepped off the bleachers. He looked the two fencers up and down, appraising them and trying to appear condescending, but it didn’t work. He was a couple inches

shorter than Cy, and a good head shorter than Brett. Plus, both fencers were dark-haired and tanned from the summer, giving them more presence. Val was blond like me, but pale and soft from an office internship. He looked like one of Cy's sneezes could blow him away.

"What are you doing here?" Cy asked.

"Just observing," Val answered.

"Closed practice," said Brett. "You need to leave."

"That's a new rule," said Val.

"But a rule nonetheless," said Brett. "Door's over there."

Val laughed. "You guys think you're such a big deal? I'll have you know I was champion fencer in high school."

"Congratulations," said Cy. "But now it would appear that your sabre has gone flaccid."

Val fumed. "You're such a hotshot, Cy. My sabre's just fine. You wanna try it?"

"Nah, I'll pass," said Cy, smiling. "My mother always taught me to pick on people my own size." Balancing his sabre's tip on the floor, he shifted his weight slightly, positioning the sabre's handle between his legs.

"Come on, let's go!" Val snapped, grabbing Brett's sabre.

Cy glanced at me. I stared back at him, my eyes wide with concern. He started to smile. I lightly rubbed the end of my nose with a fingertip, scratching an itch. His eyes cooled slightly.

"I can *smell* my victory," Val said, brushing past Cy and walking over to the practice mat.

Cy's eyes sparked again. "That's surprising," he said, strolling after Val. "I would imagine it's hard to smell much of anything with your head so far up your own ass."

I stood up and headed for the door, the bleachers rattling loudly as I booked it out of the gym. I powerwalked down the hallway towards the front door of the athletic building, but Brett caught up with me before I could exit the building.

“Rosie,” he smiled down at me. “Come back in. You know Cy’s got this.”

I shook my head. “I don’t want to watch Val go for his eyes and then say he missed Cy’s shoulder.”

“I feel that,” said Brett, “but I’m also pretty sure you’ve got nothing to worry about. Val’s just wants to make Cy look bad.” He put a fraternal hand on my shoulder and guided me back to the gym.

Inside, the rest of the team members had gathered round the duel. One of them was holding a whiteboard, keeping score. Val had one point; Cy had two.

“They’re playing to three,” Brett explained. “Val must have just scored.”

“How?” I demanded.

“Dumb luck,” Cy called from the mat.

“Bitter that fortune no longer appears to be on your side?” Val asked.

The two squared up for the match point.

“Tell me, Cy,” Val taunted. “You’ve read *Don Quixote*, right?”

“Obviously,” Cy replied, clearly unsure of how the book was relevant.

“Remember the chapter on windmills?”

“Ah,” Cy said, nodding. “So I’m attacking a flighty and fickle being, am I?”

Val paused, his rhythm thrown off. “No,” he said, pulling himself back together. “A windmill’s blades often knock an attacker flat on his ass!”

“Or catapult him into the stars!” Cy grinned and lunged smoothly, landing a solid blow on Val’s chest.

Val froze, stunned and humiliated. Cy walked up to him and delicately plucked Brett’s sabre from his hand.

“Closed practice,” he said, nodding towards the door.

I woke up the next morning to another email from the *Cadet’s* editorial staff.

“Hey, thanks for the fencing profile!” the email read. “You’ve got a really good feel for the team, and a better sense of fencing terminology than most of our other sports writers. Want to be the regular fencing correspondent?”

I sent an email accepting, since I’d be at all the tournaments anyways.

I went to the first practice after tryouts, around mid-September, so I could see how Cy and Brett integrated new members into the team. I settled myself in the back of the bleachers, propped my notebook open on my thighs, and looked up. I promptly fell back against the wall, my heart vibrating.

There was a new guy on the team. Based on the way he interacted with the seniors on the team, he was clearly an upperclassman. He had the complexion and sunny air of the Mediterranean. I shook my head and stared at my notes.

“Focus, stupid,” I mumbled. But I kept sneaking glances up at him, no matter how hard I tried to focus on Cy’s leadership abilities.

Later that night, Cy came over with a box of donuts. We ate them while lounging on my couch.

“So,” I said slowly, rubbing the bridge of my nose. “Who’s the new guy on the team?”

“We have a bunch of new guys,” Cy said, blowing on his mug of tea. “You’re going to have to be more specific.”

“The Mediterranean-looking one.”

“Oh, Christian. He’s an exchange student from France. Nice guy, though he seems a little bland. Why do you ask?”

“No reason,” I said, focusing on my own mug. Cy waited a minute, and then leaned over and gently but insistently started nudging me with his elbow.

“Tell me the truth,” he said. “Tell me the truth. Tell me the truth, tell me the truth, tell me –”

“Fine!” I burst out, laughing. “Well...it’s just...I don’t know...he’s really cute.”

Cy sat back abruptly. “Oh,” he said finally. “Is that all?”

I shrugged. “Do you think you could find out what he thinks of me?” I asked, hesitantly.

“Rosie, he doesn’t know you from Adam.”

“Just find out if he noticed me at practice today!”

“Nice, Rosie. Very high school.”

“Come on, Cy,” I said. “I don’t want you to be my messenger. I’m just saying my job would be easier if I had an introduction.”

“Your job?”

“You know what I mean. Also, be nice to him.”

“What?” Cy stared at me. “Where did that come from?”

“You called him bland, Cy. That’s a definite sign you’re gearing up to tease him. He’s probably just not good enough at English yet to be really witty. So try to be nice to him?”

“Yeah, sure, fine.” Cy stood up. “Well, it’s getting kind of late. I should head home.”

I stood up, too. “Are you ok?” I asked.

“It’s nothing,” said Cy. “I’m just tired. I’ll see you around, yeah?”

“Yeah,” I said. I moved to hug him, but he brushed me off with a half-smile and then left.

I ran into Brett the next morning at the campus café. We were both headed in the same direction, so we walked together.

“Hey,” I asked him, “is Cy ok?”

“Why do you ask?” Brett replied.

“He was over last night, but he was acting really weird when he left.”

Brett paused. “You know, I don’t actually know,” he said. “We had a morning practice today, and you know Christian, the French guy?” I nodded, my stomach turning flips just at the mention of his name. “Well,” Brett went on, “Christian actually made a couple jokes about Cy’s nose. Just little digs, but you know how Cy is. We’re not even allowed to make cracks about that! But Cy just let them slide.”

“He what?” I asked.

“Yeah,” said Brett. “Go figure. Well, this is me,” he added, turning towards the redbrick history building. “See you around. Oh! Don’t forget. We’ve got our opening tournament this weekend.”

“I’ll be there,” I said. I turned to keep walking and nearly collided with Val.

“Hey,” he said, attempting suavity. “I saw your latest bit on the fencing team in the paper this morning. You’ve got quite a nice way with words.”

“Thanks,” I said. “One of Cy’s many influences on me.”

Val blinked. “Yeah...well, got to go,” he said curtly. “Bye.” He stalked off. I smiled and kept going on to class.

The gym was still chilly when I got there to cover the tournament that Saturday. It was also far too early for my taste. No one should be awake at 8:00am.

I dropped my bag in the bleachers and ducked off to the bathroom, prepping for the long day of competition I had to watch. When I came back, there was an index card tucked into the top of my bag. As I sat down, I snugged my sweater tighter around me and plucked up the card.

It wasn't an index card. It was nice cardstock, folded over and sealed with a simple gold foil circle sticker. I slit the sticker with my thumbnail and popped the card open, revealing elegant navy script inside.

Sans vous il n'y a plus de poésie, il n'y a plus de Dieu, il n'y a plus rien.

I glanced up at the fencers. They were still warming up, so I didn't need to worry about missing any of the matches yet. I pulled out my phone and typed the line into the Google search bar. It was a quotation from the George Sand novel *Lélia*, and it translated to, “Without you there is no more poetry, no more God, no more anything.” French.

I looked up. Christian smiled over at me. I swallowed hard and tried to smile back like a normal person. He turned back to the group, stretching out his legs. I leaned back against the wall behind me, my heart turning somersaults. I wiggled my nose and then massaged it gently. How was I supposed to stay focused on the tournament now?

I noticed Cy staring at me, and waved. He stared at me a little longer, but eventually he grinned and dipped into a deep side lunge, knocking Christian off balance as he bent. Christian simply straightened, laughed, and changed his stretch.

