



# Happy Ending

**Author:** Jazzy Yammout

**Category:** Romance, Lesbian Romance

**Description:** Drew Sterling hates change. Ever since her dad left, it's been her and her mom against the world. That is, until Laine Loveum returns to town after moving to California ten years ago. Drew finds herself quickly drawn to Laine as their moms rekindle a past friendship, and suddenly, she and Laine are inseparable. However, the feeling of stability in their whirlwind friendship becomes acutely fragile when Laine's mom forces her to move to a Catholic school, causing her to reevaluate everything she knows about herself. Now, Drew must decide whether to fight for the only person besides her mom that has ever felt stable in her life, or forever mourn the girl she fell in love with.

Laine Loveum has always been adaptable. Her family's fast-paced lifestyle keeps her on her toes, never giving her a chance to get close to anyone. However, when an incident with her father forces her to move back to Georgia, she finds herself setting roots in the comfort and vulnerability of Drew's friendship. Having never developed such a deep connection to someone before, especially not a girl, Laine sees religion as the perfect scapegoat to suppress her feelings and follow the path God has laid out for her to live a perfect, sin-free life. Caught in the crosshairs of living out God's (and her mother's) plan for her, Laine is forced to redefine her values and pivot from the picturesque future she'd always imagined for herself—even if it means disappointing her mother, upsetting her newfound church community, and finally accepting a part of herself she's tried so hard to deny.

**Total Pages (Source):** 71

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1

Drew

I value individuality more than emotion. People say you're

a complete person once you find your other half, but I don't need my other half. I'm complete on my own, and I am certainly not looking for completion from an external source, especially not an external person.

Ever since my dad left, it's been me and my mom against the world. She was the only person who stayed consistent in my life. Consequently, we became super close, almost trauma-bonded from years of trying to fill the gaps my dad left. I used to think my parents had the most picture-perfect romance. Childhood sweethearts; they were the playbook for how to fall in love for the first and last time simultaneously.

I should have known that love doesn't work like that. Love doesn't stay long enough to give you a happy ending, it stays long enough to give you hope for one.

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"Oh, Drewsy! I forgot to tell you that I invited the Loveums over for dinner next Friday. You remember their daughter, Laine, right? She went to school with you a long time ago." My mom interrupts my thoughts as we take the long trek back from our weekly Sunday dinners with my grandparents, who unfortunately live out in the sticks of Georgia and refuse to drive to us.

I give her a lazy nod. The drive is long and dull, so I'm not exactly in the mood to hear about another socialization event. Staring out of the window at the never-ending fields of barley growing on the side of the road, I try to rack my brain for who Laine Loveum is and why in the world her family would be coming to our house for dinner. Her name sounds familiar, but I just can't quite pinpoint who she is. Finally, I equate my failure to retrieve this deeply lodged memory from my brain to the drowsiness and give in.

"I very vaguely remember that name. Why are they coming over? And how do we know them?" I ask, forcing myself to listen after being checked out for over half of the one-hour drive already.

"Well, we used to be family friends with the Loveums. We got together way back when you and Laine were in elementary, but they moved to California, and now they've moved back. We spent a lot of time together back then, Drew. I'm surprised this isn't ringing more of a bell for you."

"You know I have a bad memory! And bad facial recognition skills!"

"Ha ha okay, just promise me you will be home and dressed nicely when they come over." Mom pulls into the garage and reaches for the door. "And at least pretend to remember them, okay?"

"Yeah yeah okay." I smile and playfully smack her arm before unloading from the car.

I grab the leftovers from dinner and bring them inside the house. My cat, Glibby, greets me at the door, headbutting my calves for my attention. She meows as I reach down to pet her head, then I make a beeline for the kitchen. A message pops up on my phone as soon as I reach the fridge. I glance down at my lit screen and see a notification from my best friend, Tatum.

Tatum and I have been friends since third grade. We've done everything together and seen each other through our best and worst phases. My favorite of hers was her Ariana Grande phase. She had saved up all her money, bought every perfume Ariana released, and changed her ringtone to a different song from the latest album daily. I think that was Tatum's prime.

Tatum and I were also supposed to hang out with the friend group this Friday.

Tatum

9:24 pm

heyyyyy drewwww

could you pick up some bags of ice for friday please? jared's got like one bag left and his parents are probably using it for their champagne tonight

Shit.

Me

9:25 pm

soooo slight problem about that...

my mom's having this family over for dinner that i guess we used to know

i think she said they lived here in georgia for a while then moved to cali

and now they're back and feasting with us on friday honestly i don't get why they couldn't have installed their kitchen first and now busting on our night

Tatum

9:27 pm

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ugh!

couldn't they have waited to come back until saturday or something?

Me

9:28 pm

guess not :/

Tatum

9:30 pm

well, that stinks!!

i hope you have so much fun with that (not really) we'll miss you here!

I let out an exasperated sigh and set my phone down, lying back on my bed and staring up at the ceiling.

Can't. Wait.

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The days chill off as Friday rolls around, and I find myself setting the table for five with our best silverware. The dining table is small, having only needed to feed two

for so many years, but we make it work, somehow fitting five sets of dinnerware and three huge crockpots.

The doorbell rings.

“Drew, they're here! Please act like you remember them because they certainly remember you.” Mom lectures as she rushes to open the door.

A brunette woman with not nearly enough wrinkles to be a mother to a grown teenager hugs my mom and hands her a potted plant. Her hair falls short, framing her sharp jawline, and her neck is adorned with a golden cross necklace. Beside her stands a very tall, slender girl who I'm assuming is Laine. Laine offers my mom a polite smile, then extends her arms out to hug me. At first, I'm taken aback by her bold gesture, considering we haven't seen each other in years, but she seems comfortable with me, so I ease into her and don't pull away immediately. As she wraps her arms around my shoulders, her hands are warm, despite feeling oddly bony and lanky.

Eventually, she pulls away and meets my eyes as our mothers exchange formalities. Her eyes are a deep green with subtle swirls of brown, and her hair is a wave of chestnut brown that sits effortlessly below her shoulders.

I notice her hands are stained with fresh remnants of pastel-colored paints, but they look so natural on her that you'd assume it was a purposely designed tattoo etched into her copper skin. Her pastel yellow sundress sticks to her side as the wind picks up outside, and she smells of strawberries and cinnamon, a combination you would have never thought would go together, but the pleasurable mix lingers under my nose from her hug.

The nervous pit in my stomach grows. This girl is never going to be friends with my ragged ass.

Feeling awkward, I rack my brain for what to say to her, but quickly stop myself because the silence doesn't feel uncomfortably looming.

Glibby, being the socialite she is, comes and jumps on top of the dining table, reaching her head toward the potato-filled crockpot. Mom embarrassingly shoos her off and apologizes, then gives a tour of what's on the table as she beckons Laine and her mom to sit opposite us.

"This looks lovely, Anne. Thank you for having us." The brunette woman nods at my mom.

"Of course, Marissa. I'm glad we've reconnected!" Mom says, cheerfully clasping her hands together.

Laine still hasn't said anything to me, but her eyes return to my face as we sit down. I can't tell if her look is admiration or judgment, but I'm not sure I want to know. Her stare is heavy, but it makes up for the lack of dialogue she's provided to the conversation. Almost as if her face says the multitudes that she can't bring her mouth to say.

"Where is Todd? We saved a seat for him!" Mom reaches across the table to serve Marissa and Laine chicken pot pie from the crockpot.

"Oh, he couldn't make it tonight. Work has been giving him a hard time since the move." Marissa shakes her head in what I'm assuming is disappointment, except the gleam in her eye tells me she's both happy and concerned that her husband isn't here with us tonight. I take mental note of that as I glance over at Laine, who is now shifting uncomfortably in her seat and looking down at the napkin folded neatly in her lap, avoiding eye contact with anyone at the table.

There's an awkward bout of silence, and then Marissa joins hands with Laine and



reaches for my mom's hand as Laine reaches for mine. I look around, scanning for clues as to what to do next, until Marissa and Laine bow their heads. Laine wiggles her fingers, gesturing for me to take her hand as her mom starts to speak.

“Dear heavenly father, bless this food our dear hosts, the Sterlings, have prepared for us, and thank you for this meal. Nourish our souls with grace, kindness, and strength. Amen.”

“Amen,” Laine parrots as I glance at my mom, who politely smiles at me, then at Marissa.

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After one painful hour of awkward small talk and staring, everyone's plates are empty and stomachs full. Mom suggests I take Laine upstairs to my room while she and Marissa have "after-dinner coffee," a concept I've never quite understood. The time post-dinner should be when you wind down, right? Not the time to pump more caffeine into your body that'll keep you up for hours.

Laine still hasn't said a word to me besides a few quiet "mhmmms" followed by smiling nods, and by the time we reach my room, I'm stressing over what to say. I notice her eyes wander, taking in the clutter on the floor and posters covering every inch of my walls. I can tell she's curious about me as she scans the room, probably silently judging my maximalist decor style.

"I like your room." She says softly, but most likely out of cordial niceness.

"Thanks," I say back, awkwardly rubbing my hand on my neck. "So what brought you back to Atlanta?"

"Oh, you know, the bustling film industry and the abundance of peaches everywhere."

I pause, looking straight into her eyes. She must not remember living here, because there are definitely NOT peaches just rolling at our feet.

"The what?"

She lets a loose smile slip from her lips, returning my gaze.

So this girl is funny. Noted.

“I’m kidding. My dad’s work brought us back.” Her eyes tear away from my walls and fall back on me, suddenly going very serious.

As she says this, I remember her mom saying that her dad's work was practically giving them hell for moving back, but I decide not to push further.

“Who's this?” She picks up a picture of me and my friends.

I walk over and point to each person in the frame, reciting their names as my finger hovers over each one. “That's Tatum, Jared, and Greyson.”

“They look nice.”

When she turns her head to speak, I realize how close we’re standing. In an attempt to avoid any discomfort, I back away. Despite her seeming oddly comfortable with me, I don’t share the same feeling. I mean, we were eight when she left Georgia. How could she possibly remember me well enough not to feel as awkward as I do right now? “How was the plane ride over?”

It's a stupid question, but I'm desperate to fill the silence. I don't want her to realize how awkward I really am.

“It was good. I got a lot done on a project I’ve been procrastinating on for a while now.”

“What kind of project?”

“I’m creating a sort of statement piece. So far, I just have a rough sketch of a body, and I’m not entirely sure who she even is yet, but once I have more of a foundation

for the piece, I'm planning on painting it on a bigger canvas." Laine's eyes glisten as she talks about her art. I've never seen someone so rawly passionate about something like this before. I can tell it's a personal project solely from the way she lights up at the mere mention of it.

"Wow." I breathe in, not knowing what else to say.

"It's still fairly new, so I'm still finding my direction."

"I'm sure it will be amazing! You seem very passionate about it, and passion is the first step of any goal, right?"

Her smile grows wider, and she gives a slight nod of her head.

Just as I'm about to ask more about the painting, Marissa calls upstairs for Laine to gather her shoes and jacket to leave.

When we reach the front door, Laine stares at me, giving me the same soft smile as when she came in.

"See you around?" She nods.

I nod back, offering a smile back.

As I start heading back to my room to get ready for the night, my mom calls up to me, hanging around the banister at the bottom of the stairs.

"Drew! How did it go with Laine? Was she nice?"

I turn around. "Yeah, it went well, I guess. She was chill."

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“Well, I’m glad you two got along because we are going on a getaway trip to Blue Ridge with her and Marissa next month.”

“Wait, what? Didn’t they just get back in town?”

“They did, but we need this. Marissa and I have decided that a getaway to the mountains this November would be the perfect opportunity for us to relax and for you girls to bond.”

“It just seems sort of... I don’t know, out of the blue?” My brows furrow in both confusion and disbelief, still trying to wrap my head around how our moms could decide they want to be all besties again this soon after they moved back.

“They’re a nice family, sweetie. And Marissa and I realized that we deserve a vacation,” Mom says matter-of-factly, putting her hands on her hips.

“Okay...”

What a weird thing to do with people we just recently reconnected with. I mean, I barely remember Laine. Our parents couldn’t have been that close.

As soon as I reach my room, I immediately text in the group chat a debrief of tonight and what’s to come.

Me

8:31 pm

you guys will never believe what just happened!!

Jared

8:33 pm what??

Tatum8:33 pm ????

Me

8:34 pm

my mom just planned a weekend getaway to the mountains with these people!

Greyson8:34 pm

With who?

Tatum

8:34 pm

that new (but not so new?) girl and her mom! keep up greyson!!

also omg, what??

Jared

8:34 pm

that's insane

did ur mom keep in contact with them while they were in Cali?

Me

8:35 pm

not to my knowledge

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Greyson

8:35 pm

That's kind of weird...

Me

8:35 pm

thats what im saying!

im worried my mom is diving too deep too quickly the loveums were family friends when i was little but their name hasn't been spoken in our house since they left georgia

it's almost like she's found an old tie to my dad and she's latching onto it

there's no way she genuinely felt ten years of lost connection with this woman over one dinner

Tatum

8:36 pm

well, how do you feel about it? how was dinner with Laine tonight?



Me

8:36 pm

it was okay

she didn't really have much to say, but neither did i to be honest i was just trying to not act awkward like usual

she will definitely fit in here, she's not like us

Jared

8:36 pm

HEY

wdym not like us? what's wrong with us?

Me

8:37 pm

nothings wrong with us!

im just making observations!! she's just not our crowd her mom was wearing a **CHUNKY** cross necklace and we **DO** live in the bible belt of the south

all im saying is she'll have no problem fitting in with those beach girls who think 30A is exotic

Tatum

8:37 pm

she's religious????

don't let her try and convert you drew!!

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Greyson

10:38 pm

Wait guys give her a chance.

From what Drew is saying, that's probably the mom's thing, not hers.

Jared

10:38 pm

idk man...

if that's the house she's been raised under...

Me

10:38 pm

no, greyson is right

she seemed genuine

she told me about this art project she's been working on

you guys should've seen the way she lit up talking about it

Tatum

10:38 pm

don't be fooled by her charm drew!! that's how they get you!!!!

Me

10:39 pm

get me?

no, she didn't even mention religion

i mean, her mom led a prayer before dinner, but that was it

anyways, i could tell that project means something to her

Jared

10:39 pm

interesting....

you def gotta find out more and let us know what's up with that

Me

10:40 pm

i will, i promise

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but later, i'm tired

i'm gonna go to bed but i'll talk to you guys tomorrow

Tatum

10:40 pm

alrighty, stay safe goodnight

Jared

10:40 pm

nighty night xx

Greyson10:40 pm Peace.

Even though I probably shouldn't care this much about someone else's passion project, I want to know more about her art. I want to know what about it made her glow like she did. But most importantly, I want to know what about her family made my mom, the most organized and type-A person I know, make such an impulsive decision like that.

2

Laine

Last night's dinner was amazing. Drew's mom was such

a great cook that I woke up still feeling full from that heavy chicken pot pie. Despite my still bloated stomach growling at me to stay comfortably tucked under my bed sheet, I force myself to get up and walk over to my desk, where my sketchbook is laid out.

Pulling out a mirror from one of the drawers, I cherish the sight of the drawer being neat from having just moved in, and I already can't wait to organize it using my new Ikea desk drawer dividers. It's not often that you find quality items that are cute and on clearance, right when you need them.

Carefully pulling up my pajama top, I hold the mirror up to my side and study the curve of my torso. Why can't I get it right? What am I missing? I take a seat at my desk and pick up the piece of graphite I've been working with, determined to get this part of the body right. Hopefully, using myself as a model for this piece may help find direction for this piece.

I want it to mean something to me, not just be another random sketch to get me through another bump in the road. But that's particularly difficult to do, seeing as I haven't even fully figured myself out yet. On top of that, unfortunately, there's only so much you can see of yourself, and staring at my bony side isn't sparking any new insightful strokes on this piece.

"Laine! Why don't you come downstairs and have breakfast with me? I got bagels from that place down the street you used to like!" My mother echoes down to me. Because my room is in the basement, the acoustics ring a little longer than they do upstairs.

When I reach the top of the steps, landing in the kitchen, I see she's prepared my favorite sesame bagel with lox and jalapeño cream cheese.

“¡Buenos días!” Mother smiles at me, caressing my hair as I sit down at the table. “So, how did you and Drew get along?”

“Fairly well,” I say through a mouthful of bagel. “¡Ay, qué bueno! Because you two are going to be spending some time together. I really missed talking to Anne, and now that her husband and your father aren’t in the picture, we really got to sit down and have a real conversation.”

I scoff as she says this. I always hated how my father overtook conversations, acting all macho like he was the man of the house. Sure, he was the only man in the house, but he didn’t have to make it his responsibility to facilitate conversations that he wasn’t a part of. It just felt very patriarchal, that’s all.

“Also, I wanted to talk to you about some potential church options. I’ve been researching catholic churches in the area that I’d like us to try out.”

“We’ve barely unpacked, though.”

