

*A Weekend Away*

An Honors Thesis for the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies.

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## Writing Process Blog

In addition to my short novel, I wrote a blog throughout the year documenting my writing process. The blog contains eight posts:

1. Hello!
2. Revisiting My Old Work
3. I'm BACK!
4. Story and Diction Edits
5. Writing Schedules and Habits: Structure vs. Inspiration?
6. Who do I write about?
7. Specificity of Place
8. Turning it in... (YAY!!!!)

The link to my blog, "Thesis Thoughts," is included below:

<https://emily0276.wixsite.com/thesisthoughts>

## Chapter One

Jack Perriman walked through the endless corridors of the terminal, searching relentlessly for his gate. Between Gates 8 and 9, Mia's blonde ringlets bounced past him towards the escalator. With a second glance, he realized it wasn't her; these curls were shorter and unfamiliarly bright. He continued on, pushing the intrusion out of his mind. When the scent of her chocolate chip pancakes drifted through at Gate 12, he hastened his pace and failed to notice a barista at Corner Bakery pulling a tray of cookies from the oven. Thankfully, the sign for Gate 14 appeared around the corridor's turn. Glancing around, he noticed a row of empty chairs along the wall to the left. Jack sat on the nearest leather seat, which sagged in the middle from previous and unknown multitudes. After tolerating the screaming children across the row for nearly nine minutes, he placed his headphones over his ears and pressed play. As the low brass repeated the familiar rhythmic pattern, the title of the piece inched across the screen:

The Planets, Op. 32: I. Mars, the Bringer of War

Gustav Holst – London Symphony Orchestra

The anxious melody soothed Jack's matching temperament, as if Holst had foreseen this precise moment in time. He tapped along impulsively on the plastic armrest, moving his fingers with more force as the piece became increasingly violent. If this wasn't calming, what was?

Lost in his own world, Jack failed to notice a woman across the row glaring at his hand and switching to a seat further away. Closing his eyes, he tried to distract himself from thinking of Mia again. Had he remembered everything?

*Light blue dress shirt. Navy tie. Belt. Tan slacks. Underwear. Socks. Toothbrush.*  
*Wait—were the underwear there?? Dammit—they were.* Tragically, he had not forgotten a thing. There was no excuse for a last-ditch effort home. Like it or not, he was flying to Seattle.

As Jack had initially insisted, he didn't *really* need a new job. New England Consulting was a *great* place to work (well, that was what he told his friends, when they used to make arugula-ricotta ravioli with Dev's pasta machine or drink mojitos at some eclectic neighborhood bar near Isabelle's apartment... though it had been a while since he had seen either one). It was ranked fourth in Forbes's "Firms with Highest Growth in 2018." Besides, Jack was talented. His Bachelor's and MBA were certainly not going to waste. He knew what the company needed, especially when they had no clue. Like some 1940's Hollywood detective, he found the answers in the numbers, plain and simple. No room for arguments or disputes.

His boss, Mr. Manfred, was an overall adequate man; neither short nor tall, kind nor mean-spirited, old nor young. Jack followed suit, did as he was told, and did quite well for himself. After having received a promotion each year since he joined, he finally had his own office. Sure, there were no windows, but the door was glass, so that almost counted. Artificial light seeped through the panes. New England Consulting took up eight of the building's twenty-four floors. Each looked practically identical—the gray carpets were vacuumed nightly, everyone had the same ergonomic desks and chairs, and greenish geometric paintings ("Les Rêves," Variations 5-12) from some half-French up-and-coming artist hung

directly across from the elevator doors (except on Floor 9, where Variation #7 was inexplicably three feet to the left).

As he neared thirty (though it was still a few years away), Jack's work life was both respectable and comfortable. No risks required. Paid him enough to only shop at Whole Foods.

After breaking up with Mia (or rather, getting broken up with by Mia), Jack's roommate refused to let him loaf around the apartment.

"I swear to God," Aiden called out from the kitchen, "if you don't get off your lazy ass and do *something*—literally anything out of your ordinary—Jack, I will pack up your crap myself and ship it all to your mother's house in Richmond."

"I go to work," Jack responded, slumped over on the faded couch across the room. "I eat. I sleep. I do laundry. Besides, you don't want to pay my rent."

"I can find a new roommate easier than you think, man. Stop sulking."

"Yeah," Tess, Aiden's girlfriend, chimed in. "I can pay your rent and just—"

"No! nonononono..." Aiden cut in a little too quickly, but trailed off at the end. "I mean, your place is just so great. Your view of that garden behind your building is much better than ours, and that coffee shop across the street is our favorite!" Tess narrowed her eyes, and continued chopping jicama for their tacos (she made Jack try it a year or two ago, noticing his irrational fear of the unfamiliar vegetable. It was actually quite tasty). Aiden grinned sheepishly at Tess, and she tossed a stick of jicama at him from across the island.

“Besides,” Aiden said. “I don’t mean just functioning like a human being. Congrats on accomplishing that, bro, really. Stellar job. You need to have fun. Do you remember what that is?”

“Yes.”

“Well then why didn’t you have a single story besides “it was someone’s assistant’s birthday at work yesterday” to tell when we hung at Renee’s last week?”

“Because he hates work,” Tess said.

“I don’t hate it,” Jack argued, lowering his voice. Barely above a mumble, he continued. “I mean I don’t *love* it, but I don’t *hate* it.”

“First off, you told me three years ago you wanted to quit. Secondly, at least go out afterwards. Have some fun.”

“Yeah, sure.” He reached over, took a piece of jicama from the pile, and bit half off.

Jack had stopped taking Aiden’s dramatic tone seriously sophomore year of college, but discovered that he was actually serious after returning home from work one Tuesday evening. Half of Jack’s closet had been emptied into a large cardboard box labeled “Get your shit together,” written in a thick black sharpie that left his room smelling faintly toxic for a while. After considering his options, Jack unpacked the box.

The next morning, while pouring himself a bowl of cereal, Jack turned to Aiden. “I think I want a new job.”

“Yesssss!” Tess called out from the bathroom as she fixed her ponytail.  
“Finally!”

Two weeks later, the airport’s dim lighting weighed down Jack’s eyelids until they finally fluttered shut. He fought to stay awake, eventually resolving to buy some coffee from the brightly striped cart down the hall. Standing up, he threw his backpack on his shoulder, lifted the handle of his carry-on, and walked over. An oversized sign hung above the counter, displaying four roasts, five artificially flavored lattes, a cappuccino, and espresso. The options, though completely common, overwhelmed Jack, so he let a man with a faded Tron T-shirt behind him go ahead.

Jack and Mia had dated for five years after meeting in *Managing the Emerging Enterprise* their first year at Wharton. He told her he loved her three months later on their way to Thanksgiving at his house (thank God she said it back—that could have been an awfully uncomfortable week), and practically lived together their second year in the program. They moved to Boston after graduation, where his undergrad roommate had a recently open room in an apartment in Beacon Hill. Though Jack had fully planned to propose to Mia, he hadn’t thought much about it in the last year. His mother offered him his grandmother’s diamond-encrusted band at Christmas, but he couldn’t decide whether or not to bring it back to Boston.

After sawing through the taped box with his house key and placing his shorts and pants back into their respective drawers, Jack searched online for jobs (with Aiden hovering over his shoulder to ensure that this was actually occurring).

His preferences were quite broad: Business Analytics and/or Business Strategy. Green Light Technologies was the first company to respond, and Jack booked the first ticket available shortly afterwards. An hour and forty-five minutes before his flight, he bought a medium, plain latte and returned to his seat.

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Matt reached over and squeezed Beatrice's hand, which was curled so tightly around the metal armrest that her knuckles had begun to turn white. After having just given up trying to calm down their children, she relinquished the homemade lemon-raspberry cupcakes packed in a Tupperware labeled *BREAK GLASS IN CASE OF EMERGENCY*. That morning, Nathalie had a meltdown over not being allowed to bring four books in her backpack (which her parents knew they would ultimately end up carrying), Nicholas removed tiny racecars from his backpack and left them on the terminal floor, and Nora refused to un-Velcro and remove her sparkly red shoes in the security line. At least now that their mouths were full, they were finally quiet. An old woman sitting behind the family had turned around three times, judging the exhausted parents for their inability to control their eight, seven, and five year-old children.

If Beatrice did not absolutely have to go to Seattle, she would have certainly stayed home. It wasn't the unique dissonance of three tired children, and her husband was as sweet as can be. Matt has his own issues with his father, but Alan liked her well enough (her baking certainly helped). His mother Lily was the real issue.



Lily had always dreamed that Matt would marry his girlfriend from law school. She was, in Lily's eyes, perfect. Matt and Lauren had been introduced at the Harvard Law Opening Gala his first year by some long-forgotten mutual friend. Truth be told, he had already known who she was—everyone did, on some vague level. Two years of study sessions and movie marathons later, he returned to his apartment from class early one afternoon to find Lauren screwing his best friend. In the kitchen, of all places.

Matt wandered into Lola's Bakery a few weeks later, in dire need of sugar and caffeine after long nights in the library and long days without rest. Still dazed from an especially exhausting Torts lecture, he failed to realize that the only other customer left as he walked in. Though the shop had technically closed ten minutes earlier, he approached the empty counter.

"Hello?" He called out, glancing to the left then right.

"Coming!" a distant voice replied, followed by quick footsteps. A girl with a long, dark French braid ran over, her lilac apron covered in haphazard chocolate smudges.

"We're closed, actually," she said, wiping ganache from her hands.

"Oh, sorry." He turned around and picked his books off a table.

She looked up, immediately noticing the dark undereye circles of the unusually tall boy standing before her.

"Wait!" she called out. He turned back towards her. "The owner already left, and I was experimenting in the kitchen. Do you want to try something?"

“Sure!” He responded, looking less tired for a moment. She ran back towards the kitchen, and he stood awkwardly until she returned.

“Here!” She said, hand outstretched. “It’s an apricot-raspberry tart with pistachio cream.”

“Are you serious? This is incredible!”

“Sure!” She reached into her apron pocket, pulling out another fork. “But only if we get to share.”

“Deal,” Matt said, reaching out his hand. “I’m Matt, by the way.”

“Beatrice.” She responded, smiling and taking hold.

Three children and nearly ten years of marriage later, Beatrice felt perpetually inadequate around her mother-in-law. Feeling a headache coming on, she closed the Tupperware, placed two Advil in her mouth, took a swig water from the large bottle purchased immediately after security.

“Bea, do you want me to take the kiddos for a minute?”

She looked at Matt, gratitude shining in her eyes, then back at the children. “You guys want to go on an adventure with Dad?”

Nathalie, Nick, and Nora responded positively through open mouthfuls of pink mush, so Matt herded them over to a booth down the hall where Red Sox and Celtics paraphernalia lined one shelf and colonial and revolutionary trinkets covered another. While Nick and Nathalie ran over to the section with picture books and stuffed bears, Nora trailed behind her father. He walked up to the rightmost shelf, picked up a snow globe, and shook it. Feeling a tug on the hem of his shirt, he looked down to Nora’s wide hazel eyes staring up at him in curiosity

and placed the sphere into her hands. Ignoring the chaos of the terminal around her, she stared unblinking at the orb as thousands of pieces of glitter floated down onto miniature versions of Faneuil Hall and Bunker Hill. The city appeared more magical within the globe—then again, it was just a toy.

“I know we got Papa those books he likes, and your mom knitted him a scarf, but I want to get him just this one more thing.”

“And our drawings!” squealed Nathalie, who had grown bored of the picture book selection.

“How could I forget those?” Matt responded, tousling her hair. “They’re tucked away safely in my bag. Don’t you worry!”

“Why do you want to get Grandpa *this*?” Nick asked, clearly unimpressed.

Matt placed the snow globe on the counter and handed the cashier his credit card.

“When I was little, Grandpa had to travel all around the country for work, which made him sad that I couldn’t come with him. But every time he came home, he gave me a snow globe from that city. My collection took up a whole shelf of my bookcase, but my three favorites—Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Albuquerque—sat on my windowsill.” The chip reader beeped, and he pulled his card out of the slot and placed it in his wallet. “Now Papa can have one from me. Don’t you think he’ll like it?”

All three kids zoned out during the story, wholly distracted by the multi-colored floor-to-ceiling candy display. Matt took the plastic bag from the counter and chuckled, pulling them back into reality.

“Noooo way. No more sugar.” Despite their protests, Matt refused to surrender. Instead, he marched the children back towards their mother, who anxiously refreshed her email for the fourth time in as many minutes.

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Lydia’s phone buzzed with a message from her mother:

Can’t wait to see you Honey! 🍯🐝🐝🐝

Having never grown out of nervous flying habits, she placed her phone in her jacket pocket, and decided to locate her gate before responding.

Lydia kept reminding herself that she did have one thing to look forward to this weekend—seeing her family. Dad was going to pick her up with a white paper bag of steaming over-salted fries from their favorite diner, Mom will have meticulously arranged her old bed with the same faded fringed pillows and stuffed sea creatures from years ago, and June was almost certainly going to shove her away from the bathroom mirror to apply an extra coat of mascara or curl her hair.

Lydia glanced around the terminal and squinted her tired eyes to read the sign above. In the middle of list, she found SEATTLE, FLIGHT 4251, 4:50 P.M., GATE 14. She shuffled her feet leftwards, thinking about how much more pleasant the trip would be if it had been made out of whim or nostalgia. Instead, this felt more like reluctant moral obligation.

She remembered opening the invitation from her former best friend four months ago, still sweaty and red-faced from her usual Tuesday-Thursday post-work spin class. The swirling calligraphy, watercolor foliage border, and deep green envelope were inarguably beautiful. After untying the satin ribbon and

unfolding the crisp card stock, Mrs. Hillman's perfect handwriting jumped off the page. "Please join us in celebrating the union of Grace Hillman and Thomas Montgomery on July Twentieth, Twenty-Nineteen. Forever starts now!" Having failed to come up with a rational reason to check the box marked "Regretfully Decline," she begrudgingly settled upon "Happily Accepts."

*Yikes*, Lydia thought, tossing it aside. *Forever starts now? Really?*

Truthfully, there was something about Grace's life that Lydia pitied. In eleventh grade, the Montgomery family—including Tom and his brother Ethan—moved to their neighborhood from the exotic and mysterious world of western Ohio. Tom wandered into Mr. Hamilton's fourth period European History class one November afternoon (disrupting a rather dry lecture on the French Revolution) and settled into the broken desk in the back of the room next to Sophia T (who was *not* to be confused with Sophia B). The next day, though, Grace invited him to sit beside her, as Lydia was running late from Chemistry. Day by day, Tom took Lydia's seat in the rest of their classes, at the lunch benches, and everywhere else. Grace and Tom quickly became inseparable, unknowingly removing Lydia from their friendship. She remembered Grace's initial insistence that they continue to hang out, but third-wheeling quickly proved to be lonelier than sitting alone.

Eventually Lydia tried confronting her friend, citing Grace's nauseatingly constant use of 'we' rather than 'I'.

"You just don't understand what it's like to be in a relationship, Lydia. I'm more *complete* with Tom."

In the back of Lydia's mind, she pictured the rebels in *Les Mis* waving their enormous red flag in the air (attending the show had been extra credit for History the previous week). Despite never having had a boyfriend, she was certain that being complete and in a relationship were two completely unrelated concepts. Her inexperience, however, ultimately disqualified her from this particular argument.

Having found the gate with over an hour to spare, Lydia glanced around, settling on a magazine rack that appeared to be adequately distracting. She flipped through a dramatic tabloid, considered a *National Geographic*, deliberately skipped over all six wedding magazines, and eventually settled on a copy of *Real Simple*. Its cover was particularly soothing with images of labeled mason jars and matching Tupperware, reading "Organize your pantry—with style and function!" Lydia threw in a bag of peanut M&M's for the hell of it and checked out at the counter. After walking back to the row of seats beside the gate doors and check-in desk, she wiped a chair over with a crumpled napkin she'd pocketed from the morning's coffee run and sat down.

Lydia and Grace had determined in eighth grade that they'd move east for college—see new places, meet new people...all the clichés you hear and say when you're fourteen. But by the end of junior year, Grace suddenly decided she would be much happier staying in Seattle than living anywhere along the Atlantic. Which was convenient, considering Tom received a full-time scholarship at UW. Grace ended up studying Art History, and became an interior designer after college at the same company where her sister had been working the last few

years. Tom proposed the night before graduation, but the couple decided to wait until after he finished his Master's in Accounting to get married. Though the then-twenty-two year-old was disappointed she's have to wait another two and a half years, Grace accepted without a second thought.

Grace never actually told Lydia any of this in person or over the phone, but sporadic texts and occasional and strategic Facebook stalking revealed Grace and Tom's story as it unfolded. Meanwhile, Lydia had moved across the country, double-majored in Communications and Psychology, studied for a year in Auckland, and received four job offers from four public relations firms three months before graduation. She chose to stay in Boston, after summer internships in New York left her terrified of the city, and moved up the ladder at Prince PR over the past few years to her current position as a Media Relations Manager.

*At least Grace has somebody,* Lydia thought, watching summer storm clouds through the window. She recalled her only real relationship in college, which ended—not through tearful goodbyes or dramatic arguments—but mutually and amicably before going abroad. Bored, she looked over the ex-boyfriend's Instagram for a few minutes. He needed a haircut, but was definitely still attractive. There weren't any recent pictures with other girls, but nearly too many with the kitten he must've just adopted. *Maybe I should text him,* she thought. *No, no no no. That would be dumb. Come on.*

Lydia knew that she was successful; she just had to remind herself from time to time. Her apartment had granite countertops, bay windows, and access to a meticulously groomed rooftop garden. Her position came with long-term benefits.

After years of endless papers and determination, she emerged into adulthood triumphant. Every time Lydia returned home, she was praised and celebrated for her achievements. Then again, she only flew home alone.

Having settled into a seat, Lydia pulled her phone out of her pocket and opened her messages.

Can't wait to see you Honey! 🍯🐝🐝🐝

So excited to see you! I'll call as soon as I land. Love you! ❤️

She placed it into her purse, which rested atop her carry-on and leaned against the handle. The navy suitcase contained the weekend's necessities: the plum-colored strapless dress and nude pumps that made an introvert like herself feel as confident as possible, a makeup bag, an outfit for the next day, and a new mug for her mother's collection. She never brought pajamas home—the tattered flannel owl pants and cross-country T-shirts from high school still lived in the oak flea-market dresser in her childhood bedroom.

Unlike the carry-on, Lydia's oversized purse rivaled that of Mary Poppins. Besides the basics—phone, wallet, keys—it contained her laptop, two granola bars, thirty-seven cents of loose change, a flash drive, an infinite number of loose bobby pins, hand sanitizer, an extra phone charger, three different colored pens, noise-cancelling headphones, and her boldest lipstick in the shade “RED-y or not.”



A woman in the airline's retro uniform and large cat-eye glasses turned on a microphone at the desk, the feedback shrieking and reverberating for a few seconds throughout the crowded room.

"I'm sorry, folks, but it looks like your flight has been delayed due to inclement weather. You will now be leaving at 8:40, and will arrive at 11:45 p.m. Seattle-time. Please form a line at the desk if you wish to receive a refund ticket for another day. Thank you and have a nice weekend," she said flatly.

While some of the gate's guests filed behind the desk, Lydia remained in her seat, the weekend looming above her head like the dark clouds outside.

## Chapter Two

Jack looked up as an ill-tempered line formed beside his row, heavy footsteps rattling his armrest.

*Dammit, he thought. I'll easily still make it.*

As the interview was at ten o'clock the next day, he had no excuse to bail from the flight alongside the rest of the unhappy passengers. Leaning back against the seat, he closed his eyes again, meditating on the purpose of the trip.

Contrary to Aiden's remarks, Jack really didn't hate his job. After business school, NEConsulting was on the rise and hiring. Though it wasn't exactly what he wanted to do, it paid well and would be a great "stepping stone" (according to Mia—who was correct). Two years at NEConsulting, then he would find a young and creative company to help build from the ground up (*not* some corporate giant). But almost by accident, two years turned into three, then three turned into four, and Jack settled in. There was a hoard of other twenty-somethings there, who all seemed to be fueled by constant 'friendly' competition. No one at work knew about this trip—partially because they would certainly start to vulture off his clients, but mostly because Jack had stopped mingling with them a year earlier. Jack told his supervisor he was taking Friday off because he was leaving for sister's wedding in Seattle, and need to arrive early to help parents set up. He didn't have a sister—her invention was fine, as nobody in the office had talked with him recently enough to know any better.

Besides this imaginary sister, Jack did actually have an older brother. Christopher was nearly perfect—he led their high school's victory at the State

Basketball Championship, won valedictorian, and attended Yale undergrad as well as Wharton Business School (he and Jack were legacies—their father and grandfather had also attended Wharton). A year after receiving a financial analyst position at Goldman Sachs, he proposed to his girlfriend Harriett Millhouse (another flawless specimen from the corporate finance world).