I managed to concentrate on the actual matches, although it was hard – my thoughts kept drifting back to Christian’s note. But as I forced my mind through the pragmatism of journalism, logic took hold and changed my perspective. The note was flattering, and it definitely made my stomach do flips. At the same time, it was more than a little weird, not to mention a touch creepy.

But I’m such a sucker for the rom-com moves. The actuality of the note kept overshadowing my reasoning about it, and the warm fuzzy feeling worked its way back into my brain. I started smiling uncontrollably.

Later that evening, I reviewed my notes from the tournament and was a little nauseated from what I had written.

“The boys fence elegantly, moving as if their souls were in sync.”

“Like snowflakes, they flit and leap, lunging rings around their opponents.”

“Team captain Cyrus Bergeron is especially graceful: his sabre is a paintbrush, and his attacks are art that outshine any of the Old Masters.”

Ugh.

Over the next few months, the notes continued to appear regularly. Most days I would come home to find one in my mailbox. But sometimes, I’d leave my books in the library or campus café, only to come back and find another note sitting proudly on top of my bag. They varied in content: sometimes, like the first note, they were just one line long, quotations from famous French love stories. There were lines from Flaubert, Saint-Exupéry, and even Molière and Racine. Other times, they were long, flowing epistles of affection. And though I couldn’t quite shake the idea that this was straight-up bizarre, I found myself slowly falling in love.

“Ugh, you stupid,” I would say to myself as I got ready for class or for bed. I’d square up to the mirror and talk right to my reflection. “You don’t love him. Don’t get ahead of yourself.”

I didn’t need hindsight even then to know that I wasn’t anywhere close to falling in love with Christian. The letters never revealed anything about him, or even what went on inside his head other than this apparent wellspring of adoration for me. I didn’t know if there was anything there to love. But I was falling in love with his words.

They could hardly be called letters. His words were pure poetry. They were witty, and clever, and carefully measured to play my heartstrings like a guitar. They were also sappy and cheesy, but there was no denying how happy I was to receive a letter.

“His wordplay is on par with yours,” I told Cy one night, about a month after I’d started getting the letters.

“You don’t say,” he said.

“I do say,” I said. “In fact, he might be better at it than you.”

“Really?” Cy asked, sitting up on my couch.

“I hate to break it to you, but he sweeps me off my feet in a way you never have,” I said.

“Hm,” said Cy. “Guess I better up my game.”

“You seem pretty calm about it.”

“Does he talk as well as he writes?”

“That’s...not...relevant,” I stammered weakly. I quickly busied myself with homework, while Cy chuckled good-naturedly.

The fact of the matter was, Christian and I had still never had a direct conversation. As wonderful as the notes were, the method of communication was starting to feel stale. It wasn’t long before I started to wish Christian would say the things in his notes to my face. He seemed

perfectly content to yak it up with Cy. He was always with Cy when I bumped into him, and he seemed perfectly happy to let Cy do all the talking, as well as all the coming up with excuses for why they had to rush off. Finally, I decided to take matters into my own hands.

It was mid-December, and reading period had just started. I was heading to the campus café, in desperate need of a muffin to cheer me up after the soul-sucking library. Just outside, I bumped into Christian. He was alone, probably waiting for Cy. He smiled at me and started to turn away, but I seized the opportunity and walked right up to him.

“Hey!” I smiled brightly at him. His smile froze, and he looked down blankly at me. He opened his mouth slightly, but stayed silent.

“How have you been?” I asked, trying again.

“Ok,” he said, shrugging a little exaggeratedly. I had to strain to hear his voice.

“Do you have a lot of finals?”

“Not too many,” he said, his English heavily accented. “I just have a few exams, towards the end. And then I go back to France for the holidays.”

“What do you study, again?” I asked casually, although I actually had no clue.

“Economics,” he replied.

“Oh, cool! And where in France are you from?”

“Paris.”

“Cool.” I nodded at him. The conversation stuttered to a sharp halt. I stood there, dumbfounded, when suddenly Val walked up.

“Rosie!” he exclaimed. “Aren’t you a sight for sore eyes? How’s reading period going for you?”

As if on cue, Cy materialized. “Hey Val,” he said, clamping onto Val’s shoulder and propelling him through the café doors. “I wanted to ask you about your budgeting plans for next semester...”

Alone with Christian again, I swallowed hard and bit the bullet. “What’s with the love notes?” I asked. “We barely know each other.”

Christian relaxed noticeably, and his smile eased its way across his face once more. “*L’amour toujours n’attend pas la raison,*” he said. He bent down, planted a soft kiss on my cheek, and then followed Cy into the café.

I stared after him, but eventually confusion lost to the desire for a muffin, and I walked into the café. I bought a blueberry muffin and settled at a table in the corner. Christian and Cy, as well as a captive Val, were at a table in the center.

I looked up what Christian had said to me. It took a couple tries, since I was spelling the words phonetically, but I eventually typed the sentence correctly into the Google search bar. It was a line from Racine, and translated to, “Love does not always wait for reason.”

“What the *hell?*” I muttered. I closed my laptop and sat back in my seat. I twitched my nose, brushed a knuckle across the tip, and stared at my laptop, lost in thought. Then suddenly, I stood up, slung my bag over one shoulder, muffin in tow, stalked over to the guys’ table.

I leaned down to Christian’s eye level. “You can’t just quote dead Frenchmen to me if you lack your own originality,” I said. A faint shower of crumbs from my muffin detracted slightly from the cool factor. I straightened up and strode out of the café.

The daily notes continued after that. Actually, they started coming multiple times a day. I just didn’t read them. They were longer letters this time, probably attempting to explain Christian’s inability to hold a conversation, but I didn’t care. I was annoyed.

The whole situation was stupid. It shouldn't have mattered that the love notes were truly spectacular – pretty words don't mean anything if you can't carry them off the page.

I had many mirror conversations with myself about it that week.

“How could you get so carried away?” I demanded of myself. “This isn't a movie, you ding-dong. Nothing gets built off of one-sided communication.”

“But it was flattering,” I'd then plead. “It was sweet. Cut yourself a break. Him, too.”

And then I'd groan, long and wordless and discordant, because I felt pathetic.

One afternoon, about a week later, I was packing up to head home for winter break. I was listening to the last episode of “The Gazette,” Cy's radio show, of the semester.

“We're all clearing out for the break,” came his laughing voice from my computer speakers. “And honestly, the campus feels as dead as it does on any given Saturday night. Hopefully we all party harder on New Year's Eve than we do on weekends!”

As his hour-long segment wound down, though, he grew serious.

“I now have a special message for someone,” he said. “It comes from this year's exchange student, Christian Neuville. As for the recipient, you know who you are.”

I was kneeling on the floor, cramming socks and underwear into any available empty crannies in my suitcase. I straightened, a pair of socks hanging limply in my hand.

“Christian unfortunately had to go back to France for break before today's episode,” Cy's voice continued, “but he left a written letter with me to read aloud. He asks that the intended recipient bear with him, as it does open with a quotation.”

Cy cleared his throat. “*Il y a des personnes,*” he read in clear but faintly accented French, “*à qui on n'ose donner d'autres marques de la passion qu'on a pour elles que par les choses qui*

ne les regardent point ; et, n'osant leur faire paraître qu'on les aime, on voudrait du moins qu'elles vissent que l'on ne veut être aimé de personne.

“That’s a quote from *La Princesse de Clèves*,” said Cy, “and it translates to, ‘There are those to whom we dare give no sign of the love that we feel for them, except in things that do not touch them directly; and, though one dares not show them that they are loved, one would at least like them to see that one does not wish to be loved by anyone else.’ Essentially, just because someone is unable to express his emotions as fully as he might like, that does not detract from the power of his emotions.”

“I don’t give a rat’s ass,” I grumbled.

“Here’s the rest of the letter,” Cy went on. “‘You’re right. Quotes are a cheap excuse for my shortcomings, but you must understand: seeing you makes my mind go blank. If minds are oceans of opportunity and originality, then your face is the meteor that drains them on impact. You are a phenomenon unto yourself. Forgive my inability and please, find it in your heart to give me one more chance.’”

“Ugghhhhhhhh...” I released a long, grating groan and hurled the socks into my suitcase.