“Sí, pero I think it would be a good idea to get involved in the catholic community around here as soon as possible. Plus, unpacking is an ongoing endeavor, Laine. I know you have been stressing over how disorganized everything feels, but an hour out of your Sunday will not significantly impede your unpacking process.”

We’ve always been a religious household, and I know my grandparents on my father’s side are devout catholics, but I figured we would have a minute to breathe and settle in before finding a church, or more realistically, I assumed my mother would have already picked one for us to start attending. I didn’t expect us to spend our Sundays shopping around.

“Claro que sí, of course, Mother. I understand.” I say through a mouthful of bagel.

“Mm,” she mumbles contentedly, kissing the top of my head and tapping a finger to my chin to close my mouth as I chew.

Ever since my father’s been out of the picture, Mother has encouraged the “path of God” as she calls it, and insists we “mustn’t stray from it.” In my opinion, this is her way of coping with the way my father left us. What he did, ultimately catalyzing our move back to Georgia, was the perfect reason for her to believe she could be a better Christian than she was before.

Part of me is glad she’s found something to help get her through the transition period of having him in our life full-time to having him in our life no-time, but the other part of me knows she’s setting unrealistic expectations for both of us. Her infatuation with becoming the perfect Christian woman and my becoming the perfect Christian daughter is just the slightest bit concerning. I pride myself in my faith already, but even I recognize nobody can be perfect.



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I know she means well, but in my opinion, she's only setting us up for disappointment and failure. However, at the end of the day, I know what she really needs is her daughter's support—for us to be a team—so that is exactly what I plan to give her.

I head back downstairs and prepare my bag for my first day back at school. I wonder who I'll run into that I've met before, and if they'll have to pretend to remember me like Drew did. I could tell she was hiding it, but I knew she didn't remember me from Elementary school, and to be honest, I don't blame her. I was a reserved kid, and I still am in a way.

I remember very little of her, just that our parents were friends and we would play Barbies together while they sat around the table after dinner and talked. I particularly remember this one Barbie castle she had. I was so jealous of it. It was massive, and it quickly became all my little juvenile heart ever wanted.

I remember putting it on my Christmas list that year, only to be disappointed when all that was under the tree was a Barbie dog that walked around all stiff-legged and pooped little brown plastic pellets everywhere.

Money was tight back then, and that's all my parents could afford for Christmas that year. I was so mad at them, but looking back, I'm grateful that they at least cared enough to spend their last pennies on a Barbie brand toy. I wish I had never taken that for granted.

Now, my father's gone, and my mother is silently struggling, only keeping a brave face on for my sake.

\*\*\*\*\*

Monday comes around faster than I expected, and the crisp air has turned muggy and uncomfortably warm for October. The bipolar weather is definitely among the few things I did not miss about Georgia. The leaves have barely turned color, and the trees are still full and green. If you didn't have easy access to a calendar or a phone, you'd be utterly surprised when someone tells you it's actually fall and supposedly turning winter soon. The only characteristic fall thing right now is the rainy weather. I guess this will just be one of the many things I will have to readapt to.

As I walk into my first class, I scan the room for familiar faces. It's hard to gauge whether a face is familiar in the way that I've known that person before or in the way that all American teenagers have the same comfortable yet slumpy look to them, not even considering the fact that I haven't seen these people since the second grade. Finally, my eyes land on a familiar face.

It's Drew.

She's sitting alone, so I slowly walk in her direction. "Hey." I offer her an awkward smile.

"Laine! I didn't know you were in AP Environmental

Science?"

"Yeah, you know, I'm just a really big tree hugger."

This makes her laugh.

I don't think I've heard a laugh quite like hers before.

It's the perfect mix of bellow and class, like she's at a fancy

Gatsby party but can't control her enjoyment.

I like it.

"Well, I'm no tree hugger. Just a senior in need of a

fourth science credit." She responds, still smiling. I return a chuckle, but it's nowhere near as jubilant as

hers.

Just then, a middle-aged man in a striped button-down

shirt, dress pants, and a cheap-looking toupee for hair

walks in.

"Okay, I guess I'll see you around."

Without thinking, I turn to take a seat a few rows

behind Drew, ignoring the open seat right next to her.

Why? Why did I do that? Now I'm stuck in this seat for

the rest of class, and potentially the rest of the year. I turn

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to my left to see a boy with crumbs all over his face and clutching his trapper keeper so tight to his chest like he's scared someone could snatch it at any moment.

Great. First class of the first day, and I'd already made poor decisions. I wonder what my mother would say if she saw me now, fraternizing with a crumby boy and admiring a laugh that is far too loud to be that of a proper young girl.

"Oi!" The boy grabs his trapper keeper and brushes what I assume are granola remnants from the desk beside him.

"Sorry. Can I sit here?"

"Uh- sure!" He scrambles to finish brushing crumbs off my desk and pats the desk with his fingers.

I'm taken aback to hear his Irish accent.

"I'm Laine." I start to extend my hand toward him,

but then decide against it considering the fact that his desk

looks like the crime scene of a murdered gingerbread man.

Regardless, I figure I should at least introduce myself if

we're going to be sitting together for the rest of the year.

"I'm Thom."

Thom gives a cheeky grin plastered on his scrawny

face. His hair is a medium brown going in all different

directions, and his eyes are a deep black, almost fading into

his pupils. He smells surprisingly good despite looking

completely disheveled. Not that I'm sniffing him or

anything.

He looks harmless, friendly even. Immediately,

immense guilt overcomes me as I realize everything I just

assumed about this boy was harsh and uncalled for on my

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part.

“Are ya new?” He asks, his grin fading into a soft,

friendly smile.

“Sort of. I lived here in Georgia until I moved to

California when I was seven. I’ve recently moved back.”

“Ah! So you’re familiar with the area?”

“Somewhat.”

“Well, I moved here from Ireland a few years back.” “Ireland! That’s cool.”

“Indeed. I miss it all the time. Do ya miss California?” “I’m not sure yet. I guess time will tell.”

There’s a slight pause before he continues.

“So, what’s a pretty girl like you doing sitting next to

me, of all people, in this class?”

Usually, I get queasy when guys make comments

about my appearance, but the way he says it feels oddly comfortable. Like he means it in a respectful way rather than lustful, which is what I'm used to from teenage boys, and unfortunately, even some adults.

"What?" I'm taken aback, unsure of the angle of his question, if there is one at all.

"Well, I just mean, look around. I saw you talkin' to Drew Sterling. You seemed to know her. Better than ya did me, considering we've only just met. Nobody ever acknowledges me."

"Well, I did, so screw them!" I respond, suddenly feeling even worse for making assumptions about him. Thom's face widens, and his eyes lighten, relaxing into a smile. The class quiets down as the teacher announces the lesson for today. I sit back in my chair, suddenly feeling slightly less anxious about coming back to school here.

Maybe Thom could be my first friend here, besides Drew,

if I could even call her that.



3

Drew

The air finally chills off as mid-October rolls around. It's

been a week since Laine came back to school, and everyone has been talking about her, but nobody seems to be talking to her. As for me, we've been exchanging friendly smiles, but in the one class we have together, she sat a few rows back next to Thom Sternum, the weird kid.

Rumor has it that in ninth grade, Thom released a rat into the girls' bathroom, which got him out of school suspension. Nobody really knows if he actually did it, but he took the fall anyway. Now, he just stays to himself and doesn't talk to anybody. Even if he didn't do those things everyone says he did, it was definitely an interesting pick for Laine. She doesn't seem like the type of girl to gravitate toward loners like Thom.

"Hey! What's for lunch today?" Greyson jumps over a bench in the courtyard and playfully smacks Jared on the back.

"Cafeteria's got pierogies today! You gotta get some before they run out, man." Jared laughs, pointing toward the cafeteria doors.

"I can attest to that!" Tatum raises her fork with a half-eaten pierogi poked onto the tines.

I can't believe this is our fourth and final year eating together. I still remember how

we banded together the first week of freshman year. Jared and I sat together on the first day, he'd said I looked like the friendliest in the courtyard and he was scared of the jocks, whose table was farthest from the one I chose.

The rest of the week, the others trickled in. Jared and Tatum met in biology class and he brought her to the table that Wednesday, and then on Thursday, Greyson joined us because he was the jock that all the other jocks chose to pick on because he was a "good guy," and apparently good guys aren't cool anymore. We formed an unlikely group, but I wouldn't have it any other way; they're like my second family.

"So, how was Friday night without me?" I ask teasingly.

"Honestly, it wasn't that eventful. We played the new Far Cry game, and Greyson figured out he could juggle traffic cones." Tatum says casually.

"Hold up. How did you all play a single-player game like Far Cry together? And how did Greyson even figure out he could do that? And where did you guys even get traffic cones?"

There's no way they did that much while I was away at one dinner.

"Chill out, miss FOMO." Greyson puts a hand up. "First off, Jared played, we just watched and yelled at him when he inevitably sucked and then we all fought over the controller for thirty minutes. As for my new party trick, we just went outside and plucked the cones off the street.

"I was trying to carry them into the basement without Jared's parents waking up and realized it was easier to balance them if they were in the air, so I just threw them up and caught them in a loop. Then Tatum pointed out that I was basically juggling them, so I think I'm just naturally gifted."

Greyson pretends to brush his hair behind his ear on one side and rolls his eyes.

“Damn. Sounds like you guys had a night! I’m sorry I missed it.” I’ve never been one to feel like I’m missing out when I don’t go to parties or school dances, but I do get insane FOMO when it comes to my friends.

“Nah, it’s okay, you were hanging with little Miss Perfect. I’m sure you guys had fun... uh- discussing the dangers of sex and drinking.” Jared nagged.

“Okay, actually, she didn’t seem so uptight. She’s in my first-period AP Environmental Science, but she sat next to Thom on her first day back, and she’s been sitting with him ever since, so I haven’t gotten to really talk to her much.”

“Wait, Thom? As in, rat attack Thom?” Jared’s eyes go huge.

“Yes, rat attack Thom.”

“You know what they say about him now, right? That he’s evolved from rat pranks, and now he hides cameras in the girls’ bathroom. Laine better watch out. If she gets too close, she’ll be the next victim of his reckless shenanigans.”

“Jared, you’re such a gossip! We don’t even know if the rat story was true, or if he was even the one that did it.” Tatum corrects Jared, shooting him a stern look of disapproval.

“Okay, but practically the whole school knows it was him. Heliterally got suspended for a month.” Jared rolls his eyes.

“Listen, man, I try not to judge because I know what it’s like. Everyone thinks I’m this dumb jock whose life revolves around playing ball, but here I am, a huge softie having super chill, down-to-earth conversations with a band nerd, a real nerd, and a

girl who has more game than me.”

“Hey! Just because I happen to absolutely destroy the trumpet at every one of your games doesn't mean I'm a band nerd.” Jared throws his hands up in protest.

“At least you're not arealnerd.” Tatum scowls.

“Hah! I'll take mine.” I smile, knowing Greyson's right, and I do pull more than he does.

“Look, all I'm saying is don't judge this guy too hard, okay?” Greyson raises his hands in surrender.

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*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:10 am*

“Alright, whatever, you hippie.” Jared rolls his eyes again, and our laughs echo through the courtyard.

The air thins out as the school day wraps up, and I go to deliver a package of special oil paint to the art room, requested by Ms. Bardot, the school’s one and only art teacher. Despite having never taken an actual art class (thank god for music counting as a fine arts credit), she is easily my favorite teacher in the building.

I turn the knob to her class with a bag of new brushes and oil paints perched in the joint of my elbow. When I walk in, the familiar aroma of fresh paint and turpentine mixed with Ms. Bardot’s expensive perfume fills my nostrils.

The lighting is ambiently dimmed, and the room is messy as always, with racks of canvases and sinks filled with dirty cups and brushes lining the far left corner and her cluttered desk in the adjacent corner. Workstation tables are perfectly aligned with each other, lab rat style.

It’s a miracle how she manages to wear such chic clothes and keep them pristine throughout the day with the amount of mess in the nature of her classroom. It makes me think that, in the most poetic way possible, the classroom is the only place she allows herself to be messy, almost as if her disheveledness is being solely poured into her art and her room, and none of it on her actual person. She’s compartmentalized, and I like that about her.

After taking in the chaotic mess of the room, I make a beeline for the supply cabinets on the far wall. As I’m filing the new paint away, I hear a booming crash, followed by shuffling coming from behind me. Ms. Bardot didn’t tell me anyone would be here

at this hour.

My posture stiffens, and I quietly open one of the new packs of paintbrushes and grab one, positioning it in my hand, ready to attack the intruder as needed. Slowly, I turn around to find Laine, droplets of paint dripping down her arms and face, staring off right past me like she's seen a ghost. Her face falls when she sees me, and the slight downward curvature of her lips makes her look like a lost puppy.

"Laine! Jesus, you scared me." I take a deep breath of relief when I realize I had forgotten she's an artist, so of course, she'd be here.

"I'm sorry! I was just trying to grab some supplies for my project, and the whole shelf came crashing down." She looks embarrassed, almost on the verge of tears, and I realize I need to change my face from horrified to comforting.

"Are you okay?" is all I manage to get out.

"Yeah, I'm okay. I ran out before it fell, but some of the paints splashed me on their way down."

"Wait, what were you doing in there?"

"I needed a brush, and Ms. Bardot said there were some in the closet."

My face goes back to confusion for a minute, then I realize what she means.

"Ohh! I think she meant the cabinet. And actually, I just bought some new brushes. Here, take your pick." I dump the bag onto the counter and sift through the packs of brushes.

Then it hits me. The oil paints Ms. Bardot sent me to get were for Laine. For her

project. Why didn't I realize that before? From all the stories I've heard from Ms. Bardot, not many of the students here take the time or energy to learn to use oil paints as opposed to acrylic, so this can't be a coincidence.

"Thanks." Laine opens a new pack of the flatter brushes and holds them in her paint-stained hands, hesitant to take them.

"I think these are for you, too," I say, handing her the oil paints and gesturing toward what I now see is her workstation set up at the far back table. "Let me help you clean up the mess in the storage closet."

When we get to the closet, there is a puddle of acrylic paint spilled on the fallen rack, and old, frayed brushes everywhere. I bend to start picking up the brushes, and she joins me on the floor, crouching and clearly not avoiding the spilled paint like I am, as she carefully picks up each brush.

"Let me get some towels to get this paint up."

"I'm really sorry about all this."

I turn back to meet her eyes, which are now looking up at me on the verge of tears again. I know I need to do something instead of continuing to stare at her blankly, but I freeze up, unsure of how to respond to her outward show of emotion.

After far too many seconds of racking my brain for what to do now, I finally snap back to reality, rushing to say something, anything, to comfort her.

"Hey, seriously, it's okay. These supplies were old anyway. I'm pretty sure Ms. Bardot was planning on pitching them sometime in the next week. We're just helping her get it done sooner."

“Are you sure?” She blinks bits of paint out of her eyelashes.

“Positive. She’s a big procrastinator, so you probably actually did her a favor, to be honest. These brushes needed to go.” I swipe my thumb through the patchy, stiff hairs of one of the brushes I picked up, showing its age.

I leave to grab wet towels, but by the time I return, most of the paint is already gone. Poking around the closet, I look for Laine, but she’s nowhere to be found. The faint sound of water rushing from the sink in the classroom rings through, and I turn back to head into the room, following the sound. There, I find Laine at the cluttered sink, scrubbing bright red paint off her skirt. My jaw drops as I stand in awe of the paint-covered girl before me.

“Did you... Wipe the paint off the floor with your skirt?”

I laugh a little at the idea of her rubbing her butt against the floor in an attempt to mop the paint up with the fabric of her skirt. Honestly, and incredibly immaturely, I’m a bit disappointed I missed it.

She looks over at me with a soft smile as she nods.



“Why, may I ask? I brought towels.”

“Hands can be washed, and color is meant to be worn.”

I’m not entirely sure what she means, yet it feels oddly poetic. Although her hands may be able to be easily washed, her face is splattered with paint as well, and I doubt she plans to take a whole-body shower in the sink.

“Here, you have some...” I trail off, bringing the towels up to her face. I pause, hand clutching the towels, hovering over her face. Is this too close? Too intimate?

Surprisingly, she ducks her head down, bringing her cheek over to my hand and giving me a slight nod of approval. My eyes widen at her openness, considering we don’t know each other that well yet.

Despite my reservations, I start wiping paint off her left cheek, careful not to breathe too close to her face. I hold my breath, and I can tell she is too. She scrubs away at her hands and eventually up her arms, and I realize I need to get her forehead.

Unsure of how to signal that I need her to face me directly to wipe her forehead, I pull her face toward me with my dry hand and gently scrub her forehead. She laughs, which is the first time since our awkward encounter that she seems to be fully comfortable, unafraid of my reaction.

As soon as we finish cleaning up, she walks to her workstation. Naturally, I follow. On the table lies a sketchbook with an outline of a woman’s body from the side. It’s exactly how she described it, and it makes me wonder if that’s an artist thing or just a

Laine thing. Can artists capture their work into words that easily and accurately? Or does Laine's talent with pencils go beyond shapes, dipping into wordsmithing as well?