The weekend after Christopher popped the question, he and Jack’s mother threw the couple an opulent engagement party, where their expansive property was transformed into a modern-day Eden. Endless strings of twinkling lights dressed the ancient oak trees and thousands of tiny candles bordered the pathway from the backyard to the Virginian mansion. Enormous arrangements of orchids, lilies, roses and peonies rested on the tables and overwhelmed the senses of each and every of the 134 guests.

“Jack, go find your brother!” His tipsy mother yelled over the jazz quintet, pointing towards their large antebellum estate past the edges of the party. Her long emerald earrings shook as she spoke, the three previous glasses of champagne taking their toll upon her grace. “It’s time for his toast... oh hello, Darling! It’s been too long since...” She turned towards an old friend whose name she could not remember and spilled some of her drink.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Millhouse,” Jack said, watching his mother spill a little of her drink as she attended to the other guests. He hoped her interruption hadn’t offended Harriet’s mother, who genuinely enjoyed the conversation she’d been having with Jack and Mia.

“Oh no problem!” She responded. “You go get your brother, and I’ll keep chatting with your lovely girlfriend here.” Jack looked at Mia, who looked particularly beautiful that evening in her long navy dress.

“Duty calls!” Mia chimed in, shooing him away.

“It should just be a minute—I bet Chris went to grab a copy of his speech. I’ll be right back!” He squeezed Mia’s hand and walked towards the house.

“Christopher! Let’s go!” Jack yelled as he wandered through the long hallways. Public speaking was one of Christopher’s few known weaknesses, so he always held a paper copy of any speech or presentation as worst-case-scenario backup.

“The longer you take, the more Mom is going to try and make me network with *every* person here.”

There was no response, so Jack walked on, raising his voice as he did so.

“Besides, I’ve decided to start looking for jobs around Boston. Mia’s already got one in the city and we’re serious enough now that I want to stay there with her. Who knows, maybe we’ll move in together soon, you never know.” Jack kept rambling as he continued down the corridor. “Well, I guess you do know, since you and Harriett moved in after graduation too.”

Again, nothing.

“Dude, are you freaking out or something? There’s SO much booze here we can get you a drink within the minute. Come on!” Jack finally arrived at his brother’s room and opened the door. Inside, he found Christopher and three

groomsmen sitting on the floor. One bearded man laughed to a clean-shaven one while the third tried to hide something behind him.

“Jack! Want some?” Beard-o shouted. Jack couldn’t remember his name—all of Christopher’s work friends were so similar (Jack never liked the finance guys at Wharton—he stuck with the business development ones instead). He glanced down the row, finding Christopher slumped over on the end. His eyes were mostly closed, and he mumbled something incoherent in no apparent direction.

“What the fuck is wrong with him?” Jack said, moving into the room.

“Woah.... It’s cool, he’s fine.” Finance-bro #3 replied. “Nothing out of the ordinary.” He smiled in Jack’s direction, but his eyes never fully focused. Hearing a thud, Jack turned around to find Christopher having fallen face-first on the floor, murky bile spilling out of his mouth.

“Chris!” He rushed over, shoving the boys aside to reach his brother.

“Chris, can you hear me?” He wasn’t drunk—this was something else. Without hearing or seeing any form of response, Jack reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. *Fuck—it’s dead.* He reached up onto Christopher’s desk and felt around for the handheld—his father had wanted to get rid of the home phones a few years ago, but his mother had protested. *Found it.* He dialed 911, and sirens interrupted the party seven minutes later.

Jack shivered from the unpleasant memory and the airport’s aggressive air-conditioning. He looked up—a circular vent hung directly above him, blowing a small piece of yellow thread slightly to the left. Standing up, he stretched his

back until he felt a crack, and peered down the hall at his dinner options. Because the sun had disappeared behind the other side of the building, the terminal interior was now solely lit by scattered fluorescent bulbs. They shed light upon a few greasy chain restaurants, all of which seemed wholly unappealing. After a few minutes of contemplation, Jack resolved to sponsor the restaurant closest to him and bought an overpriced, mediocre burrito.

Half an hour later, he returned to his seat. A girl around his age was now sitting in the next chair, taking advantage of the rare power outlet inconveniently placed on the floor between them.

“Oh sorry,” she apologized, unplugging her phone charger. “I didn’t mean to monopolize the outlet.”

“What?” He replied, giving her a strange look.

“The outlet. You left so I figured it was okay,”

“Oh, no problem,” he muttered. “Don’t worry about it.”

As the girl plugged her cord back into the wobbly socket, Jack opened a book and placed his headphones back on, failing to notice that she turned around to talk to him.

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Four hours later, Matt sat down in seat 12B, popped two Advil in his mouth, and rubbed his temples. For the first hour of the delay, Nathalie and Nick had played sticks. This only upset Nora, who was too young to understand the rules. Beatrice settled the issue by letting her choose where they would eat dinner. Of course, this power imbalance quickly upset the other two, so ultimately,

mayhem ensued. Eventually, all three were whining, crying, or some combination thereof.

After eating, the kids settled down. *Thank God.* Matt turned toward Beatrice, who was re-braiding Nora's hair.

"I'm gonna call my parents, let them know we'll be late."

"Shoot... we should've done that as soon as we knew. Eh, I'm sure it's fine. Oh and remind them they doesn't have to pick us up."

Matt dialed the number, stood up, and walked a few feet away. After only half of a ring, his mother answered the phone.

"Hello, Gardiner residence," she began. Matt could hear her smiling; could see her looking out the kitchen window as she picked up the phone.

"Hi Mom," he replied. "So with the thunderstorm over Boston right now, we're not gonna be able to get in to Seattle until tomorrow morning."

"Oh no! Is it safe? I saw it on the news, it looks like quite a doozy!"

"It's a lot of rain, but nothing too terrible. We just have to hang around here for four extra hours tonight."

"I'm so sorry, Dear! Is Beatrice entertaining the kids?"

"Yeah, we're doing whatever we can to keep them occupied. We just had dinner." He replied, running his fingers through his hair.

"Then I'll just freeze my lasagna for you to eat later," she replied. Matt winced, feeling guilty about how much time and energy his mother had already spent preparing to host them this weekend.

“I’m sorry Mom, I know this makes things difficult.” Matt took a deep breath away from the phone.

“Oh please! You are *never* a burden, Matthew. Go play with your kids, and just call me when you get here, I can come pick you up.”

“Oh that reminds me. We’re gonna get a rental car for the weekend, so you and Dad don’t have to pick us up. You don’t even have to wait up for us—it’ll be pretty late.”

“Of course we’re going to stay up and wait for you! Don’t be silly!”

“Okay, sorry again. I’ll text as soon as we land, just in case you do fall asleep.”

“My Goodness, Matthew! Just call. Don’t worry about a thing! Have a safe flight, I’ll talk to you later!”

“Bye Mom, love you!”

“Love you too, Dear!” He took the phone away from his face and returned to his seat.

Round two of Parents vs. Children began when Nick and Nora became fussy after the plane’s initial ascent. Beatrice unbuckled her seatbelt and handed her laptop across the aisle to Nora, whose small size dictated that she perpetually sat between the other two. The screen was set to play yet another animated movie that featured singing animals, by which the kids were completely mesmerized time and time again. Clearly, the children’s movie industry had really nailed down their audience’s (often annoying) demands. After nearly tripping over Nick’s dinosaur backpack, Beatrice sat back down across the aisle from her husband.



“Good call,” he whispered into her ear.

She smiled, as though outsmarting the kids was a real victory. “Did you get it?”

Matt pulled out the plastic bag from underneath the seat and handed the trinket over to his wife. “Yeah, I think he’ll like it,” his voice clearly strained. “The books are obviously the main part of the present but it seemed like something fun—for tradition’s sake.”

“Of course he will,” she said, smiling and rubbing his back, unsure if his posture was worse than usual because he was too tall for the plane seat or because he was stressed. While Matt wished otherwise, there was no real certainty in his father’s impending reaction to their news.

After another twenty minutes, all three children fell asleep. Beatrice retrieved and opened her laptop, pressing the spacebar to wake the screen from its technical slumber. Immediately, a badger started to sing about friendship with a blue jay by his side.

“Shit,” she whispered loudly, pressing the volume button as fast and as many times as possible. After apologizing to the woman in front of her for the disturbance, she opened her email and hit the green refresh button, checking again for something from the real estate agent. Even before attending culinary school, Beatrice had dreamed of opening her own bakery. But after having three kids in four years, time had been tight. A month before the weekend trip, she and Matt finally had enough to put an offer on the old Chinese restaurant on Fourth Street. Ever impatient, she was dying to hear from the agent if they had gotten the

building or not. The plane's free WiFi was impossibly slow, but eventually one email downloaded. **Help needed at Adams Elementary Jog-a-Thon! Sign up now!**

"Ugh." She closed the laptop, avoiding the ever-persistent PTA parents who had been scouting her since Nathalie started kindergarten three years ago.

"Still nothing?" Matt asked eagerly.

"Nope," Beatrice replied, frowning. "The agent did say she would let us know by the end of the weekend, but I was just hoping she would get back to us earlier."

"We'll get it, don't worry! There's no question."

"I don't know..." Beatrice rubbed her eyes, regretting wearing her contacts in the uncomfortably dry air of the plane.

"I do." Matt said, pulling his jacket over himself like a blanket and smiling as he closed his eyes. Unfortunately, his unwavering support did not run in the family, and Beatrice worried what his mother would say when she heard how they were spending their resources. The *family's* resources.

There was nothing she could do now, 36,000 feet above any responsibilities, so she decided to sleep while she still could. She reached into her purse and removed a blue silk eye mask with little stars embroidered in silver thread. Shifting in her seat, she shivered and placed her head on the tray table in front of her. Still cold, she pulled Matt's jacket off of him and onto herself, falling asleep shortly thereafter.

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Lydia wandered down the maze of the enclosed gangway, exhausted from the flight and the fact it was the middle of the night back in Boston. She recognized the cute boy from the gate again and cringed, remembering that she had said something stupid about the outlet.

*God, she thought. No wonder I'm single.* As she turned the corner, her eyes squinted and began to tear, momentarily blinded by harsh lighting of the Seattle terminal. She shuffled under the massive rectangles of harsh light, making her way as quickly as her weary feet would allow towards the exit. Through groggy senses, she spotted her family under a colorful sign against the room's far border. Its green lettering and orange arrows pointed in every direction; far too complicated to realistically help travelers navigate the building. Her parents held a large tattered poster from her years in college. "Welcome home, Lydia!" was written in her mother's curlicue handwriting, surrounded by painted flowers and butterflies. As she cleared the crowd, Lydia could see that June was in her pajamas, holding two travel mugs.

"Hey Honey! How was the flight?" her mother asked.

Lydia hugged her father as she responded. "Fine, as soon as it actually took off. Sorry for making you stay up so late!"

"Yeah, thanks for that," June replied sarcastically. "Rooibos or Sleepy-time?" She laughed at Lydia, who was desperately eyeing the second cup.

"Oh my God, thank you. Rooibos." She grabbed the cup and downed the tea, spilling a little on the sleeve of her jacket.

“Okay gang, her father said, shaking his sleeve off his wrist so he could see his watch. “I think eleven forty-seven may be too late for post-flight fries.”

“No!” Lydia shrieked.

“We *have* to!” June whined, as if she was eight and not twenty-one. An older gentleman waiting for his luggage glared at the pair of them.

“Sorry Paul, it appears as though you’ve been out-voted. Fries it is! Vamonos! Allons-y!” their mother replied, picking up Lydia’s suitcase handle and wheeling it away.

As they made their way through the parking lot, June stepped back behind their parents and turned towards Lydia.

“So... on a scale of one to ten how excited for tomorrow are you?”

“Um... a four?”

“Liar.”

“Okay fine. Negative four. Thank God you decided to come. I don’t know WHAT I’d do without you!” she said, clutching her sister’s arm.

“Drama queen. It’ll be nice!”

“Mm-hmm,” Lydia responded, lips pursed into a smile. “Of course it will... there’s an open bar.”

“What was that?” their mother asked.

“Nothing!” The girls immediately shouted in unison, giggling.

June and Lydia approached their mother’s green station wagon and hopped into the same back seat from ten years before, the bench’s worn leather torn in the shape of a lightning strike across the left side.

Lydia hadn't realized how long it had been since she had driven that half-hour route to the diner. *Six? Seven? No... eight months; since Thanksgiving.* Though she had wanted to return home for Christmas, she couldn't manage to leave work for the holidays. A week after her promotion, her boss offered her a ticket to the company's fiftieth anniversary New Year's Gala in London (well, to write about it for PrincePRBlog, but still—it was a free trip to London. There was no good reason to turn it down). She flew overseas for the holidays, rubbing elbows with the UK branch PR and media reps and dining with friends from college who found work abroad after graduation.

Concrete lamps lined the highway, dimly lighting the surrounding scenery. Though familiar, it somehow seemed far away; somewhere between home and something else entirely unfamiliar. Though the leaves had grown anew since the last time she was home, the landscape had remained unchanged since her childhood. It felt safe; enveloped by taller, denser, and more vibrant greenery than that which inhabited the blocks around her apartment in Boston. Besides the blurred foliage, Lydia's exhaustion from the partial night's sleep and the warm steam lulled her into a trance. Staring out the window, she soon lost her train of thought, only hearing half of what June babbled on about her apparently tedious internship.

Their father drove along on the nearly empty highway, each white word on every green sign prompting its own flashback. At Lake Street, the pier, which she and Grace had finally been brave enough to jump off the summer after fourth grade, came and went in an instant. At Third Street, the movie theater where Ollie

Watkins kissed her for the first time senior year whizzed past. It was quickly followed by Fairfield Avenue, which (if you took the second left) hosted the hospital where she had tonsils removed when she was seven.

Just after her father switched on the turn signal, the car gently veered right. Three clicks later, the curved exit spat them out onto a road much homier than the highway, and the familiar scene compelled Lydia to smile out the window. Main Street sprawled before them, and the high school sat at its other end. In between lay about twenty shops, including Banana Republic, a flower shop with crates of kaleidoscope bouquets, Seattle Optometry, and Bittersweet, the old coffee shop the neighborhood's hipsters had recently claimed as their own.

As Lydia's father turned into a parking spot at end of the block and in front of the diner, she noticed under the flickering streetlights that the street's paint had been freshly retouched since the last time she was home. Peering through the window, she recognized the diner's long wooden tables, hanging orb lamps, and Spanish tiles that covered the floor. After June shut the car door, the family hurried inside, and the bell above the door jingled.

"Look who it is!" Charlie shouted as he waved them inside, eyes crinkling around the corners as he smiled. Decades after youthful summers spent flipping burgers, the orthopedic surgeon purchased the diner after retiring and leaving his practice to his son. Now, thanks to an entirely new menu and an expensive renovation, the rebranded "Charlie's" was busier than ever.

After stepping out of the car, Lydia checked her watch. Although the diner had closed eight minutes earlier, the others inside looked to be in no rush—gossiping over brioche burgers or cups of iced drip coffee.

“Lydia!” June called out, opening the door. “Come on!”

“Coming!” Lydia responded, hurrying to the door.

## Chapter Three

“No! I’m not having fucking burnt chicken *again* tonight! Do you hear me?”

Jack could hear a muffled response coming from the cab driver’s phone in the pause that followed.

“I don’t give a shit! Anything else!”

*Thank God. We’re here. Just stop the car, please.* He slid his credit card through the machine on the back of the passenger headrest, eager to not dwell in the car any longer than completely necessary.

“Well maybe I *will* go back to Crystal then! At least *she* made me a decent dinner! You’re such a fucking—”

*Finally.* Jack jumped out of the taxi, rushing to avoid hearing the end of the driver’s conversation. He tripped on the curb, but received no recognition; thankfully, the late hour and nearly-complete darkness meant that he had no spectators. Having only awkwardly half-tripped onto the pavement, he stood back up, grabbed his suitcase handle, and hobbled over to the revolving doors. The ride from the airport had been a painfully long one, and the summer breeze was, quite literally, a breath of fresh air.

But a moment later he found himself back inside, the air now smelling of an artificial citrus cleaning solvent. The hotel lobby was wholly unoriginal, filled with olive tiles around the check-in desk and similarly abominable greenish-beige paint and carpeting. Two grey couches from Ikea were positioned into a perfect right angle (Jack wondered if it would always be a little uncomfortable to turn



your neck and have a conversation from one couch to the other). A small, empty breakfast room sat off to the side, decorated with stock photos of a generic businessmen and cardigan-clad woman laughing at salads and smiling down at stacks of pancakes. There was a faint, unexplained whirring sound, by which the receptionist seemed unbothered. Jack could probably afford better accommodation, but there wasn't a good enough reason to permit such extravagant spending.

“Why hello there, my name is Janet! How can I help you this evening?”

*Was Janet was smiling too much? It looked like it hurt.*

“Checking in. My name is Jack Perriman,” In the breath he took between sentences, Janet looked down at her computer and began typing frantically. “I was supposed to arrive a few hours ago but my flight got delayed. I might be past the check-in time, though, so—”

“Got it!” Janet interrupted enthusiastically. “Don't worry Mr. Perriman, we can still check you in. You're in Room 806. Elevator is to your right!” As soon as he turned away, her smile flipped into an irritated frown.

The elevator took two and a half minutes. After finding his room halfway down the hall, Jack slipped off his shoes, flopped onto the bed, and stared up at the ceiling. Although he could feel his eyelids drooping, he wasn't ready for sleep. Instead, he flipped through the television channels, recalling his and Aiden's preparation for the interview.

1. What draws you Green Light Technologies?

“I don't know.”

“Dude, it’s really not that hard. Start with Wharton.” Aiden had insisted on helping.

“After majoring in economics at Princeton, I attended to Wharton School of Business.”

“Keep going.”

“After graduating, I wanted to focus my career in business development, so I moved on to New England Consulting.”

“Dear Lord, Jack. Sound enthusiastic. You’ve thoroughly enjoyed your past four years at NEConsulting, where you’ve had the opportunity to work with a broad range of companies. Now that you’ve learned how to combat an array of issues, you want to invest your time and energy into one company and really help it grow. Green Light has potential to make a real impact in the community, and you think it would be a great fit.”

Tess hopped over from the couch. “Then quantify how many projects you’ve worked on, companies you’ve worked with, whatever. Give them concrete numbers and examples”

Jack raised his eyebrows.

“Damn, alright. That seems good.”

“I am aware it’s good. Write it down.”

2. What’s your greatest strength?

“Keep it simple,” Aiden instructed.

“Ummm”

“No ‘um.’ Pause, think, respond confidently.”

“Okay, okay. I’ve learned not to focus solely on data analysis or communication, but streamline the two to find creative ways to improve a firm’s performance in a broad range of categories, from marketing, to finances, to management. I’ve also got a strong handle on all of the programs listed right here…” he noticed Aiden and Tess staring. “Right?”

“Don’t ask me! I’m supposed to be interviewing *you*.”

“And I have a follow-up question,” Tess said in a deep voice, mimicking the interviewer. “It seems like NEConsulting has given you some great opportunities. What hasn’t worked for you there?”

“Don’t tell them you don’t give a shit about the companies you’re sent to. Or NEConsulting, for that manner.” Aiden said.

“I don’t *not* care about it.” Jack replied.

“You could care about it more.”

“Fair point. Alright—” he paused, thinking. “I’ve learned a myriad of skills with NEConsulting. But I’m ready to settle into one company and really work with the management long-term to create sustainable growth.”

3. What’s your biggest weakness?

“Rapid decision-making, obviously.” Aiden responded, prompting a chuckle from Tess.

“Hey!” Jack protested.

“Just spin it,” Aiden responded. “Say you’re better at taking the time to… I don’t know… analyze the nuances of an issue, rather than make a split-second

judgment without all of the pertinent information. You strategize before action, minimizing further issues and maximizing the efficiency of everyone's time."

"If you say so."

"Don't question me. I'm the one who knows how to interview here." (This was true. Aiden was offered a job that required seven years of experience right out of college.)

"Alright, alright. Let's move on."

4. Now that you've mentioned the long term, where do you see yourself in five years?

For the purposes of job interviews, the answer was fairly simple. Staying at one company (shows loyalty) with opportunities for advancement (proves he's goal-oriented), specifying that the location for said position was completely open (doesn't limit the company's options).

In reality, though, this was not so simple. Not too long ago, Jack knew the answer: propose to Mia at 27, get married at 28, start having kids by 30. Move outside the city, into a house with room for a piano and a backyard where he could hang a swing from some enormous tree that would change colors with each season (now that he thought about it, this was pretty close to Christopher's plans with Harriett).