“Anyway, have a happy and safe holiday season!” Cy called from my computer speakers. I flopped back onto my floor and stayed there until Cy came over about an hour later to drive home together.

“You ok?” he asked, walking into my room.

“Christian was here for a week,” I said.

“What?”

“Christian was here for a week before he left!” I exclaimed, sitting up. “Why didn’t he just come say all that to my face?”

Cy sat next to me on the floor. “You said it yourself,” he said. “Christian isn’t good enough at English to be as witty as you want. So you either need to be ok with that, and let him use letters as a way to be that clever, or you need to move on. I know he’s cute, but – ”

“It’s not about the cute,” I interrupted.

“Huh?” Cy asked.

“Yeah, his being cute helps,” I said. “But life doesn’t exist solely on paper.”

“So talk to him!”

“Talking to him is boring, Cy!” I said. “I tried to talk with him, and it was awful. He couldn’t carry a normal conversation.”

“So then move on. You just said life doesn’t exist on paper, but then you only want what he can offer on paper.”

“I just want him to try,” I said.

“It looks to me like he is trying,” said Cy. “Why don’t you?”

“I did!”

“You had one conversation with him. If you want to try with him, then you have to keep trying.”

I rolled away from him. “Stop telling me what to do.”

“So you just want to complain to me?”

“Yes.”

“Rosie, you can’t just sit back and wait for things to happen to you.”

“Not fair,” I said. “I do things, Cy.”

“Oh, like that disastrous camping trip?”

I sulked. “I got good photos from that.”

“And you’ve got a good story out of this. So decide if you want this to stay a story, or if you want to live it.”

I sat up. “Don’t be so sappy.”

Cy reached over and squeezed my shoulder. “Come on,” he said. “Hurry up and finish packing. I’m ready to get out of here!”

I had expected the daily letters to stop during break, but they only slowed down to once a week. But on top of the letters, I started getting daily emails. And a couple days into break, Christian sent me a Facebook message. Within a few days, we had started a daily tradition of chatting back and forth, only for an hour or so. But what made the chats so great was that they were both instantaneous and normal. They weren’t highbrow declarations of passion; they were just check-ins and jokes and updates. They were real conversations.

“How was your day today?” I’d ask.

“Pretty uneventful,” he’d respond. “I went to the gym today, so I’m fairly tired.”

“Haha,” I’d type back. “Oh, the gym. Something I should do more of.”

“I just feel like it does a soul no good to let the body moulder.”

“You just can’t drop the poetry, even when talking about the mundane, huh?”

“LOL sorry ☺”

I was bummed he never suggested Skyping, but the instant gratification of the chats showed me that he was trying to fix the problems I’d pointed out before we’d gone home.

When I told Cy about it, he just smirked at me.

In late January, Cy and I drove back to school a couple days early, so we could get settled before the semester took off. I unpacked my suitcase and then ran next door to ask Cy if we could run to the grocery store. Brett answered the door.

“Hey Rosie!” he smiled. “Did you have a good break?”

“Yeah,” I grinned back, squeezing past him into the house. “Nice and relaxing. What about you?”

“The same,” he said. “Cy’s actually a little busy right now.”

“Hm?” I didn’t pause as I pushed Cy’s door open. Christian and Cy were sitting on the floor together.

“Oh!” I said. “Sorry, I was coming over about going grocery shopping. Hi Christian!”

“Hi,” he smiled at me, and then got up and made to go.

“I really appreciated all the messages over break,” I said. He paused, glanced at Cy, and then looked back at me.

“I’m glad,” he said softly. “I hope they made you smile.”

“They really did,” I said. “I feel like I know you so much better now.”

He nodded. “Yes, me too. Please excuse me; I need to go finish unpacking. I’ll see you later,” he added to Cy before rushing out.

“Hang on a sec,” I mumbled to Cy, and chased Christian out into the street. “Wait!” I called to him. He turned back to me.

I jogged up to him. “All that talking over break, and you can’t even hold a conversation with me now?” I demanded. “This isn’t fair, Christian.”

“No,” he said gravely. “It’s not.”

“Then talk to me!” I said.

“I can’t.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I don’t have the words you want,” he said. “I’m very sorry, Rosie. This has been unfair to so many people.” Leaving me floundering in the corniness of his language, he walked away.

The next day, I found out that Christian had taken the upcoming semester off and gone back to France.

The rest of January found me wallowing in confusion and self-pity. One week I would be up early, working out obsessively and counting my calories and hitting my books hard, as well as getting plenty of sleep. The next week, I would stay up until 2:00am, watching TV and eating ungodly amounts of cookies. Valentine’s Day was especially rough, as the very idea of exchanging cards sent me spiraling into despair. Then, on February 15, Cy burst into my room. I was curled up in bed, watching Wes Anderson movies. Cy dropped a bag of mini Three Musketeers on my bed.

“Candy sale at CVS,” he said. “You may eat exactly the serving size, and then you are getting up.”

“Uggghhhhhh,” I groaned. I rolled onto my back and massaged the bridge of my nose. “He went back because of me, didn’t he?”

“You can’t stay like this, Rosie. You’re eating cookie butter straight out of the jar!”

“You were right,” I said miserably. “I was too needy.”

“No,” said Cy, “you were giving him chances to open up to you and make whatever you guys had into something real.”

“What happened to ‘you need to try, too’?”

“That was before he freaked and ghosted.”

I flopped back on my pillows and banged my head on my headboard. “Ow!” I exclaimed, sitting up slightly. I rubbed the back of my head.

“Look,” said Cy, “whatever the reason, at least this taught you what you want out of someone, and what you need from yourself. And now you have to move on, because the other option is no longer available.”

“Look, Cy,” I said, “thanks for the candy, but I think I need to reach a conclusion like that on my own. Please leave me here to continue telling myself that I’m an idiot.”

“Rosie,” said Cy, “it does the soul no good to let the body moulder.”

I sat all the way up. “What?” I asked.

“Get up!” Cy exclaimed, flinging my blankets off me. “Get up, go take a shower, get dressed. We’re going on a walk.” He stepped out of my room. I heard him settle on the couch to wait for me. I got up slowly, my head reeling slightly.

Must be the aftershocks of colliding with the headboard, I told myself.

Over the next few weeks, Cy brought me back to life. He would explode into my room every morning and drag me to the gym. I would work out while he had morning fencing practice. During the day, he’d lend me books or send me funny articles. On weekends, he always had a new museum exhibit he wanted to visit or hike he wanted to take.

And then, suddenly, at the end of March, everything came crashing down again.

“I got an internship!” Cy told me over breakfast one morning. “BBC radio.”

“BBC?” I said. “Isn’t that British?”

“Yeah,” said Cy. “They’ve offered me a six-week internship/job trial. I talked it over with my advisor, and since I’ve got enough credits to graduate already, I can count the internship for a credit.”

“Cy,” I said, “there are only eight weeks left in the semester.”

Cy nodded. “I move to London in a week. It’s really last-minute, but it’s too good a chance to pass up.” I nodded mutely.

The next week was spent helping Cy get ready to go. Both of our heads were spinning.

“What am I supposed to do without you?” I moaned the night before he drove home. He would fly out of our hometown airport in two days.

“What you’ve always done with me,” he said, as we sat together on my bedroom floor.

“Let you stand up for me?”

He laughed. “Look,” he said, “this is what you gave Christian so much grief about. You can’t hide your own insecurities behind other people’s words. Live beyond the language – isn’t that what you said?”

“But you’re so much better at it than me,” I said.

Cy shrugged. “Practice makes perfect.”

I snorted. “Think I’ll ever get there? Perfection, I mean.” I reached up to rub my nose.

Cy reached out and grabbed my hand. “To me,” he said, “you always have been.” He leaned over and kissed my nose, and then got up and left. On the floor, where he had been sitting, was a piece of cardstock, folded over and sealed with a circular gold foil sticker.

About a week later, I was sitting in the campus café. My laptop was open on the table in front of me. Next to it was my latte, going cold. I stared blankly at the screen, my hands resting in my lap, when someone slipped into the seat across from me. I looked up.

Brett lounged in the chair, sipping his coffee. “You’ve been looking pretty worn down these past few days.”

I shrugged, closing my computer and putting it away. “Self-loathing is good for the complexion.”

“That bad?” Brett asked, his eyes softening. I stared at him for a moment, and then slumped forward, resting my head on the table.