"Are you also an artist?" She looks up at me from her stool, and her eyes feel genuinely curious.

I laugh. "I can't do art to save my life. But I can admire work from others."

"Well, you sure knew which brushes to get." She's beaming now, almost as if she finds this entertaining.

"Ms. Bardot gave me a list; I'm just the errand girl. Same goes for the paints. I have no clue what those mean." I point to an assortment of letters and numbers on the paint tubes she's grabbed from my shopping bag.

"Ah, I see. So more of a looker than a doer..."

"Exactly!"

"How did you become Ms. Bardot's errand girl if you don't dabble in art at least a little?"

"Well, I'm more musically inclined, but I met Ms. Bardot on my first day of sophomore year. She was carrying fourteen variety packs of different paint brushes with bristle shapes I didn't even know existed, and seven paint palettes. I remember that day so vividly.

"I was in the art hall on my way to music appreciation class when I noticed she was struggling to open the door to her room, so I opened it for her and asked her about the different types of brushes she was carrying. She wrote me a pass to skip music

appreciation and taught me about each brush as well as some basic color theory.

“I’ve never really attempted to do art, but Ms. Bardot, always dressed to the nines, said it was important to know at least the basics of color theory so you never walk out of the house wearing black pants with a brown top. And well, the rest is history, and now I’m her top errand girl. ”

“Wait, that’s like, soon brand for those cliché inspirational stories where a kid becomes unlikely best friends with an elderly person who finds life in the kid during their last dying days. Except Ms. Bardot isn’t elderly, and no one is dying.”

“Wow, that’s really specific,” I say through a raised eyebrow at her teasingly. “Also, Ms. Bardot is in her sixties. But you got part of it right; she’s definitely not in her last dying days. That woman can throw it back like she’s still a teenager in the 70s.”

“Ms. Bardot is sixty?!”

“Yeah, I know, she looks very young for her age. But yeah, she’s got grandkids and everything.”

“I refuse to believe that.”

“Well, it’s true!”

We laugh, followed by another comfortable silence.

“So, how long have you been coming to the art room after school like this?” I ask her, curious to see if she’s made a home in the same room I have for years.

“Honestly, I found it pretty quickly after coming back to school. I’m taking an advanced-level art course with Ms. Bardot and got to know her in the time I’ve been

here. She said I could come by in the afternoons to work on my personal project as needed.”

“So you’ve been working in here for a while now.”

“Mhm. I love the ambiance in this room. It’s calming, which is what I come here for. You know, to clear my mind.”

Of what? I wonder, but I don’t ask.

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I nod, alluding to the idea that I understand what she's talking about, even though I'm intrigued to ask and actually find out. It's clear that Laine has some things from California that she doesn't want to talk about, judging by the way she clams up whenever her dad is mentioned or the way her mom changed the subject so quickly at dinner when my mom asked where he was.

I know in some capacity, I could be able to relate to her. I'm not sure what she knows about my dad, or if she even remembers what he was like when we were younger, but maybe if she did know more, she would feel comfortable opening up to me. And I know the only way to get to that point with her is for me to open up to her, too, but I'm not sure I'm ready for that conversation either.

Then again, why do I even care whether she wants to open up to me? And why do I suddenly want to let her into all of my shit? It's not like we're besties or anything.

For some reason, though, I find myself wanting to know more about her and her past. Maybe it's because she's the mysterious new (but not really new) girl? Or maybe because it feels like there are parts of her I should know from when we were (allegedly) friends before? Whatever it is, it's making me want to learn about her in ways that confuse, yet excite me.

4

Laine

I can't stop thinking about the way Drew seemed so at

home in a room she has no use for. Even worse, the way she gently turned my head to face her with a careful finger on my chin as she rubbed the paint off my forehead runs through my mind probably a million times.

God, I must've looked like an absolute fool having to have paint wiped off me like a toddler who just discovered their mom's makeup drawer. I feel drawn to her, like part of me feels tied to her in order to pay her back for her kindness in the art room.

Ever since the blowup with my father in California, I've felt extremely self-conscious about my mistakes. I have a bad habit of latching on to everyone who has seen my flaws in a sad attempt to make sure they can't go anywhere, and I definitely don't want to do that to Drew. I'll just have to avoid her from now on and pretend like our earlier encounter didn't happen. It shouldn't be too hard.

Ever since we came back to Georgia, Mother has insisted on taking us to a different church every Sunday until we've tried all the ones on her long list. She says it's crucial we find the right one. I say you can make any church the right one with a good community. But I can tell this is important to her, which makes it important to me.

Of all the churches we've tried so far, I liked the second one the best. It was slightly smaller than the one we are headed to next, though still one of Georgia's well-known mega-churches. I told myself not to get too attached, though, because Mother complained about the smell as soon as we stepped foot inside, saying something along the lines of how the smell of a church can tell you how the Lord is treated there.

I had checked out of the rest of the conversation as she droned on about the importance of finding a church with similar values to us, and how that one just wasn't it.

We set on down the road to the final church on the list: Holy Trinity. The place feels dry inside, but what it lacks in humidity, it makes up for in stained glass. The stained glass row on the bit of wall right before the ceiling is beautiful, with multi-colored crucifixes displayed along every six or so inches. Between them are cartoony-looking sheep, each stained with a light gray, circular shard of glass for the body and a darkened, transparent black for the head. I'm not sure how they managed to make a Shaun the Sheep cartoon-looking creature so alive, but they pulled it off.

The service is insightful, but nothing special compared to the multitude of mega-churches in Atlanta we've already tried. After mass, the man who I assume is the priest introduces himself as Father Robert and tells Mother about the philanthropic programs offered here and the community lifestyle. He hands her a brochure that I peek over to glance at, titled: The 7 Deadly Sins (and how to redeem yourself).

She flips through the pages, and my eyes dart away to the stained glass again. I find myself not wanting to look at the brochure any longer for fear that I might start overthinking whether I've committed any of the sins listed. As I stare intently at the high walls of the church, the glass feels all the more captivating.

The drive home is long. Mother rambles on about the pros and cons of each church while I stare out the window, trying not to doze off again. It certainly doesn't help that most of the scenery is endless fields of who knows what.

About two minutes out from home, we pass my old elementary school. Nothing looks like it has changed from the outside. The familiar maroon brick walls are still intact, strong as ever, and the dark beige pillars still stand.

I shift up in my seat to get a quick glimpse of the playground in the back behind the building. The nostalgia hits like a rock to the head, and suddenly I feel a strange pull to go back and visit for old times' sake. Luckily, downtown Atlanta has enough action to keep the cops busy, enough to not bother checking whether teenagers sneak

onto their old suburban elementary school fields.

Honestly, I need to clear my head; today felt so long. I make a plan to go after dinner, and Mother agrees, implying that it would be a good way to think about which of today's churches I like best, though I don't bother telling her that I actually don't have much of an opinion after she ruled out my favorite.

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I make my way over to the playground after dinner and make sure to bundle up since it's cold and dark, and the streetlights are already on. This will be the first time I'm truly left alone with my thoughts since we've moved back here, and I'd like to do it comfortably. However, part of me is scared that seeing and being on my old playground will bring back memories I don't want to resurface.

Don't get me wrong, a lot of great things happened in elementary. I had a great childhood, and that's what scares me. Reminiscing over that part of my life that I'll never get back, because what's the point of wallowing over something you can't control? It's how I adapt so well to change; I just don't think about it. It may not be the healthiest thing to do, but it's always worked for me, and I don't plan on messing that up now.

As I make my way around the bend and down to the playground, I notice a shadow coming off the swings, then a dark figure sitting atop one of them as I slowly walk closer.

My heart pounds as I approach the playground, contemplating turning back before it's too late and I become another true crime victim on the podcast girls my age listen to as they drive to school without a worry in the world. Okay, maybe I listen to too many true crime podcasts myself, but seriously, who else could possibly be here at this hour? I step quietly, careful to avoid the leaves on the ground that look the



crunchiest.

I step closer, and closer, and closer, and closer.

It's Drew. Of course, Drew comes here all mysteriously at night. I should have known.

"Drew?" I call out, revealing myself from out of the shadows.

She squints and raises a hand, hovering it over her eyes. "Laine? Is that you?"

"Yeah, it is. What are you doing here?"

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“I could ask you the same thing.”

“I came here to think.”

“To think...”

When I reach the swing next to hers, I can tell she’s smirking.

“Yes. My parents chose thought daughter, so I think a lot.”

“Well, thought daughter, would you like to think next to me?”

She pats the swing next to her, and I sit, questioning what I’d even think about now that there’s another body next to me.

“Soooo, whatcha thinking about?” She purses her lips and looks at me, intrigued.

“We’ve been church hunting for the past few weeks.”

“Church hunting?”

“Yes, a different one each Sunday since we’ve moved back. My mother’s idea, not mine. I don’t really care.”

I know what people at school must say about me, so I make it a point to sound nonchalant about the whole religion thing, even though I do really care.

Drew lets out a soft laugh, which settles into an even softer smile. “I’ve gathered.”

We share a comfortable silence.

“I guess it’s my turn to ask, why are you here?”

Drew fumbles with the skin around her thumb, and suddenly her expression goes stiff.

“I guess the same reason you are. To think.”

“Do you come here often? Is this like your thinking spot?” I offer a small chuckle, trying to lighten the mood that I seemed to have accidentally dampened.

It works, and she smiles again.

“Actually, yeah. I come here a lot during the week, sometimes on weekends when I don’t have tennis tournaments. It started when I was picking up trash left here by the kids, and eventually, I found this place pretty peaceful at night, so I started coming to just sit with myself.”

“That’s actually pretty cool.”

“Yeah, I like it.” Drew turns her head to me, and suddenly she’s serious again. “So tell me your thoughts.”

“My... what?”

“Well, you came here to think, alone presumably, but you’re not because I’m here, so tell me what you’re thinking about.”

Wow. She's forward, but I like it.

Her swing stops rocking as she looks straight into my eyes, so intently that I can't help but notice how her deep brown complements the moon's pale light.

She would make amazing art.

Looking at her tonight in the dim moonlight, I can perfectly see the angular shape of her face and the depth of the lines extending from the sides of her nose to her lips. The lighting is absolutely perfect, and as an artist, I want to draw her. I want to capture this moment in colors that speak the words my social filters stop me from saying aloud right now.

I stare back at her until I remember she's awaiting my response. Waiting to hear the jumble of thoughts in my brain that have never left said brain, let alone gone to another person before. I don't usually let people in, but for some reason, I find myself spilling my guts to her right here atop the itchy mulch of our childhood playground. "I wish we never moved to California."

She waits for me to say more, still staring with soft eyes.

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“My father worked for a rubber production company, a very successful one. He got a promotion that ended up being a completely different position and required him to be close to headquarters in California, so we moved.”

Drew’s eyes still haven’t left my face, and with each word I say, they burn into mine. I haven’t talked about what happened with my father to anyone, and at this moment, as I finally turn the wheel to the vault, the world feels dizzy. Everything around me is blurry except for Drew, focused in the center of my field of vision.

I keep going.

“He was very involved in his family and his church prior to the move. Everything was perfect, but about a year or two in, he started to struggle with the new position and had serious self-image issues due to the pressure he felt from the church to be the man of the household, and when he felt like he could no longer perform his patriarchal provider duties, he crumbled.”

I pause, waiting for Drew to say something, but instead, she puts a hand over mine and nods for me to continue.

I want to stop myself. Stop myself from doing the one thing I vowed I wouldn’t do with Drew and oversharing. But the small, frustrating part of me that I can’t control takes over, and I continue against my better judgment.

“He just couldn’t handle it anymore, and you know, California is pretty open and liberal when it comes to drugs. He got involved with some bad people who gave him unhealthy, yet unfortunately very efficient, coping mechanisms. The drugs ruined

him.” I feel a tear run down my cheek. I reach up to wipe it, and hopefully pretend it didn’t happen, but Drew beats me to it, caressing my cheek with the hand that isn’t holding mine. I’ve never been comforted like this before. Never had anyone who would listen to me like this.

“He started getting more involved with those stoner crowds and less with the church and with us, his family. Then one night, we got a call that he’d been taken into the county jail for assaulting and killing a prostitute.” I’m now on the floor, trying to hold it in the best I can, but the tears persevere until they’re practically streaming from my tear ducts.

“I think he was trying to turn himself around. Be more involved with the church. But the drugs had already gotten to him. He told the cops that sex workers were sinners. That he was protecting the state of California from them, I guess in his own twisted way.” Drew still doesn’t say anything, adjusting herself closer to me on the scratchy mulch, her hand still over mine.

“That’s why we’ve been church-hopping these past few weeks. My mother blames it all on the fact that he couldn’t uphold God’s expectations of him, so he strayed from His path. She says if he were just stronger and resisted the urges and temptations of sin, and the drugs, he could have pulled through and seen God’s light at the end of the tunnel. I don’t know what I believe about my father, but I think that’s her way of coping with it all. And now we’re back here, in Georgia, running away from our problems and starting over. Kind of...”

I sniffle again, and the sudden panic sets in. “I’m so sorry. That was a lot, I don’t know why I just told you all of that. I’ve never told anyone before.”

“Don’t be sorry,” is all Drew says.

Then she holds me.

I've been trying to hold it in for so long that now the floodgates have burst and I'm ugly crying in the arms of a girl I barely know. I've always been Little Miss Perfect, always pressured to live up to the standards of my parents and now the church. But despite the limited interactions I've had with Drew, I don't feel like I have to be that girl with her. With Drew, I can be messy and vulnerable and sad and broken. And she just listens.

She has listening eyes that reflect the moon's light.

Eyes that make you feel you're the only person in the world.

Eyes that beg to be made into art.

5

Drew

I can't stop thinking about that moment of vulnerability

Laine and I had last night. The evening plays in my head the whole way to school, and I can't shake the sight of her breaking down in my arms. I hate that I panicked, not knowing what to say. All I did was hold her, but I should have said something to comfort her. I could have said anything, but instead, I said nothing at all.

The memory plays so vividly in my mind. Her breaking down on the ground in front of the swings. Her hair falling so perfectly over her shoulders, even when her head was a mess on the inside. The way her lips puckered and pursed down when she cried, and her tears carried years of grief for a father she thought she once knew. It felt so raw, so personal. It was everything I felt about my dad.

I know our situations aren't the same at all because my dad is still out there

somewhere, living happily without me or my mom. But still, I understood perfectly her grief of losing someone she once cared for, yet I chose to say nothing. Nothing! How could I be so stupid?

I want to ask her about it today. I want to talk to her more about what she—no, we—are feeling. But the moment felt so intense that I'm afraid of prying too much and pushing her away. I understand now how our moms must feel with each other, having someone to relate to after losing someone you love. Suddenly, that whirlwind trip together next month makes a little more sense.

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When I get to first period, Laine is already in her seat, shuffling uncomfortably and fidgeting with the zipper of her backpack. I contemplate going over to her and saying something—anything—about last night. About all the things she said, and all the things I wish I said. I muster up all my courage and decide to do it.

“Hey.” I give her an awkward wave after setting my backpack next to my seat and walking over to her desk.

“Hi.” She looks up at me, then quickly back down at her backpack, like she's looking for something in there.

“So... last night-” She looks over at Thom and then darts her eyes back at me.

“What about it?”



*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:10 am*

Ouch.

“Don’t you think we should talk about it? I’m free after school today if you are. Maybe we could meet back at the-”

“I, uh, I don’t know if I can. I’ve got something tonight.” Laine says quietly, still looking down. I glance over to see Thom glancing over at me, then going back to pretending not to listen.

“Oh, alright then.”

I bow my head awkwardly in defeat and head back to my seat. Now it’s been confirmed. I really messed up by not saying anything remotely helpful last night. I’ve always been terrible at comforting people, and I never know what to say when someone cries in front of me. The best I know to do is to just touch them in a way that makes them feel touched on the inside, so that’s what I tried to do last night. But clearly, it wasn’t enough.

Honestly, I’m more mad at myself for not being able to pull any comforting words out of my ass at the moment than actually not being able to be comforting. I mean, it isn’t that hard to at least bullshit some sympathetic words, even though I really did care, yet I couldn’t do it.

I start to space out as our AP Environmental Science teacher, Mr. Rickshaw, drones on about the pros and cons of different irrigation methods.

About halfway through class, someone taps on the back of my shoulder. As I turn

around, I'm greeted with a tiny folded note. I thank the girl behind me who passed it along and open it carefully.

Inside, there's a phone number written in neat, bubbly handwriting with the letters LL next to it. I cock my head back subtly and see Laine's eyes go big and a soft smile plasters over her face. I smile back at her, and my face turns pink.

Yes! This is good. Maybe this means I didn't fully mess it up last night.

I grab my phone out of my backpack slowly so Mr. Rickshaw doesn't see, and I text the number.

Me

8:40 am hey

Laine8:40 am Hi

Laine

8:41 am I'm sorry

Me

8:41 am for what?