Jack hopped back off of the hotel bed, and the springs let out a shrill squeak. It was time for a shower. After walking over to the bathroom, he leaned over the counter and stared into the mirror. His auburn curls were both kinked and flattened from his nap on the plane, and his stubble had crossed the line from

handsomely mature to disheveled and raggedy. Dark circles rested beneath his eyes, which would hopefully disappear by morning. Rifling through his bag, he pulled out his toiletries and hopped into the shower. The warm water made him even sleepier—it always did that. So, in the mornings, he only let himself rinse off in completely freezing water. This had been his pre-exam ritual throughout all of college and then business school, beginning each day of finals stressed and ending pleasantly surprised. When something worked, why question it?

“Mia, you want to hop in after me?” Jack asked, their Business Analytics exam in a little over an hour.

“Yeah!” She had called out from the kitchen table, checking emails as she ate a spoonful of Rice Krispies. “But turn on the hot water so I don’t have to wait for it to warm up!” A few bites later, she heard Jack pull the shower curtain open; that was her cue.

Twenty minutes later, she emerged wrapped in a faded blue towel, steam spilling out of the open door.

“How on *EARTH* can you take cold showers on a day like today?” She asked, rummaging through every drawer in search of her missing sweater. “It’s blizzarding!”

“It’s lucky!” Jack responded. He knew what she was looking for—the purple one—and had seen it in the hamper along with the rest of the laundry he had taken off the drying rack. Leaning back in his chair, he reached over and grabbed it from the middle of the pile.

“That’s ridiculous!”

“Then why do you need this *specific* sweater?” He responded with a cheeky grin, tossing it over. “What’s wrong with all of your others?” Mia tried (and failed) to hold back a smile.

“Because it’s SNOWING!” Her voice rose in pitch and volume on the last word. “This is my warmest one!” she said, her voice muffled as she pulled it over her head. “Besides, you studied enough that you’re plenty lucky.”

“That is *certainly* true, mi a-Mia. I am the luckiest!” He responded, kissing her cheek. She blushed and smiled, but her eyes quickly widened. The wall clock behind Jack informed her that there was only half an hour before their exam.

“Oh shit! We have to go!” She ran around and frantically shoved a hundred different pens and pencils into her bag, while he laughed and opened the door.

“Well, come on then!”

Jack tried to shut off the hotel’s faucet, increasing the pressure and dropping the temperature 40 degrees. He frantically spun the knob in the other direction, and the water finally subsided. Forcing the memory away, he brushed his teeth and got into bed. Things had changed; dwelling in the past couldn’t help.

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“I HAVE TO PEE!” Nora shrieked. It had been seven minutes since the Gardiners left the rental car parking lot.

Beatrice pulled up to a red light, and Matt handed her a five-dollar bill.

“Told you,” she whispered, “no way they were gonna last ten minutes.”

“Me too!” added Nathalie. Matt turned around and promised they would stop at the next Starbucks so everyone could ‘go.’

Back on the road, Beatrice took a sip from her white paper cup and plugged in the address for Matt's childhood home on the unfamiliar GPS system. After mistyping the street name three times, she figured out the touch screen had a glitch which required pressing each key a little to the left. She and Nick were the only other ones awake, and they played their favorite game to pass the time.

“P! Pizza Heaven!”

“Good one Nicky! Q might be kinda hard, so keep an eye out.”

The car was silent for a few minutes; it was a good nighttime game. Sometimes the kids fell asleep between letters. But not before long, he shout-whispered, “Can Dairy Queen count for Q?”

“Sure!” Beatrice turned off the main highway and into the familiar neighborhood. Though Nick was disappointed to end the game, Beatrice reassured him they could start where they left off in the morning.

After passing a few streets, the silver Subaru turned onto East Amaryllis Street. As Nick pressed his face against the window and stared up at the trees that soared overhead, his breath fogged up the glass.

“Nat Nat, Nora, we're here!” he exclaimed. Half-asleep, they both groaned in response. Nick poked Nora's cheek, and she shoved him back with all the force of her tiny five-year-old body.

“Hey, hey. Hey! That's enough, come on guys.” Matt said, having just woken up. “No fighting this weekend or else you can't help Mom taste-test recipes when we get home.” They cherished this opportunity, and silently vowed (through forceful glares) *not* let it get taken away.

“I see Nana!” Nathalie called out from the backseat.

Lily Gardiner stood on the porch under dim lamplight, waving a dishtowel at the car as if she was signaling the start of a race. The kids hopped out as soon as they stopped in the driveway, Matt went to grab the suitcases out of the trunk, and Beatrice walked up the steps to greet her mother-in-law.

“Hello Lily,” she said with a slightly-forced smile, “it’s lovely to see you!” Looking up to meet Lily’s eyeline, she realized she’d forgotten again just how tall the woman was.

“Oh you too, dear. Where’s my son?” Lily said, turning around and watching Matt shut the trunk. “Doing all the work, I see. Matthew! Come give your mother a hug.”

He sped up the steps and set the luggage down next to his wife, granting Lily’s request. “Hi, Mom! How are you? Where’s Dad?”

“He fell asleep hours ago—you know his schedule.”

They walked inside, and Beatrice followed. Matt’s mother asked him about work, and the kids’ school, and so on. Occasionally Beatrice interjected about Nathalie’s ballet lessons or Nick’s interest in fossils, but Lily seemed most interested in hearing from her son. After chatting for a few minutes, Matt and Beatrice took to the guest room to unpack while Lily navigated her grandchildren (who were begging to watch TV now that they were awake) into their bedroom.

Beatrice dropped her gray duffel bag onto the floor while Matt glanced around. The room felt uncanny, as it was previously his own, but had been recently re-done. The once-carpeted floor was now covered in a light hardwood—



*was it Maple or Cherry? Probably Maple.* The walls were now a muted lavender, instead of their previous blue. The only piece of furniture that had survived the room's transformation was his white bookshelf, which now contained Lily's dog-eared collection of British literature and two rather aggressively-scented candles: *Summer Seaside* and *Springtime Garden* (why the room needed to smell of two different seasons was unclear).

"Hey Mom, what did you do with my stuff?" Matt called out from the bedroom. There was no response; he figured she couldn't hear him from down the hall. Matt left Beatrice to unpack the kids' clothes and made his way into their converted bunkroom (an extra bedroom where Lily set up a trundle bed that fit all three children). Standing in the door frame, he found his mother turning off the television mounted on the wall. Nathalie, Nick, and Nora sprawled out on the beds, fast asleep.

"That didn't take too long," Matt whispered. "What were they watching?"

"My *Planet Earth* DVD—I picked the show they'd have the least interest in. I think Nora chose the *Deserts* episode"

"Perfect," Matt chuckled. "Anything animated would've kept them wide awake. Which season?"

"One, but I have season two as well if you want to borrow it."

"Thanks Mom; we can just buy it online though. Oh hey—the house looks great, by the way."

She smiled. "Thank you, Dear!"

"Do you know where my stuff is?"

“Yes, I wasn’t sure what you still wanted. The boxes in the garage.”

“Great, let me go grab them.” Matt turned towards the hallway, but Lily stepped in from of him.

“It’s past midnight, there’s no reason to do it *right* now. Go through them later—they aren’t going anywhere.” As she finished her sentence, Beatrice walked in.

“All settled in?” Lily asked.

“Yes! And I took some towels from the hall closet, if that’s okay.”

“Oh I can’t believe I forgot to take some out!”

“Oh my gosh, Mom,” Matt said. “Don’t even worry about it. Thanks for everything.”

“Of *course!* I’m so happy you’re all here this weekend.” Out of the corner of her eye, Lily noticed Beatrice yawn.

“Me too!”

“I actually think I’m going to head to bed though.” She said, picking up a water glass to place in the dishwasher. “I usually run on a pretty early schedule.”

“I think we will too. It’s—” he unlocked his phone. “Oh gosh, it’s almost four in Boston.”

“Goodnight, Dear!”

“Night Mom!”

“Goodnight Lily!” Beatrice added. Lily didn’t respond—she was probably too far down the hall to hear.

Matt walked further into the room and tucked in each of his children, removing Nathalie's glasses and placing them on a nearby desk. After Beatrice brushed her teeth, washed her face, and (finally) removing her contacts, she hopped into bed and checked her phone—still nothing. By the time Matt was ready for bed a few minutes later, he found Beatrice fast asleep, phone still in her hand. Carefully, he pulled it from her grasp and placed it on the nightstand. After turning off the lights, he crawled into bed and closed his eyes, hoping to get a few hours of decent sleep before the next day arrived.

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“Uuggghhh,” Lydia groaned. “Dammit.” She had forgotten to draw the curtains, and blinding sunlight poured through the windows and landed onto her face. She pulled her pillow over her eyes, but now that she was awake, that was it. There was no going back to sleep.

“What's the matter with you?” June called out. The doors of the Jack-and-Jill bathroom between them must have been left open.

“Curtains. Open.” She tossed the pillow to the foot of her bed and sat up, placing her glasses onto her face. As she did so, June came into focus as she walked into Lydia's room. She wore a purple sports bra and floral spandex shorts, and was tying her hair into a tight bun.

“Well now that you're awake, wanna go for a run?”

“Right *now*?”

“Yes.”

“What time is it?”

“8:06.”

“Gross.”

“Is that a yes or no?”

“Can you give me till 8:15 at least?”

“Ugh, fine.”

A faint *ding* went off, and June walked back into her room.

“But you have to actually get up if you want me to wait for you!” She called.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” Lydia mumbled, rolling out of bed dramatically. She practically crawled into June’s room, where her sister sat on the floor, stretching.

“Can I borrow workout clothes? I didn’t bring any.”

“Sure, they’re in the third drawer down. Your boobs are probably too big for my sports bras though.”

“I’ll just wear two then.”

“Geez, does that work?”

“I mean, not really, but it’s better than one. Do you have two of the same color?”

“Yeah—the white ones.”

Lydia found the bras and threw them on. After digging through the rest of the drawer, she decided upon a pair of black shorts and a turquoise tank top with a large, iridescent Nike swoosh across the front. Her old running shoes still sat at the bottom of her closet, and while they weren’t her first choice, they still worked.

By 8:20, the pair made their way outside. Lydia missed these summers, which were significantly more manageable than the ones back east. She followed June on her normal four-mile loop, which she had re-established after coming home from San Louis Obispo for her summer internship at an architecture firm downtown. They ran a little faster than Lydia was used to, but the cool morning breeze felt so delightful that she didn't really care.

By the end of the third mile, Lydia passed her sister in front of Bernard Hamilton's house, where the older man tended to his garden under the shade of his roof. She rounded the corner, and June caught back up. A moment later a car pulled out of a driveway, slowing down when it approached the girls. The driver's window rolled down, and Patricia Turner (Sophia T's mother), waved them over and pushed her sunglasses atop her perfectly curled hair.

"Is that who I think it is?" She yelled, though the rest of the street was quiet except for some cheerful birds and a far-away lawn mower.

"Hi Mrs. Turner," Lydia said, forcing a smile.

"Why are you stopping?" June whispered, wiping sweat from her brow.

"We have to be polite. Come on." She whispered back, walking towards the White Range Rover.

"Please call me Trish! You girls don't have to be so formal with me, I've known you since you were practically in diapers!"

"Hi Trish," June said. "How are you?"

"Oh fine, you know. The girls are here and there—I wish I got to see them all more," (*I know I talk fast, June thought, but damn. This lady did not need*

*coffee this morning.*) “I bet your mom feels the same way but just look! You’re both home! Will Soph see you at the wedding?”

“Yep! And—”

“Sophia’s bringing Greg—you remember him? They moved in together in January. Found an apartment with two bedrooms! In San Francisco! Isn’t that lovely?”

“I’m bringing June, we’ll be sure to say hi!” Lydia responded.

“Oh... that’s fun! It’s nice not to have the pressure of bringing a boyfriend to a wedding anyways. Besides, I’m sure Soph will be *so* happy to see you both. You kids are growing up too fast!”

June stretched and bumped her sister, trying to make her finish the conversation.

“I know!” Lydia responded a little too loudly, forcing a laugh. “Well, it was great catching up but we really have to get going...”

“Sure thing! I’ll give your mom a call soon,” she said, beginning to roll away. “We really need to catch up! Let’s all get lunch on—” At this point, Trish had driven too far down the street to be understood.

June let out an exasperated sigh.

“Dear Lord—she is a LOT.”

“Yeah.” Lydia said, standing in a daze.

“Great,” June said. “Now we don’t have time for the rest of the run. Let’s just take the shortcut home.” She took off, and after a few more seconds, Lydia joined her.

## Chapter Four

Jack peered up at the corporate façade soaring before him. The windows were brightened by the sun's reflection, but a thin layer of clouds prevented the blinding of any innocent observer. His eyes trailed down the columns and rows of glass squares, trying to count the stories but losing track after twenty-four when a man in a gray suit pushed past him, running from the glass doorway, texting frantically, and refusing to look up from his screen.

*Excuse you*, Jack thought. He reached forward and grabbed the cool metal door handle before it shut, deciding that this opening left him without an excuse to continue standing out on the pavement.

The lobby felt somehow larger on the inside than it had appeared from the outside. Though the exterior of the building was expectedly rectangular, the doors opened up into a cylindrical interior. Each floor wrapped around an empty center, which reached a large, circular skylight on the distant ceiling. An enormous contemporary sculpture of Atlas, holding a bronze globe upon his back, rested in the middle of the marble floor. Jack couldn't remember whether he was a hero of the myth for choosing this extraordinary responsibility, or the villain who was punished with it. Either way, he was impressed that the man hadn't crumbled under the weight of the world. The statue was surrounded by two rings; a circular desk, where three women and two men sat in front of computers and phones, then a mix of round white couches and modern oversized chairs.

Suddenly aware of the fact that he had been staring up at the building's interior for the past minute, Jack forced his feet forward until he reached the white

countertop. After introducing himself, the woman pointed to one of the couches, and so he sat, waiting for further instruction.

But three and a half minutes later, he approached the desk for a second time.

“Sorry, you got my name, right?”

“Yes,” the receptionist replied coldly, eyes glued to her monitor. Squinting intently at the screen, she dragged her mouse across a circular pad, clicked twice, moved it back to its original resting place, and began typing frantically.

“It’s Jack—”

“Perriman. Ten-o’clock appointment. You’re early.”

“Yes, I didn’t want to be late, so—”

“I’ll let you know when they’re ready.” Taking his cue to leave her alone, Jack returned to the chairs and sat. Unfocusing his eyes, he took a deep breath and decided to think about something else, for the time being. He did not choose his distraction, however; as always, it chose him.

“What do you mean?” Jack had asked, trying not to raise his voice. He sat at the breakfast table, behind an untouched bowl of now-soggy cereal.

“Jack,” Mia replied, taking the seat beside him. She hesitated moment before placing her hands over his. “I just... I can’t...”

“Why? What’s going on with you?”

“*Me?* Jack, what’s going on with *you?*”



“What are you talking about?”

“Jack, you put your life on hold a year ago. I can’t keep mine paused any longer.”

“That’s not fair.” He replied, frowning.

“I know that everything with your brother has been really hard for you,” she said in a softer voice. “Of course it has.”

“So, what? I’m not happy enough all the time for you?”

“Jack—your brother is okay. I know he almost wasn’t, but he is—”

“No he’s not, Mia! He’s in rehab. He lost his job, his fiancée. He—he almost died. We were there. He almost *died*.”

“He didn’t, though. And ever since, you’ve just stopped... stopped doing everything.”

“What are you talking about?”

“When was the last time we had dinner outside of this apartment? What happened to leaving NEConsulting after a few years? And what about the weekend we were going to spend at Martha’s Vineyard? We talked about that last August.”

Jack sat silently, clenching his spoon until his knuckles turned white.

“You haven’t moved forward in a year. *We* haven’t moved forward in a year. I can’t stay here forever—in this life stage, or whatever. You know what I mean. I didn’t think that’s what you wanted.”

“That’s not what I want! You know that!”

“Do I, though? You haven’t proven it in a *year*. Honestly, I used to be sure we were going to get married, and now, we’ve been together five years, I’m twenty-seven, and I haven’t even moved in. All I have here are a few goddamned drawers.”

“We were,” He paused, remembering to correct himself. “I mean, we *are* going to get married! My mom offered me her ring over Christmas!”

“Did you take it?”

Again, silence.

Mia sighed. “Jack, we can’t get married from an ultimatum. I have to keep moving forward with my life; you’ve been in a standstill for a year.”

Silence.

“I’m sorry.”

A phone rang, snapping Jack back into the present. The receptionist picked up the receiver, waving him over. After informing him that they were ready, she directed Jack towards the elevator. As it ascended to the twelfth floor, Jack wondered who “they” were, exactly. He fussed with his hair in the mirrored walls, recognizing the piece playing softly from the speaker above him. It was the Bach Fugue in G Minor, something he had performed in orchestra years earlier. Floor after floor, more instruments joined in, their overlapping melodies building and increasing in volume. Before the piece could resolve, a round button with two triangles pointing away from one another lit up a bright yellow, accompanied by a sharp bell. The doors opened and he stepped outside, missing the end of the piece.

“Jack Perriman?” He spun around and looked at the man before him, instantly reminded of the “Little Teapot” song. Short and stout, he stood nearly a foot beneath Jack, and was likely twice his weight. Though his white shirt was tight around his round belly, his suit looked expensive. Jack knew nothing of fashion, but the rich navy fabric and close tailoring certainly appeared more professional than anyone he remembered at his current office. Jack shook the man’s hand.

“Yes, hello. Nice to meet you, ...”

“Mr. Winterbottom.”

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Winterbottom.”

“Shall we head into the conference room?”

“Yes, Sir.” They walked around the balcony, and Jack glanced over the railing below him, noticing how small the receptionists looked from this height. After a moment, they entered a small conference room, where two others sat at a long table. As Mr. Winterbottom sat down beside them, Jack was offered a seat across the table.

“You were early,” Mr. Winterbottom said. “That’s a good start.”

“And we really appreciate your willingness to fly out here,” said one of the others. “Your resume really impressed us, and we wanted to make sure you could interview in person. We much prefer it that way.”

“Of course,” Jack responded awkwardly, unsure how to navigate this casual limbo. After a moment, he added, “thank you for the opportunity.”

Mr. Winterbottom reached out and opened the new bottle of water in front of him, twisting the seal on the cap until it broke. He took a sip before setting it back down, leaving a ring of water on the table. One of the men adjusted his chair while the other cleared his throat, interrupting Jack's half-formed thoughts on the irony of an environmental firm using plastic water bottles.

"Alrighty then," Mr. Winterbottom announced. "Why don't we get started?"

Without any more preludes and preambles, the interview began.

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"I had a feeling these kids would be in desperate need of a good breakfast." Lily said. Her son wandered into the kitchen with messy hair, looking almost as he had when he was a tired teenager.

"They're happy with a bowl of cereal Mom, you didn't have to go through all this trouble." Matt said.

"Of course I did! Look how excited they are" Lily said, turning back to the stove where yellow batter bubbled on the hot pan. Sure enough, Nathalie, Nick, and Nora sat, elbows on the table, ogling the growing stack of pancake reserves. "It's really no trouble. They needed some breakfast anyways."

"Well thanks, Mom. Did you all thank Nana?"

"Thank you Nana!" they shouted in near-unison.

"First batch is ready! Plates out!"

Lily walked over to the table, placed two pancakes onto each of their plates with the spatula, and returned to the stove to continue cooking. Matt

noticed the array of toppings on the table—whipped cream, additional chocolate chips, maple syrup, and three small bowls of strawberries, blueberries, and banana slices.

“I better see some fruit on everyone’s plate!” he called out. Only Nora indicated that she had heard him, nodding with an enormous grin as she reached for the strawberries.

“You need to eat, too, Matthew! Here’s a plate.” Lily said, handing him a fresh stack. Beatrice walked into the kitchen, wearing her large glasses (afraid to confront the contacts that had driven her crazy the night before) and a messy bun.

“Morning, Beatrice. Why don’t you take a seat and eat with your family?”

As Beatrice complied, Matt gave her a kiss on the cheek.

“What’s the plan today, Lily?” Beatrice asked.

“After breakfast, we can go to lunch, visit the Arboretum, and then head off to dinner.”

As Nora finished her first pancake, Alan arrived at the table.

“Good morning, Sweetheart!” Lily exclaimed, flipping another pancake.

“Happy Birthday!”

“Happy Birthday, Dad!”

“Happy Birthday, Papa!”

“Happy Birthday, Alan!”

“Well hello, everyone!” Alan exclaimed, walking to the table to give each person a hug. “I’m so happy to see you all! Nathalie, my Dear, how are those piano lessons coming along?”

“I don’t really like piano anymore,” she replied through a mouthful of pancake. “Mom said I can switch instruments this summer before school starts.”

“They let the third graders choose between a few instruments for Beginning Band,” Beatrice explained.

“Oh really?” Alan asked. “Which one do you want to play?”

“Ummm, I don’t know yet. We can do violin, cello, clarinet, flute, and trumpet.”

“Oh wow, those are all good choices. I can see why you haven’t decided yet. Nicholas, Nora, how are you two?”

“Good,” Nick replied.