“I. Am so. *Stupid*,” I said into the tabletop.

“You don’t say,” Brett remarked.

I looked up, propping my chin on the table. “Christian was an Econ major!” I exclaimed. “I bet he’s never even read *La Princesse de Clèves*!”

“He most certainly has not,” said Brett. “A nice guy, but bland, bland, bland.”

“So Cy was writing for him the whole time.”

“Cy was logging into his Facebook to message you over break,” said Brett. “He adores you.”

“For how long?” I asked.

“For as long as I’ve known him,” said Brett. “Probably longer. But he was always so sure that you wouldn’t reciprocate, given the whole...you know...” Brett flicked the tip of his nose with his thumb.

“Yes,” I snapped, sitting up. “I am aware of the problem, Brett, thank you.” Suddenly self-conscious, I pinched the tip of my own nose.

Brett smiled gently. “Look,” he said, “I don’t think Cy did this so you would feel guilty at the end. He definitely didn’t think Christian would bolt.”

“I know that,” I said. “Cy did it so I’d learn something about myself. This was him preparing to exit, but he wouldn’t leave if I’d still needed him.”

Brett nodded. “He wanted you to have a story outside of him. But because it’s Cy, he just had to write that story.”

“What a turd,” I smiled helplessly. Brett grinned back at me.

“So now what?” he asked.

“I move forward, because the other option is no longer available.”

“And how do you plan on doing that?”

“I don’t actually know,” I said. “I feel like, no matter what I do, it’ll feel like I’m either still following Cy or rebelling against him.”

“You’ve got to stop thinking in terms of him.”

“How do I do that?” I asked.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Brett chuckled. “Look, kiddo, he’s always going to have some kind of sway over you. Just get better at adapting it, not adapting to it.” He finished his coffee and got up to go. But then he paused.

“Can I ask what was on that last note?” he asked.

“Sure,” I said. “I’ll even tell you what’s on it.”

Brett half groaned, half laughed.

I held up Cy’s last note to me and read aloud in careful French: “*Ils ne prendront jamais mon panache.*”

“What does that mean?” Brett asked.

“They’ll never take my flair.”

“Kind of *Braveheart*-y, don’t you think?”

“Kind of cheesy, don’t you think?”

Brett took the card from me and stared at it a little longer. “So,” he said finally, “what does it mean?”

I sat in silence for a moment. Then I took the card back and put it away.

“It means I better start finding my flair,” I said.

[Paradise]

So much of my life has been shaped by wanting what was convenient at the time. For about as long as I can remember, I never had much real drive. I was good enough at everything that I just kind of slid by, poking my head up every now and then, mostly to cause mischief. I had never needed to really struggle for anything, so it had never occurred to me to try. And by the time I got to senior year of college, I was pretty well stuck in that groove.

All throughout college, I did what I enjoyed, not what would necessarily help me out in the future. I always found it both impressive and amusing to see my friends plot out their lives and take measured steps to make sure they achieved their goals. It was impressive because they had the kind of drive that I never thought I'd have. I could barely be bothered to plan ahead for the weekend, let alone the next several years of my life. But it was amusing for almost the same reason. They were so focused and driven that they became inflexible. The slightest mishap sent them spiraling into self-doubt and stress.

One of the nice things about coasting is that nothing fazes you. I had this unflappable approach to college life that my friends envied. Exam season never took too big a toll on me, and I always believed that, despite my lack of a plan, I would land on my feet. My friends would probably have judged me a little if they had known that my Zen exterior hid a distinct lack of motivation, but since my overall performance was never affected, they never suspected a thing.

I should clarify: I wasn't just a bump on a log. Or would a rolling stone be a more appropriate metaphor? Either way, my point is that I didn't just slip through college. I did try things. Like, my freshman year, I got to college thinking that I would walk on to the volleyball team. I had captained my high school team, not due to a ridiculous amount of overall talent, but due to diligence and a freakishly naturally strong serve. I had stuck with volleyball throughout

high school because I enjoyed it, and my willingness to show up and stay positive, plus my consistent ability to pound out un-returnable overhands, impressed the coaches. I figured I was good enough to walk onto the team and at least bench-warm.

I showed up to tryouts during Freshman Orientation, stepped wrong during a warm-up drill, and promptly rolled my ankle. The coach offered me a job as stats keeper, with the option to try out again in the spring, but I declined. I wasn't dedicated enough to the sport to commit that kind of time without getting to play. But before the bummer of no more volleyball could really set in, I got swept up in another activity that ended up defining the rest of my college career.

I had been randomly placed into a mixed-gender, mixed-year suite my freshman year. Carrie Hollis and Jess Faraday were both Air Force ROTC students, working on their second year of a five-year engineering program. Carrie's brother Beck, who was my year, had picked into that suite. Beck was a budding environmental studies major with plans to join the Peace Corps after graduation. There was also Tom Danville, the socialist poet, and Alex Connor, the bright and spontaneous Manhattan party girl. Carrie and Jess had founded a political opinions magazine, titled *The Quest*, the year before. They convinced the rest of the suite to start contributing regularly. I signed on as an editor. Again, it was something I knew I was good at, but didn't require too much extra effort or practice. Since our suite was the main team for the magazine, we often ended up working on it together, late into the night. It was more fun than I'd anticipated, but more so for the company than the actual content.

When I told my mother I'd joined the magazine team, she asked if we needed financial donations or a graphic designer. My mother is well-intentioned, but detached from reality. She

still believes a cocktail fundraiser and parental approval can solve anything. She had sent me the contact information for five of her aspiring artist friends before I could get in a word edgewise. I tried to tell her that parent donations were fine but not recommended, due to the team's principle that we should try to be self-sufficient. She pooh-poohed my attempts to explain that this was just as much an exercise in independence as it was in publication and expression. She insisted I talk to our faculty mentor to smooth things out (meaning, smooth out an opening for her to swoop in and try and reorganize).

I suppose I should thank my mother for bringing up the faculty advisor. I had planned on not even contacting our faculty advisor – why put in the extra effort when I knew what the answer would be – when it occurred to me that I didn't actually know who our faculty advisor was. I asked Jess, and he told me to look up Professor Maloney Darcy. I ended up emailing Professor Darcy, figuring we should at least know who the other was. We set up a coffee meeting for a few days later.

The day of our meeting, I took the long way to the coffee shop, strolling through campus to enjoy the changing leaves, still limping slightly from my stiff, although healed, ankle. It was mid-October, so the weather was still sunny, but there was a definite chill in the air. I had yanked a brown beanie, which proudly sported a giant fuzzy pompom on the back, down over my ears. As I crossed the street off campus, I hooked my fingertip over the bridge of my sunglasses and slid them down my nose slightly. I picked out the coffee shop, pushed my sunglasses back into place, and walked inside.

I scanned the room quickly. I had hoped that Maloney Darcy would be a wizened old Jane Austen specialist. There hadn't been a photo of him on the English website, but his bio had described him as a specialist in creative writing and satire. While a perfect match for our

magazine, it struck a bit of discord with his name. Nobody in the café looked like a Maloney, so I got in line and ordered a chai latte while I stared openly at people. Most people paid me no mind, though some noticed me staring, in which case I'd simply flick my eyes over to the next person.

After I got my latte, I hovered awkwardly by the counter for a few moments, wondering whether I should take a table or just start calling out for Professor Darcy. Neither turned out to be necessary.

"Amy?" came a voice by my left shoulder. The voice was round and warm and jolly, but with grave undertones. I turned, anticipating a sort of intellectual Santa Claus, and stopped.

"Amy Blaine?" asked the man next to me. He was only a few inches taller than me, though I am a few inches above the average height for women. He looked like what happens to youth ministers when they grow up. Once young and wiry and probably very good at hacky sack, he was now soft and slightly thicker around the middle, though he still radiated good energy. He was mop-headed and scruffy, and he wore wire-rimmed glasses and a Black Watch plaid shirt and a gray cardigan. I realized I hadn't acknowledged his question.

"Yes," I said quickly. "That's me." He smiled genially.

"I've put my things at that table there," he said, indicating a table by the window, but away from the door. "I'll just get my drink, and I'll be with you shortly?" I nodded and walked over. Once at the table, I observed him unabashedly.