Laine

8:41 am

Everything. Last night

This morning

Me

8:42 am

it's okay

are you okay?

Laine

8:42 am

I'm okay, just really embarrassed

I hate that you had to see me that way. I don't know what came over me.

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*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:10 am*

That's not like me to just spill everything like that

Me

8:42 am

hey it's okay! i won't tell a soul pinky promise!

Laine

8:42 am

I appreciate it.

Me

8:43 am

and im sorry i suck at comforting. i never know what to say and i always freeze up

Laine

8:43 am

I don't think you suck.

I actually found you pretty comforting

Me

8:43 am

you really think so?

i'm so glad

i was worried i made you feel worse by not saying anything

Laine

8:43 am

You didn't.

No one has ever listened to me like that before

Just then, Mr. Rickshaw clears his throat loudly. When I look up, his eyes shoot between me and Laine. I quickly shove my phone into my bag and mutter, "I'm sorry." I don't look back, but I assume Laine does the same because Mr. Rickshaw goes back to lecturing about the ideal humidity conditions for crops.

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By the time the lunch bell rings, Greyson, Jared, Tatum, and I are huddled at our table discussing winter plans, even though we aren't even past October yet.

"Okay, so we should make our matching sweatshirts the first week of November, then our baking and PowerPoint night the second week, and then Christmas movies during the third and fourth weeks to prepare for December." Tatum pulls up a

schedule she's made on her laptop.

"No way you sectioned off two whole weeks in November just in preparation for December." Greyson scrunches his face in disapproval.

"Well, lucky for you, we'll only have one week of Christmas December prepping because I'm going out of town the first week of November with Laine and her mom, and then I have a tennis tournament later that weekend, so the schedule will need to be pushed back a week." I fake an eye roll.

"Wait, I forgot you were doing that Blue Ridge trip thing." Jared chimes in.

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“Stay safe.” Tatum rolls her eyes for real.

Greyson and Jared exchange looks.

I look around.

“Am I missing something?”

“It’s just that, like, do you even know Laine well enough to go on this trip with her? I mean, come on, she chose to sit next to Thom. I even heard they’re friends for real now. Like, talking outside of schoolfriends.” Jared explains.

“Yeah, are you sure you should be staying in a secluded cabin in the mountains with her? She could be a killer for all we know! And nobody will hear you scream out there...” Tatum adds.

“You watch too many horror movies, Tatum. Look, all we’re saying is just make sure you know her intentions with you before you go.” Greyson says, mediating the conversation like he always does.

“Intentions? She’s just a teenage girl, the same as me and Tatum.” I throw my hands up in protest.

Greyson holds up his hands. “Just feel her out to see if there’s more motivation behind the move. You talk about her an awful lot, and it is odd for her to just move across the country at the start of senior year. It’s clear that you’re intrigued by her in some capacity, just make sure you do your research.”

“Just be straight with me! What are you guys even implying? She and her mom moved here because her mom is religious, and we are right in the bible belt of the South. There’s nothing more to it.”

I’m not sure why my friends are flaming Laine, or why I’m feeling so protective over her, but they are, and I am. Perhaps after last night, hearing her story and how it made feelings about my dad that I didn’t even know I had resurface, it feels like they are targeting me in a way, too. Like sharing trauma and feelings with Laine makes us the same person.

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On the way back home from school, I stop by ArtsToGo and grab Ms. Bardot’s order of oil pastel crayons and sketchbooks. Her intro-level class is learning shadows, so she’s sent me to get their materials.

As I’m leaving the shop, my eye catches the back of a familiar chestnut brown wave of hair at the cafe next door. It’s Laine, of course. I always tend to run into her in the oddest places.

As I walk toward her, I notice she’s with someone. A boy. When I get closer, I realize it’s Thom. The realization sends a volt to my stomach, almost like someone sucker-punched me right in the middle of it.

I guess my friends were right about her and Thom. Though as much as I can admit they’re right about this, I really hope they weren’t right about the other things they said about her.

I contemplate going up to them, crashing their little tea party, and saying hi, but then I remember how Laine acted in class today when I tried to talk to her with Thom next to her, and I decide against it. I wonder if she and Thom are together. Like, together



together. Like, dating together. Dating each other, I mean.

I wonder if he's seen her cry like I have, or if she's told him about what happened in California. But then again, why do I even care? It's not like she's only mine, or I even want her to be. So why do I care so much that they're together at this cafe right now?

I mean, maybe, if what my friends said about her and Thom is true, then everything else they said could be true as well. What other secrets could she be harvesting? Maybe I do need to look more into her- I mean, this. I need to know more about her, and the trip to the mountains is the perfect opportunity to do so.

6

Laine

The ride to the mountains is long, and I, Drew, and

both of our mothers are piled into her mother's Honda Pilot SUV. Aside from formalities, Drew's been quiet. I'm only slightly worried that I put too much trust in her the other night at the playground. What if my impulsiveness made her feel obligated to carry that much weight? What if it was too soon to let her in, and I scared her away?

Well, it was definitely too soon, but as much as I tried to keep it in, I just couldn't for some reason. Almost as if the moonlight was compelling me to tell her everything. To let every one of my bottled-up emotions out right then and there on that playground mulch. Even so, how stupid of me to give in and let it take over.

"Okay, go-to road trip snack?" I say, desperate to kill the silence.

"Cheese balls all the way." Drew reaches down and grabs a jar of cheese balls from

her bag.

“You had that ready!” I give a playful, surprised face.

“You betcha! It’s in case of emergencies.” She laughs.

Laughing, that’s a good sign. I decide to milk this chance as much as I can.

“What predicament could you find yourself in that could possibly call for cheese balls?” I lay my hand out and she pours a few onto my palm.

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“Cravings, of course.” She rolls her eyes. The mood feels instantly lighter, and I feel better now. “My turn to ask a question! Is Taylor Swift the only music artist you listen to? Because that’s the only thing that’s played this entire ride.”

“Listen, Taylor’s Folklore album is the best for this kind of foggy fall weather,” I exclaim, throwing my hands up in protest. “What would you turn on, given a situation wherein I give you aux?”

“Definitely Clairo or Noah Kahan, if we’re staying in this weathergenre.”

An easy smile creeps onto her lightened face as she talks about her musical interests. I can’t help but stare.

“Interesting...” I smirk at her jokingly and she laughs again, her laugh just as bellowy as that first day in class.

Her laughter relaxes me. Maybe she was just tired. Maybe I didn’t mess up too badly after all.

“You’re interesting,” Drew says, sounding the most genuine I’ve ever heard someone be.

Her words send jitters through my body, and I shift in my seat in an attempt to hide it. Something about the way she says “you’re” makes me believe she truly means it. But what exactly does she find interesting about me? Does she think of me the way I thought of her the other night at the playground?

Whatever she means by it doesn't matter, though, because whatever I felt for her then needs to be shut down. It was too intense. Too intense for a girl to think about another girl like that. Girls who are supposed to be friends, or, trying to at least.

\*\*\*\*\*

We pull into the driveway of the cabin, and the ground is damp as I step onto fallen orange and red leaves. The building is a quaint A-frame perched perfectly on top of a hill. There's still mist in the humid air, giving the wooden log walls of the cabin a darker look.

The interior has the same cozy feel as the exterior did, with frames hung along the walls of cheesy lake quotes and fluffy sherpa blankets laid carefully along the tops of the couches. There's a kitchen to the left, and a small living room area straight ahead with board games and playing cards stacked haphazardly around the room. Atop the loveseat in the foyer sit two perfectly fluffed pillows that read, "lake vibes." Somillennial. I roll my eyes and chuckle to myself.

Drew comes to join me over by the loveseat and scoffs. She must have thought the same as I did.

"Okay, girls, so around the corner, there is the master bedroom. You'll be staying there. Marissa and I will be in the room upstairs." Drew's mother, Anne, guides us to the master bedroom, then leaves to set her bags in the upstairs room with my mother.

They gave us the master bedroom? Don't the adults usually get the

"Uh, Laine?" Drew nudges my elbow as we walk into the room to set our bags down, interrupting my stream of thoughts.

Of course, the master bedroom has only one bed. Why didn't that click in my head

earlier? Our mothers took the upstairs room because it had two beds.

“You know, that loveseat out there looked really comfy. I don’t mind sleeping there. Let me just set my bags down in here.” Drew scrambles, setting her duffle bag down in the corner of the room.

“No, it’s okay, you stay here. I’ll take the loveseat.” I wave my hand, turning toward the door.

“Wait, no! You’re taller.”

I turn back and stare at her, racking my brain for another excuse. I have none.

“You know what, this bed looks like a king. We can definitely both fit if we stay on our sides. I think there’s even room for a pillow barrier in between.” Drew suggests.

“Oh... right.”

Why, universe? Why??

I walk over to the closet in search of extra pillows, but there is nothing in there except for an extra quilt that looks uncharacteristically scratchy for the style of this cabin. Annoyance now clearly showing on my face, I march over to the bed and start shuffling the sheets around. I then go to look underneath the bed, only to find nothing but a dirty dryer ball.

“Hey, hey! Calm down. I don’t think there’ll be any extra pillows under the sheets or the actual bed. If they weren’t in the closet, then there probably aren’t any more besides the two on the bed right now.”

Drew storms over to where I’m standing and rests a hand on my shoulder. “We can

go a few nights without a lesbian prevention guard.”

Slight panic ensues inside of me. I don’t know whether I’m freaked out over whether she’s a lesbian, thinks I am, or because I know my mother wouldn’t want that for either of us.

I can tell she senses the panic on my face when she adds, “Relax, I’m joking.”

My heart slows to a steady pace, and my vision unblurs, trying to shake the thought from my head.

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“Let’s go see what our moms have planned for dinner.” She adds, grabbing my wrist and gently pulling me out to the kitchen.

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After a delicious carrot soup dinner, we head back to the room for the night, and our mothers go upstairs. As I’m brushing my teeth, I hear Drew yelp from the bedroom.

“What? What’s wrong?” I ask, frantically running out of the bathroom, toothpaste and spit still hanging around the corners of my mouth.

“Today’s your birthday?” My mother’s Facebook page is pulled up on Drew’s phone, and her eyes widen.

“Oh, uh- yeah.” My body relaxes, and I duck back into the bathroom to rinse my mouth out, not wanting to make this a bigger deal than it needs to be. But of course, Drew follows me in.

“Um, hello? You didn’t tell me today was your birthday!” She throws her hands out to the sides.

“It’s really not a big deal, Drew.” I let the water run over my toothbrush as Drew slides over to the sink with me.

“It is! You’re legally an adult now!!”

“It really doesn’t have to be a big deal. It’s just another year around the sun. Yippee.”

I offer her a sarcastically stoic face, but that doesn't wipe the grin off hers.

"Why don't you like birthdays? Especially this one! Eighteen is a monumental milestone. If anything, you should be extra excited about this one!" She nudges me as I put my toothbrush back in its travel container.

I don't bother telling her that eighteen is also the age at which I could be tried as an adult if I commit a crime. That, if I ever become like my father, I'll suffer the same consequences he did. I no longer have that "legal minor" safeguard. The only thing that's stopping me now from ending up like him is morality.

"I'm just not into that stuff, okay? Could we please drop it?" I swat her away.

Drew's face turns dim for a moment, almost as if she could hear my thoughts. Then, that perky smile of hers comes back, and suddenly I'm worried about what she's about to say next.

"Will you draw me?" She runs back to the bed, bounces a few times, then lies out on her side with her head propped up on her hand. She gives an overexaggerated satirical, pouty face.

"What?" I slowly walk toward her and the bed.

"Laine, I want you to draw me like one of your French girls." Drew giggles and sits up straight now, reaching her arms out for me to join her on the bed.

This makes me laugh. Like, really laugh. For the first time since we've gotten here, possibly. That's the one thing about Drew. She always knows how to make me feel at ease when I'm stressed. Between last week at the playground and today with the one-bed situation, she always manages to calm my nerves, but not dismiss them. I like that about her.



“Did you just... quote Titanic?”

I sit on the opposite end of the bed on yet another scratchy quilt laid out at the foot of the bed. So many scratchy quilts yet no extra pillows? This place is definitely not getting a five-star review from me when we go home. Drew laughs and nods her head, patting the spot next to her. I join her at the head of the bed, pulling a pillow over my lap and grabbing my sketchpad.

“You’re so cheesy.” I flip to a blank page and start sketching faint lines with my pencil. “But, if you insist...”

“I insist! I’ve actually been in the market for a new headshot. My LinkedIn profile’s been lacking in action recently.”

“Ah, yes. A full-body headshot, I presume?” I chuckle, now rounding out the shape of her chin on the paper.

“Exactly! Now, how should I pose? Like this?” She sprawls out on the bed, limbs going in all directions like a starfish, and her left hand playfully smacks me in the face.

“Absolutely not!” I smile, gently grabbing her wrist and positioning her hand under her chin.

It’s clear she’s never modeled before, because her wrist goes loose as soon as I place it, forcing me to reposition it. I reach for her other hand and place it on the duvet, positioning each finger so that it looks naturally laid out. Then I move to her legs, bending them back and placing them slightly unaligned for dimension. As I reach for her legs, she jerks them back, almost kicking me in the face.

“That tickles!” She cackles.

“Hold still!” I grunt, still smiling from her cheesy Titanic quote.

Finally, I get all of her limbs stationed in place and set to draw. My pencil moves smoothly across the paper, outlining each curve of her body. It is at this moment that I realize I’ve never actually taken in her features this close before.

She’s still giggling, and I notice how her mouth curls down when she smiles, yet it still feels warm, unlike a frown. Her dimples protrude outward instead of inward, and her eyes crease further and further into a waning crescent the larger her smile gets.

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She smells a sweet scent of cardamom and basil, which fills my nose, relaxing me further than her words ever have. As my pencil works its way down her body, drawn on the paper, I can't help but observe the way her hips sink deep towards the top where her torso meets her pelvis.

If I didn't already believe in God, if anything—or anyone—were to make me a believer, it would be Drew's body in the most intimate, yet innocent way. As if every groove on her body was meticulously made to be there by an overarching force of nature. Like she was created by God Himself.

How could someone have such intricate features that lay so perfectly aligned with each other, all on one body? I thought I had studied the anatomy of the human body to the fullest extent for my personal project, using my own as a reference, but after tonight, my studies don't hold a candle in comparison to Drew's.

7

Drew

The first night at the cabin goes swimmingly. Given

Laine's neat and composed nature, I expect her and I to both stay on our own sides of the bed, but to my surprise, she sleeps all over the place. I think she must have kicked me at least four times last night and starfished at least twice.

When she wakes up, her hair is a rat's nest, and her voice is raspy, and as much as I'd like to say it's not a good look for her, she somehow makes it oddly attractive.

The forecast for today is calling for rain all day, so the plan is to attack the mess of board games and playing cards in the living room as well as consume hours of stupid budget movies—the kind that are bad in all the best ways.

Turns out, Laine is awful at Giant Jenga. Who would have thought? A thin, lanky girl with delicate artist's hands struggles with carefully pulling pieces of wood from a careful and strategic stack. Though I have to admit, it is adorably hilarious watching her squeal when she senses the tower of giant wooden bricks impending and imminent collapse.

But what she lacks in motor dexterity, she makes up for in strategy card games. She has an impeccable poker face, which ends up winning her most of the potato chips we bet on during poker.

A day that was supposed to be our slow day flies fast as we make it fun in each other's company.

A few rounds of Uno and two movies later, the rain clears up and our moms decide to go for a stroll along the water to walk off the pizza we ordered for dinner, leaving me and Laine alone to find another terribly made, tacky movie to end off the night.

“What are your thoughts on early 2000s Disney?” I ask Laine, hoping for a slightly higher budget but equally as cheesy production to go to sleep on.

“I’m cool with Disney. Although I haven’t seen many of the teenmovies, mostly just the classics.”

“Wait, you’re telling me you’ve never seen Camp Rock? Or Princess Protection Program?” I gawk at her in disbelief.

She offers an awkward chuckle, head bowed, fidgeting with the skin around her

fingers. "I have not."

"Oh my god, we have to have a Disney movie marathon."

"Sounds good to me!"

"There are so many good teen Disney movies that became staples in my childhood. You have to watch all of them!" I hold my head high and shoot her a playful, cocky smile.

I'm not sure why, but suddenly I'm feeling excited to share a part of myself that I chose to bury, just like she had with her father. The only difference is that her reasoning was because of what her father did, and mine is because of everything my father didn't do.

I've blocked out most of my childhood because I always told myself I would rather not remember at all than form long-lasting memories of missing someone. But now, right here on this stupidly cozy loveseat, I find myself wanting to dig up those repressed memories just so that I can share them with Laine.

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The evening chills off, the air still moist, but the ground has mostly dried. Our moms came back tired from their walk and decided to call it a night, leaving Laine and me alone to entertain ourselves once again. We sit on the loveseat in silence, racking our brains for what to do for the rest of the night.

Just then, Laine springs up from her spot, leaving a butt groove in the memory foam cushion, which I take a beat to laugh at.