“GREAT,” Nora added, trying to one-up her brother.

“Well I’m glad!” Alan said, laughing. Lily walked over holding two plates of pancakes and handed one to Alan, after which they joined everyone else and sat at the table.

“How are you, Dad?” Matt asked.

“Oh you know, I’m good. Going to the office a little less now, I’m only working on a few cases these days.”

“Is that what you want?”

“Certainly; it’s what I asked for. I don’t need to work sixty-plus hours a week anymore, especially since I’m looking to retire in the next year or two.”

“Wow,” Matt said. “That’s great, Dad.”

“Yes, it is!” Lily responded. “We finally have weeknight plans! Movies every Tuesday, dinner downtown on Thursdays.”

“That sounds lovely!” Beatrice said, glancing over at Matt for a second.

“We’re also switching up our week, actually.”

“Really?” Lily asked.

“More time at the office, Matt? I knew you had to be making partner soon.”

“No, actually...”

“I’M DONE!” Nora interrupted.

“Why don’t you guys go play in the backyard? The sun’s just coming out.”

“Okay!” All three ran out the sliding glass doors, neglecting their dirty plates at the table.

“So what’s happening?” Lily asked.

“I’m actually not taking partner right now, I’ve decided to wait a few years,” Matt said. “I want to be home a little more right now—”

“Because we decided it’s time I finally opened my own bakery!” Beatrice continued.

“You’re what?” Lily asked.

“We put in an offer on a great location, and Beatrice already has a few staff members lined up. We’re really excited.”

“Clearly.” Alan said.

“The hours might be long for the first year or two, but I think it’s going to take off soon. That article came out about my catering business, the one that Matt emailed you a few weeks ago, and I’ve gotten more than twice the usual business

since then. I mean, I always planned on doing this, since culinary school; it's just a better time now that the kids are a few years older." *Stop. Rambling.* Beatrice thought. *Geez.*

"Well, I guess congratulations are in order," Lily said, smiling.

"Matthew, you're excited about this, too?" Alan asked.

"Oh yes," he said. "Bea's been waiting for this for so long. I'm so glad we finally have the chance."

"Then that's wonderful." Alan said, his tone mismatching his words.

Unsure of how to continue, Matt reached for another pancake and a spoonful of blueberries. Nora suddenly reappeared, panting from her sprint between the door and the table, and sat back down.

"Can I have seconds?" She asked.

"Sure, Dear! Here you go." Lily responded, holding out the stack.

Reaching for the plate, she knocked over a cup of orange juice, spilling it all over the table.

"Oh no!" Nora exclaimed. Before Lily could react, Beatrice jumped up and grabbed a handful of paper towels from the counter.

"Don't worry, Dear. It appears as though your mother's got this one."

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Lydia showered in the bathroom between her room and her sister's, where June sat and painted her nails a shimmery rose gold.



“Don’t you think there’s something kind of—I don’t know—sad about Grace and Tom?” Lydia shouted over the loud spray of water. In the background, she heard a few dings. Hopefully it wasn’t work.

“Sad? They’re getting married. They’ve been together forever.”

“No, no, I know. But like... they never dated anyone else. They stayed here for college, and for work after.” She turned the water off, wrapping herself in a towel.

“I don’t know,” June responded, a few more dings going off. “I mean, they’re kinda young to be getting married, but they’re really happy around each other. I think it’s sweet.”

“I guess you’re right.” After drying off and throwing on a bra and underwear, Lydia checked her phone. *No messages*. Walking back through the bathroom, she sat on June’s bed, her wet hair dripping on the comforter.

“I heard quite a few texts a minute ago... who could it possibly be?” she teased. Of course, it was Fucking Daniel, June’s on-and-off-again boyfriend from college. *Fucking Daniel is the worst at communicating. Fucking Daniel was all over that bitch from Indiana at a party last night. Fucking Daniel refused to go to Spring Gala, can you believe that?*

“It’s not Daniel, if that’s what you’re wondering,” June replied.

“Did you guys break up again?”

“Yeah, for the last time. He was cheating on me with Cynthia.”

“What?”

“Yep. Found out two weeks before finals. Honestly, I’m not that bummed.

He was kind of the worst.”

“Fucking Daniel.” Lydia said, shaking her head. They both laughed.

“Wait—so who was texting, then?”

“Um…”

“Oh my God, June. You have to tell me. If I have to have zero romantic life, at *least* let me live vicariously through yours.”

“Fine. Okay, well, when I came home at the beginning of summer for the internship, I reconnected with some high school friends, since they’re the only people I know around here anymore.”

“Someone I know?”

“Kind of…”

“Ooh, let me think… Ryan Kim? He was always cute.”

“Nope.”

“Andrew Murray, or Mitchell, or whatever?”

“Umm, no.”

“*WHO* then?”

“Ethan Montgomery,” June said quietly.

“…Tom’s little brother?”

“Yep.” After that, it was silent for a few seconds.

“That’s great!” Lydia feigned excitement to the best of her ability, but her sister knew better.

“We hung out in a big group at first, but he asked me out after a few weeks.” June said, speeding up her sentences. “He’s different than I had remembered...not so skinny anymore, and his hair’s much shorter. And he’s almost a foot taller than me! He’s pre-med at UW, doing an internship at Seattle Memorial this summer. In their oncology center.”

“You don’t have to justify it.” Lydia said with an awkward laugh. “It’s great!”

“I know,” June responded. “I’ve been meaning to fill you in. Mom and Dad know—he came over for dinner a few weeks ago, and I see him pretty much every weekend.”

“So is it getting serious, then? Is he your boyfriend?” Lydia asked. Ethan was certainly an improvement over Fucking Daniel, but something still seemed weird.

“Yeah, he is.” June said, beaming.

“So,” Lydia responded, crisscrossing her legs on her sister’s bed. Pushing her reserves aside, she smiled back. “tell me EVERYTHING. Also, show me his Instagram.”

As the sisters continued to get ready, June told Lydia all about the new relationship. Lydia curled her hair while June straightened hers. They verified the evenness of each other’s eyeliners, and debated over which eyeshadow colors the other should use. Lydia steamed her purple dress, which had accumulated a few wrinkles in the suitcase, while helping June decide between two options. Ultimately, they agreed on a navy tea-length dress, speckled in colorful

embroidered flowers, and a pair of nude open-toe pumps. After a few final touches—including earrings (they had both almost forgotten), Lydia’s clutch, and June’s setting spray—the sisters descended the stairs.

Per usual, their father insisted on taking a picture before they left. As he rotated his iPhone from landscape to portrait, their mother returned from the kitchen, handing each girl a Nature Valley granola bar.

“Mom, I’m *sure* that there will be food there.”

“Just in case! Sometimes you have to wait forever between the ceremony and reception. Just throw the bars in your bags.”

“Why does she only buy the crumbliest ones?” June whispered to Lydia, prompting giggles from both sisters. After their father announced his satisfaction with the pictures, June disappeared from the entryway. A moment later, she returned carrying a large, clearly heavy box wrapped in glittery silver paper and a large matching bow.

“I do *not* understand why you felt the need to get Tom and Grace the freaking cast iron skillet,” June complained, censoring her language in the presence of her parents. “Some wine glasses would have been lovely. And light.”

“June, this is a *Le Creuset*,” Her mother retorted. “It is a *much* lovelier gift than a set of plain old wine glasses. Don’t complain.” And with that, she opened the door for her daughters to make their way to the car. “Have fun!”

“We will!” Lydia responded, making her way down towards the Uber that had just arrived.

As the driver turned onto the highway, June opened the compact mirror from her purse. “So how’s work?” She asked, applying lip gloss.

“Good! Great actually, I’m really enjoying the new position.”

“That’s cool! Maybe you’ll get to go to the London office more often.”

Lydia laughed. “I don’t know about that. I mean maybe, you never know. How about you? How’s the internship?”

“Ehh, work is alright. Being around actual architects and watching them work is way more interesting than listening to a professor just talk, talk, talk about design. I mean, of course I’m working on my own designs all semester, but it’s definitely different here.”

“Then what’s wrong? You don’t sound psyched.”

“I don’t think I want to do commercial architecture like this firm. Drawing offices is already getting boring, and it’s only been a few months. I think I’d rather design houses—it seems more creative and less monotonous.”

“That’s good, though!”

“Doing what I don’t want to do?”

“I mean, figuring out what you *do* want to do. That takes some people ages.”

“I guess so.” They continued chatting, laughing about June’s strange coworkers and cramped cubicle, discussing everything besides what was on both of their minds.

Twenty minutes later, the sisters arrived at the venue. They entered the charming white church through large wooden doors, and June placed the gift on a

round table in the foyer. Making their way through the aisles to find a seat, they each waved to familiar faces in the crowd, eventually finding room in the fifth row. After fifteen minutes or so, the minister, Tom, and four groomsmen made their way to the front of the room, encompassed in the natural light that streamed through the large, pointed, unstained windows. As the processional music began to play, Lydia watched the flower girls make their way down the aisle. When they reached the altar, she noticed Ethan, looking much older than she had remembered, flashing a bright smile towards her sister. As the bridesmaids made their way down the aisle, June waved back, unaware of the bride's entrance.

## Chapter Five

The interview had taken much longer than expected. After meeting with Mr. Winterbottom and the two executive associates, he was passed off to three other teams, including business strategy, HR, and R&D. Unfortunately, none were punctual, and he was forced to return to the lobby and sit for twenty or thirty minutes in between each interview. Just over three hours later, Jack emerged back out onto the pavement. He turned left and right, squinting from the sudden brightness of the sunshine, trying to regain his bearings.

But before he could decide which direction to begin walking, his phone began to vibrate in his pocket. It was his mother calling.

“Hey Mom,” he said.

“Can you hear me, Jack? It’s your mother.” She said, something buzzing in the background.

“Yes Mom, I can hear you.”

“Oh good, the neighbor’s gardeners are here and their lawnmower is awfully loud.”

“You’re loud and clear, Mom.” For no particular reason, he decided to start down the sidewalk to the left.

“Good, good. How was the interview?”

“LONG. I just got out.”

“What? That’s ridiculous.”

“I know.”

“But how do think it went?”

“Honestly, I think it went really well. They liked my resume, what I had to say...

they talked me through some supposedly-hypothetical business and marketing issues and asked how I would solve them, and they seemed happy with my answers. And they said they’d let me know by the end of the day. I guess I was the last person interviewed.”

“That’s great!”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Do you?”

“Do I what?”

“Think it’s great? The company, I mean.”

“Definitely. They make environmental technology, and sell them to private and public sector firms.”

“That’s nice. Didn’t know you were interested in that sort of thing.”

“Sure I am! I haven’t gotten an offer yet though. They said they’d let me know by the end of the weekend.”

“I bet you will though.”

“Thanks, Mom. Fingers crossed. How’s everyone at home?”

“Your father’s good, he’s working in the garage right now. Want me to go grab him?”

“No no, it’s fine. How’s Chris?”

“He’s good! Liking working at the bank, so that’s good. He actually went out last night, too. What a relief.”



“He did?” Jack asked, surprised. Chris never left the house these days.

“Yes! He said he had a date from one of those apps—what was it called?”

“I don’t know.”

“Oh come on, yes you do. The popular one.”

“Spark?”

“Yes! Spark—that’s the one. He went out with a girl named Mandy or Mindy or something like that. Seemed to have a nice time.”

“Well that’s good to hear—I’m glad he’s going out again.”

“Agreed! Don’t be so worried about him—he’s doing much better lately.”

“I’m worried just the right amount, Mom.”

“Anyways,” his mother continued. “What are you doing the rest of the weekend?”

“I’m not sure. No plans, really.”

“Why don’t you wing it? Go out and explore the city. Grab lunch at the Pike Place Market, wander around.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s a good idea.”

“I won’t hold you up any longer. Go have a good time!”

“Okay! Love you, and say hi to Dad and Chris for me.”

“Will do! Bye!”

With that, Jack peered around again at his surroundings. He walked slowly whenever he was on the phone, and had only gone halfway down the block.

Unsure of where to go next, he called an Uber; within forty-five minutes, he had returned to his hotel, changed back into his jeans and a buttoned short-sleeve with

a jacket, dropped off his briefcase, and made his way back downtown. He would be eating a late lunch at this point, so (rather than waste time being adventurous) he decided to navigate to where his mother had offered. On the ride over, he scrolled through his phone. After failing to find anything remotely interesting on Facebook and Twitter, he decided to update Aiden.

Nice, man. Do you think you'll get an offer?

Yeah, I think so

See? I said you need to get out of the house. LMK what they say.

Will do. Do you have any recommendations around the city?

I haven't been in a while, let me ask Tess

She says the best view is from Kerry Park. ("RAINIER!")

Where's that?

Idk. Google it.

Lol thanks

After another ten minutes following his phone's (sometimes unreliable) navigation, Jack reached Pike Place, and walked inside. Though he had hoped to miss the lunch rush, he quickly realized that would be impossible. People from all

directions shouted orders, shoved through the pathways, moved when he stopped, stopped when he moved. It was chaos—but the best sort. Signs of every color and typographic style littered the walls and hung from the ceilings, while scents from every possible cuisine mingled in a delightfully confusing aromatic steam that fogged his glasses upon arrival.

“What would you like?” A man behind a counter asked. While absorbing his surroundings, Jack had accidentally made his way to the front of a line of a Russian pastry shop. Looking at the menu, he had no clue what sounded good.

“Umm,” Jack responded, staring at the list of unfamiliar items. A woman behind him grumbled to her friend, so he turned around.

“Why don’t you two go ahead of me?”

“Thanks,” one said. She stepped up and immediately ordered a beef and cheese piroshky, while her friend chose the mushroom, celery, and onion.

Jack looked around at the other nearby vendors—a sandwich shop, a cheese shop, and a dumpling shop were the closest. All three sounded fine, and as he just began to step away from the line, he caught the look of the second woman’s face as she bit into the pastry. She hadn’t finished paying, hadn’t left the counter, but couldn’t wait one moment longer before starting.

“Lori!” The first woman said.

“Charlotte, I’m starving. It’s too good to wait.”

“Alright, just don’t finish before we find Sandra over at the deli.”

Lori took another bite, then rolled the paper bag over the remainder of the pastry. They walked away, and for the second time, Jack found himself at the

counter. He looked towards the sandwich shop again—the line was short, and he could get a turkey on rye. But as he turned back, he noticed Lori sneak another bite as she walked away.

“Ready now?” The vendor asked.

“Yes,” Jack replied. “What did that second woman order?”

“Mushroom-celery-onion,” he said.

“Perfect. I’ll try one of those.”

As soon as he had the pastry in his hands, he made his way towards the densely-populated marketplace’s exit, ready to explore more of the city.

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Walking behind her brother and sister, Nora’s strawberry ice cream began to drip onto her fingers. Beatrice had recommended she get a cup, but no; it had to be a cone.

“Mom! It’s getting everywhere!” she shrieked, hurrying to the front of the group as they entered the park.

“Here Nora,” her grandmother said, reaching into her purse. “I have a tissue.”

“Thanks Lily,” Beatrice said, after swallowing her spoonful of her own lavender-honey ice cream. After the obligatory Molly Moon’s visit, Lily suggested that the Arboretum would be a lovely place to spend the afternoon. As it was much sunnier than usual, everyone agreed, thankful for the shaded paths and benches.

“Papa!” Nick said, tugging on the hem of Alan’s shirt. “Let’s go to find the bridge!”

“Alright, Nicholas,” Alan responded. “Who else wants to come?”

“ME!” Nora shouted, throwing the tissue back at her grandmother and running to catch up to Alan.

“I guess I’ll come, too.” Nathalie added, trying to sound more mature than her siblings.

“That’s the spirit, Nat,” Matt said, joining his father to help if the kids became too much to handle.

“I think Beatrice and I will stroll a little slower,” Lily said. “Looking at the trees and flowers and such. We’ll meet you there.”

“Okay, sure! Sounds great! Here Matt,” she said, handing him a bottle of water. “Just in case the kids get thirsty.” The five of them hurried off, leaving Lily and Beatrice alone on the pathway.

“So how are things with you?” Beatrice asked.

“They’re good,” Lily answered. “It’s nice to have Alan home more than he used to. I just bought us season tickets to the symphony for his birthday. Tenth row orchestra.”

“Wow!” Beatrice said. She tried to hasten their pace, wary of how long it would take them to reach the others at the bridge.

“I’m excited,” Lily said, refusing to move past a saunter. “He’s been talking about it forever.”

“That’s going to be wond—”

“Enough about me,” Lily interrupted. “So, tell me about this bakery.”

“Yes! We’re waiting to hear from the realtor about the location right now. She said she’d email by the end of the weekend.”

“What sort of place is it? Is it somewhere customers could stumble upon, or do they have to look for it?”

“It’s towards the end of a busy street, with lots of foot traffic from cafes and restaurants and shops. And there’s a farmer’s market one block away each Sunday, so that’s good.”

“Sounds like it.”

“The building itself it great, too. It’s an old Chinese restaurant that just closed down a mile and a half from the house, with a ton of space in the kitchen and a perfect spot for a counter and seating in the main salon.”

“Will it be expensive?” Lily asked unapologetically.

“Sort of, but nothing we couldn’t handle. It’s a fixer-upper of sorts, which saves some money, and I’ll need to buy some new equipment and hire a few staff members, but Matt and I worked out all the numbers.”

“And the numbers work? With him stepping down at work?”

Beatrice began picking at her fingernails—an old habit. “He’s not stepping down, really. He’s just not taking partner quite yet…” she trailed off. “But yes, the numbers work.”

“Even saving some and making a plan with future income for the kids’ college?”

“Yes, we’ve accounted for that.”

“That’s good,” Lily replied hesitantly. “I’m just concerned for the kids a bit, you know? And for Matt, sacrificing all this for you.”

Looking down, Beatrice no longer had white on three nails on her left hand. *Whoops*. Intervening, she stuck her hands in her pockets.

“I don’t think it’s really a sacrifice... he’s just as excited about it as I am, and so are the kids... we’ve been talking about it for as long as I can remember, definitely before the kids were born.”

“It certainly *is* a sacrifice,” Lily responded, stopping in her tracks. Beatrice stopped too, hoping they had continued on a bit longer to the next patch of shade. Instead, they were stuck in complete sunlight. “Matthew is postponing his career. Someone else could swoop in and take partner at the firm. Did you think about that?”

“He talked with the partners, they’re happy to wait a few years for his partnership...”

“*And*, Lily continued, “it is certainly a sacrifice for the kids, too. You’ve been home with them their whole lives, and now what? You’re working long days, out of the house? Who will make them breakfast? Who will pick them up from school? Who will help them with their homework? Matthew? Some random nanny?”

Beatrice really wished they would keep walking—the shade was only ten or so feet away—but she was stuck here, letting her ice cream melt in the sun. This had become an ice cream-less sort of conversation.

“I’ll have the staff open up early most days,” Beatrice said. “And I’ll be home for breakfast and school drop-off. We have a carpool with some neighborhood families, so Matt only has pick up after school on Tuesdays and Fridays, where he can work half the day at home. The shop won’t stay open too late—probably 5 or 6 or so—and I don’t even have to be the one to close up every day.” No matter how she answered her mother-in-law’s questions, Beatrice knew she was doomed to fail this test. Unable to wait any longer, she started down the path, praying that Lily would follow along.

“No matter what plan you’ve worked out,” Lily replied, catching up to Beatrice, “you won’t be home with your children nearly as much.”

“In a way, no, I won’t.” Beatrice replied. She could see the bridge, her kids racing from one end of the other, her husband, and his father. *Almost there.*

“Well, if you’re okay with that, it is what it is.”

“Matt and I think it’s going to be great.”

“I’m glad.”

“The kids are so excited, too. The renovation can be a family project, they can come help in the kitchen, maybe work behind the counter when they’re teenagers... they’re even excited to test flavors.”

“Good, good.” Lily replied unfeelingly, walking alongside Beatrice but only looking forward.

“Well, well, well! Look who it is!” Matt shouted, waving his arms around in the air. “Took you long enough!”

“We’re coming!” Beatrice yelled back. *Almost there.*



“It’s going to be fine, Lily. Really, we’ve thought this through.”

“I just think that Matthew appreciated my presence in his childhood. It would have been different if his father was the one around the house.”

“Matt and I will both be around the house.” *So close.*

“I hope so.” Lily said, having reached the base of the bridge.

“NANA!” Nora shouted, running in their direction. Suddenly smiling, Lily crouched down and opened her arms.

“Nora! What did you find?” The five year-old ran up to her grandmother, flaunting a new light-pink stain on her white t-shirt.

“A ROCK!” She shouted, completely thrilled. The kids were going to be fine.

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“Elderflower Gin and Tonic,” June said, handing her sister one of the identical drinks she had carried over from the bar.

“Fancy,” Lydia replied. After taking a sip, she added, “Oh wow... this is great. Thanks.”

“What did you find?” June asked, eyeing the plates in front of Lydia on the high-top they had snagged before other guests managed.