I took off my jacket and draped it over the back of my chair, following it with the strap of my bag. He ordered an Earl Grey tea and a lemon-poppy seed muffin, chatting amiably with the baristas. I sat and unwound my scarf from my neck. He paid, laughing at a joke he had made. It sounded like he'd said the muffin would alleviate the need for extra sugar in the tea, a necessity

since it was a long time since his badminton-playing days. As he walked over, I pulled the beanie off my head and stuffed it in the sleeve of my jacket. I shook my hand quickly through my hair.

“You’re hair’s a lot redder in person than in your I.D. photo online,” he commented as he sat.

What can you say to a comment like that?

“My dad always said I look like a stick of dynamite waiting for a match,” I offered finally.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Professor Darcy asked.

“I think that I’m lazy and lacking in spark,” I said, chuckling.

“Or that you just haven’t found the right calling yet,” he said.

Two things happened in that moment. First, I decided that Professor Darcy was too much of an optimist for his own good. Second, I sensed that our budding friendship wouldn’t release its hold on us any time soon.

By the start of senior year, I had established myself pretty well on campus. Most people knew me on sight. I was the acerbic redhead who ran *The Quest* from the background. I was a brutal editor when it came to submissions, but my weekly editorials were always among our most popular pieces. Jess was pushing for me to take over as Editor in Chief that year. He and Carrie had run the magazine for four years at that point, and he was ready to step down. Carrie thought I’d be good, too, but she was torn. Beck was gunning for the EIC spot, and Carrie vacillated between wanting to support a talented contributor and not wanting to come across as nepotistic.

“It’ll come down to grades,” Jess said the first night back. The six of us had all picked into the same suite for the fourth consecutive year (if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it).

“Hm?” Tom asked, not looking up from a collection of anti-big bank limericks he was writing. He doodled the words down the margin of his U.S. Democratic Thought textbook.

“The EIC,” Carrie explained. “We’ll wait until the first round of midterms, and then calculate a rough GPA for both Amy and Beck. Whoever’s quarterly GPA is higher gets the spot.”

Beck nodded. “That sounds fair,” he said, his voice a deep, molasses-y roll. I always wondered what it would be like to hear him get really angry.

I looked up from one of Alex’s anthropology textbooks that I was flipping through.

“Look, Beck,” I began, “if you really want the spot –”

“Nope,” Jess cut me off. “Don’t get lazy, Amy.”

“But Beck wants it more!”

“You’d realize how much you want it if Beck had it.”

Alex swept by me, plucking her textbook out of my hands as she did. “It was the first day of classes today,” she said. “How do you not have homework?”

I shrugged. “The work’ll get done,” I said, lounging back in the armchair.

“What do you even study?” Tom asked. “We’ve lived together for three years, and I can’t for the life of me remember what you do.”

“Classics and philosophy,” I laughed. “Did you know? The Romans were super sassy speech-givers.”

Tom nodded vigorously. “I really liked a lot of Cicero’s speeches.”

“Hey,” said Jess suddenly. “Have we set up our first meeting with Professor Darcy? We need to touch base with him about our goals for this year.”

“And to let him know about the power changeover,” Carrie added.

“I’m meeting with him tomorrow,” I said. “I can fill him in.”

“You meet with him a lot,” said Alex, “especially given he’s not even your advisor.”

I shrugged again. “He and I get along really well,” I said. “I forget that he’s a professor sometimes, you know?”

I was greeted by concerned looks from my friends.

“Oh, gross!” I laughed. “I meant like an uncle or something. Come on, guys – when have I ever taken anyone seriously enough to see them in a remotely romantic light?”

Laughter erupted in the suite.

“Ouch!” said Jess. “What about what’s-his-face from last year... Isaac?”

“The Cape Cod pseudo-intellectual?” I asked.

“Green-eyed demon!” Beck teased, reaching over to tickle me. I leaned just beyond his reach, my stomach cramping from laughing as I stabilized myself with my core.

Once we’d all calmed down, Carrie pulled us back to business. “Ok,” she said, tearing a page out of her notebook. “Here’s a general outline of what you need to tell Professor Darcy tomorrow.” She jotted rapid notes down the length of the page, and then handed it to me. “Does all that make sense?”

I skimmed it. “Yeah, sure,” I said. “I got it.”

Carrie’s handwriting is near illegible.

Professor Darcy laughed, loud and explosive. “I always forget how bad Carrie’s handwriting is,” he said. “I manage to convince myself every summer that it can’t be as bad as I remember. Every fall I am forced to realize I hope for too much.”

I laughed, too, ignoring the stares his laugh had garnered from the other café patrons. “Yeah, I think the biggest thing is the power changeover,” I said. I briefly summarized the Beck-vs.-me EIC situation.

“Oh, well if it comes down to grades,” said Professor Darcy, “you’ll lose.”

I sat up. “Probably,” I said, mildly peeved. “But as my mentor, aren’t you supposed to push me to do my best and fight for this?”

“Amy,” said Professor Darcy, “please. I know you better than that. You won’t fight for it unless you want it, and even then you won’t really fight.” He noticed me starting to sulk, but didn’t hasten to assuage my feelings. “Your grades are fine,” he went on, “but you don’t push yourself to get them that way. You’re still waiting for the right match.”

I pulled myself back together, mostly because he wasn’t wrong. “What if I never find the right match?” I asked.

“You’ll never know until you start actually trying things,” Professor Darcy replied. “Look Amy, you’d be a wonderful Editor in Chief. You practically run the magazine as is. Just push yourself a little these next couple months and see what happens. You might be pleasantly surprised.”

“Uuugghhhh,” I mock-groaned. “Effort.”

“Yes,” Professor Darcy nodded, smiling. “Effort. What a novel concept.”

I sat at my desk that evening, thoroughly daunted by the sight in front of me. Plato's *Republic* lay open before me, and my notebook was next to it. I stared at the pages, trying to muster up enough strength to actually take notes on my reading, rather than just skimming the required pages.

Alex poked her head into my room. "Hey," she began brightly. "Want to go grab dinner?" She then noticed what I was doing. "Are...are you doing *homework*?" she asked.

"Yeah," I laughed. "It's kind of a bet with Professor Darcy."

"I hope he's prepared to lose," Alex laughed. "But I'll leave you to it." She withdrew, and I found myself presented with a dilemma. I didn't particularly want to exert myself when I knew I'd do fine in the class. I'd probably enjoy it more if I weren't stressing about it, anyway. But I also found myself thoroughly repulsed by the idea of letting Professor Darcy down. The two sides battled it out for a moment, and then I suddenly fell to reading. I figured, what the hell – I had to do the reading anyway.

And thus started a weird phenomenon: Amy working. I was no longer a regular figure in my suite or the student center rec room. Suddenly, I could only be found deep in the library stacks or hunched over my books at a café table. The shift sounds drastic, and it was. But I also found myself enjoying it immensely. My new, deeper grasp of class material increased my ability to make biting comments in class. A crowning moment was when I had to look up a word in one of Nietzsche's essays. The etymology helped me draw a connection between the essay and the *Republic* that not even my professor had noticed. I probably came across like a pretentious ass, but I was riding high.

Another fun development was Beck's noticeable panic. He, like most everyone else in the suite, had counted on his beating me based purely on grades. Beck's a much nicer editor than

I am, but his work ethic would have trounced me. Now, I'd stumble home from the library late at night, exhausted and bleary-eyed from the small, dusty text I'd been reading, only to cheer up instantly at the sight of Beck frantically scrawling notes and flipping pages.

Everything has its perks.

The weekend before Thanksgiving break, we all gathered in our favorite café with Professor Darcy. Beck and I had received all of our midterm grades and had both calculated our rough GPAs. It was Reveal Day.

Alex dragged a couple round tables together and somehow managed to fit all seven chairs around them. We sat, all armed with steaming mugs and sugary pastries. Professor Darcy settled in the seat next to me and smiled. I looked over at Beck. He had printed out an Excel spreadsheet that showed his grades, their corresponding numerical values, and then his calculations. I had made some notes on a page in my notebook and then ripped it out. I had written really neatly, though.

“Ok,” said Jess. “Do you guys want a lot of pomp and circumstance, or just a reveal?”

“I'm good either way,” I said.

“Let's just reveal,” said Beck, a touch curtly. He was nervous.

We all sat in silence for a moment, a little unsure of how exactly to “just reveal.” Finally, Beck said, “Ladies first.”