"I'm feeling a little bloated from the pizza. Why don't we take a walk outside near

the docks?” Laine rubs her stomach and nods toward the back screen door.

“But our moms are asleep. We’d have to wake them to let them know we’ve left.”

“Or... we could just leave?” A smirk travels across her face, her left foot tapping against the hardwood floor.

“What do you mean, just leave?”

“Like, I don’t know, sneak out or something?”

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This catches me off guard. I never in a million years would have thought Laine would suggest sneaking out, but it's honestly refreshing to see her take charge for once.

I laugh. "Sneak out?"

"Yes... I assume you've done it before?"

"Um, no, actually, I haven't." I cock my head at her, looking up with confusion.

I can't tell if I should be flattered or insulted. Who does she think I am? Some kind of teen rebel? Because I only really wear flannels and snapbacks?

"Wow. You know, I kind of thought you would have before." Her smile widens, as if she's just caught on that the roles are switched and she's in control now.

"I'm not a delinquent." I roll my eyes at her and stand up. "But if you were to challenge me to a race to the docks..."

And out the screen door I run, leaving her to catch it so it doesn't slam shut. I run on my tippy toes, careful not to make the docks creak too loudly. Laine's rushed footsteps echo behind me, and I can hear her catching up. I pummel toward the dock assigned to our cabin, not slowing to catch a breath once.

Before I know it, I've reached the end of the dock, imbalanced and dizzy. My head falls forward toward the water, my feet still catching up behind me. I swear my life flashes before my eyes until I'm met with an abrupt yank on my left arm, and my face stops just a few inches shy of the water.

Then, I'm pulled back up to the docks and onto my feet. Now it's Laine's turn to hold me in her arms. We stand inches apart, one of her hands still holding my arm and the other around my waist. My breaths are heavy and warm, still processing what happened.

"You should..." Laine whispers, our faces still close together. "Probably be more careful."

Her breath is warm on my face, still smelling of the hot chocolate we made to complement our pizza dinner. We lock eyes, and a comfortable silence rings out as I realize I'm now holding her too.

After what feels like the heaviest minute of my life, I snap out of it and back into reality.

"I'm sorry. I-" I pull away abruptly and cross my arms over my chest awkwardly.

"Hey, don't be! I think you won the race." She smiles, instantly lightening the mood again.

We sit on the edge of the dock, our feet dangling just above the freezing water I almost fell into. The moon is full again tonight, and the stars are out, just like it was the other night at the playground. That night still plays so vividly in my mind, and I want to ask her more about it, but then I remember what I saw with her and Thom at the cafe.

There are so many things I want to ask her about, but unsure of when or how to do it. We share another comfortable silence for a few minutes. Finally, I get the courage to ask her the most pressing thing that's occupied my mind these past few days.

"So, you and Thom?" I gently nudge her shoulder, hoping that getting her to laugh by



teasing her will cover the sound of my heart thumping alarmingly fast inside my chest.

“Thom? What about him?” She scrunches her face in the cutest way she does when she thinks what someone just told her is silly, and god, just from that thought alone, I’m not sure I’m ready for her answer.

“Well, you know, uh-” I awkwardly rub the back of my neck with my hand, hoping to calm my pulse while I try to find the words I’m looking for. “People have been talking about you guys. Being together, I mean.”

She laughs. She laughs so hard, I’m afraid she might fall in, and I’ll have to catch her this time. She starts smacking me, still roaring with laughter. I glance at her, confused. I’m glad someone finds my nervous tick amusing.

“Me and Thom?” She asks, still lightly laughing. I nod.

“Thom and I are currently getting DNA tests together.” She says, so matter-of-factly that it rolls off her tongue with ease.

What an odd couple bonding activity, but who am I to judge?

I can tell she senses my confusion because then she adds, “Only my mother’s side is Argentinian. My father descends from the Irish. We found that we had family from the same town, and then we started naming great-grandparents, and coincidentally—or not—Thom’s had the same names as mine. We believe we may be very distant relatives.”

OH MY GOD.

Of all the things I was preparing myself to hear her say, this was definitely not one of

them. I was honestly expecting her to go off about how they are meant to be together forever, and that he's the love of her life, but I suppose this is way better—and far more comical.

“That's insane,” is all I can get out.

“My thoughts exactly, but you know, we'll see when the test results come back,” She says so casually, I think I may rip my hair out.

Laine glances out over the water, then springs up again, like she's just sprouted a brand new idea while we're sitting here.

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“Have you ever skinny-dipped?” She turns to me, her eyes searing into mine. I can’t tell if she’s still on the high from the power dynamic switch from earlier or the adrenaline from catching me before I fell into this frigid water that she now wants to jump into butt naked. Whichever it is, it’s giving me both emotional and physical whiplash.

“Okay, judging by the look on your face right now and your reaction to my idea of sneaking out, I’m going to assume the answer is no.”

“Like I said before, I’m not a delinquent. If I hadn’t snuck out before, then I most definitely haven’t skinny dipped either.”

“But, youhavesnuck out now, technically.”

“I have...”

“So, skinny dip with me.” Her smile widens again, and it’s like I’m talking to a whole different person than the quiet, awkward Laine I hung out with all day today. For some reason, though, I like this version of Laine just as much.

“I don’t know...”

“Okay, half skinny dip with me.”

“Half ?”

“Yeah, like, let’s just swim in our underwear!”

“You’re aware that that water is freezing, right? I could literally feel the chill coming off of it when I almost face-planted in it.”

“That’s part of the experience!”

“It is?”

“Listen, if you’re not getting in, then that’s your choice, but I’m going for it.”

As soon as she finishes her sentence, she starts stripping on the dock, leaving only her matching lavender bra and underwear on. Taking a running start, she jumps in, causing a wave of freezing water to come up and splash me.

“OH MY GOD!” I screech, chills going down my whole body.

“You’re already wet now! Just get in. It’ll be colder now if you sit outside!” Laine calls out from a few feet away from the dock.

I don’t know what overcomes me, but suddenly I’m stripping to my bra and underwear and cannonballing in. My eyes widen as my toes hit the rocks beneath me, and I realize just how shallow the water is compared to how it looks. The impact sends a shooting pain up my legs, but the mix of adrenaline and freezing water temperature keeps the pain relatively at bay.

I doggy paddle over to where Laine is, and I just know I look like a mess. My hair is sticking to my face as I’m gasping for air, finally reaching my destination a few inches away from Laine again.

We’re face to face now, lips purple and teeth chattering. She smiles again and then kicks off to float on her back. I follow suit, pushing myself up above the water and looking up at the sky, my breathing paced as I keep myself afloat.

The stars glimmer, scattered across the darkened sky in various patterns and creating an array of lustrous white specks all around us. Their radius stretches down to the water in the distance, and it feels so surreal, better than any immersive planetarium experience I've ever had.

Together, Laine and I lay still in yet another comfortable silence, staring up at the stars. I can't physically see her right now, but I feel her presence through the ripples made by the small laps in the water around me.

In this moment with her, I forget everything I've held onto from my past. Everything my dad didn't do and everything hers did. The world feels silent, almost as if it were just me and her existing together in it. It feels like maybe, just maybe, we will be okay. That everything—our past, present, future—will be okay. A moment so intimate, I never want it to end.

I never thought I would say this, but despite the short amount of time we've spent together since her return to Georgia, I think Laine may be becoming one of my closest friends.

Abruptly, Laine repositions herself upright.

"Come here." Her muffled voice ripples through the water and into my ear. I sit upright as well, paddling to stay afloat in this new position.

"What?" I heave heavily, still out of breath from the deep concentration it took to stay afloat on my back.

"Come here," she repeats. "I'm cold and I need body heat."

She paddles over to where I'm floating, closing the gap between us. I stare blankly at her, my brain still processing what she's asking. She guides us closer to shore, where

our bodies are still fully immersed in water, but leaving room for our heads to stay above the surface.

I feel her arms wrap around me, and her hands make their way to my back, clutching the strings of my bra. She slides her legs between mine, intermingling them under the water, both of us still kicking to stay afloat.

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When she brings her hands up to brush soaked hair out of her face, I notice there's still freshly dried paint on her fingers. I don't remember her even bringing paint here, but somehow her hands are still stained by it, almost like it's permanently tattooed on her skin at all times. Like, even the mucky lake water can't wash away her color.

Instantly, my insides are burning, and suddenly I'm not shivering anymore. I wrap my arms around her shoulders, melting into her embrace for warmth. Our faces are inches apart again, and I can't pull my eyes off her.

I stare softly into her eyes, admiring the droplets of water that rest ever so delicately on her lashes and the way the pigmented swirls in her eyes look to be at war between green and brown, almost as if her parents' genes couldn't decide whose eyes she would inherit, so they went with both. I suppose the logical term for that is hazel, but nothing about Laine feels logical.

We don't say anything, still feeling the tension and warmth from our bodies pressed together. I can tell, though, that on the outside her face is still cold by the way her rounded cheeks are extra rosy and her lips are still shaking, more subtly now, but still.

Between the light from the stars and the moisture from the air and water, her hair has turned a burnt brown, almost the color of mine when dry, and it sticks to her forehead messily.

I'm not sure if this is an appropriate thought to have right now, but I can't help but think that maybe both of her parents belong in prison, because it should be illegal to make a daughter so radiantly beautiful.

My thoughts are interrupted when I feel a drop of wetness fall from the sky right on the top of my head. I look up, mouth slightly agape, and another drop falls on my tongue.

I pull her closer and whisper in her ear. “I think it’s raining.”

“I love swimming in the rain.” She gives a soft chuckle. “And dancing, and singing, and jumping in it.” God, I love her ability to romanticize everything in life. I wonder if this is how she always remains so happy on the outside despite everything she’s battling on the inside.

The rain pours harder, causing me to flinch. Laine pulls away, laughing and spinning out across the water in the same starfish position she sleeps in. She looks so ridiculous, but I love seeing her this way, especially after seeing her in the complete opposite mindset at the playground.

As she’s spinning around in the heavy pour of rain now, a large flash of light shines over her face. The flash is soon followed by a booming roar of thunder, and her face widens.

“Oh my god. We have to get out of here!” She’s still laughing, now frantically paddling to the docks. I follow her, my heart beating out of my chest and my insides feeling like the popping of firecrackers at Chinese New Year’s parades.

“Come on! Hurry!” She shouts to me as she reaches the docks, pulling herself up and then extending a hand to me.

She doesn’t let go of my hand after pulling me up.

We grab our clothes and make a beeline for the cabin. My vision is blurry, and the rain feels like a weighted blanket on me as we sprint full speed to the screen door,



clutching our drenched clothes against our half-naked bodies. By the time we reach the covered patio of the cabin, we're both panting and trying to catch our breath.

She drops my hand.

"I can't believe how fast that storm came in!" She whispers loudly, her voice raspy from heaving the whole way up the hill.

"I know! That was insane!" I giggle, my breath steadying.

"You know, we still have to sneak back in."

I eyeball the screen door, then gently push it open, wincing when it inevitably creaks as it swings.

"Our clothes!" Laine whispers, yet still at too loud a volume for this mission.

"SHH." I shoot her a look and grab her wrist, guiding her inside. We tiptoe across the living room and into the master bedroom, our wet clothes leaving a trail of mucky water behind us.

Once we're back in our room, her voice returns to normal.

"We almost died." She exclaims, wringing her hair out over the bathroom sink.

I playfully roll my eyes at her theatrics.

"Did that count as skinny dipping?" I ask her, excited to check something off my non-existent bucket list that I just made up in my head an hour ago.

"Well, were you swimming in a bathing suit? Or anything meant to be swum in?"

“No, but-”

“No buts! We totally did it.” She smiles proudly.

Tonight, I saw a side of Laine that I didn’t know she had in her. Not only that, for the first time, I saw a future for myself that felt hopeful; a future where my past—and the people in my past—doesn’t define me. Conversely, I’ve always told myself that hope was a dangerous feeling. Hope creates false premonitions of what is possible.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:10 am*

Girls like me don't get happy endings, but tonight I got a glimpse of a happy future that felt possible for me in that moment. A future full of dangerous hope, and I can't help but tie it all to Laine.

How is it that only when I'm with her does it feel like everything could be okay? That I can move on from the decade of hurt my dad caused me. How could someone who just came back into my life so drastically change my mindset on it all?

Laine held an immense amount of power over my mind and body solely through ripples of water. Though I have to admit, it was refreshing—and oddly attractive—seeing her take control like that tonight.

8

Laine

Last night with Drew was the most alive I've felt in

years. I don't know what came over me, but before I knew it, I was suggesting ideas I never would have even agreed to under different circumstances.

Drew made me loosen up in a way that was almost freeing after being so tightly coiled from living up to my parents' expectations and our perfect outside image. It's a tiring facade to uphold, but with Drew, I can be the kid I never got to be when I was younger. I can be messy with no fear of judgment or rigid thinking. I can fall apart and be a stupid teenage girl who makes stupid teenage decisions for once instead of being the adult stuck in a young girl's body who's called "very mature for her age" by

every real adult she talks to.

It's scary how close Drew and I have become in such a short amount of time, and although the feelings of a whirlwind friendship are exhilarating, what is built quickly can be broken just as quickly.

My mind wanders through every possible scenario of where this friendship could lead, poignantly reminding myself that it would be a bad idea to get too attached. I know I can't go through another loss this year. I don't think my heart could take it, and it wouldn't be healthy for me to pick up the pieces again after another fallout.

But deep down, some part of me trusts Drew. She feels different somehow, like there's something about her that makes me intrigued to see this through, even if it ends horribly. I've already shared so much of myself with her—even parts of me that I hadn't even admitted to myself—that to me, it all feels worth it.

When I open my eyes, I find Drew's face comfortably close to mine, sleeping soundly. I sit up, noticing her hair is sprawled out over the pillow and still slightly damp from last night's swim. Her cheek is pressed firmly into the cotton pillow, and there's a small pool of drool beside her mouth. Her legs are resting straight out, and her arms are neatly tucked under her pillow.

She looks like an angel in her sleep, so calm and collected, like she has no worries or responsibilities to wake up to. Then it hits me, and I feel the sudden urge to capture this moment in graphite—to savor this sight forever.

I grab my sketchbook as quietly as I can and rummage through my bag to find my mini travel supplies box. Immediately setting out to draw Drew before she wakes up, I flip to a blank page and lightly set my pencil on the paper. As it glides across the paper, I take in each faint freckle on her face, and the birthmark at the top of her forehead just below her hairline that I hadn't noticed before.

I carefully brush her hair out of her face to get a better view of the birthmark, and she lets out a soft grunt. As I jerk my hand back, afraid that I awoke her, she buries the side of her face deeper in the pillow and goes still again.

As I'm finishing up my sketch, her eyes flutter open. She stares at me and then gives way to a smile.

"Good morning," she says quietly as she stretches, her voice faint and soft. "What are you doing?"

Drew squints and reaches her hand out toward my sketchbook.

"Oh, it's nothing!" I say, embarrassed, and scramble to hide it.

I was hoping to have it done and put away before she woke up, but now that she caught me, I might as well show her. I hold out the paper for her to see.

She takes the sketchbook and squints again, her eyes still adjusting to the morning light coming through the window.

"This is... wow."

"I'm sorry if it's creepy. I wasn't done yet either--"

"No, I love it." She looks up at me, her hair still a mess from last night, but completely dry now.

"Oh," I whisper softly.

"Was this just now? When I was asleep?"

“Yeah...” I play with a strand of my hair awkwardly.

“It’s so... raw.” She glances down at the paper again, then back up at me. “It’s a beautiful impression of me. Is this really what I look like when I sleep?”

I nod. “You sleep so perfectly. Like you’re conscious of your body but you’re not really, if that makes sense.”

“It does make sense,” Drew echoes without hesitation, like I’ve always made sense to her.

“Can I keep it?”

“If you really want it, sure.”

“I do!”

“Alright, I don’t know about you, but I smell waffles coming from the kitchen. Shall we go see what our mothers have prepared?”

“I was wondering what smelled so good! Though I thought it was just you.” Drew winks at me jokingly, and suddenly my cheeks feel warm and my legs go limp.

\*\*\*\*\* After breakfast, the moms pull out two bulging grocery bags filled to the brim with colorful markers, weird-looking knives, and stickers.

“Hey, girls! Come carve and decorate pumpkins with us.” Anne sets the bags on the kitchen counter, pulling out the carving utensils and four mini pumpkins.

“Where did you guys get pumpkins from?” Drew turns to her mother, holding out one of the pumpkins like she’d never seen one before.

“When we went on our walk, we found a cute little store downtown that had pumpkins.” My mother responds as she helps unload the grocery bags.

“Don’t worry, Drew, I got you stickers and markers so you can decorate the outsides,” Anne adds.

“Thanks, Mom.”

I turn to Drew. “You’re not carving with us?”

“I’m allergic to the insides of pumpkins.” She chuckles, grabbing the markers and stickers as she takes a seat at the rounded dining table. Every day, I feel like I learn a new thing about her, and every day, I feel closer to her.