“Crostini with goat cheese, prosciutto, fig, and honey.”

“Yessss,” June replied, picking up her plate and taking a bite before setting it back down. “Hey, have you seen Ethan around yet?”

“Not yet, sorry!” Cocktail hour was bustling, inside a hip restaurant that overlooked a rolling lawn with an enormous tent that Lydia assumed would be

their next destination of the evening. The sun was still out, but it had just reached golden hour. Tom and Grace had made their entrance only a few minutes ago, along with the rest of the wedding party. The sisters were approached by some of Lydia's high school friends, the kind that she thought she'd keep in touch with but never did. They all chatted and provided updates on each other's lives, as if they hadn't seen it all online beforehand. Nevertheless, they all enjoyed catching up, and dispersed happily after a few minutes.

"Excuse me, Miss."

June turned around, finding Ethan to have appeared out of the crowd, a cheeky grin spread across his face.

"Hey!" She shouted, giving him a quick kiss. "Great job up there. Ten out of ten on your standing abilities. Really. Bravo."

"Thank you, thank you," he replied, bowing. "Hey Lydia, it's been a while!"

"Hi Ethan! It really has!" Now that she could see him up close, she fully recognized Tom's little brother. He was taller, stronger, and a little less dorky, but still the same kid.

"You just got in last night, right?"

"Yeah!" *June keeps him updated.* "It's really nice to be home."

"I bet! Did you guys enjoy the ceremony?"

"Oh my gosh, yeah," June said, leaning against his side. Standing next to each other, Lydia noticed that June's dress matched Ethan's suit perfectly. Maybe

that's why she chose it. "Everything was lovely. The vows were wonderful, the flowers—my God. It was perfect."

"And Grace's dress, too," Lydia chimed in. "It's stunning." It really was—the strapless, A-Line, lace gown with a sweetheart neckline was spectacular. Grace could have worn anything that day and looked amazing, but on this account, she had made the right decision.

"I'm glad you had a good time!" Ethan said. "It's kind of weird, having an *in-law* now. Sounds so grown-up." He laughed.

"It really does," said June. Whispering, she added, "I hate to break it to you, but you might not actually be a kid anymore." He made an exaggerated frown, wrinkling his nose, but instantly broke into a smile.

"Just wait till you graduate," Lydia said.

"No no no no I don't want to talk about that. Too frightening," June replied.

"How's work going for you?" Ethan asked, his hand now resting comfortably on June's back.

"It's going really well," Lydia answered. "PR is great—fast-paced, creative, strategic—it's a lot of fun."

"Nice! And you're still liking Boston?"

*He's definitely making an effort here. Makes sense—he's already hung out around Mom and Dad too.*

“I am! The east coast has a different vibe, but I love it. Boston’s just the right size—totally manageable. Not too small, not too overwhelming. And the seasons there are *unreal*.”

“June showed me pictures from when she visited you in January! I cannot believe you survive in that much snow!”

“You get used to it pretty quickly. Also, there’s not much other choice.” She added, laughing. “How’s school for you? Pre-med, I hear. Good for you—that shit’s too much for me.”

“Thanks,” he replied, chuckling. “Sometimes I think it is for me too. It’s great, though. And the internship this summer is going pretty well—did June tell you I’m at Memorial? I’m really enjoying being around actual patients, not just sitting in labs, you know?”

“Definitely. I’m glad you’re liking it!”

“Thanks!” Across the room, a woman in a green dress waved both of her arms to catch Ethan’s attention. “Oh shoot. I gotta go. I didn’t have the chance to say hi to my Aunt Nancy back at the church.”

“Go! We’ll be here, come back and check in on us later.”

“You sure?” He asked, genuinely concerned.

“Yes! Go!” Before hurrying off, he kissed June’s cheek. Teasingly, she pushed him away, exclaiming, “Go!”

“Have fun!” he shouted, hurrying off towards the other end of the room. Lydia took the last crostini, biting into indulgent combination of sweet and savory.

“Sooooo...” June started. “What do you think?”

“He’s great!” Lydia replied, taking a sip of her drink.

“That’s it?”

“What do mean?”

“Come on,” June said. “You have to have more of an opinion besides ‘he’s great.’”

“I think Ethan seems like a really nice guy. Totally into you, that’s obvious.”

“Yeah,” she said, smiling. “I think so.”

“So you guys are pretty serious, then?”

“Well yeah. I told you he was my boyfriend.”

“True, but so was Daniel.”

“It’s not like that at all. Ethan... he makes corny puns—constantly. He lets me pick pretty much every restaurant we go to. He read *Vanity Fair* for me.”

“You’re kidding. It’s 700 pages long. And like, 200 years old.” Lydia said, moving towards a waiter bearing an assortment of sweet and savory tartlets. Before she managed to snag a mushroom and tomato, the waiter swerved just out of reach.

“I didn’t even ask him to—I just mentioned it was my favorite book once, and a week later he sat down at the table, looking all serious concerned, and said—‘Okay, I feel weird. I can’t decide if Becky is awesome or if I’m a terrible person for liking her.’ For a second I didn’t know who he was talking about.”

“Shit.” Lydia replied, hesitantly impressed. “But what about when you have to go back to school?”

“I don’t know, we’ll figure it out.”

“Okay. Maybe don’t get too attached, you know? Just because of the distance and everything.”

“Okay,” June repeated, frustrated. After pulling her phone out of her purse, she opened Twitter and began to scroll.

Lydia frowned. “Sorry. That wasn’t cool.”

“Not really,” June said, placing her phone face down on the white tablecloth. “He’s a really wonderful guy. I don’t know why you don’t believe me.”

“Of course I believe you! I’m glad he’s goofy and talkative and everything.”

“Mmm hmm.”

“And voluntarily reads Victorian novels—I still can’t get over that.” Lydia added, bumping her sister with her shoulder. “Nice work.”

“Sorry,” June said, her frown disappearing. “He’s taken!”

Throughout the rest of the hour, Ethan was continually whisked away to various relatives, friends, or distant unknowns who—to his knowledge—could easily belong to either category. June and Lydia grabbed a few more appetizers, chit-chatted with Sophia and Greg, and gossiped about the rest of June’s group from high school. Precisely one hour after arriving at the restaurant, the staff opened up the sliding doors to reveal a path—lined with seemingly endless strings

of lights on either side—leading up to an enormous white tent on the lawn. June took one last sip of her G&T, pulling Lydia into the stream of guests funneling outside.

“Come on!” She said, nearly having to shout above the crowd. “What are you waiting for?”

## Chapter Six

*Dammit.* Jack had really hoped to see the mountain while he was here.

Tess had gone *on and on* about how “spectacular” it was while he had packed, her voice increasing in volume with each detail she provided to her indifferent audience. Elgar’s Cello Concerto had played on his speakers across the room, and he hoped that she would finish talking before the orchestra and winds joined in on the melody—by far, the best part of the piece. But over two minutes in, her excitement overtook the crescendo of the ensemble. In the quick breaths between each of her sentences, he could hear short snippets of the section, mentally resolving to rewind and listen again after she left. But today, despite the bright sunshine overhead, a distant cloud layer had chosen to roll in and obscure his view.

So after staying at Kerry Park for five minutes, without a view of the mountain and surrounded by hordes of people, he decided to find another lookout; somewhere further away. After a few minutes of searching online and a quick Uber ride, Jack found himself at Gas Works Park. Before all of this, between lunch and sunset, Jack had spent the day wandering around the city. For no specific reason, he had no strong desire to visit the Space Needle; but feeling obligated, he went nonetheless. Upon arrival, the line wrapped back and forth, zigging and zagging five or six times before the end. Standing on his tip-toes, peering over the crowd, Jack located the wait-time screen mounted above the left-most ticket booth.

CURRENT LINE FOR ELEVATOR:



## 1 HR, 4 MIN

THANK YOU FOR WAITING.

*Over an hour??* Jack thought. *There's no fucking way.* He glanced upwards, underwhelmed by the landmark. It was tall, sure. Big whoop. Unsure of where to go next, he peered around for inspiration. *Left, or Right? Left.* An atrium, or something of the sort, appeared just beside the Needle, less than a minute from where he stood behind the line. Curiously, Jack migrated in the direction of the glass building, followed by a family speaking some rapid, unrecognizable European language. *Perhaps Dutch? Portuguese?* Who could say.

*How could Mom and Tess not mention this place?* Jack thought, wandering aimlessly and hopelessly in love. Everywhere he looked, indoors and out, the glass swirled around him, towered over him, and blossomed before him. With each new piece, his sense of location faltered; he was underwater, between the stems of an enormous garden, and in the depths of Dr. Seuss's imagination.

“Dale Chihuly, one of the world's most respected contemporary artists, was born in nearby Tacoma, Washington in 1941. After studying at the University of Washington, he pursued his real passion, glassblowing, at the University of Wisconsin. From there, he...” A woman, probably in her late sixties or early seventies, led a tour behind Jack and through a large set of open doors. As she passed through, her voice trailed off with the remainder of the crowd.

Jack took the museum and gardens at his own pace. Another docent had been watching him; it was unusual to see a young man such as himself alone at the museum, without a girlfriend dragging him along and reciting misremembered

trivia. Instead, this boy was (quite clearly) genuinely fascinated by the pieces around him.

“Do you have any questions?” She said, having decided to approach him.

“Oh!” he replied, surprised by the interruption. “Nothing specific. I’ve never seen anything like this before. It’s just... really something else.”

The woman—a little older than the tour guide—laughed. “It certainly is. I’m assuming, then, that this is your first visit to the Museum?”

“It is,” Jack replied. “I live out in Boston. Too bad there’s nothing like this out there.”

The woman furrowed her brow, responding, “Give me a moment.”

Hurrying off, she removed a large art book from a small shelf in her podium at the corner of the room. Flipping through the pages, she stopped on an image of the spiked greenish-yellow spire outside. Though Jack had already seen it, he would accept her recommendation to be polite.

“This might interest you,” she said, standing beside him and pointing down at the page. “It’s in Boston.”

“It is? I thought it was outside...”

“The one outside is quite similar. Yes, *this* piece is located at...” she hesitated, moving her finger down the page and searching for the answer. “Ah, here it is. It’s at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.”

“The MFA? Really?”

“Yes, it says in the Ruth and Carl J. Shapiro Family Courtyard.” She responded, closing the book. “I hope that helps.”

“It does,” Jack responded, looking through the window at the piece outside. “Thank you.” The attendant walked back to her post, leaving him in his thoughts.

When Chris had come up to Boston for this past February, Jack hadn’t been able to meet him and Mia until the late afternoon. Chris was still out of a job, and Mia had the day off. While waiting for him, they had gone to the museum and reported rave reviews over dinner that evening. The ancient Greek statues had been his brother’s favorite, and the Impressionism wing was Mia’s. She had proposed they revisit the museum on a few separate occasions since then, but something had always come up. Standing in Seattle, he wondered if his brother and girlfriend—or, ex-girlfriend, for that matter—had seen the same view a few months earlier. Maybe they had. He took a picture, and continued down the corridor.

A few hours later, Jack decided to take a seat on a dirty concrete bench at Gas Works Park. Once he had arrived, the venue’s name became immediately clear. Before him, a view of the Seattle skyline shone with a golden-rosy hue, while sailboats drifted across the glistening water. But behind him, surrounded by rolling hills, picnic blankets, and giggling children, was a more peculiar sight: the remains of an old gas plant. It was certainly out of order—the rusty spectacle emitted no sounds or movements—but life teemed all around it, indifferent to the industrial intrusion.

He had stared for a while, trying to figure out how the park and plant fit together, but gave up and sat down on the bench instead. The view—even without

Mt. Rainier—was perfect. As the sun met the tops of the distant buildings, a Labrador ran past him, followed by his owner. The man, sprinting down the grass, shouted, “Jeffrey! Get back here! Sit! Sit! Jeffrey!” *What a weird name for a dog*, Jack thought. Jeffrey didn’t sit; he ran around the park, in complete bliss—nearly distracting Jack from his ringing phone.

“Hello?” Jack answered, after twenty seconds of scrambling to pick it up and then take it off accidental speaker phone.

“Yes, is this Jack Perriman?”

“Speaking.”

“Hi Jack, my name is Suzanne—I’m the HR representative you met at Green Light today.”

“Oh—hello!” Jack responded, sitting up straight (as if his posture had any effect on the outcome of the conversation).

“We had a wonderful time meeting you today.”

“Thank you.”

“Of course—in fact, thank *you*. We were greatly impressed by your experience and interviews.”

Jack wasn’t sure how to respond, so he didn’t. After a short pause, Suzanne continued. “We would love to offer you the position of Business Strategy Manager.”

“Thank you!” Jack replied. “Wow—thank you.”

After chuckling, she replied, “Of course. As I said—we were very impressed. Everything you did at NEConsulting seems perfect for what you will do here. The same sorts of projects, but on a much larger scale.”

“Okay,” Jack responded. *That’s good, I think.* “By when do you need a decision?”

“How does next Friday sound? You can email it to me. Do you have the business card I gave you earlier?”

“Yes.” Jack said, opening his wallet to double-check.

“Perfect. I look forward to hearing from you! Have a nice rest of your weekend.”

“You too!” Jack replied, but Suzanne had already hung up.

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To Matt’s surprise, his mother had chosen an unfamiliar restaurant to celebrate his father’s birthday. The entire family couldn’t fit into one car, so they split into two; girls in one, and boys in the other (as the kids insisted). Beatrice drove in her car, leaving Matt, his father, and Nicholas with the rental. The streetlights around Matt’s old neighborhood shone to their own rhythm—their patterns and timing consistently inconsistent—so before Matt had driven two miles, his wife, mother, and daughters were nowhere in sight.

“Where are we going?” Nick asked, face plastered to the windows.

“Narnia,” Matt replied, eyes concentrated on the GPS.

“Daaaad,” Nick said, the pitch of his voice rising and falling. “Where are we going? *Really?*”

“Magnolia,” Alan answered, putting the boy out of his misery.

“What’s that?”

“A restaurant your Nana and I tried recently. It’s a good one.”

“Good,” Nick responded. “Cuz I’m really hungry.”

Matt drove on, following the directions off familiar neighborhood streets and onto a woodsier road. As dense forestry rose into the view overhead, the faded pink skies became less visible by the minute.

“Dad, is this right?” Matt asked.

“Yes, the restaurant used to be a small hotel out in the forest. Now it’s a formal farm-to-table restaurant, that cultivates its own ingredients from nearby. And there’s nice outdoor seating.”

“Hmm. Sounds good, I think. Hopefully the little ones can find something they like. Nick,” Matt asked a little louder so his son in the backseat could hear.

“You aren’t a picky eater, are you? Tell Papa.”

“I like everything,” Nick boasted. “Well, except for mushrooms. Or zucchini. Or tomatoes. Or coconut.”

“But otherwise, you like everything?” Alan asked.

“Yep!” Nick replied, sure of himself. “*everything*. Oh—and not blueberries. I almost forgot. Everything except tomatoes, blueberries, mushrooms, zucchini, and coconut.”

“Well I guess you won’t want the blueberry-mushroom-tomato-zucchini-coconut spaghetti, then.” Alan joked. “It’s my favorite thing on the menu.” Nick

laughed at his grandfather, then decided to practice memorizing his times tables (which was serious business and afforded no outside communication).

Matt drove on, winding through roads that curved around foliage and into the forest. Eventually the trees became so dense that they were in complete shade, struggling to know whether the sun had set.

“So tell me again about this bakery business.” Alan said, seemingly out of nowhere.

“I mean, it’s like we were saying this morning,” Matt said quietly, trying to avoid sparking his son’s interest. “Bea is finally opening up her own bakery.”

“Why?”

“Why? What do you mean, *why*?”

“Why is she doing this now?”

“Because we’ve saved enough now. It’s always been in our plan.”

“This was not in your plan—I know what.”

“Dad—what are you talking about?” Matt turned up the rear speakers, making sure Nick couldn’t listen in on the conversation.

“You should *not* give up partner. Not under any circumstance.”

“Dad,” Matt said, sighing. “I *told* you—I’m not giving it up. I’m postponing it.”

“That’s going to become the same thing. You need to reassess your priorities. Work needs to come first.”

“Are you kidding?”

“Certainly not.”

“Dad; work *cannot* come first. I’m putting my family first.”

“No. You’re putting frivolity first. If you become partner now, you’ll have a higher salary sooner, and will be able better support your family.”

“I *am* supporting my family. I’m supporting Beatrice, and what she wants. I’m supporting the kids, and what they need.”

“Matthew, you know that is not what I mean. I’m sure Beatrice would be wonderfully happy opening up her little shop. She is quite talented—your mother scolded me for how many scones I ate at your house last visit.” Alan glanced over at his son, whose eyes were narrowed at the road. “I’m just saying... I’ve been a partner. I’ve promoted upwards of, I don’t know, probably twenty people to partner at our firm. I know the environment. I know how difficult it is to postpone and actually receive the job when you want it. I know how the existing partners will think of you. You need to take the job while it’s being offered. You’re making a mistake if you wait.”

“I don’t think I am.” Matt whispered.

“It’s the truth. You need to prioritize your career.”

“Like you did?”

“Exactly. I supported you and your mother, comfortably.”

“Dad, Mom is thrilled you finally have time to go to the movies. It took you this long to have enough time for the *movies*, for God’s sake. Not to mention how much time you had when I was younger.”

“So, what?” Alan responded coldly. “This is about me? You resent me? You hate law?”



“Dammit, Dad. No. I didn’t say that.”

“You wanted me home to tuck you in at night? Help you with your math homework? Cut orange slices for soccer games?”

“I’m just saying—you weren’t home that much. You worked constantly. And yes—Mom and I were comfortable. But I want to be home with my kids more. I *need* to be home with my kids more. And I need to help Bea out.”

“I see.” Alan said.

“Dad, do you know what I picked you up on the way here? A snow globe. I thought it would be a nice gesture. The thing is, I don’t want my kids to have a shelf of snow globes instead of memories of me being home and yes—helping them with homework and making orange slices.”

“So, what? You’re quitting?”

“*No*, I’ve told you this I-don’t-even-know how many times now. I’m still working, I’m leaving early two or three days a week to pick up the kids and work at home. I talked to the partners—they *fully* support this. They were going to make me partner next year, but I asked them to hold off for five years. They agreed to this, and to raise my salary more than a new partner’s worth when I join to partially make up for whatever opportunity cost I’m “losing” (he said with air quotes) for staying home now.”

“I cannot believe I raised you to be so naïve.”

“I’m not naïve. I’m consciously making this choice, whether you like it or not.” With this, Matt quickly turned the radio up in the front of the car to match the backseat.

“Dad!” Nick shouted above the ‘80s rock station. Matt didn’t particularly enjoy ‘80s rock, but it had been the first thing on. “Too loud!” Matt quickly turned both volumes down.

“Sorry, kiddo!”

“What were you and Papa talking about? I couldn’t really hear you.”

“The snow globe your father got me” Alan answered.

“I helped pick it out!” Nick shouted, afraid of being left out.

“Oh—my mistake! Thank you, Nicholas. What a nice gesture and gift. I love it.”

Matt drove on, seething and silent. He missed the restaurant’s turnoff, and had to reverse the car down the road too narrow to turn around. After parking in the first available spot, he slammed his door and helped Nick out from the backseat. Looking up from above the car roof, he located Beatrice, Lily, Nora, and Nathalie standing underneath an awning. Holding his son’s hand, he made his way to the others as quickly as possible, widening his eyes when he met Beatrice’s glance.

“I’m ready to go home,” he whispered, kissing his wife on the cheek. She furrowed her brow, which always flared her nostrils. He wasn’t sure she knew it had that effect. Only a moment later he added, “it’s fine, I’ll tell you about it later.”

“Are they ready for us?” Alan asked, approaching the group and adjusting his jacket.

“Now that we’re all here,” Lily replied. “But I wanted to make sure we were all okay with sitting outside.”

“Outside?” said Matt. Sure enough, behind his mother and around the corner of the main building, a few large picnic tables sat in a small space of cleared-out woods. Lights hung in the branches of the trees, and lanterns hung from posts and acted as centerpieces. The table, covered in a white tablecloth, would easily fit all seven of them.

“Will we be warm enough?” Asked Beatrice.

“Oh, sure we will—it’s a nice night anyways, but they’ll bring us some patio heaters, of course.”

“Of course.” Beatrice repeated, mumbling softly. Matt followed the waitress first, followed by his mother, then all three children, Alan, and eventually Beatrice. Much to her relief, the last remaining empty chair rested between her husband and his father—who were each delighted to see the empty seat filled.

Less than a minute after sitting down, a young woman with bright and buoyant curly red hair placed a menu in front of each guest.

“Hello folks, my name is Madeleine, and I’ll be your server this evening. Do you have any idea what sort of drinks or appetizers you’d like?”

“I think we need another minute,” Matt replied. He managed to squeeze out half of a thank-you before the waitress walked away.