I cleared my throat. “Ah,” I began awkwardly, “um...well, I'm taking five classes this semester. I got two As, two A-s, and one B+, for a total rough GPA of 3.75.”

Jess' eyes sparked. I could tell he was happy for me. I didn't have to look to my side to sense the positive energy radiating from Professor Darcy. I could practically hear his congenial "I told you so."

But then I noticed Beck. The muscles in his jaw and around his eyes had relaxed ever so slightly. He put his spreadsheet on the table.

"I also took five classes," he said. "I got two As, and three A-s."

Carrie and Jess exchanged a quick look. Carrie didn't want to be the one to jump on announcing her brother as the next EIC, but Jess couldn't give up on me.

"Well," I said quickly, "I guess that settles it. Nicely done, Beck. Though," I added, "we could have reached the same outcome without making me spend all that extra energy. I don't think I've had a full night's sleep since August!" I took a big gulp of my chai, burning the tip of my tongue slightly. I then noticed some chai had dripped on my sweater and, grateful for the chance to hide my face, ducked my head to attend to it. I brushed the drops from the hunter green wool and felt my ears grow hot.

Someone squeezed my shoulder. I looked up, half expecting Professor Darcy, but it was Alex.

"Hey," she smiled. "You're still coming to my house for Thanksgiving, right? Have you bought your train ticket?"

I cleared my throat. "Yeah," I said. "I bought it a week ago. We're sitting next to each other."

"Great!" she said. "It'll be a lot of fun. My brother will be home, too."

I looked over at Professor Darcy. "How do you feel?" he asked.

"Kind of silly," I said. "All that work, and I'm right where I started."

“Not quite,” he said. “Dud matches aren’t failures.”

“I should never have told you that dynamite metaphor.”

“I do believe it was a simile.” He and I laughed.

A couple days later, I was in my room packing for Thanksgiving break when I heard a knock on my door.

“Come in,” I called, flinging socks onto my bed. Jess walked in.

“Hey,” he said. “I just wanted to check in after the whole EIC debacle.”

“I wouldn’t call it a debacle,” I said, adding a couple shirts to the pile of clothes. “Beck deserves the spot. He’ll do a good job.”

“He’ll do a good job because he’s eager to please,” said Jess. I looked up at the acerbity in his voice. “It should have been you,” he went on.

“Don’t dump on Beck just because I’m your favorite,” I smiled.

“That’s not why,” said Jess. “Look, he’ll do a good job. He wants people to read the magazine. But you would have gotten more opinions in.”

“Yeah, by irritating people so they want to argue with me.”

“Good writing should make people want to debate.”

“Just face it, Jess,” I said. “I wouldn’t have been good at it. I would have gotten bored or something and driven it into the ground.”

Jess smirked. “I told you so.”

“What?”

“Now that Beck has it, you realize you want it. That’s why you’re pushing your own apathy so hard.”

“No, I’m just actually apathetic.”

“Amy,” said Jess, “if you were going to get bored of *The Quest*, it would have happened years ago.”

I looked at him, and then tossed a pair of jeans onto my bed. “Maybe. But things ended up how they should have.”

“If you insist. Now tell me, how do you intend to fit all that into a duffel bag?”

I looked at the heap of clothes on my bed. “I guess I don’t need three pairs of jeans for a five-day break, do I?”

Jess grinned. “Depends. Are you planning on putting in effort by doing laundry?”

“Are you planning on becoming less annoying?”

“I believe you mispronounced ‘charming.’”

I pelted him with socks until he ran from my room.

One day and a four-hour train ride later found Alex and me walking up to her impressive Upper East Side brownstone.

“What does your family do, again?” I asked.

“Finance,” she explained. “Well, my dad does. Rowan will probably go into the family business after he finishes business school. My mom is a Society Wife.”

Mrs. Connor opened the door for us before we reached the top step. She was a warm and elegant lady, understated in her affluence. She welcomed us in and showed me to my room.

“When you’re finished unpacking,” she said, “come find us in the sunroom. It’s just down the hall.”

“Thank you,” I said. She left, and I carefully set my duffel bag in the middle of the floor. The room was straight out of *Architectural Digest*. Unpacking didn’t take me long, since Jess had helped me edit my packing list. I glanced in the mirror before I left the room. I paused, considering my reflection, and then quickly swapped my shapeless navy tunic sweater for a lemon yellow-checked button-down and a fitted gray J. Crew pullover. I shook a hand through my hair, walked out of my room, and froze.

Mrs. Connor was not good at giving directions.

I wandered slowly down the hall. I figured that the first several doors I passed were not “down the hall” enough, but then I reached the end of the hall. Left or right? I took a leap of faith and a breath of confidence, and then turned left.

I walked into a bedroom. The space was sophisticatedly masculine. It felt scholarly and stylish and just the faintest bit egotistical. A guy about my age stood at the foot of the bed, bent over an open duffel that sat on a cushioned bench. He straightened when I entered, staring at me confusedly. I gaped back. He had Alex’s pert nose, dusted with freckles, as well as her hazel eyes and blond hair. But his eyes didn’t have the same faintly naïve sparkle that hers did.

“You must be...Amy?” he asked. “Alex’s friend here for Thanksgiving, right?”

“Yeah,” I said, walking over and holding out my hand. “You must be Rowan, her older brother.” We shook hands.

“Sorry about bursting in like this,” I said. “I was looking for the sunroom.”

“That would be across the hall,” he said.

“So I’d deduced.”

“Did my mother give you vague directions?”

“Oh no, my Google Maps is just on the fritz.”

He laughed. “Well, I’m done unpacking. Let’s go find Mom.”

“I’ll step out so you can change,” I said.

“What’s wrong with what I’m wearing?” he asked.

“You look like a Fitzgerald dandy,” I said, casting my eyes over his pink-striped shirt and navy blazer-like cardigan. Then it dawned on me. “Oh...you dressed yourself this morning.”

“I did indeed,” he said. “I ate all my cauliflower at lunch, too. And I even enjoyed it!”

I sniffed. “No accounting for taste,” I said, lifting my eyebrows slightly. I turned and left the room before he could rally and respond.

That evening, the Connors hosted a cocktail party to start the holiday season off right. I thought I came from a Society Family, but man – the Connor’s were high rollers. They seemed to know everyone of any social merit in Manhattan, plus a few local politicians. I wandered through the party, feeling both impressed and mildly out of place. Alex tried to stick with me, but her parents kept whisking her off to introduce her to someone. I didn’t mind. I mingled my way across the living room, noting with dry amusement that Alex stood out among most of the crowd as remarkably intelligent.

At one point that evening, I heard her say, “Well, if you take Maslow’s hierarchy into consideration, I don’t think cutting back on space exploration was such a bad idea. What might be more beneficial would be to figure out how to revamp our capitalist economy using socialist values.”

I chuckled upon hearing that. Alex wasn’t dumb by any stretch, but her bubbly personality often seemed mismatched with, say, Tom’s politicized wit. At her parents’ cocktail party, though, she blew everyone out of the water.

I bumped into Rowan a couple of times during the party, too, but he, like Alex, was mostly occupied with his social duties. Unlike Alex, he seemed to be initiating all the introductions himself. Clad in an honest-to-God smoking jacket (paired ironically with designer high-top sneakers), he thrived on the attention his father's banking friends lavished on him. He flitted between the conversation clusters, relishing his patrimonial position and glowing so brightly he washed out the mood lighting.

Around 8:00pm, my stomach full of hors d'oeuvres and my head full of champagne bubbles, I quietly extracted myself from the gathering and slipped upstairs. Once in my room, I left the lights off and sat very still in the middle of the floor. I tried to reproduce the meditative breathing my mom and I had learned in a month-long mother-daughter yoga class we had taken. I would go back down once I'd cleared my head a little.

There was a soft knock on the door, and then someone opened it and slipped inside. Whoever it was closed the door quickly and left the lights off.

"Everything ok?" came Rowan's voice.

I nodded, it not occurring to me that he might not be able to see me in the dark.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"The temple is closed for maintenance," I said. The champagne was affecting me more than I'd initially realized.

Chuckling, Rowan sat down next to me, the black velvet of his jacket rustling. "Doing alright there, champ?" he teased.

"All non-believers may exit the vicinity of the temple," I said. Now that I'd started, I might as well go all out.