I grab a pumpkin and the knife set and join her at the table.

“You’re allergic to... pumpkin guts?” I reiterate, teasingly nudging her arm.

“Yes. Thanksgiving is hell, but at least I get my own cherry pie!”

I laugh.

We get to carving and Drew coloring. About thirty minutes in, I decide to check out what Drew is drawing on hers. It looks like a burnt cockroach doing a backflip.

“Hey, what is that?” I point to her pumpkin, tracing the outline of the creature.

“It’s a black cat!” She exclaims, smiling proudly and holding up her creation.

“Oh. It’s definitely... a black something.” I return a sarcastic smile.

“Hey! I’m not the artist here.” Her face scrunches as she protests. “What did you carve?”

“A witch!” I turn my pumpkin to show her my creation.

“Wow, that’s really intricate, Laine. Did you carve each individual fiber on the broom



she's riding?" Anne notices my pumpkin, turning it around to face her.

"Laine is really good at anything artsy. She has been ever since she was a little girl." My mother contributes.

"She is amazing, I can attest to that," Drew adds, giving a subtle smile in my direction.

I blush, both from flattery and embarrassment.

\*\*\*\*\*

Later that evening, we all decide to have a bonfire in the fire pit by the docks now that the wood has dried. Drew and I scurry down the hill to the pit, settling down on one of the logs beside it. Our mothers follow shortly behind, carrying a lighter, blankets, and supplies for s'mores. The air is frigid, so I scoot closer to Drew for her body heat.

"Marissa, could you pass me a marshmallow, please?" Anne extends her hand out to my mother as she finishes putting together the fourth s'more. She hands us our s'mores, and we clink them together.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:10 am*

“Cheers!” Drew grins at me with her pinky out like she’s having a tea party. She’s so ridiculous, but I love it.

We sit by the fire, munching on snacks and cuddling close for warmth. Our mothers ramble about random people’s kids’ college decisions on Facebook, and Drew and I sit in yet another comfortable silence, which seems to be a thing for us. However, I’m not surprised, because I could sit with her and watch paint dry for hours and still be entertained. It scares me to death that that’s the effect she has on me.

Underneath the shared blanket thrown across our laps, our legs are pressed against each other’s. I rest my free hand on my knee, and I can feel her do the same.

I continue staring straight ahead, avoiding eye contact as our pinkies touch. I feel her wrap her pinky around mine, which sends jolts up my spine. My heart is pounding out of my chest at a million beats per minute, and my body goes stiff, hoping my mother doesn’t notice.

I turn my head to look at Drew, taking in the way she looks in the light of the fire. Her ancient brown eyes now have a warmglimmer in them, contrasting with the paler hue they wore in the moonlight the night before. It’s eye-opening (no pun intended), seeing her in so many contexts and so many different lightings. It’s an artist's dream.

She’s an artist’s dream.

As an artist myself, I base my work on sensations. I believe that experiencing the muse in a diverse array of settings and using multiple senses helps you better depict the art on paper.

I thought I had studied all of Drew with my eyes through sketching her, but now as I'm incorporating multiple senses in learning her and becoming familiar with the way her body feels against mine—between our night at the lake and tonight on the log—I'm starting to realize there's so much more of her I have yet to learn, and suddenly, she feels so much more multidimensional.

9

Drew

On the last day of the trip, we go for a hike in the

mountains. There's no signal as expected, so we stay on the recommended path for safety, even though my mom and I are quite experienced hikers.

The trail is windy and very rocky, but we all manage, with Laine and her mom bringing up the caboose. The lines of trees go on for miles, and the dirt is firmly compact—aside from a few stray rocks here and there—from decades of hikers coming up through these trails.

Laine stops in her tracks, pulling me back with her. She takes a small pocket knife out of her pocket and holds it up to a tree slightly off the beaten path. God, this girl can really make art everywhere.

She holds onto the tree with her left hand and starts carving into it with her right, her eyes narrowing as she etches into it. When she finally steps back, I realize she's carved a small D+L into the scratchy bark. My chest flutters as she watches me look at it.

“There, now we'll be ingrained here forever.” She smiles softly and looks to me for approval.

“I love it.” I return her a smile even bigger, and we set off again on the trail.

Eventually, we reach the waterfall at the top of the mountain.

“It’s beautiful.” Laine stands at the edge of the wooden hanging platform, her eyes full of admiration. I watch her as she watches the rushing water. I can’t even begin to imagine how much inspiration this view must carry for artists. Not that I would know much about artists’ muses.

The water sprays us softly, and we both step back and try to blink it out of our eyes. As Laine flutters her eyelashes, droplets sitting so fragile atop them, I’m instantly taken back to the night on the lake when I got to see her eyes up close and her hair messy for once. Only this time, her eyes are only slightly damp, and she’s wearing jeans, a concert tee, and a puffer jacket instead of a matching bra and underwear set.

We look at each other for a beat, then burst out laughing. My damp hair falls over my shoulders as I’m bent over, cackling. I’m not sure what exactly is so funny, but the laughter comes out strong on both of our ends. Once we catch our breaths, her widened face turns soft.

“Hey, I think I saw a little fairy house along the trail. Want to go check it out?” Laine asks excitedly, rubbing her eyes with the back of her hands.

“You girls can go ahead. We’re enjoying the view up here, but we’ll follow shortly after you.” Marissa nods in the direction of the path we came from.

Laine takes my hand and guides me down the trail again, careful not to trip on the steps leading up to the hanging platform. We make our way down the mountain, our steps in sync.

As we make it down the windy trail, a scruffy man who looks to be in his fifties

walks up towards us, clutching an empty pill bottle in his left hand. I grab Laine's wrist and pull her closer to my side, linking my arm through hers.

"Heya girlies," the man sneers, following us as we ignore him. "Pretty day, ain't it?"

I offer a dismissive, exaggerated smile, hoping he gets the hint to back off.

"What are yin' doin' out here? Pretty girls out on a pretty day..." His words slur, and he spits as he speaks. He continues to follow us, now picking up speed. Hurriedly, we match his pace and then some, trying to get further ahead of him to the gift shop around civilization.

"Ya know, I was good with pretty young girls back in the day. Grabbed 'em by the you knows what and played 'em like the fiddle." A spine-chilling grin plasters across his face. "Unfortunately one of them parents snitched on me and got my ass thrown in prison. I got out, though. I always gets out."

Laine freezes. I glance at her hurriedly, gently pulling her arm.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:10 am*

“Laine, we have to get to the bottom,” I whisper, but she looks to be completely in shock.

“Do yous pretty girls want a turn?” The man catches up to us and stands too close for comfort.

I grab Laine’s arm and pull her to the side of the trail. Putting a hand on her shoulder, I look into her eyes, trying to get through to her. Despite my efforts, her face remains sheet white and her eyes look empty.

“Laine, please,” I whisper, moving my hand up to the back of her neck, contemplating shaking her awake from this trance she looks to be in.

“HEY! GET AWAY FROM THEM.” A familiar voice calls out from behind him. I don’t think I’ve ever been more grateful to see my mom than in this moment.

“You can join if you want to, ma’am.” The man turns to our moms.

“İAY VETE! GO!” Marissa charges at him with her water bottle, and he scurries, arms flailing idiotically as he runs.

My chest is pounding as I turn back to Laine, and I notice she’s breathing heavily, but breathing nonetheless, which she didn’t seem to be doing before.

“Hija, are you okay?” Marissa comes rushing over to Laine, grabbing her daughter’s face in her hands.

Laine nods.

“What happened?” My mom hugs me, and I can feel her heart beating against my chest.

“He just started talking to us. Saying stuff about how he molested younger girls and bragging about being an escaped felon.”

Marissa’s head jerks my way as I say this, and her eyes widen. I can tell Laine and her mom are especially shaken up by this interaction, so I don’t bother telling Marissa how long he followed us before they got here.

“I’m glad we came when we did,” Mom says as she pulls away and turns toward the trail again. “Let’s head down to the car and get out of this area. We can have a chill evening for the rest of tonight at the cabin.”

Nobody says anything as we make our way down the rest of the trail and to the car.

\*\*\*\*\*

When we get back to the cabin, the moms go out on the docks to have a drink and suggest that Laine and I should watch a movie or two to unwind before bed. I turn on one of the Disney movies I suggested to Laine on the second day, but it’s clear there’s an elephant in the room.

When I press play on Camp Rock, I expect her to come sit by me on the loveseat. Maybe we’d cuddle for warmth or share a blanket again, trauma bonded by today. Instead, she takes the small chair beside the loveseat and curls up in her own blanket, her eyes still blank like the ghost she saw earlier today is still in the room with us now.

I start to wonder if I did something wrong today. Did pressing her to keep walking down the mountain when she was clearly in shock only further her anxiety? I've never been great at comforting people, as she's probably aware of from that night at the playground, so maybe I didn't handle it right today.

I figured, though, after everything we've been through, that today would bring us closer together, not create distance. That we've built enough trust that she can turn to me instead of pulling away from me in situations like this. Just when it felt like I had finally gotten her to be comfortable with me, now she's closed off again, just like she was at that first dinner where we spoke to each other through stares.

Honestly, I'm a little hurt that she's making the conscious effort to pull away from me now after she let me in so easily when we barely knew each other.

\*\*\*\*\*

The next morning, we pack our things and pile into the car. The drive home feels just as heavy as the night before. Our moms talk casually about other people's kid's college applications and their Facebook groups again, but even their conversation remains surface level, almost as if they're scared that if they say the wrong thing, the feelings of yesterday will come back, even though they're already here but nobody wants to admit it.

When we get back in town, we drop Laine and her mom at their house and head to ours. As soon as I get home, I march up to my room to text the group that they were wrong about Laine. That she's just a girl finding her way in the world with no hidden intentions toward me. I know I'm biased, but I could feel it this week.

Everything I experienced with her at the cabin felt so raw, so real. There was no way anything that happened could've had malicious intent behind it. She's not like that. So what if she hangs out with Thom, her potential cousin? His reputation has nothing



to do with her character, and maybe Greyson is right; it's just rumors.

Me

5:23 pm

i have stable internet again!

Tatum

5:25 pm

## Page 30

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:10 am*

whoo!!

how'd it go with Laine??

Jared

5:26 pm

omg you're alive

Me

5:26 pm

i am alive, yes.

and actually, you guys were really wrong about her she's nice, and considerate, and smart, and funny and she's surprisingly spontaneous!

Tatum

5:27 pm

wait a minute

is she like your new bestie or something?? don't you dare replace us. EVER.

Me

5:27 pm

no, of course I could never replace you guys! you're my home, she just may be becoming my second home

If I didn't screw it up, that is...

Me

5:27 pm

i don't know!

just, everything around her feels easier

Jared

5:28 pm

hold up...

do you like her? like, like like her?

Tatum

5:28 pm

PLOT TWIST??

Me

5:28 pm

## Page 31

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:10 am*

guys, no!

i mean, i don't think so?

Greyson

5:29 pm

Hey sorry guys, I had practice but coach let us out early

What did I miss?

Jared

5:29 pm

drew likes Laine! drew likes Laine!

Me

5:30 pm

i never said that!

I didn't, right? I mean, sure, I admired her beauty, and we held pinkies by the fire, and pressed our bodies together every chance we got, but friends do that. Close friends, even. Besides, what does it even matter now? Now that I've messed it all up

again due to my lack of comforting nature.

I wish there were another way to show her I care about her. A way that I'm better at executing. Or maybe I'm just not nurturing enough.

Ever since my dad left, I've shut any emotions down whenever I felt them come up because it was easier to convince myself I didn't care than to actually feel, and now, I'm bad at comforting others because of it.

It's like I don't even know what to do when someone else shows emotion in front of me. I freeze, and in the process, not show up for people I care about when they need me most.

But I do care for Laine. A lot. And I want to show up for her. I just need to find how to show it, and if that means letting emotion back into my life, then so be it.

10

Laine

For just a minute, when I wake up, I let myself lie in bliss. I forget what happened that last day of the trip for just that minute. The memories of Drew play in my head.

The movies, the board games, the lake, the pumpkins, the hike. The hike. When I get to that part of the trip, everything comes rushing back. The way I felt in that moment when I heard him say he was an escaped felon. The fear that if he could do it, so could my stubbornly persistent father. And I know that if my father ever got out, if he knew we picked up everything and left—no, moved across the entire country—he would for sure try to find us, try to come back in our lives, and I don't know if I could look at him after everything he'd done.

I turn over in my bed and grab my phone from my bedside table. I'm not sure why I expected a text from Drew, or a call, or anything, but I did. Honestly, I'm not sure what she would even say. Or what I would say, for that matter.

We left an interesting dynamic between us that's killing me inside, yet I'm not entirely sure I have the energy to revisit that right now. Instead, I find a text from Thom.

Thom

11:57 am

Hey! You back from the mountains yet?

Let's study together at the cafe whenever you're free.

Disappointed to have only one person who wanted to see me when I got home—aka not Drew—I glance up at the time and realize I'd slept until noon. I spring out of bed, frantically searching for my house slippers. Once I find them, I slide them on and head upstairs to find my mother.

When I make it to the kitchen, she's nowhere to be found. My stomach is growling, so I figure I might as well make us both some breakfast for us to have together whenever she gets back.

I fry up some eggs—over easy because I'm not a crazy person—and throw some bread in the toaster. Shortly after the toast pops up, I hear the door opening and keys jingling.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:10 am*

“Ay, sweetie! You’re awake.” Mother comes pummeling through the door and into the kitchen. She gives me a quick kiss on the head and glances over at the plates of food I’ve prepared.

“Why did you let me sleep so long?” I grunt, getting us napkins and sitting down.

“You looked tired. I wanted to let you rest,” she says as she joins me at the table. “I just went out and signed us up as members of the Holy Trinity.”

“What?” My face drops, and I can tell she notices.

“Because, hija, it’s time we start going. As soon as possible, preferably. I liked that one most, and they were very welcoming to us after the service.”

“Mother, all churches are welcoming. They’re always trying to recruit more people. Why are you in a rush all of a sudden?”

“That man, in the mountains...” Her voice becomes shaky. “He strayed from the path of God just like your father. We need to start on our paths as soon as possible.”

“I know how you’re feeling. I was just as scared of that man as you were, but is this really necessary? You know we’re not like Father. We’re stronger than him, we can resist temptation. Besides, Georgia has exponentially fewer avenues for easy drugs than California. Wasn’t that the whole point of moving here?”

“Sí, yes hija, but we also moved because we were better off here. When we lived in Georgia, we were poor, but we were happy. California ruined our family. Besides, it’s



just better to get involved with the church sooner rather than later. Just to be safe.” She puts a hand over mine on the table. “I also found an amazing catholic school affiliated with the church. I put the deposit in for you to attend next semester.”

My heart stops, and for a moment, the room is spinning. Going to church before we’ve settled in is one thing, but Catholic school? She can’t just uproot my life when I’ve finally settled here. California didn’t ruin my father; the drugs did.

I stare blankly at the wall, then stand up abruptly, storming out of the kitchen and back to my room. Mother calls back to me, but I need to be alone. First, she moves us all the way out to Georgia after not living here for ten years, and now that I’ve finally readjusted, she moves me to another school? Unbelievable.

I grab my phone from where I left it on my bedside table and pull up Drew’s contact. My finger hovers over the call button, but it stays there. She’s the first person I want to call, but I can’t bring myself to do it. Not after how we left things at the cabin. I’m not even sure she’d want to talk to me after how mucky I left things.

The encounter with the drugged-out man in the mountains shook me so bad that I shut Drew out, and now I’m stuck in limbo, afraid that I may call and say the wrong thing, but also afraid that if I don’t call, I may never talk to her again.

I need to clear my head, to think about anything but this, so I pull out the one thing that always distracts me: my art. Art has always been my escape.

Back when we were struggling financially, I would doodle in the margins of my school notebooks given to me by various charity organizations to take my mind off the hunger boiling in my stomach or the thoughts of worrying when my next meal would be.

Once my father got a job with that rubber company, working long hours and coming

home for only about two to three dinners a week, I would draw in my fancy new sketchpad bought with the money that was exchanged for his absence.

When that fancy new job eventually moved us to California, I would carry around a pocket pad of paper and a golf pencil to distract myself during long meetings with real estate agents as they discussed California school zones and all the other ways they were uprooting my life in Georgia.

With everything that happened with my father recently, I started this personal project because I felt like I needed something bigger. Bigger than notebook margins and fancy sketch pads and pocket paper.

I needed something more than a doodle or a drawing to distract me. Something that could make me forget entirely, just for those few hours. Something I could sit down and pour myself into and pretend that a smudged mess up was the worst inconvenience of my life.

I lay the sketch paper out on my desk and flatten it.

It's time to put this on canvas.

For the next four hours, I meticulously transfer the sketch onto the canvas. It's rewarding to see my drawing blown up on a bigger scale, and just as I intended, it takes my mind off the news at breakfast.