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“And so,” Ethan said, wiping a tear from his eye along with the rest of his audience, “let’s all raise a glass to the Bride and Groom!” Over the symphony of

cheers and applause, two hundred champagne flutes rose high into the air. In response, the crowd shouted, “To the Bride and Groom!”

Lydia looked to her sister as she took a sip of champagne, peering over the rim of her glass. Two thumbs up and smiling, June turned her attention away from Ethan and back towards her sister.

“Damn.” June said.

“I’ll admit—I didn’t think Bio majors could write,” Lydia laughed. As waiters emerged from the enormous tent’s back entrance, the guests’ chatter grew resumed; they had been silent since Ethan stood up from his chair and began his speech almost ten minutes earlier. “Ooh—I wonder what we’re having for dinner... I marked us both for chicken.”

Following her sister’s eyeline, June replied, “This isn’t dinner, it’s the salad course; spinach, goat cheese, and candied walnuts with an orange-champagne vinaigrette. Dinner is lemon-rosemary chicken, risotto with thyme and parmesan, and mixed roasted vegetables.”

Lydia stared down the closest waiter, who was still five tables away. “You can see that?”

“What? Oh,” June said, chuckling. “No, no, no, I asked Grace the other day.”

“You asked Grace?”

“Yeah I had dinner at her and Tom’s apartment with Ethan and last... Friday? Saturday? I don’t remember. Oh and with Amy, too.”

“Amy?”

“Yeah, she’s a bridesmaid. She said she knew you from high school.”

Lydia did know Amy from high school. They were never particularly close, and she didn’t recall Grace being particularly close with her either.

“Oh yeah, I thought I recognized her.”

“I think she dyed her hair,” June said. “She used to be a brunette.”

“Yeah, she was in US History or Econ or something with me. Do you know her well?”

“Not really.”

“Have you been hanging out with Tom and Grace a lot?”

“I guess so. Tom and Ethan are really close, and of course Grace tags along,”

“Of course,” Lydia mumbled.

“You know you should really give her another chance. She’s really nice.”

“She was.”

“I call bullshit on that, but we can move on.”

“Okay,” Lydia said, leaning to the left as a waiter placed a salad plate onto her placemat. “Wait,” she added. The waiter paused, asking if she was vegan and wanted a salad without cheese. “No, sorry. The salad’s great. Thank you.” This time, she waited until he had walked away. “Were you supposed to be Ethan’s date?”

“No, you signed me up to come with you before we started dating.”

“No I know, but... if I hadn’t, would you be here anyways?”

“I guess so,” She said, stabbing a candied nut with her fork. “Who cares?”

“Not me,” Lydia said. “I was just curious.” As if on cue, Ethan approached their table.

“Hey! Can I join you ladies?” he asked.

“Shouldn’t you sit with your parents and, oh, I don’t know, the bride and groom?” June teased. “You are the Best Man, after all.”

“Nah,” he replied. They’re all about to start making their rounds. I want to eat.”

“Oh I see,” said June. “This salad is really worth the table in the back.”

“Yeah, that’s pretty much it,” he replied, poking June in the side. “So, Lydia.” He added, pulling over a nearby empty seat. “You work with press releases and speeches and stuff like that. How would you rate my toast?”

“Hmmm,” she said, playing along. “Sincere, check. Funny, check. Tasteful, check. Emotional, check. I’d say...” she paused, pointing to June.

“What?”

“You’re supposed to do a drumroll!”

“How was I supposed to know that?”

“You just were!” Rolling her eyes, June tapped her fingers on the edge of the table.

“I’d say,” Lydia repeated, waiting until she was satisfied with the build-up. “Ten out ten!”

“Not an eleven?” Tom asked. “Damn.”

“Well, you tried. Better luck next time,” June added.

As the evening progressed, the three of them worked their way through each course. And despite unwarranted expectations, Ethan was beginning to grow on Lydia. They even bonded over their mutual dislike of chocolate when Ethan gushed over how excellent the cake would be. And he was right; Lydia wished she could've snagged a second slice of the vanilla bean sponge with lemon mousse, fresh strawberries, and white chocolate buttercream (in other words, heaven).

And then there was the first dance; not Ed Sheeran—thank God. They avoided that cliché. In fact, Lydia didn't recognize the song at all. It was slow and soft-spoken, played only on strings and sung only by one woman. When Tom and Grace swayed together, back and forth, Lydia wondered if they had forgotten the rest of the world.

*She* hadn't, though. Trying not to get caught, she kept sneaking glances at her sister and her new beau. She had brought her chair just beside his, and leaned against him while they watched the scene unfold before them. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed her younger sister turn her head back to Ethan and kiss him, both smiling afterwards and resuming their near-cuddle. Eventually, June noticed Lydia glancing in her direction.

"What's up?" she asked softly, trying not to distract from the dance.

"Nothing, just zoned out a bit." Lydia said. "Do you know this song?"

"Yeah—you don't? It's 'Daydreams' by... Ethan, who's it by?"

"Imogen August." he replied.

"Yes—that's it." June said. "I'll send it to you later."

“Thanks,” said Lydia.

After a rather lengthy two and a half minutes, the song concluded. As the band transitioned into a midtempo swing, they invited the guests onto the dance floor. Lydia quickly recognized this one. She had seen *When Harry Met Sally* enough times to know “It Had To Be You” after the first four bars. June and Ethan hopped up, but Lydia said she would stay, maybe grab another slice of cake, and join them in a bit. *And, she thought, this is a weird song to dance to alone.*

“No, save room. There’s gonna be a dessert bar later with sugar cookies—that have T&G initials in icing calligraphy—and I-don’t-remember what else.”

“Alright, alright,” she said, zipping her clutch and moving it from the tabletop to her seat for safekeeping. After looking back longingly towards the remnants of the cake, she stood and shuffled her feet reluctantly towards the rest of the crowd.



## Chapter Seven

After hanging up the phone, Jack left the park, no longer feeling drawn to its views. Instead, he found a local bus to return him to the city's urban center. Much to his delight, the bus was nowhere close to full; but after the second stop, an older woman chose to sit directly beside him. She talked, not really with him, but *at* him, until he exited the vehicle three stops early. If she had wanted to discuss her job, or her grandchildren, or the city, he would have obliged. But she wanted to know about him—*his* job, *his* family, why *he* was in the city. And so he left.

Three stops, however, turned out to be much further from the hotel than he had realized. He checked Google Maps; he was a twelve-minute walk away. Because the air was still rather warm, he decided to take the trek through the city.

The offer had been bouncing around his head since its arrival. He had received an email shortly after the call, laying down any details forgotten or forgone by the woman from HR. Business Strategy Manager. It was the role he wanted. Yes, it was definitely the sort of position he was looking for. Helping a firm grow and develop. There was no issue—he was almost certain of it.

Turning down a different street, the sidewalks became suddenly alive with bright colors, loud voices, and clinking beers; all floating over a dampened and unfamiliar melody. As Jack walked along, he took in the faces of the people he passed. A group of hipster twenty-somethings talking very seriously over wine. One wore enormous glasses and a frumpy brown sweater. A group of professionals in suits and skirts and blazers, definitely a few drinks in. A group

singing “Happy Birthday” to a young woman with a bright red dress, sipping lattes and finishing sprinkled cupcakes. A group of (mostly) men shouting at screens over a close slide onto third base. And as he walked on, the music grew louder.

After two, maybe three minutes of walking, he found its source. The building—though brick—had been painted over with a mural composed of the brightest versions of every color, interrupted by open windows, and swirling into a mess of abstraction. The door, however, was a simple black. And because he had nothing better to do, Jack opened it.

The first thing he noticed was the band. Playing on the opposite side of the room, the group consisted of a singer, bass, guitar, keys, and drums. It wasn’t exactly jazz that they were playing; but it wasn’t R&B or hip-hop either... something in between the styles, syncopated with a deep groove. Fanned around the small ensemble sat about twenty or so small tables, each with two chairs and small lights. But instead of candles, or something he would imagine at a usual jazz club, they were LED orbs, each glowing a different vibrant hue. As a couple stumbled in behind him, he moved out of their way and approached the bar to his left.

“Hey,” said the bartender behind the counter. “What’ll you have?”

“Umm,” Jack replied, scanning the menu, recognizing nothing. Everything must have been local.

“What do you normally like?”

“IPA. Or a cider.”

“The Night Owl is really good,” she supplied.

“Alright,” Jack replied. “Why not? I’ll go with that, and…” he looked over the remainder of the list. “the sweet potato fries.”

“That’ll be \$12.45.”

He handed over his card, received his drink and plate, and found a seat somewhere in the sea of tables and chairs. The band had just begun a new song, something to which the audience was compelled to move; some with their feet, others drumming on armrests, and the rest bobbing their heads or swaying their bodies to the beat. No one talked, except for a few along the perimeter—the rest sat in comfortable silence, absorbing the music that flowed through the room.

As Jack listened, he envisioned life in Seattle. He saw himself arriving at Green Light each morning, straightening his suit jacket in the elevator ride. He’d say hello to Suzanne and Mr. Winterbottom in the elevator. He’d chat up the receptionist until she warmed up to him. He’d work alongside the 146 members of the business development team, parallel to 14 other managers. He’d receive a hefty paycheck, and probably get his own apartment at this point; his first move after coming to Boston five years ago. He’d never really been much of a hiker, but that was more of an option in Seattle than it had ever been out East. He’d come here or check out the restaurants down the street on weekends. Maybe even bring a date. He’d never sought out this kind of music before. Listening, he continued to ponder this future.

His phone buzzed, an email notification interrupting his trance. “Hate long lines? Check in online for your upcoming flight by clicking the link below!” He

glanced up at the top of the screen—it wasn't as late as it felt, but it was time that he get going. He stood up between songs, not wanting to disturb the crowd, and pulled his jacket off the back of the chair. After waving a thank-you to the bartender, he pushed open the door.

After the hour-long detour, he re-routed his way to the hotel. It was now a ten-minute walk—he hadn't gotten very far down the busy street. Now that it was later in the night, the air had become much cooler, and he threw his jacket over his goosebumped arms. Rather than pop in his headphones, Jack let the sounds of the city score his walk back to the hotel as he continued his contemplation.

He could stay at NEConsulting. Or he could leave. He could find places to hike all around New England, if he wanted to. He'd never really looked for this kind of bar in Boston, but he could start searching. Come to think of it, he couldn't remember the last time he saw live music. No, that wasn't true. It was last December, when Aiden, Tess, and Mia finally agreed to come to the Boston Symphony Orchestra because they were performing the Nutcracker for the holidays.

Nine minutes. He wondered what Chris would think about the offer. Jack knew he shouldn't take his brother's professional opinions into high consideration, but he cared nonetheless. Despite Chris's follies, he had made the right decisions at one point or another. He went to Wharton. He graduated with honors. Harriet agreed to his proposal. Somewhere, deeper now than before, Chris did have a compass that pointed him in the right direction.

Eight minutes. Turn left. He'd have to finish up with this client—Current, a corporate communications software company in Fairfield—before he could take a new job. But if he wanted to quit as soon as possible, he'd have to give his two-week notice by Monday.

Seven minutes. He stopped at a rather long red light, waiting for the green hand to let him cross the street. But as soon as it turned, an ambulance came barreling down the street, forcing him to miss this light and wait for the next one.

Six minutes. All of his connections were in Boston. Aiden, Tess, Isabelle, Renee, Dev, and plenty of others from Wharton or undergrad at Princeton. Even the ones that had become disconnected were still in the city. And his family wasn't far; Boston was surely closer to Virginia than Seattle.

Five minutes. Should he grab a tea from the Starbucks next door to his hotel? He knew he was in Seattle, but tea sounded better than coffee at the moment. Wait, no—he had an extra tea bag in his backpack. He could use the kettle in his room, make a cup of the Trader Joe's Bedtime Tea, crawl into bed, and find something to watch on his laptop.

Four minutes. His mother wasn't much help. "That's nice. Didn't know you were interested in that sort of thing." Of course he was interested in strategy—that's what his concentration was at Wharton. He fondly recalled his work with the start-ups that won the Idea-Thon each year, helping them develop financial plans and marketing strategies and hiring tactics. NEConsulting was too big. Too corporate. He was juggling too many plates there.

Three minutes. Turn right. Damn construction; he had to go an extra block to cross the street. He was surprised that, although the construction had subsided for the night, the barriers remained on the sidewalk.

Two minutes. He knew what Aiden would say. “Take the fucking job, Jack. You need a new opportunity. You need to get out of the house. You need to mingle. You need to actively love your job.” None of that would be false. In Seattle, he could get out of the house and mingle. He could love Green Light. It was certainly a new opportunity.

One minute. What would Mia think? Would she be proud of him? Angry, for not getting his shit together sooner? But more likely, would she even know? Or if she did, would she say anything? Would she care?

Before he could imagine her reaction, Jack arrived back at the hotel, ready to sleep off his concerns—at least for the moment.

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Using the tired and whining children as an excuse, Matt, Beatrice, and the kids took their rental car back to the house, tactfully apart from his parents. Nathalie and Nick fell asleep on the drive home, while Nora had already begun drifting off at the table. On the road home, and only after all three children were asleep, Matt brought up his father’s reaction.

“That’s ridiculous,” Beatrice responded. “You know your partners better than he does. Maybe everyone he works with is old-fashioned. Almost everyone at your firm is—frankly—much younger than your dad and his partners.”

“I know,” said Matt. “It makes me worry a little, though—knowing that my Dad has been so successful. He knows what he’s talking about, in law.”

After stopping at a light, Beatrice replied, “Of course he does. But maybe he knows what he’s talking about in his own context, and not in yours.”

“Probably,” Matt added, combing his fingers through his hair and readjusting his seatbelt. Beatrice thought he’d continue, but he did not.

“Do *you* think the partners will back out?” she asked.

“No. I had the meeting with Teresa, Georgia, Henry, and Michael. They were clear about the 5-year deal.”

“And they’re all trustworthy—right?”

“Absolutely. I’ve been with them all for... how long have I been at Anderson and Lowe?”

“Eight years, I think?”

“Well, for however many years I’ve been there. I trust them.”

“So you have nothing to question,” Beatrice said. “Apparently I do, however.”

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s probably nothing. Just something your mom said.”

“What? My mom loves you.”

Beatrice scoffed. “She doesn’t, but—”

“Bea, don’t be ridiculous—of course she loves you.”

“I think she loves me out of obligation, but I don’t think she *likes* me.”

“You’ve been family for over a decade.”

“Haven’t you noticed how she talks to me? It’s like she *enjoys* pointing out everywhere I go wrong. She likes to... one-up me. All the time.”

“I think you’re reading into things,” Matt protested.

“I’m pretty sure I’m not. When we were at the park today, when you and the kids and your dad ran ahead to the bridge, she pulled me aside and basically told me if I opened the bakery I wasn’t being a good enough mom.”

“What?” Matt asked, a little too loudly. Nathalie stirred, turning in her seat, but didn’t open her eyes.

Whispering, he repeated himself. “What?”

“Yeah,” Beatrice said, proceeding to recap her earlier conversation with Lily.

“Dammit.” Matt said quietly in response, staring on the road ahead of them. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not. I’ll talk to her about it.”

“You’ll just make things worse—just let it be and let her accept things as they are and move on.”

“It’s already taken too long for that to happen, and—wait. Also. Just so we don’t move past it—you are *not* being selfish. You know that, right?”

“Yeah,” she responded.

“Don’t just *say* yeah. You need to *know* that you aren’t being selfish.”



Beatrice took a deep breath, evaluating the situation internally before speaking. “I know I’m not. It just sucks to have someone think that. And not just anyone. Your mom, of all people. But I know I’m not.”

“Good.”

“It might not even matter. We might not even get the shop.”

“So?”

“What do you mean, ‘so’? We need a storefront.”

“There are endless storefronts.”

“Matt, I usually appreciate the positivity, but let’s keep it grounded, please. There aren’t endless storefronts. Not in our price range, that are close, that get foot traffic. It took us *months* to find this one.”

“I know,” he said solemnly. “Sorry.”

“Ugh,” Beatrice said, frustrated. “Don’t feel bad. There’s no reason for you to be sorry. I love your attitude. This whole visit is just stressing me out.”

“Me too,” Matt replied, placing his hand on his wife’s shoulder. After pulling into Matt’s parents’ driveway, she put the car in park. “One more night. Then we’ll go home and figure everything out. Actually—we’ve already figured it all out. We shouldn’t let my parents convince us otherwise.”

“I know they mean well,” Beatrice said. “Your mom wants the best for you and the kids, and your dad knows his shit—I mean, he’s been in law for forty years. I love them, I do. I don’t want you to think that I hate them or anything. Because I don’t.”

“Of course I know you don’t!”

“Okay good.” Beatrice said, smiling. She then pulled the key out of the car, but remained still. “Do we have to go inside?”

Matt laughed, opening his door and stepping out onto the pavement. “I’m afraid so.”

“What if I just sit here for one more minute?”

“Nope, sorry!” He opened the door to the backseat, gently waking the kids. “Hey guys,” he said softly. “We’re back at Nana and Papa’s house. It’s time to wake up and get ready for bed!”

After twenty minutes of refusals (I’m not going to brush my teeth! Not those pajamas! I don’t want to sleep in that bed!), Beatrice plugged a moon-shaped nightlight into the socket beside the dresser and closed the door to the kids’ room. Matt stood behind her, dressed in new sweatpants and an old “Yosemite ROCKS!” t-shirt, rubbing his tired eyes.

“Are you going to bed?” she asked.

“No, I should talk to my parents.”

“Tonight? Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, then I’m coming too.”

“You don’t have to, you should just get some sleep.” He yawned.

“Please—of course I’m coming.”

“Okay, okay. Get your game face on, then. Let’s do this.” Matt lead Beatrice down the hallway and into the living room. His parents sat on one of the

leather couches, where his mother watched “The Tonight Show” and his father flipped the page of a leather-bound book.

“Are the kids down?” Lily asked, eyes still on the television screen.

“Yeah,” Matt answered. “Almost couldn’t get Nora into pajamas but we managed in the end.”

“Good, good,” she replied, distracted by the monologue. “So are you going to bed?”

“Not quite yet, Actually, could we talk with you both for a minute?” Beatrice asked.

“About what?” said Alan, putting his book down onto the coffee table, marking his page with the sewn-in bookmark, and (eventually) glancing up at her.

“The bakery,” Matt responded, sitting down on the couch across from his parents. Beatrice joined him in the silence that followed.

“I’m not sure that’s really necessary,” said Alan. “What about it?”

“I thought we went over all that this morning,” said Lily. “Was there more?”

“It *is* necessary,” Beatrice replied, pushing her non-confrontational nature as far down as she possibly could.

“Alright then,” Lily said, pausing the television. “What’s the matter?”

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The evening had drawn on much longer than Lydia expected. She had danced, had sung along, had taken off her heels, and had thrown confetti on the

bride and groom as they made their exit in a light blue vintage car—what kind? She didn't know. Lydia's not a car person.

At long last, the music subsided and the guests made their way to the parking lot to drive or catch rides home.

“You sure you don't want to catch a ride with us?” Ethan offered, walking through the lawn to the sidewalk alongside June and Lydia. “Your house is on our way home.”

“No, no,” June said. “We don't want to impose upon your family, especially tonight. We're just gonna catch an Uber home.”

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“Yes, oh my gosh—it's no trouble at *all*,” she insisted. He said his goodbyes, promised to text June in the morning, and left to meet up with the group of random relatives staying at his house. The sisters sat on the curb with imperfect hair and makeup, too tired to remain upright as they waited for the car to arrive.

“Did you see Ethan introduce me to his grandma?” June asked, tightening the strap of her left heel. The right shoe was still on the ground beside her, waiting to be reinstated.

“Yeah,” Lydia replied, tying her hair into a ponytail. “That was sweet.”

“That definitely seems like a good sign. Do you think so?”

“Probably.” said Lydia plainly.

“Alright—what's the matter with you?”

“Huh? Nothing. I'm tired.”

“No, you’ve been snippy all night.”

“No I haven’t,” Lydia replied, watching a random couple walked by, both stumbling a little.

“Yes, you have. You’ve been judgmental about me and Ethan ever since I brought him up.”

“I like Ethan.”

“Don’t bullshit me.”

It wasn’t bullshit, but it wasn’t the whole truth, either.

“Okay, fine. I didn’t think you wanted to stay here. I thought you were happy to get out of Seattle.”

“Who said I was staying here?”

“I mean, Ethan’s life is clearly here—not just his family, but he obviously has the best chances of getting into med school here too.”

“So?”

“So... Come on, June. You don’t want to be stuck here like Grace.”

“First of all, that weird pity for Grace is all yours, not mine. You need to get over your whole stupid high school grudge against her. Sure, Grace was a shitty friend when she was 18. Who even cares anymore? Get over it—you’re 25. Second of all, Ethan is not Tom. I am not Grace. Third of all—”

“Oh my God, there’s a *third* of all?”