Rowan reached over and started massaging my wrists. “I’ve heard this helps with tipsiness,” he said.

“I’m pretty sure that’s for motion sickness,” I said. A wave of dizziness hit me, like I’d been whacked in the head with a pool noodle.

“Are you always this much of a smartass?”

“Only during business hours.”

“Business hours?”

“Nine to five,” I said. “Normally inflexible, but I’m pulling a little overtime now because you’re clearly in need of so much help.”

“Now there’s a business I’d like stock in,” he said softly.

“This is a strictly private enterprise,” I replied.

“Even private companies need investors,” he said.

I laughed. “And for how long are you hoping to invest?” I asked, looking him straight in the eye.

He had long stopped rubbing my wrists. “I’m kind of hoping to be your sole investor,” he said.

I stood up sharply, stumbling backwards. “Don’t mix business and pleasure,” I managed lamely, before rushing back downstairs to find Alex.

That following Sunday morning, Alex and I loaded ourselves onto a train to head back to school. Rowan insisted on coming aboard the train and helping us with our duffels. Once we were situated, Alex tactfully excused herself to say a final goodbye to her parents. Rowan and I stood in the aisle, smiling dumbly at each other.

“Well,” I finally said. “I guess I’ll see you around sometime.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I’m thinking of coming up and visiting Alex in a couple weeks, so I’ll probably see you then.”

“She and I do live together,” I said. We both nodded awkwardly, bobbing our heads like chickens. Suddenly, Rowan laughed.

“It’s amazing the difference a little liquid courage makes,” he said. He gave me a one-armed hug, wrapping his right arm around me and pulling me in close, and kissed the top of my head.

“If I come visit,” he said, “it’ll be to see you. Is that ok?”

Instinctively, I squeezed a fistful of his cable-knit pullover in my right hand. “Yeah,” I said, my voice muffled by his rowing-lean chest. “Yeah, that would definitely be ok.”

He kissed the top of my head again, tightening his grip around me as he did so, and then he pulled away just as Alex reentered the train car. He turned and hugged her.

“See you soon, kiddo,” he said, and then he left.

Alex and I sat down. She turned to me. “What’s happening between you two?” she asked.

“Alex,” I said, “I told you what happened. Nothing has changed since then.”

“So he didn’t make a soap opera scene when I stepped out?”

I laughed awkwardly. “Well...kinda.”

“Yes!” Alex punched the air. “This is awesome.”

“Don’t get too excited,” I said. “There haven’t been any real developments yet.”

“Shhh,” Alex covered my mouth theatrically. “Don’t ruin this moment for me. We’re practically in-laws already.”

I jerked back. “What?”

“Siblings talk, Amy. He really likes you.”

“Have you ever seen me stick with someone long enough to call it anything but a fling?”

“It’s different this time,” Alex insisted. “I saw the way you looked at him.”

“With confusion and mild concern for my own mental wellbeing?”

Alex snorted so hard she started hiccupping. “No!” she said once she got her breath back. “You guys are really drawn to each other.”

“Alex, we spent the entire break making awkward eye contact and avoiding one-on-one interactions.”

“Oh, hush. This’ll be something good. You’ll see.”

“Mm,” I said noncommittally.

True to his word, Rowan came up and visited a couple weeks later. And again about a week after that. And once more just before finals started. And suddenly, I was having to listen to Alex’s ‘I told you so’s on an almost daily basis.

She had been right. Rowan and I were magnetic. We couldn’t get enough of each other. When we were together, we never stopped touching each other. I don’t mean anything overtly PDA-y – we just always wanted to be in some form of physical contact. His hand on my elbow, our knees brushing under café tables, even just my index finger hooked around his thumb.

Jess teased me that the physical contact was the only thing that gave us away as a couple. Rowan and I preferred verbal sparring or lively debates to sweet nothings. But he could also be romantic. He sent me an enormous bouquet of Persian violets at the beginning of reading period, wishing me good luck.

“That’s a weird choice of flower,” Beck commented. He leaned against the doorframe into my room, while I tried to pick the best place for the giant vase.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Those calendula?” Tom asked, sticking his head in.

“Yeah,” said Beck.

“Weird.”

“Hey,” I said. “Would anyone care to explain why?”

“Calendula,” Beck explained, “otherwise known as Persian violets, are poisonous.”

“So I won’t eat them.”

“They signify that all good things come to an end,” Tom said softly.

I paused, but then laughed. “I highly doubt that this is a breakup in bouquet form.”

Tom shrugged. “Interpret as you will,” he said. “But it’s not the best omen, if that’s your thing.”

“It’s not,” I said vehemently. My phone chimed, the light bell sound somehow augmenting my cloud of self-created tension. I picked it up. I had gotten an email from Professor Darcy, asking me to stop by his office as soon as possible. I fired back a quick response, saying that I would head over presently.

I looked up at Tom and Beck. “Sorry for snapping,” I said.

Beck waved away my apology. “Sorry for being dicks about Rowan being cute,” he said.

I smiled, tugged on my coat, and set off. I crossed campus as fast as I could, penguin-waddling to avoid slipping on the layers of ice and snow on the ground.

Professor Darcy’s office was a warm, tea-scented haven from the frosty world outside.

“I’ve always thought that your office was the room equivalent of being inside a muffin,” I commented as I sat down.

“That’s my goal,” Professor Darcy replied. “Now, Miss Blaine, why don’t you tell me what’s going on?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I haven’t seen you in several weeks,” said Professor Darcy. “Any need for me to be worried?”

“Oh, no!” I said. “I’ve just been busy.”

“Doing what?”

“With the magazine, mostly. And a very good friend has been visiting a lot lately.”

“Ah-hah,” Professor Darcy smiled. “I believe this very good friend is Alex Connor’s older brother, correct?” He laughed when I blushed. “And how is the magazine doing under Beck’s leadership?”

“It’s fine,” I said. “It’s not quite as hard-hitting as it used to be. Beck’s a much kinder soul than...than Jess.”

“And than you would have been?”

“Yeah,” I said slowly, and then I shook my head. “But it’s fine. People like Beck, so the readership is up. And I’ve got other things going on now.”

“Such as?”

“I’m looking at editing jobs in New York,” I said. “It’s something I know I’m good at, and New York feels like a good fit for me.”

“And no doubt the presence of Rowan Connor acts as a draw,” Professor Darcy said. He looked at me for a moment, his eyes faintly melancholy. Or were they pitying? “On a much more enjoyable note,” he went on suddenly, “what are your plans for winter break?”

“I’m going back home to the Midwest for the first couple weeks,” I said, “and then I’m flying out to Vail and going skiing with the Connors for the second half of break.”

“That’ll be wonderful,” said Professor Darcy. “Just one thing. If I might assign a small project.” He handed me a flyer for a national speechwriting competition. “Just think it over while you’re home. You’ll be too busy skiing while you’re in Vail. But just consider it.”

“Extra work over break?” I asked, feigning offense. “Ok, but only for you, Professor Darcy.” I stuffed the flyer in my pocket and headed home.

I forgot about the flyer until I got all the way back to the Twin Cities. After greeting my parents, I went to my bedroom to unpack. I shucked off my coat and heard something crackle. I pulled the sheet of paper out of the pocket.

The competition rules were simple: you picked a congressman, you picked an issue in an upcoming rally (the flyer listed the acceptable topics), and then you wrote a speech about that topic according to the congressman’s position. The winner’s speech would be read at the rally.

I stopped trying to unpack and lay down on my floor instead. It sounded fairly easy. Speechwriting aligned nicely with what I studied, and my experience with *The Quest* taught me how to write clearly and effectively. It could be fun. At the very least, it’d be something to do until I saw Rowan and Alex. I didn’t have to submit the speech if I didn’t want to.

I flipped onto my stomach and scanned the list of topics, settling on climate change. It was a big, touchy subject, but I knew a lot about it from Beck, and the different political

perspectives in my suite had given me a pretty good grasp of how the different sides viewed the issue. And I knew that one of the senators from California shared a lot of my views on the topic. I decided to write for her.

Over the next couple days, I played around with an outline. I kept muttering buzzwords to myself as I wrote, mumbling things like “pathos, ethos, logos,” and “efficiency trumps morality.” I’m pretty sure my parents thought I was going crazy. And hell, I almost did. As the outline developed, I found myself getting more and more excited about the speech. My fingers felt itchy if I wasn’t near my computer. The writing consumed me, but I felt so exhilarated every time I produced a really tight, solid paragraph.