My stomach rumbles halfway through, begging for sustenance after I abandoned breakfast so quickly this morning, but I keep working through it. Unfortunately, I did inherit my father's stubbornness when it comes to holding grudges, and going upstairs just to run into my mother was not something I was willingly going to do.

I finish the sketch and start on the oil paints. As my brush drifts across the canvas and

down to the hips on the outline, I'm reminded of whose hips those are. I try to shake the thoughts out because I'm not supposed to think when I do art. But I can't. No matter how hard I try to forget, the thought of Drew stays firmly planted in my mind.

What makes it even worse is that when I glance down at my half-finished painting, lines that were supposed to be objective, abstract, supposed to mean nothing, suddenly resemble her figure. Like the shape of her hips and the deep-sunken dimensions of them are permanently ingrained in my brain from when I drew her at the cabin.

I hate how much of her became familiar with me, deeper than surface level. I hate that I can't even make basic art without it winding up looking like her. I hate that I've let someone in so intimately that I can't push them out, no matter how hard I try.

I hate that even the eyes on the painting reflect the moon, the medium I saw—really saw—her eyes through. I hate how perfectly the color matched the woman in the painting's hair compared to Drew's and how it reflected that cute little birthmark right under her hairline.

I hate that Drew ruined the one thing that was only mine—my escape. But most of all, I hate that despite hating all of these things she's made me feel, I could never hate her.

In a moment of impulsive weakness, I pick up my phone and pull up our texts. The last messages exchanged were from when I first gave her my number in AP Environmental class, and we talked about that night at the playground.

I want to text her. To tell her that I need her. That I need to cry on her shoulder again, and I need her to hold me silently and play with my hair and tell me everything will be okay. But there are no words that can be typed to explain everything I feel, so instead, I click out of our messages and press the call button.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:10 am*

My heart pulses as the phone rings out far longer than my anxiety can handle right now. Finally, the ringing in the phone speakers cuts off, but the silence rings out in my room.

“Drew?” My voice is shaky, trying not to let her hear me crying.

I’m met with silence on the other end. Bringing the phone down from my ear, I hover over the end call button in defeat. But then I hear a muffle.

“Laine,” Drew mutters softly. I stand frozen in my room, which is still spinning.

Words cannot describe how grateful I am to hear her voice.

“Um, can you meet me at the playground?”

“Yeah, I’ll be there in ten.”

The line goes silent.

11

Drew

When I get to the playground, Laine is already sitting

on one of the swings. It’s dark outside, but I could recognize her chestnut waves anywhere. She’s wearing sweatpants and a baggyoff-the-shoulder shirt, her hair

straggly. My chest pounds at the sight of her, and nerves overtake my body, considering the fact that we haven't exactly spoken to each other since the incident in the mountains.

The swing beside her is biting cold as I sit down, the chains even chillier. Neither of us says anything, and for the first time since she's moved back, the silence is beyond awkward.

"I'm not coming back to school next semester." Laine blurts out, fidgeting with a piece of woodchip in her hands.

"What?" My stomach sinks at the thought of losing her again when I've only just got her back.

"Are you moving back to California?"

"No, it's not that..." Her eyes are plastered to the ground, increasingly watering.

"What do you mean you're not coming back, Laine?"

"My mother is moving me to catholic school."

The silence turns heavy as tension spreads through the air.

"Oh," is all I can muster up.

Is this why she was so distant that last night at the cabin? Did she know all along that we would end up distanced by proximity anyway, so she just decided to do it herself early? Anger boils inside me as I think up all the possible scenarios in which she could have betrayed me.

“I’m sorry.” She whispers, but I don’t bother asking what for this time.

Despite being mad at her right now, the fear of losing her overcomes me. I rack my brain, trying to think of all the things I could say to make her stay.

At this point, I’m desperate, and if telling her what happened with my dad could possibly change her mind, then it’s worth a shot. I could show her that we really are the same, and whatever she’s going through right now with her dad, I can relate. If I open up to her—really open up—she’d be bound to me by word, right?

“My parents were high school sweethearts. They won every couples-themed high school superlative, and people placed bets on their imminent marriage.” I start, not caring that this probably sounds completely irrelevant to her right now. “They went on to get their bachelor’s degrees together, and eventually got through law school together too. They even started their own firm.”

Picking up a wood chip myself, I nervously trace infinity signs over my thigh as I tell my parents’ story.

“They were doing well financially and lived pretty happy lives together until they struggled to conceive.” My eyes glance over at Laine only to find her already looking at me, listening intensely.

“Their fertility journey was long and strenuous, but the struggle only made them stronger together. Eventually, they put in their application for international adoption, got approved within the next two years, flew to China, and adopted me.

“We were the perfect family, and everyone from their high school looked up to them as an example of how to be and praised them for being white saviors to a colored orphan. My parents ignored them, and we were happy and financially stable. Until one day, when I was about eight, maybe, my dad just up and left us. Being very

young at the time, I didn't understand what happened. I just thought he didn't want us anymore."

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Laine leans over and rubs my arm, her eyes soft with sympathy.

“Once I got older and my mom told me what really happened, the sadness turned to anger. Angry that someone I thought I knew so well and looked up to turned out to be someone I didn’t even everything he ever wanted—or at wanted.

recognize. He had least I thought he

“He had a stable job, a loving wife, and a kid he had waited for so long to bring into his family. But he changed. He threw all of that away on a whim. A whim of a rocky career in real estate—something he showed no interest in before. It’s like he was having a midlife crisis or something, stuck on the things he didn’t do instead of appreciating and cherishing the things he did.”

“Wow.” Laine breathes out a heavy sigh. “I’m sorry.” “I mean, it’s fine now. I have my mom, and she always tries her best to make up for everything I lost when he left.”

The air feels crisper, and I wish more than anything right now that I could pull Laine in for warmth just like she did so casually at the cabin. The wood chips pierce my bottom as I move to the ground, curling up in a ball with my knees pulled up to my chin and my arms tucked around them.

Surprisingly, Laine joins me on the ground, scooting close to me and resting her head on my shoulder.

“You know, I was a wreck this morning when I found out my mother had put in the deposit for Holy Trinity Catholic School of Excellence.” She says softly.



Wait.

“This morning?” I turn to her, suddenly feeling awful that I just trauma dumped on her in an attempt to manipulate her into fighting against a choice that wasn’t hers to make in the first place.

“I know, right? She told me over breakfast that witch!” Laine pulls her head off my shoulder to look at me.

Holy shit. This changes everything, and immediately I realize that instead of grieving the friendship as a whole, I should be grieving the loss of time we’ll have together.

“We’ll still be friends, Laine. We’ll talk every day and hang out as much as we can.” I reassure her, even though I’m just as scared for us as she is.

“Pinky promise?” She extends her freezing purple pinky out to me, and I wrap mine around it, smiling harder than I should be right now, given the circumstances.

Laine and I became such close friends in such a short amount of time, it felt unbreakable before. But now that this wrench has gotten thrown at us, our friendship feels so fragile. Like one day of not talking could lead to the rest of our days not talking. The few days we spent apart after the cabin felt like an eternity in hell; I can’t imagine an actual eternity.

“I started tracing my project on canvas,” Laine says softly, looking at me for my reaction.

“That’s amazing!” I smile gently at her, reaching out my arm and brushing my fingers through her hair. My stomach settles, finally feeling comfortable with her again, the way that had become so familiar in the past few months with her.

“I couldn't finish it, though. I got to the hips and just couldn't get the curve right.” She looks down at the ground, picking up more wood chips and fiddling with them in her hands.

“Oh.”

I'm not sure what the correct things to say to a struggling artist are, so I just continue playing with her hair as I watch her face fall, waiting for the spark to reignite in her eyes as she talks more about the thing she loves most.

“I couldn't do it because the only hips I memorized the dip of were yours.” My heart skips a beat, taking in her words as an arrow shot straight to the chest. “And I didn't want to draw you because I thought I messed up with you. I thought I scared you away.”

“You could never scare me away, Laine.”

The comfortable silence returns, and now her eyes are piercing mine back, her hazel swirls pulling me in and locking me into a trance-like state. The air feels warm now in her emotional embrace, and she's making me feel like everything is going to be okay again.

“You know, I think you're my best friend.” She breaks the silence, keeping eye contact.

I take her hand and give it a gentle squeeze, my face feeling warmer by the minute. I know I don't need to say it back for her to know.

I know she can feel it through my touch.

We spend the rest of the evening sitting in front of the swings, discussing her

thoughts on my favorite Disney movies, her and Thom's shared ancestors, and planning winter activities to do together before school starts again. After tonight, I'm confident that her switching schools won't distance us. Our bond is far too strong to be broken by proximity.

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On the short walk home from the playground, my mind replays everything Laine told me and everything I felt at the moment. About how I was her muse, and about how she considers me her best friend. About how I crumbled and told her everything that happened with my dad out of pure fear of losing her. About what that meant for me and my feelings about her. About how I told her things I'd never told anybody else, just to stay in her presence a little longer.

My thoughts are interrupted as my eyes cut to the local late-night ice cream parlor a block or two away from my house. Thom is behind the counter, smiling as he hands a little boy a small chocolate cone drowned in sprinkles. He catches my eye from inside the shop and grins widely, gesturing toward the tubs of ice cream in front of him. Despite his reputation at school, he seems to be important to Laine, which makes him important to me, so I go in.

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“I didn’t know you worked at Starry Scoops.”

The sweet smell of pineapple mixed with coconut fills my nose as I approach the counter.

“Why would ya? We only did one project together.” Thom chuckles, slipping on gloves. “What’ll ya have? Our special at the moment is tropical in winter.”

“What?”

“It’s rather ironic, I know. Ma Pops likes to think he’s a quirky one.”

“Your Pops?”

“Yeah, he owns this place.”

Regret hits me hard. Regret that I didn’t give Thom a chance, didn’t give him the time of day before Laine came along.

“You know what, I’ll take one scoop of the coconut. In a cup, please.”

“Comin’ right up!” Thom purses his lips, scooping my ice cream with far more concentration and meticulousness than necessary.

“So, how long have you guys been running this place?” I ask him as he rings me up.

“Since we immigrated here. Ma Pops works a day shift in retail, so he opened this

place in the evenin' for a bit o' extra cash. He's a single one ya know, and we've got ma seven younger siblings to support."

We've. He speaks about his siblings like they're his responsibility, too. How could I have been so blind to think he was ever a threat to Laine? Greyson was right, Thom is a genuinely good guy who was judged too quickly. A victim of high school rumors, if you will.

I give Thom a friendly nod, then head out with my cup of coconut ice cream. My friends were wrong about a lot of people, including Laine. They were so close-minded that they convinced me to believe the same contorted ideas they had of people before I even gave those people a chance. Now, especially after letting Laine in, I can't help but resent them for it, just a little bit.

12

Laine

The following few weeks leading up to the start of the

next semester, Drew and I spent almost every day together and Thom and I intermittently. We do everything off our Christmas activity checklist in preparation for seeing each other significantly less, our bond growing stronger every day as our intimacy borders along blurred lines of something questionably platonic.

I'm not exactly sure what we are, or what that means for me and my identity. All I know is I love being around her, talking to her, our skin constantly touching, and how easy everything feels when I'm with her. I don't care whether we have a label if that means I get to be in her presence every moment I can. To soak in her laughter, her smile, her beauty, her warmth.

These past weeks with Drew play on a loop in my mind. From the time we went ice skating, dragging each other hand in hand along the rink, her laughter I've grown to love booming hysterically when my uncoordinated ass inevitably fell on the ice.

From when we built gingerbread houses and hers looked as awful as her pumpkin, though we equated it to my inclination for art, giving me the upper hand for architecture.

From when we went to a holiday photo booth down in Atlanta, dressed up in ridiculous wigs and feather boas, and by the fourth photo, I wanted to kiss her so badly, but the thought of having physical evidence of my feelings for her printed on a tangible strip of ink scared me terribly. I felt exceptionally stupid letting the feeling of fear overtake the multitude of gut-wrenching feelings I felt for her, but ultimately, it got the best of me.

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My room is a mess, with paint tubes and charcoal pencils splayed across almost every inch of my floor. I scramble around, trying to at least push them all into a corner before Drew gets here. This evening, we're walking to our playground to stargaze, and although we just saw each other yesterday, I couldn't be happier to spend this evening with her.

When she gets here, she throws her arms around me and I'm wrapped in her warm embrace, I've become so comfortable in. We head down toward the playground and stop at Starry Scoops for a snack on the way—and to say hi to Thom, of course.

As soon as we reach the playground, we lay the first blanket on the grass, climb on top, and then crawl under a second blanket for warmth. Our heads are completely underneath the top blanket, giggling as it slowly sinks to fit around our faces.

“How are we going to stargaze with a blanket over our heads?” I ask in between laughs, turning to look at her.

“The stars in the sky pale in comparison to the stars in your eyes,” Drew whispers, my laugh softening into a gentle smile. “Those are the stars I’d rather have steal my gaze.”

The warm, familiar feeling inside comes back as my body goes limp and I melt into her words, taking in the sound of her tender voice. I can barely make out the shape of her face under the blanket, yet I can still feel her eyes burning onto my face, etching her words into my soul like pyrography. I feel like the luckiest girl in the world to be beside her tonight.

Drew’s hand moves closer to mine under the blanket, both of us breathing heavily but silently. She interlaces her fingers with mine, and I’m instantly seeing stars inside the folds of my eyelids as I squeeze them shut. Holding my breath, I lay completely still.

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Neither of us says anything as she lowers the blanket off our heads so we can look up at the actual stars. Our hands are still clasped together underneath the blanket, but I lie less stiff, relaxing into the comfort of her skin against mine.

“You see any of the dippers?” I finally break the silence, my eyes pointed up at the sky.

“Nah, but do you see that weird monkey butt shape up there?” Drew asks, pointing toward a patch of stars in the northeast direction.

“Yeah. What is it?”

“It’s called monkey’s butt.” Her face deadpans as she pivots her head to look at my reaction.

“Actually?” I furrow my brows and narrow my eyes in disbelief.

“No.” She laughs, returning her gaze up to the sky.

“You little-” I start as I tickle her under the blanket, causing her to kick her feet and curl her body into mine so that her forehead rests sideways on my chest.

Drew pulls her head up so her face is centimeters from mine. Her warm breath blows softly onto my face as our eyes meet, unwavering. I press my forehead to hers, my cheeks turning bright pink.

My heart is pounding, and my stomach drops as a million butterflies swarm it at once.



She brings her hands up to my face, cupping my burning cheeks. Her eyes divert from my eyes to my lips, then back up to my eyes.

We hold contact for a minute, the air feeling more pressurized each second that goes by with my face in her hands. I reach up to caress the back of her head with my left hand and run the fingers of my right through the hair in her eyes, brushing it out of the way so I can see her whole face.

She leans in, our lips barely touching.

This is it. This is the moment I've longed for ever since that night in the lake, though I'm ashamed to admit I've been pining for this long. The moment that may ruin our whole friendship. Ruin the image I had of myself. Ruin everything good we have right now.

And just like that, the butterflies turn into moths. I pull away, awkwardly looking at the bare patch of dirt beside me and away from Drew. I hear her sigh as she turns back up to face the sky, my eyes still averted to the grass. Her hand is still in mine, but her grasp feels looser as if she wants to create distance between us, but she's scared that if she lets go, we would have to confront what just happened.

The weight in the air is lifted, but a new kind of weight has replaced it, heavier than before.

We lay in silence for another ten minutes, the air colder now as we look up at stars that seemed to have dimmed in the past hour we'd lain here. I am incredibly stupid. Stupid for pulling away. Stupid for backing out of confronting feelings I've harbored in secret all this time. Stupid for messing it up out of fear of messing it up.

But just a small part of me is relieved I didn't lean in to kiss her. The guilt comes rushing in like a tsunami hitting a town I'm a foreigner in, confusedly reading the

warnings in a language I'm unfamiliar with.

Just when I think I've spared myself a restless night of overthinking about who I am versus who I thought I was, it hits me.

I almost kissed her.

There was a part of me that wanted to. I touched her hair, held her hand, and stroked the back of her head. I leaned in too. What would my mother think of me? What would Holy Trinity think? I need to leave. I need to be alone with my thoughts and marinate in them until every single possible scenario is played out. Then I need to cry.

"It's getting late. I should go." I say, standing up and picking up my phone.

"Oh, um, okay," Drew replies softly, shaking her head and avoiding eye contact with me.

I look away, knowing I'll cry if I watch her cry, and I'm not ready to cry yet. Not until I've overthought this a million times over in my head and settled on the worst to prepare for it. The only time I've cried outside of my scheduled times for crying was right here at this playground with Drew, and I'm not exactly feeling up for recreating the moment again right now.

As soon as Drew stands up, I grab the blankets and head off the field, walking fast, as if I'm prey in a stealthy chase for survival, which, in a way, I sort of feel like I am right now. I try my best to hold back tears, walking briskly across the street, opposite the side of Thom's ice cream parlor. Luckily, it's dark enough on the streets that I don't think any of the people sitting outside the parlor recognize me.

When I get home, I make a beeline for the stairs and head down to my bedroom.