“Yes, just fucking listen.”

“Okay fine.”

“Third of all, there’s nothing wrong with living here. You judge everyone who stays. What makes you any better for leaving? Why does it matter?”

“I don’t think I’m better,” Lydia protested.

“Uh huh. Sure.”

“I just think that Grace could have, I don’t know, evolved as a person, if she’d met new people living somewhere else. She would have become more independent. I want the best for you. I don’t want you to settle for—”

“I’m not settling for anything. I don’t even know where I’m gonna live after I graduate next year. I could stay in California, I could come back to Seattle, I could move to Ireland or Indonesia for all we know. So far—and let me remind you I’ve only been dating Ethan for a few months—I’m *happy*. I haven’t digressed. I haven’t backslid. He’s a major upgrade from guys like Daniel.”

“Of course he is.” Lydia received a notification—**Be ready outside, your driver is almost here!** *Stupid Uber*, she thought. *We’re already outside.*

“You need to stop projecting all of your insecurities and shit onto other people, Lydia.”

“I’m not doing that.”

“Yeah, you are. And I think you’re a little bitter partially because you’re still single. You have to stop comparing yourself to everyone else.”

“The car’s here,” Lydia said, getting up. She got in and buckled her seatbelt without another word, waiting for 4.78-star Jimmy to drive his Prius away from the tent behind them.

The drive home hadn't been an especially comfortable one. 4.78-star Jimmy drove much too quickly down the highway, slammed on his brakes much too hard, and took turns as if he was racing in the Grand Prix. But because Lydia felt badly to do otherwise, she still gave him a 5-star rating. By the time the sisters were back home, in pajamas and brushing their teeth side-by-side in the Jack-and-Jill bathroom, it was just past 1:30 in the morning.

“Do you have a makeup wipe?” Lydia asked after rinsing out her mouth. This was the first thing she'd said since their conversation on the curb thirty-four minutes earlier.

“Top drawer.” June said, mouth still full of toothpaste. She spit in the sink, filled a glass of water, swished a large sip around, and spit it back down the drain. Having been too exhausted to wash her hair (it was quite the process) she brushed through the tangled mess and began braiding it into something that would make the next morning more manageable.

“Thanks.”

“Mm-hmm,” June replied, concentrating on tying the end. After she was content with her work, she closed the drawer Lydia had left open. “Look, I'm sorry if I was being bitchy earlier.”

“It's fine,” Lydia responded. “I guess you might have been a little bit right.”

“I know,” June said. She looked at her sister, pore strip plastered to her nose, and grinned. Lydia gave her a small shove. “Hey!”

“I mean, they still seem pretty young to be getting married, but putting that aside,”

“You could be less judgey.”

Lydia pressed her lips into a flat line before responding. “Yeah, yeah, maybe I could,” she said, then popped her purple retainers into her mouth.

“Look—you’re kicking ass at work. I know that. You know that.” June said. “But you just have to be easier on other people. And on yourself.”

“I know.”

“And you could always go on Spark,” June offered, despite knowing the answer in advance.

“Gross. Absolutely not.” Lydia answered, laughing. “Nope. No way.”

“Girls!” Their mother shouted from down the hall. “It’s the middle of the night!”

“Sorry!” They shouted back, shutting the doors from their rooms into the hallway.

“So can you back down about Ethan now?” June asked.

“Yeah,” Lydia responded. “Not liking him was getting pretty difficult anyways. He really wasn’t giving me anything to go on.”

“How rude,” June chuckled. “I’ll let him know.”

“Good.” Lydia said. Though it was well into the night, she was wide awake. Instead of crawling into bed, she sat on the chair that hung from June’s ceiling, spinning around slowly and looking over the contents of her sister’s room.



“What time is your flight tomorrow?” June asked, removing her contacts. Lydia had to look away—it was a sight she hated to see.

“One, so I think that I should leave here at like, I don’t know, eleven, probably.” June wandered into the room, squinting.

“Do you see my glasses anywhere?”

Lydia glanced around—they were on her desk. She picked them up to hand them over, but first decided to try them on.

“Woah!” She said. Have you gotten *more* blind?”

“Yep,” June said, taking the pair off of her sister’s face and placing them onto her own.

“These frames are cute, though.”

“Haven’t you seen them?”

“On Snapchat, but not in person. I didn’t realize they were more of a rose-gold than a light pink.”

“Oh, yeah. They’re more metallic-y in person.”

“Yeah,” Lydia added. The swing chair was starting feel like a rocker. She was beginning to feel the time difference. Or just the fact that it was almost 2 am. Or it was just the swing chair acting like a rocker. Most likely, it was all of the above. “Alrighty then,” she said—not drunk, but almost sounding like it. “Time for bed.”

As Lydia made her way towards her own room, June shouted out, “Wait!”

“What?”

“Can you turn off my light?”

“Ugh, Lazy. Fine.”

Lydia turned the light on full-blast. “Like this?”

“Noooooo,” June groaned, pulling the covers over her head. Lydia turned the lights off the second go-around. “Like this?”

“Yes—now let me sleep!”

Lydia left her sister’s room and crawled into her own bed. After scrolling through Instagram for a few minutes, nothing was interesting, so she gave in and shut her eyes. She then counted the hours of sleep she would get, trying to leave enough time in the morning to spend with her family before they had to drop her off at the airport, but fell asleep before she finished her calculations.

## Chapter Eight

Jack's alarm did not wake him. Neither did any sunshine, for the sky was covered in clouds that morning. He had awoken an hour or so ago—he wasn't exactly sure, and hadn't picked up his phone to check. Instead, he'd spent the ambiguous time staring up at the ceiling, watching a piece of yarn dance from the air conditioning vent. Though there were six days before he needed to decide whether or not to take the leap, he could feel the deadline and its subsequent stress approaching much quicker.

*Alright, he thought, throwing back the covers. Lying here won't get me any closer to figuring it out.*

So instead, he threw on a pair of jeans, a t-shirt, his jacket, and laced up his sneakers. They were the expensive ones that Mia had gotten him for his last birthday, and looked better (as she had pointed out) than his worn-through Converse from college. Sitting on the edge of the bed, and after knotting his second shoe, he looked out the window. He had a mediocre view of the city, but if he leaned all the way to the right, he could see the water through the bottom left corner. The cars, small and packed on the streets below, moved slower than he expected—perhaps the height distorted their speed. That, or it was just traffic.

Plopping his foot back onto the floor, Jack stood up and took a lap around the room, double-checking to ensure he hadn't left anything behind. His bags were packed, and he still had Mr. Winterbottom's card in his wallet; he was good to go, but a harsh sense of uneasiness had taken over him. What if he had forgotten something? He realized, in that moment, that he'd never stayed in a

hotel room alone before. There had always been someone to triple-check his double-check.

*Whatever, he thought. I have everything I need.*

Wanting to free himself from any unnecessary time constraints, Jack decided to check out from the hotel sooner rather than later. He took the elevator down all eight floors, where the middle of “Festive Overture” sang out from the speakers above him. *What was with this city?* He wondered. *What happened to chill elevator music?*

Luckily, the ride had been a short one (don’t get Jack wrong; he loves Shostakovich. Just not this early. Not before caffeine). He rolled his suitcase over to the concierge desk, where Janet was once again manning the helm. This time, he caught her frowning at a monitor before noticing him and powering herself on.

“Hello! Checking out?”

“Yep,” he said, handing her the keycard. “Room 806.” She ran the card through a scanner, prompting a beep from the computer. “Perfect. You’re all set, Mr. Perriman. Thank you for your stay!” Before he could respond, she had already turned her attention onto another guest.

There were still a few hours before he would have to arrive at the airport, so Jack wandered down the street in search of a cup of coffee. The first shop he stumbled upon was a little hipster hole-in-the-wall, with a chalkboard propped on the sidewalk just beside the entrance. The shop’s name, **JOE SHMO**, was written in black block letters across a white wooden plank that hung above the door. There were only a few people inside; clearly regulars. Two had books, two had

laptops, and one was chatting with the barista as he made her drink. When Jack walked inside, a small bell above the door alerted the staff of his arrival; but then again, considering he was the sixth customer, the bell rendered itself essentially meaningless.

“Hey,” Jack said, approaching the counter and scanning the menu. “I’ll have a cappuccino.” As he pulled out his wallet, his phone began to ring. It was Aiden.

“Hey,” Jack answered. “What’s up?”

“What time are you getting home tonight again?”

“Ten-ish. Why?”

“Okay cool. No reason, Tess just wanted to know.”

“Big plans?”

“Well, she made me start watching *The Crown* on Friday, and while I thought I’d only last an episode or two, we’re already almost done watching the whole first season.”

Jack laughed. “My mom LOVES that show. I didn’t know you liked 20<sup>th</sup> century British history.”

“NEITHER DID I,” Aiden responded. “But, here we are. Download that shit for the plane.”

“Alright,” Jack agreed. “Oh hey, I didn’t tell you—”

“Didn’t tell me what?”

“I got the offer. For the job.”

“Dude! Congrats! TESS!” he shouted. Jack winced and pulled the phone away from his ear. “HE GOT THE JOB!”

“I knew it!” She said, her voice quieter than usual or expected. She was probably shouting from another room, rather than sitting beside Aiden and speaking softly. Tess was not a quiet person.

“Did you give your notice to NEConsulting yet?”

“I haven’t even accepted the offer yet.”

“Why the fuck not?”

“They gave me till Friday to decide.”

“Take the job! Come on! Get out of your comfort zone!”

“I don’t know man—it’s pretty comfortable here. I have a beanbag and room service and everything.”

“HA-HA,” said Tess, much louder than before. Aggressively sarcastic, as well. “HILARIOUS.”

“Jack?” The barista called. “Cappuccino for Jack?” He walked over to the counter, grabbed his drink, treading carefully as to not spill his drink and burn his hand. It wouldn’t be the first time.

“Anyways,” Jack said, returning his attention to his housemate, “I’ll land around ten, and maybe get home at like... I don’t know... 10:30. Depending on traffic.” Finding a seat at the window counter, he rolled his suitcase beside him, and sat down on the barstool.

“Sounds good,” Aiden said. “we’ll see you then.”

“AND TAKE THE JOB!” Tess added, just finishing her sentence before Jack hung up the phone.

The view out the window wasn't spectacular. He sipped the drink, which was still too hot. It burned his tongue, leaving that awful tingly feeling for the remainder of the morning. While he waited for the cappuccino to cool, Jack became a Sunday spectator. He couldn't see the Space Needle from here, just a landscape view of the bottom floors of the apartment building across the street. And so, rather than watching the sweeping sunrise over the city skyline, he watched the people that passed by instead. The normal, boring sort.

A man stumbled by first, pulling his stubborn child along with him. The child stopped, suddenly, and the man crouched down, saying something to him with a very serious look on his face. But a split second later, the little boy broke out into an enormous grin and began sprinting ahead, the father chasing along after him.

Just after they passed the revolving doors, a woman emerged from building's interior, clad in black leggings and a purple NYU tank-top, and armed with a yoga mat strapped to her back. She had headphones in, the white wires snaking from her ears to her jacket pocket, and was either talking on the phone or singing along to whatever she was listening to.

Distracted, she almost ran into an older couple walking a puggle towards their favorite park down the street. The only reason Jack could distinguish the animal from any other pug or beagle was Mia's obsession with the breed back in business school. She scoured websites of breeders and shelters, searched only for

apartments that allowed pets, and planned a list of appropriate names. She almost found one, their final semester, when—

*Stop*, he thought, interrupting himself. *This can't be healthy. You can't keep doing this to yourself.*

Taking a sip from the drink in front of him (which had finally reached a safe temperature), Jack shifted his focus from the past to the present, glancing around at the café's other customers.

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"Nathalie, why don't you slide in first?" Beatrice said, attempting to arrange her children amongst the two sides of the booth so that none of them bumped into or kicked one another.

"But then I'm squished!" she protested.

"I'll go," Lily offered.

"I want to sit next to Nana!" Nora shouted. After Lily slid down the seat, Nora followed, then Nathalie. On the other side, Nick went first, then Beatrice, then Alan. Finding little to no room on either side, Matt pulled a chair from a nearby empty table and sat on the end.

"Is anyone feeling too squished?" Beatrice asked, her shoulders squeezed between her son and her father-in-law.

"I'm good!" said Nick.

"Me too," said Alan.

"Me three!" Squealed Nora.

"Are you good?" Matt asked Beatrice in return.



“Yep! Squished, but just the right amount.” She responded, pushing Nick a little with her elbow.

“Hey folks,” an older man with an apron said, handing out menus. “Alan, Lily! Haven’t seen you in a while! How are you?”

“We’re doing great, Charlie—and your son was a big help with Alan’s knee last month.”

“Glad to hear it!” Charlie answered.

“This is *my* son,” Alan said, motioning to Matt, “and his wife, and our three grandkids!”

“Nice to meet you,” said Beatrice.

“And you as well!” Charlie answered.

“Charlie!” A woman shouted from behind the counter. “Can you come help me with this?”

“Well, duty calls,” he said, walking towards the register. “Come say bye before you leave.”

“Will do!” Alan responded.

Everyone looked over their menus, scouring the options. “Have you been coming here a lot?” Beatrice asked.

“Sort of,” Lily responded. “Charlie was Alan’s orthopedic surgeon before his son took over the practice. We’ve been coming here ever since Charlie opened up the place.”

“That’s fun,” Beatrice said.

“No it’s not,” said Nick. “Who cares about orthodontists?”

Lily laughed, placing her menu down onto the table. “Well, I’m ready.”

“Who else is ready?” Matt asked. “Raise your hands.”

All but Beatrice had their hand up in the air.

“Just order, I’ll be ready when it’s my turn.”

Shortly after, three plates of Challah French Toast, a Feta-Spinach-Tomato omelet, a slice of avocado toast (with a side of bacon, of course), and two plates of eggs benedict were passed around the table. Each member of the family devoured their first few bites, forgetting to put their forks down and continue on a conversation.

“So,” Lily asked. “Did you hear from the real estate agent this morning?”

“Uh, no.” Beatrice answered, pausing as she sliced Nora’s meal into smaller pieces. “Not yet.”

“That’s too bad,” Lily responded.

“Yes,” Alan added. “It is. You’ll let us know when you do?” The remnants from the previous night’s conversation hung in the air, still slightly sticky and uncomfortable.

“Sure,” said Matt, throwing a look towards his wife and hoping she’d catch it. “It’s all up in the air until we know anything.”

“Of course, of course,” said Lily.

“SYRUP!” Nora shouted, seemingly out of nowhere.

“What was that?” Beatrice asked, holding the dispenser in the hand furthest from her youngest daughter.

“Can I *please* have the syrup?” Nora repeated, this time with a slight attitude.

“Yes, you may!” Beatrice responded, reaching her arm across the table and handing Nora the syrup.

“...Oh, yeah. The shop. Yes, of course we’ll keep you posted.”

“Good,” Alan said. “I’m glad.”

As the lull in the conversation grew increasingly tangible, Matt wracked his brain for a new subject. This one had been going well, but he didn’t want to jinx it, especially with the kids sitting between everyone.

“So, Dad...” he started, praying for a topic to come to mind.

“...yes?”

“So besides the movies on Thursdays and dinners downtown on Tuesdays—”

“Other way around, Dear,” Lily interrupted.

“Oh, my bad. Besides movies on Tuesdays and dinners downtown on Thursdays, what other plans do you have coming up soon?”

“Well,” Alan replied. “Those, and the symphony tickets your mother just gave me, and... I’m not sure yet. We might get out of town every once in a while.”

“Really?” Lily asked, having not heard this before.

“Perhaps,” Alan replied. “Where do you want to go? We should start with long weekends; when I retire we can do the bigger trips.”

“Napa—I haven’t been since I was around 24 or 25,” Lily said.

“I’ve heard lovely things about Cambria,” Beatrice suggested. Despite their tension, she felt a sort of kinship for Lily, as she imagined what her life would be like if Matt hadn’t taken the step back from work.

“Or further,” said Alan. “like Bryce and Zion... but those may be too warm.”

As the table continued to ponder potential destinations, Matt faced the instinct to remind Beatrice that he hadn’t gone on any sort of trips like these when he was younger. His father had always been too busy. But as he glanced at the faces of those around him, Matt decided not to say anything. Progress was being made, and the past couldn’t be altered.

“You could come out to Boston,” he suggested. His wife and parents looked at him, surprised he had suddenly decided to join the conversation.

“It’s a little far for a weekend, don’t you think?”

Matt laughed. “Mom, that is *exactly* this trip for us.”

“Oh, I suppose it is.” She laughed. “I guess it’s doable then.”

“You could come in a few months or so; when—well, assuming we get the space—when the bakery opens.” This time, all eyes were diverted from Matt and placed onto Beatrice’s fearful face.

“You know,” Lily said. *Oh God*, Beatrice thought. *Here we go*. “I think that sounds like an excellent idea. Don’t you think so, Alan?”

“Oh yes; sure; definitely.”

“Great,” Matt added, trying to hide his disbelief.

“Oh you know what you need to do—” Lily said, then paused. She had caught herself. “That is, if you think it’s a good idea...”

“What?” Beatrice asked, wearily open to her mother-in-law’s opinions.

“Well, I think it would be nice if—assuming you get this place, but if not, assuming you get another place—you could have some kind of opening party. You know, lots of balloons outside, maybe offer sales for the day or weekend, maybe have some activities or games for kids in the neighborhood to do...”

“Lily,” Beatrice said, “That would be *great!*”

“I’m glad you think so!” Lily replied, smiling through her bite of omelet. “You call me when you’re close to the date. I can help find you the right kind of vendors and decoration; actually, I’ll just start making a list of everything you need, and every time I think of something I can just keep adding to—”

“Aah!” Matt shouted. “It’s ten thirty! We need to get going.”

“Oh!” Lily replied, dazed from being cut off mid-thought.

“Nooo, I don’t wanna go!” Nick whined. “We just got here.”

“Sorry bud,” Alan replied. “We’ll see you soon enough.”

Matt rushed to the register and paid the bill; avoiding the time lost waiting for the check to be delivered. As he was rung up, Beatrice, Alan, and Lily wrangled the kids into the car.

“Bye-bye Papa!” Nora shouted. “Bye-bye Nana!”

“Bye!” squealed Nathalie.

“See you later, crocodile!” Nick added. The adults chuckled, Matt hugging his mother while Beatrice hugged Alan, before they traded partners in their round of farewells.

“Love you guys,” Matt said, stepping into the passenger seat.

“Love you, Dear!” Lily replied.

“And happy birthday, Alan!”

“Thank you, Beatrice. You’re too kind. Oh—and don’t forget to let us know when you hear back from the realtor.”

“Will do!” She said, pulling away from the spot. As she was already turned to face the backseat, she whispered, “Wave to Nana and Papa!”

As the car drove off, six little hands shook frantically in the wind, accompanied by excitable voices and unspoken relief from all adult parties involved.

Except, four minutes into the drive, Nathalie announced that she had left her backpack on the floor of the booth.

“Why did you bring it into the diner in the first place?” Lily asked, throwing on her turn signal.

“I dunno. I thought I might need something.”

Taking a long, deep breath, she circled the car around, driving back to retrieve the forgotten item.

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“Lydia, you’re gonna have to get out of the car pretty soon here,” her father said. He had parked it in the Denny’s parking lot across the street from the airport, where the family waited until the last moment before Lydia had to leave.

“Uuuggghh,” she replied. “Do I *have* to?”

“Not yet,” June said, eyes glued to her screen. “We still have ten more minutes. It’s only 11:10.” As she scrolled through the endless stream of edited, cropped, and cheesily-captioned pictures on her Instagram feed, she received a notification: **You’ve been tagged in a post**. Beside the sentence was a button that read “View,” which—of course—she promptly clicked. It was a picture of her and Ethan dancing in the tent. A portion of Lydia had been cropped off, but—by leaning much closer to June than appreciated—Lydia could still clearly identify herself in the picture. She wondered who had taken it; maybe one of the other groomsmen, or bridesmaids. June’s dress was perfectly flared mid-spin, and the goofy grin on Ethan’s face was borderline ridiculous. Leaning even closer, Lydia double-tapped the picture on her sister’s phone. A large heart appeared on the screen, disappearing a moment later.

“Wait—you’re still pre-check, right?” Their mother asked.

“Yeah,” Lydia replied, returning to her normal position in the seat. “Wait—why? Does it expire?”

“I would assume so,” said her father. “But I’m actually not sure. You should look into that while you’re waiting at the gate.”

“Will do,” Lydia responded.

“I don’t know why you always get like this when you have to fly back,” her mother continued. “This” referred to Lydia’s current emotional state; fragile, quiet, and close to tears. “You’ve done this trip...let’s see... every August, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Spring Break for four years... so that’s...”

“Mom, you don’t need to do the math,” June protested.