The speech grew slowly. I worked it a paragraph at a time, making sure that my transitions flowed smoothly, that my signposts were nuanced, and that my rhetoric was persuasive. I drew on Cicero and Aristotle, on John Muir and Henry David Thoreau, and on pop culture. When I submitted the speech two days before I flew out to Vail, I had produced a fifteen-minute speech that covered (among other things) the science proving climate change to be real, the ethical and academic need to save the planet, and the importance of creating jobs through homegrown clean energy. The language was clean and fluid, the jokes were pointed but light, and the finale was truly grand.

Before I submitted it, I emailed a copy of the speech to Jess. He texted me a single word twenty minutes later: “Damn.”

Overjoyed, I uploaded my speech to the contest online submission form and clicked “Submit.”

I didn't tell Rowan about the contest. And since I didn't hear anything further from the contest organizers during break, I figured that I hadn't placed. The thought kind of put a damper on the ski trip. I felt like I was walking around with a giant lump in my stomach the entire time. Every chance I had, I refreshed my email on my phone. And every time the desired email didn't pop up, the lump swelled.

"You ok?" Alex asked me late one night. We'd been in Vail a little over a week at that point.

"Yeah, of course!" I said, a little too cheerily. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"You've just been acting weird lately," she said. "Kind of edgy. Is everything alright?"

"I'm fine," I said, smiling. "It's just...it hit me that we're heading back to our last semester ever. It feels kind of weird."

"Ugh, I don't want to think about it!" said Alex. She rolled over in her bed, yawning. "Well, I think I'm going to crash. Got to be up early to hit the slopes!"

"Yeah," I said. I rolled onto my side, away from Alex. Hiding the glow of my phone with my body, I refreshed my email again. No new messages. I curled in on myself, massaging the cramping pit in my stomach.

The afternoon of the first day of second semester, I was reading in my room when Tom walked in.

"You've got mail," he said, lilting his voice like the old email notification. He handed me a large, official-looking envelope. I took it calmly, but once he had left the room, I almost tore the thing in half in my haste to get it open.

“Congratulations!” it read in big, flowing script. “Your speech has been selected as the winner of the...”

I didn’t even bother to read the rest of the letter. I printed out a copy of my speech, jerking on snow boots and coat while the printer whirred, and then grabbed the speech and the letter. I bolted out of the dorm, slipping on ice as I booked it to Professor Darcy’s office.

His office is on the third floor of the English building. Normally, I’m winded by the time I get to his door, and today was no exception (especially since I was running). Panting heavily, the cold air still burning in my lungs, I burst into his office and placed the stack of paper on his desk. I flopped into the chair next to his desk, admiring the new additions to his collection of Thomas Pynchon while I caught my breath. He read my speech, and then the letter. When I looked back over at him, he was beaming.

“You get to go to the rally,” he said. I nodded eagerly, still not breathing normally.

“What does Mr. Connor think of this?” he asked.

I swallowed hard, forcing myself to eke the words out. “He...doesn’t...know.”

“Oh?” Professor Darcy raised his eyebrows. I nodded again.

“But,” I gasped, then paused. I took a long, slow breath, and exhaled equally slowly.

“But,” I began again, “I’m going to tell him this week.”

I didn’t.

But not because I didn’t want to! I got caught up in my work. I had to help Beck sift through the backlog of *Quest* submissions that no one had wanted to touch over break. Beck gave me free reign, and I ripped mercilessly through the submission pile. The contest organizers reached out to me with a few editing suggestions, and I spent much of my free time emailing

back and forth with their editing team, tweaking words and commas. And at the end of the week, the Senator's office sent me an email.

"Ms. Blaine," wrote a man named Reese Chancellor, whose official signature said he was Head Speechwriter. "We are very impressed with your writing skills and would like to offer you a full-time job on our speechwriting team once you have graduated."

"Congratulations," said Professor Darcy when I shoved my phone, the email open on the screen, in his face. You could feel the pride and joy radiating from him. "See what happens when you apply yourself?"

"I found the right match," I replied simply.

"Climate change?"

"Telling other people exactly what to do and say." We laughed and clinked our muffins like champagne flutes.

"I'm sorry," Rowan said, "but when exactly were you planning on telling me this?"

It was Valentine's Day weekend, about three weeks after getting back to school. Rowan had come up to visit. He now stood in the middle of my suite, frustration boiling higher with every passing second. The rest of my suite-mates hid in their rooms, eavesdropping.

"I meant to tell you once I heard that I'd won," I said. "But then I got caught up in *The Quest* and in editing the speech, and then the job offer came, and I've been looking at places out in California, and —"

"You're looking at places *where*?" Rowan demanded.

"The Bay Area," I said.

"*Why*?"

“Because that’s where my post-grad job will be,” I said, confused.

“You accepted already?”

“Well, yeah,” I said, half laughing. “It’s a great job, and this is the first time that I’ve found something that I’m really passionate about.”

“Gee,” Rowan snapped. “Thanks.”

“That’s not what I meant,” I said, forcing my voice to stay level. “*You* know what I mean. I’m always coasting. For once, I’ve found something that makes me want to *work*. And I’m good at it.”

Rowan inhaled slowly, and then exhaled. “You’re right,” he smiled. “I’m not being fair. This is great, babe. Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“So we do long distance for awhile,” he went on. “No big deal. It’ll just be for another year.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, suddenly on the defensive.

“Well, I graduate from business school next spring. And then I’ll go into investment banking with my dad, and you’ll move back to New York so you and Mom can plan the wedding.”

“The wedding?” I yelped.

Rowan blushed. “Yeah,” he said sheepishly. “I was kind of hoping to do this better, but that’s why I came up here this weekend.”

“We have been dating for about two months.”

“And we both know this is the real deal.”

“Not if you keep up that attitude,” I snapped. He gaped at me. I closed my eyes and took a breath.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “That wasn’t fair. But I’m not marrying you. I don’t know what I want from life yet, and I’m not going to figure that out by getting married straight out of college.”

“But my parents love you!”

“Are you proposing because your Society Family is pushing it?”

“No!” Rowan paused, struggling for words. “I mean, yes, they’re old-fashioned and expect matrimony pretty soon. But I love you.”

“Rowan,” I said, “I care about you a lot. But I can’t say that I love you, and I definitely don’t know now if I’ll ever be able to marry you. It makes my skin crawl that we’re even having this discussion.”

“Because of your commitment issues?”

“Excuse me?”

“You told me yourself, you’ve never really committed to anything. I thought you wanted us to be different. That means making compromises.”

“We are different,” I said. “I’m not just dropping you. I’m trying to roll with everything I’ve just been handed.”

“Look, Amy, I really am happy for you for your new life plan. But why won’t you consider working mine in?”

“Because it’s outdated!” I exclaimed. “Look, I have finally found something that I’m willing to commit to, and it hurts me more than you would believe to say that it isn’t you. I’m

moving to California after graduation. And I am ready to try long-distance with you, but you're going to have to get with my program."

"You're being really selfish," he said.

"Maybe I am," I said, "but so are you. I'm offering to give us a shot."

Rowan turned pained eyes towards me. "I know what I want, Amy."

"That's just it," I said. "You know what you want. I don't. All I know is that, for the first time, I have real drive. So I'm going to chase that, and I would love to have you along for the ride. But that's your call."

"You're not going to fight for us?" Rowan asked, sitting heavily on the couch.

"Rowan," I said, my voice dangerously close to cracking, "please stop putting this on me. Of course I'd like being in New York with you. But I can't just do what's easy anymore."

Rowan stood up and looked at me silently. "I'll call you tomorrow," he said finally. He walked over to me, but instead of the usual one-armed hug, he put his hand on my shoulder and kissed my forehead. And then he left.

I sank into the spot he'd just vacated. I felt an oddly cathartic sense of release. I felt the couch dip next to me – Jess had sat down.

"You going to be ok?" he asked.

I stared at my knees until my vision went blurry. I squeezed my eyes shut and sat up straight. When I opened my eyes, lights twinkled across my field of vision and then faded.

"Yeah," I said.

"You sure?"

I nodded. "I know myself," I said. "And that's all I can ask for."

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