“Yes I do, I’ve already started. Where was I? Oh, yes... four trips times four years, so that’s sixteen, plus maybe, oh, I don’t know 2 or so times a year for the last three years, so that’s...”

“22,” their father interrupted. “and I thought you loved Boston,” he added.

“I do!” she responded, eyes becoming misty. *Not this time—come on.* “But it’s nice to come home every once in a while and just hang out with you guys. I miss this.”

“Me too, Honey,” her mom responded, getting misty-eyed herself. “BUT! You have a *fabulous* life out in Boston; *fabulous* friends, a *fabulous* job, and a *fabulous* apartment,”

“For being 25,” June added, scoffing. “If I were you, I could use a bigger closet.”

Lydia rolled her eyes. Every time she was home, she was transported back in time. She didn’t miss being 16—not by any means. But there was something soothing about escaping adulthood, even only for a weekend.

“So, how was the wedding? You girls haven’t mentioned it yet.” They really hadn’t had the time. Though she and June had intended on getting out of bed at a reasonable hour, giving themselves plenty of time to go for a run and



cook everyone some eggs and bacon, the exhausted sisters slept through all six of their combined alarms. By the time they came downstairs, they only had an hour before it was time to leave. Luckily, their mother had left a batch of oatmeal sitting on the stove. The remainder of the morning was extraordinarily typical; not worthy of an extensive recap.

“It was good,” Lydia replied. “the ceremony was lovely, and *oh my God*—Grace’s dress.”

“What was it? What did it look like?”

“A-line, lace, strapless, with a sweetheart neckline. Something between bright white and cream.”

“Oh wow,” their mother replied.

“Ethan and I managed to drag Lydia onto the dance floor,” June proudly announced.

“Did you really?” Their mother responded, turning around in the passenger seat to face her daughters.

“Don’t sound so surprised!” Lydia exclaimed.

“I like Ethan,” their father added. “He’s a good kid.”

“Yeah,” Lydia responded. “I think so too.”

“Good!” June said.

“Oh shoot,” Lydia said, frantically unzipping her bag and rifling through its contents. “My retainer—I think I left it on the bathroom counter, dang it.”

“I’ll just ship it to you,” their mom said. “Is there anything else you want me to throw in the box?”

“Umm... I don’t think so. I’ll let you know if I think of anything by tomorrow, though.”

“Are you sure? You know what—I saw that the cutest stationary at Daiso last time I was there. Little llama sticky notes, and planner stickers, and washi tape with little roses on it. I’ll add those.”

“You know I can’t turn down paper supplies,” Lydia said.

“Oh! They also had these light pink—or light yellow, but I liked the pink better—reusable containers. I thought they’d be good for bringing lunch to work. Or even organizing your desk drawers or something.”

“Those sound perfect, Mom, thanks! Dad—how much time now?”

“A few minutes,” he replied.

“Eeegghh,” Lydia replied, sliding down her seat. “I don’t know why I never get used to this.”

“Because you’re a first-born Velcro-child,” her father said, laughing.

“Hey!”

“It’s true,” said June. “Actually, I was gonna ask you—can I come visit before my quarter starts?”

“Look who’s the Velcro-child now!”

“Well, I don’t have to,” June teased.

“No! I want you to! When does your internship end?”

“Late August—I think it was designed for semester students, so I pretty much have a whole month between finishing it up and school starting in the fall.”

“Oh perfect,” Lydia said. “Yay! It’s been a while since you came out to Boston.”

“I know!” June said, then gasped. “Do you remember that day at the Common when—”

“Girls, I hate to interrupt this, but it’s 11:20...”

Lydia took a deep breath. “Oooookaaayyyyyy, fine... if I must.”

“So dramatic,” June mumbled. Their father pulled out of the parking spot, and less than five minutes later, he parked in the “do not park” zone in front of the JetBlue door at the terminal.

“June, can you grab your sister’s suitcase out of the trunk?”

“What? She’s perfectly capable of doing it herself.”

“Pleeeeaase?” Lydia replied.

“Ugh. Fine.” The car’s four doors opened simultaneously, each person stepping out completely in sync with one another. As June walked around to the trunk, Lydia gave her parents a hug.

“If you think of anything else you want me to throw in the box, just let me know.” Her mother said.

“I will, Mom.” She said, holding on tightly.

“Your next visit will be longer, right?” Her father asked.

“Yeah—I get the Thursday and Friday off for Thanksgiving, but I might take Wednesday off too.”

“Oh good,” He said. “Two days was not enough!”

“I know,” Lydia responded, refusing to get choked up *again* this time.

“My turn!” June shouted, pulling Lydia’s suitcase up to the curb and shoving her way into the group. She gave her sister a hug, saying “I’ll let you know which week of September works for me.”

“Okay! And keep me posted on everything,” she replied.

“You won’t get all judgey again, right?”

“Me? *Never!*” The sisters laughed.

Lydia gave each person one more hug, and eventually made her way through the terminal’s open automatic doors, wiping a tear from her eye. *Dammit.*

## Chapter Nine

“Your shoes, sir.”

“What?”

“Your shoes.”

“Oh,” Jack responded, not necessarily to the TSA agent, but mostly to himself. Though he had spent the last fifteen minutes cursing those in front of him for taking so long, he was now the one holding up the security line. A woman behind him, carrying a small dog in a large bag, huffed impatiently.

“Sorry,” he said to her, trying to untie his laces as quickly as possible. He had double-knotted them. *Shit*. Forgoing the laces, he yanked the tightly-secured sneakers off, resolving to untie them after he walked through the metal detector.

“It’s fine,” the woman responded through tight lips. It clearly wasn’t, but he chose not to linger on apologizing.

After making it through to the other side of security, Jack gathered his belongings and haphazardly carried everything to a nearby bench. After plopping his backpack down beside his suitcase, he placed his laptop back inside its designated section and retied his shoes. As he sat and reorganized, Jack glanced up at the board above him and scanned the list from the bottom up for his destination. CINCINNATI, CHICAGO, CHARLOTTE, CHARLESTON, BURBANK, BUFFALO, BOSTON, BOISE—*wait, too far*. BOSTON, FLIGHT 4252, 1:05 P.M., GATE 15.

Gate 15 was closer than expected. On his way, Jack passed two gates, a Starbucks, and a Hudson Newsstand. He was tempted to grab another coffee, but

decided against it; he was still too caffeinated from that morning, and didn't need to be shaky on a five-and-a-half-hour flight.

Rather than continuing to wander, Jack took a seat in the middle of the gate's (empty) fourth row and removed his laptop from his backpack. The airport WiFi, while free, was painfully slow, so he connected to his phone's hotspot instead. From there, he opened his email.

Somewhere between the gate and the coffee shop, sometime between early and late morning, Jack had made his decision. Specifically, he couldn't tell you where or when it had happened. It honestly may have come to fruition the night before, and he just hadn't been aware of it. And so, he clicked on the "New Message" button and began typing.

<b>To:</b> Richard Manfred <R.Manfred@NEConsulting.com>
<b>CC:</b> HR@NEConsulting.com
<b>Subject:</b> Two-Week Notice
<p>Hello Mr. Manfred and the HR Staff of New England Consulting,</p> <p>Please accept this letter as my two-week notice of resignation from New England Consulting. This decision was difficult, but I think it is best for my long-term professional interests. I greatly appreciate all of the opportunities and experiences throughout my time at the company and wanted to thank you for your five years of mentorship and assistance.</p> <p>Thank you again, and please contact me if you have any further paperwork or questions on the subject.</p> <p>Sincerely,</p> <p>Jack Perriman</p> <p>J.Perriman@NEConsulting.com</p>

Without hovering over the button (though, after re-reading it once more to check for typos), Jack hit send and took a sigh of relief. While he had been typing, a girl about his age—no, a little younger—had sat in the chair next to him. For a minute, he wondered why she looked familiar. When she pulled a phone charger out of her bag, he remembered clearly.

“Hey, I don’t want to monopolize the outlet,” He said, jokingly. He unplugged his own phone, which was already at 100%.

“What—oh! Hey. Thanks,” she said, chuckling through her bright red face. She plugged in her phone, and chatted with him for a minute before running off to grab lunch for the plane.

After watching a plane take off, Jack re-opened his laptop and began composing a second message.

<b>To:</b> William.Winterbottom@GreenLightTechnologies.com
<b>CC:</b> Suzanne.Hindleman@GreenLightTechnologies.com
<b>Subject:</b> Replying To Your Offer

Hello Mr. Winterbottom and Ms. Hindleman,

I wanted to thank you for flying me out to Seattle this weekend and giving me the opportunity to interview at your firm. I had a wonderful experience seeing your offices and meeting your staff.

Although I greatly appreciate your offer, I have decided not to accept the position at Green Light Technologies. This decision was extremely difficult, but I have come to realize that the role is not the best fit for me, and does not fully reflect my long-term professional interests.

Thank you again for this wonderful opportunity, and I wish you all the best.

Sincerely,  
Jack Perriman  
Jack\_Perriman@gmail.com

Before he shut the computer, Jack decided to take a scroll through Twitter. Nothing he saw was of particular interest, except for a tweet from Tess posted 47 minutes ago: “OBSESSED with @TheCrownNetflix! 👑 Already starting season 2! GB” He favorited it, then exited the app. It reminded him to text Aiden with the update.

Gave 2-week notice to NEConsulting. I'm out of there!



Turned down the offer from Green Light. It's not what I wanted.

DUDE.

WHAT?!

Also, I'm moving out.

It's time.

Jack wasn't in the mood to read Aiden's response at that moment, so he exited the thread. But before closing the Messages app, he opened up an older one, which he'd looked over countless times over the past few weeks but remained begrudgingly inactive.

Hey, Mia. It's Jack—in case you deleted my number.

Surprisingly, this weekend was a pretty eventful one for me; it even involved a trip to Seattle and a job interview, believe it or not

If you want, I'd love to grab lunch or coffee this weekend to update you on everything.

Too frightened to wait for her response, he put his phone on Airplane Mode and threw it in his backpack. It was just in time for the girl with the charger to return with a salad in hand.

As he contemplated introducing himself, the flight attendant called for Group A to begin boarding the plane.

Jack stood up, grabbing his suitcase handle and throwing on his backpack, and moved towards the line that formed before him. Despite being entirely unsure of where his life was headed, he knew it was time for a change of direction.

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“Mommy,” Nora asked. “Are we Group A?”

“No, Honey. Group D. Two more groups after this one before we can go.”

“Why?”

“Because we have to board in order.” Matt joined in.

“*No*, why are we group D?”

“You know,” Beatrice said, “I’m actually not sure how that works.”

“It might be the order we bought the tickets,” Matt offered.

“Maybe,” Beatrice said, refreshing her email. *Nothing*. She looked up to her husband’s expectant face, and shook her head.

Nora returned to the floor, where she sat beside her older brother and sister. Nathalie scribbled in a math workbook while Nick read from his new chapter book; both oblivious to the movement of the passengers lining up behind them. Nora, looking to be a part of the fun, pulled her “Oceans and Seas” coloring book, along with her zippy-pouch full of washable markers, out of her bright purple backpack. On the trip over, she’d lost the blue marker—especially unhelpful for this set of drawings—and began filling the ocean in with a bright green instead.

As Matt kept an eye on all three children, he leaned over towards his wife.

“You know,” he said, “I’m pretty surprised by Mom and Dad’s response to last night’s chat. They were unusually supportive at breakfast, don’t you think?”

“Honestly, I was thinking the same,” Beatrice responded.

“I mean, I almost caught Mom trying to order you around about the bakery, but—”

“It was different this time,” Beatrice interrupted. “I mean, I think your mom likes a firm grasp on everything around her,” she said, chuckling, “but it seemed like it was, oh, I don’t know... supportive, this time. Less you’re-doing-it-all-wrong-so-let-me-take-over, and more what-you’re-doing-seems-exciting-and-I-want-in-on-the-action.”

Matt laughed. “Yes, exactly like that. You took the words right out of my mouth.”

“And your Dad seemed excited, too.”

“Yeah, he’s not one to re-hash something over and over, but he definitely seemed more supportive. Like he wasn’t fighting back as much.”

“Definitely.”

“I’m glad he’s working less; for Mom’s sake as well as his own.”

“I think it—Nick! Don’t grab your sister’s markers! If you want to use one, *ask*.” She paused for a second, searching for where she’d left her thought. “I think it’s going to be great for both of them.”

“And now they can visit us!” Matt exclaimed, his excitement half-genuine and half sarcastic, ever (albeit slightly) fearful of his parents’ opinions backsliding.

“Yes—” Beatrice responded. Rather than attempt to simultaneously phrase her complex emotions and preserve her husband’s feelings, she stated a fact instead of an opinion. “That’s true; they *can* visit us more. It’ll be good for the kids, too—to see your parents more. They see my parents probably, like, five times more right now.”

“Yes,” Matt mimicked with a grin. “That’s true.”

She refreshed her email again. This time, one unread message with the subject **Chinese Restaurant Location** appeared in bold.

“Oh God,” Beatrice said.

“What?”

She showed her husband the phone.

“Open it!”

“Right now?”

“No, just wait a few days and see how you feel—YES OF COURSE NOW! Come on!”

“What if we didn’t get it, though?”

“We will find another spot.”

“But this one was so hard to find. And so perfect.”

“*Mom*, Nick said. “You don’t know what’s gonna happen. Don’t count your ducks before they hatch.”

Trying to maintain her composure and match her son’s seriousness, she said “That’s true, Nicholas. I shouldn’t bank on what happened before I actually find out.”

“So let’s find out,” Matt said.

“Alright,” Beatrice agreed. She took a deep breath, then counted “One, two, three... four,”

“Mom!” Nathalie said.

“Okay, okay,” Beatrice responded. “Here goes nothing,” she added, clicking on the email.

**Rebecca Johnson, Massachusetts Commercial Realtors**

Chinese Restaurant Location

To: Beatrice.Gardiner@gmail.com

Hello Beatrice,

Congratulations! Your offer on the Chinese restaurant on Fourth Street has been accepted! Stop by the office sometime this week and we can get your paperwork started as soon as possible.

If you have any questions, please feel free to reach out to me at R.Johnson@MassCommRealtors.com. I look forward to moving on with this project alongside you and Matthew, and especially when I can purchase all of your famous desserts!

Best,

Rebecca Johnson

R.Johnson@MassCommRealtors.com

“OH MY GOD!” Beatrice shouted. Most of the passengers standing in line, now those through Group C, turned around in surprise at the outburst.

“We got it?!” Matt asked, jumping out of his chair.

“We got it!” Beatrice responded, glowing with pride. “I can’t believe it!”

“I can,” said Nathalie matter-of-factly.

Beatrice grinned, jumping alongside her husband to give her daughter a hug. “Group hug!” she called out. Nick rushed to join the excitement, Nora reluctantly put down her markers, and Matt wrapped his arms around the entire bunch. Well over the tops of his kids’ heads, he kissed Beatrice.

“Ew!” Nick squealed, wriggling free.

Realizing they had caused a scene, Beatrice and Matt sat back down onto the pleather seats.

“Ooh,” said Beatrice, opening up her laptop. “Now I can actually start making a real *list* of everything to sell! Regular items, seasonal stuff, special orders,” she said, trailing off as her thoughts jumped from her lips to the Word document on the screen. As Beatrice typed frantically, Matt, Nathalie, Nicholas, and Nora surrounded her, shouting out their favorite recipes to add to the list, eager to join in on the action.

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*Dammit, Lydia thought. I didn’t get his name (or number) again. Maybe I’ll see him on the plane or back at Logan. Honestly I’m just surprised he remembered me. She looked around to see if he was still in line, but couldn’t find him. Maybe I just need to chill, she added, chuckling to herself. She stopped*

almost immediately, hoping nobody noticed and assumed that she had lost her mind.

Boarding was taking much longer than usual. Lydia bought a salad, then sat down. She went to the bathroom, and returned to her seat. She bought a latte, walked a lap around the terminal, then found her way back to Gate 15.

At this point, the flight attendants were still on Group C, but the line had dwindled down to only ten or so more people. Hopefully, they would be calling Group D soon. She opened her phone, and opened Facebook. June had been tagged in the same photo from Instagram she'd liked (on her sister's phone, and over her sister's shoulder) in the car nearly two hours earlier. Amy Sheffield had posted it, along with...*35 others? Dear God.* Lydia liked the photo, noticing a red "1" plastered on the tiny notification bell at the bottom of the interface. She clicked it.

"Ethan Montgomery requested to be your friend." To the right of the message sat two buttons, "Accept" and "Deny." But instead of clicking either one, she tapped on his name, curious to see his profile—or at least whatever was publicly accessible.

After seven minutes of scrolling, she discovered nothing scandalous, nothing questionable, nothing rude or weird or frightening. She saw a boy on their high school's soccer team, a profile picture of him holding a "UW Pre-Med" pennant, and various pictures he'd been tagged in including the ones from the night before. He looked nearly identical to his brother, which was, admittedly, a

little bizarre, but she could get over that soon enough. She returned to the previous page and accepted the request.

She looked up from the screen; the line hadn't budged. From this vantage point, it appeared as though there was some issue with the size of a woman's carry on. Wait—no—the carry-on barked. Probably an issue with the dog.

Finding nothing else to do, she returned to her phone, and opened her App Store. She perused lists of meditation apps, food delivery companies, and eventually made her way onto the “Most Popular Dating Apps” page. *Fuck. Spark was still #1.* Frowning, and tilting her phone so no one could see, she pressed “download” and stared at the app until it was ready to be accessed—which took precisely 24 seconds. She created an account, swiped seven times, and promptly deleted the app.

The woman with the dog looked rather upset. She clutched the handles of her designer puppy-satchel, eyebrows furrowed and lips bent into a frown as the flight attendants spoke to her. When they ceased, she shouted back, finally agreeing to hand over her suitcase in exchange for keeping the dog beside her on the flight.

Lydia opened her backpack, located the *Real Simple* she'd forgotten to read on the flight over, and flipped through its pages. She folded the corner of a recipe for honey-chipotle salmon, skimmed an article on the comparing the long-term effects of morning versus evening workouts, and worked her way through the cover story on pantry organization. *Damn*, she thought. *Who knew pantries were something that could so clearly belong on Pinterest?*



She felt her pocket vibrate—it was a text from Mom.

Have you boarded yet?  
How was the security line?

Still haven't boarded, but it looks like the flight attendants fixed the hold-up. Some rude lady with a literal "doggy bag"

Realizing that the text she thought was funny needed some additional explanation,

Lydia added:

She was pissed they wouldn't let her take a suitcase and her dog in one of those pet-carrying purses on the plane. Kept the dog, ditched the bag.

LOL!

Have a safe flight, and I'll talk to you later!

Love you! Miss you already!

They were now boarding the rest of Group C, but still hadn't called Group D to join. Lydia leaned back in her chair, closing her eyes. She re-watched Grace walking down the aisle, Ethan joining them at the dinner table when he wasn't supposed to, June dancing in bare feet, and eating oatmeal at the breakfast table. Though this weekend had been a blast from the past, it also felt like a window into the future—and one she didn't seem to mind.

“We’d like to ask Group D to join us in the boarding line,” the flight attendant announced over the microphone. “Group D may now join the boarding line.”

Lydia shoved the magazine into her backpack, zipping it and standing up as fast as possible. *FINALLY.*

As she speed-walked towards the rush of passengers, a family of five merged in line just in front of her. They were a younger couple, with three little kids who would Not. Be. Quiet. *Those poor parents.*

But the more Lydia watched, the less she pitied. The couple—despite wrangling small children, having to carry various duffels and backpacks, and trying desperately to locate all five boarding passes before they reached the front of the line—were clearly happy. Way happier than she would have imagined possible. Struggling through this visibly exhausting and overwhelming situation, both parents wore smiles brighter and cheerier than the gate’s combination of direct sunlight and overhead LEDs.

Soon enough, the family managed to make it through the final gate check with all of their bags, all of their boarding passes, and all of their children. As soon as they reached the covered hallway to the plane, the littlest girl took off, the parents and older siblings racing behind her.

“Hello, Miss,” The flight attendant said. Lydia stepped up to the desk in response. “I apologize for the delay. May I please see your boarding pass?”

“Yes,” she said, fetching it from her jacket pocket. “Here you go.”

The woman took the slip of paper, sliding it under the scanner. It beeped, but not the happy-beep with the neon green light that everyone else in front of her received. Instead, it was an angry-beep accompanied by a harsh red light.

*Oh no, she prayed. Please. No.*

The flight attendant almost frowned, paused, then slid the paper under the scanner again. This time, Lydia received the green-light happy-beep.

“There we go,” she said, handing the boarding pass back to Lydia. “It happens all the time.”

“Oh!” Lydia said. “That’s good to hear!”

“Have a nice trip to Boston,” the flight attendant replied cheerfully. “I hope you enjoyed Seattle!”

As Lydia walked down the hallway and approached the plane, she considered the sum of her weekend experiences. She actually had enjoyed Seattle, astoundingly.