Thankfully, my mother is upstairs, fallen asleep on a chair in the foyer. A bible rests in her hand as she's passed out, which only makes me feel worse.

Once I'm in my room, I close the door gently, careful not to wake her. Normally, in this kind of stressful situation, I turn to my art. Except this time, I'm scared to turn to the one thing that comforts me in fear that I'll only end up subconsciously drawing Drew. Instead, I switch off the lights and lie in my bed, my eyes adjusting in the dark to stare up at the blank ceiling, wishing I were back at the playground seeing stars again.

It drives me insane that she's ruined the one thing that grounds me. No- that I've either ruin the one thing that grounds me. That my art became her because she became my anchor. Despite how amazing it felt in the moment, I hate how much of myself I gave her in such a short period of time. I'd never let anyone in so quickly before, never so deeply.

My parents always had a crowd around them, but the friendships always felt so superficial, almost like we were a family of actors, and the people they kept around were our audience. As a result, I never let myself get too close to anyone there. I figured it was better not to let anyone in, in case the curtain fell and I ended up blamed for our exposure.

Except none of that mattered in the end, once my father went to prison. Everyone knew we weren't the perfect family we pretended to be, and nobody stuck around. I can't blame them, though. I wouldn't want to hang around the family of a murderer.

But since I've been back in Georgia—since I've met Drew—everything from before that I tried so hard for got flushed down the drain. Almost like I found home in her, getting comfortable enough in it to lay down roots like she was a thing that was promised forever.

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But she's not. I know she's not, and now that I've let her in, I have to do damage control. I can't ghost her because she's seen too much of me, but I also can't let myself get too close again, both physically and emotionally.

I'll just have to create distance, which shouldn't be too hard to do, considering we won't be going to the same school anymore, and I won't have time to see her every day like we've been hanging out this past month. As relieved as I can be in this situation, I roll over and try to get to sleep, though I don't get much.

13

Drew

It's officially been a month since our night stargazing at

the playground and a week since Laine's moved schools. The past few weeks have felt strained, and going back to school without seeing Laine every morning in APES feels empty, but oddly relieving. Neither of us has brought up our almost-kiss on that heavy night, and without seeing each other every day, neither of us has to.

Honestly, I've been mostly on autopilot, regathering myself and trying to get all my shit together for the second semester of senior year, though my brain has been nothing but foggy. It certainly doesn't help that Laine and I have been avoiding the elephant in the room, with intermittent texting and occasionally talking, like everything is normal.

I jolt up in my seat as Mr. Rickshaw clears his throat, glaring at me and diverting my

thoughts back to the lesson. When he catches my eye, he shoots me a stern look, then continues lecturing.

“As I was saying,” he says as he smacks the whiteboard with a yardstick, tracing circles over a poorly drawn picture of a patch of mowed grass. “The tragedy of the commons occurs over a shared piece of land or water wherein the community around it uses the resources in self-interest, and with all of them doing that, it depletes the land or reservoir of its resources.”

Kind of ironic to be honest, how the Tragedy of the Commons applies to me and Laine. Both of us acting in our own self-interest, inevitably depleting our shared resource: the fragile, yet close bond we shared over the course of the six months she’s been back in Georgia.

Maybe I played the part of the selfish farmer, using our sacred resource with the mindset that one takes in the grand scheme of gives and takes wouldn’t deplete it. Like I was holding onto something that felt good to me without thinking of what was best for Laine. After all, she’s moved to a school that would never accept people like me.

People likeme, who like people likeher.

Maybe it was selfish of me to expect her to reciprocate feelings that would get her ostracized in a setting she’s being forced into.

As for her part in this all, she made me feel all the things that realists say are reserved for the movies. Then she shut me out.

I know she was only doing what she felt she needed to do to protect herself. To protect her peace. I just wish it didn’t mean that she had to block me out. Right when it felt like she was letting me in, like, truly letting me into her soul. Letting me see all

of the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Just then, my thoughts are interrupted again by my phone buzzing. Mr. Rickshaw shoots me another glare, and I pretend to put my phone away in my backpack. Looking down at my lap, I open my messages, only to find a text from Laine.

Speak of the devil.

Laine 8:52 am Hey

My stomach flips.

It's just a simple 'hey', but still, it feels nice to know she's thinking of me after everything.

Me

8:53 am hi

Laine

8:53 am

Can you come over later tonight?

Me

8:53 am

sure

is everything okay?

Laine

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8:54 am

I've been trying to finish my oil paint project, but I can't seem to get a part of the torso right. I need a reference, and I've drawn you before... I guess I was just wondering if you could model for me.

Model for her? How could she act like everything is normal after what happened—or almost happened—at the playground? As I struggle to find what to reply with, she texts again.

Laine

8:54 am

I just need the torso part.

You can keep your undergarments on, of course.

Right... How stupid of me to assume otherwise.

Me

8:55 am

sure

7pm good?



Laine8:55 am ??

The rest of the day passes slowly as I count down the hours until I see her again. I haven't told my friends about what happened between me and Laine, considering the wound is still fresh and I'm not exactly sure where we'll end up in it all, especially with her at a different school and us already feeling so distant. Worst case scenario, I can just tell them we drifted because of the switch. Technically, it wouldn't be a lie.

Despite my best efforts to keep them separate from this, I know they can tell something is going on at lunch. They don't immediately press, though, and instead, we talk about Jared's parents and their inclination to throw extravagant parties every weekend.

"Yeah, I don't know. My parents just decided to do New Year's part two, I guess." Jared rolls his eyes, stabbing at his rice with a fork.

"Do you think they ever get tired?" Greyson asks.

"Well, considering their parties go until two in the morning and happen almost every week, I'd be surprised if they didn't." Jared's eyes widen as he looks around the table in excitement. "You guys should sleep over on Friday! We can crash in the basement and steal their liquor."

I think about the invite for a minute, and although I'm physically and mentally exhausted as is, I decide that maybe it would be a good idea to get out of the house and be somewhere Laine isn't. Somewhere that was my comfort place before her, my stability.

"I can't sleep over because I have a tennis match early the next morning, but I'll be there. I could use a night out, or in, I guess." I respond, giving Jared a weak smile.

“Hey, what’s been going on with you? You’ve been super spacey since we’ve come back from winter break.” Tatum nudges my arm, a concerned look growing on her face.

She flips her braids over her shoulder and waits for my response, but I’ve got nothing.

“Um, I’ve just been really busy with finishing up senior year stuff.”

“Okay, since when do we lie to each other?” Tatum’s face scrunches in disapproval as I scramble for what else to say.

“Yeah, something’s going on. We know you, Drew.” Greyson chimes in, his eyes narrowing in concern.

“I’m serious! There’s a lot on my plate this semester. With varsity tennis starting up again and all these damn college application deadlines, I’ve been swamped!” I throw my hands up jokingly, and they all nod and feed me sarcastic ‘sures’ and ‘mhm’s’.

“Whatever you need to tell yourself,” Jared mumbles loud enough for me to hear, but quiet enough to act subtle about it.

\*\*\*\*\*

I feel stupid laying out a matching bra and underwear set to wear to Laine’s. Mostly because I don’t even know why I care so much. It’s not like anything is going to happen, considering the only time something was going to happen, she shut it down and ran home. Okay, maybe it was more of a brisk walk, but it felt like she was running. Running away from me. Running away from her feelings.

Either way, I shouldn’t care this much whether my underwear matches. She just

needs my body for a project, not my brain or my terribly messy feelings.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:11 am*

Even the doorbell feels louder than I remember it as I push the small button and give a weak knock to the front door. When Laine answers, her hair is tied up in a messy bun, and her fingers are once again stained with vibrant tones of colors you could only find in the jungle.

One side of her overalls is unclipped and hanging down by her side, while her pink pastel shirt is bunched up, resting on the side dip of the denim.

She looks a mess, but I can't pull my eyes away from her effortlessly beautiful face, even with eye bags sulking down to her cheeks and her eyes puffy like she hasn't slept in weeks.

"Hey! Uh- come in," she says softly, opening the door and stepping aside to let me in.

As soon as I step inside, the familiar scent of her mom's famous empanadas fills my nose. We walk through the kitchen to the basement door, and I spot her mom happily humming away by the kitchen counter, mixing some sort of meat in a bowl.

"Ay, Drew! Good to see you around again. Where have you been?" Marissa asks, whipping around to face me.

"Hi, Ms. Loveum! Oh, you know, just trying to get through this last semester." I feed her the same line I've been telling everyone this past week.

"Laine, this is what you should be doing instead of doodling in your room all the time." Marissa gestures to me as she shakes her head at Laine.

“It’s not doodling, Mother! It’s a personal project I’ve been telling myself I’d complete since I was young.” Laine argues back.

She looks hurt, and although my first instinct is to wrap my arms around her and tell her that I believe in her and her project and that I don’t think she’s wasting her time by doing what she loves, I side with my better judgment and decide against it.

Laine leads me downstairs to her room, and her sweet scent of strawberries and cinnamon floods my nose once again. I try to remind myself that the comfort attached to the scent isn’t there anymore, but inevitably, my body relaxes at the first whiff of it.

“You can take your shoes and shirt off and lie on the bed,” she says, nodding towards the bed and sitting on the floor. She swirls around so her back is towards me. “I’ve been working on the floor because it’s way easier to work on this big of a canvas this way.”

I can tell she’s trying to make casual small talk, but it feels uncomfortably superficial compared to the deep and vulnerable conversations we’ve had before. I untie my Converse and kick them off onto her floor, nodding my head slightly even though her eyes are fixed on the floor, focusing on the array of brushes laid out on the tarp she’s covered the carpet with.

As I slip off my shirt and throw it in a pile on the floor onto my shoes, I glance down at the painting of a woman lying on her side on the canvas.

Instantly, I can tell Laine is far too hard on herself. The line that was once the torso is ever so faintly visible, but it looks perfect. From the curve to the ratio of it compared to the whole body, to the thickness of the strokes, it’s flawless.

It’s Laine’s.

I'm almost angry with myself for being able to recognize her torso solely from holding it in the lake, sitting against it on the log by the fire, and lying beside it at the playground. Angry for letting myself learn so much of her, knowing that none of it was promised. Angry for thinking I had something stable, something unchanging.

"You can turn around," I say, quieter than I intended to, letting it ring out almost as a whisper.

Laine spins around and gets up on her feet, slowly walking toward me on the bed. She grabs my legs and gently spins them around to put them in a mermaid-like position behind me.

Just the feeling of her long, familiar fingers on my skin makes my heart pound incessantly, and I'm suddenly praying to the God that's slowly taking her from me that she can't hear it through my chest as she stands over me, leaning against the mattress as she positions my limbs where she wants them just as she did when she drew me at the cabin.

My legs stiffen as I try my best to lock them into place, which also happens to be my pathetic attempt to hide how much of my body is shaking with nerves under her touch.

Instantly, the reluctance to come here feels like a huge mistake, but I'm already too far in to quit now. The best I can do for the rest of tonight is to act normal and lie still until she's done. It's just a side, how long could it possibly take?

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Sixteen tries and two hours later, Laine claims to have finally gotten the curve right, though I believe she got it right fifteen tries ago. But what do I know? I'm not the artist here.

By now, there's paint smudged all over her face, and her overalls are barely blue anymore. Her fingers, however, are still stained delicately to the point where it looks like the paint is supposed to be there. It feels surreal watching the colors accumulate on her skin after memorizing the way they looked so natural for so long, as if this is confirmation she doesn't just wake up this vibrant.

I'm still lying on my side where Laine's positioned me as she tilts her head sideways, looking down at the canvas intently. It's almost completely painted, except for the torso she just fixed. My legs feel numb and tingly from lying at that angle for hours, and my abs are definitely feeling it from holding themselves up for this long.

Finally, she clicks her tongue against her teeth and slowly walks over to me. I stare up at her as she leans against the bed again, this time reaching out her colorful hand and tracing along the side of my torso.

Her eyes dart carefully between the canvas and my side, her warm fingers sliding up and down the curve of my side. She looks into my eyes as she touches me, and my insides feel warm again, like they do every time she's touched me before.

Instantly, I forget everything I had been angry at myself for. I give in to her, melting into her warm embrace so comfortably like I had before at the lake, by the fire pit, at the playground.

My legs unstiffen, and my whole body goes limp as Laine traces her fingers up my side, eventually reaching my shoulder, then around to the back of my neck. She tenderly guides my neck down so I'm lying flat on my back atop her bed, and she swings one leg around me, her knee digging into the mattress.

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With one foot still on the floor, she leans down so her face is inches away from mine again, the gap between our lips slowly closing. Despite the heat rushing through my body, I'm ironically frozen in place, afraid that if I move or say something, she'll run like the last time she did when we were face to face like this. But this time, she doesn't.

Instead, she leans down until our lips meet, pulling her other hand up to my waist.

Laine kisses me like she's using her last breaths to do so. Like I'll disappear if she doesn't. I kiss her back, bringing my hands up to hold her face. She tastes like herbs, surprisingly. Like a mix of basil and mint, and rosemary.

I let out a heavy breath as she holds my bottom lip between her teeth, moving her hand from my neck and up through my hair. My lips burn, and my head feels pressured, but in the best way possible.

My body feels electric as I learn her lips in ways I'd been yearning to for months. Ways I'd only learned her body through holding it for comfort.

I undo the side of her overalls that hadn't already been hanging before and slip her shirt off, running my hands down her upper body and stopping to rest them on the sides of her abdomen, gently guiding her body as it moves into mine, each kiss getting more passionate than the last.

Even though she's seen me in less than I have on right now, my cheeks burn bright red from giddy embarrassment now that she's seeing it in this context.



Laine pulls away, looking into my eyes and making everything around me a dizzy blur. Paint splotches are stained all over her face, and most of her hair has fallen out of her messy bun.

She looks deathly attractive even when she's a disheveled mess. Her lips are swollen, and her eye bags have sunken even further, and it's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

I study her face, dropping my gaze from her eyes to her lips, then back up to her eyes again before gently grabbing the back of her head and moving my other hand to her waist, pulling her into me.

Her body is warm against mine, and despite never having much of an interest in art before, I've never wanted to be a starving artist more than I do right now.

14

Laine

I'm not sure what came over me when I texted Drew to

come over. I told myself I wouldn't call her, no matter how stuck I felt on my project. I wouldn't pull her across the line I drew in the dirt that fogs my head.

Part of me is disappointed with myself that I became so desperate. So desperate that I let her infiltrate what was supposed to be my distraction from her. So indulged in my own feelings that I lost my artistic touch without her.

The more I hung out with her, the more the yearning inside me grew. But the more I went to Holy Trinity, the guilt came back. I can't help but feel like there's something wrong with me. I can't figure out why I harbor these feelings, I know I'm not

supposed to.

I stare down at the canvas, studying the smudges of the torso I drew perfectly fifteen times before finally settling for the sixteenth. I'd made Drew lie in a mermaid position for close to two hours, stalling the final outline, doing anything to keep her here with me. At my house, in my room.

The original plan was to use her for my project, then distance after. Dick move, I know, but I figured I was already a villain in her story after walking out on her at the playground, so what's one last hit to the heart? After all, it would be easier to distance myself from her if I told myself she already hated me.

But seeing her actually showing up at my door that evening, laying on my bed in only a bra and sweatpants, watching her eyes narrow in concentration as she laid still as a stone for me, while studying each freckle on her body so intricately, I couldn't ignore the butterflies swarming in my stomach.

I've never been a bold person, but with Drew, I find myself taking control. I can't even begin to describe the feeling as it comes over me.

All I know is the fire in my chest that took over me at the lake when I suggested we go skinny dipping was the same fire that took over me when she came to model for me. It made me do things I never would have imagined I'd do, never planned to do.

I've always had my whole life planned out ahead of me. Until Drew came along. With Drew, all of the things I thought I wanted to feel dull, and suddenly I don't know what I want for myself or my future.

The plan was to move back here, get through senior year, go off to college with a fresh start, possibly meet my husband there, settle down in a copy-paste picket fence house in the suburbs, have maybe two and a half children, raise them, then grow old,

die, and go to heaven.

I didn't plan for Drew to be such a big part of my last year before I went off to live the life I had etched out for myself. To go forth and achieve all of the things I thought I wanted. But despite knowing deep down that I shouldn't, all I know I want now is her.

It scares me, considering I've never been one to hold doubts. But I've never felt more uncertain than I do with Drew, and I've never loved it more than I do right now.

\*\*\*\*\*

The more I stare at my canvas, I'm flooded with memories of the night everything changed. The painting now only brings reminders of the feeling of her lips on mine and her hands on my waist, and I feel guilty for just the act of painting it.

I crouch to a low squat, spinning the canvas around to find an angle that doesn't feel like it holds the weight of that evening, but I just can't get it. Pacing back and forth in my room with my hands perched on my dizzy head, I think about a sermon Father Robert gave us this past Saturday evening—only a few days before I kissed Drew.

Don't hate the sinner, hate the sin. We mustn't cast out our confused youth but rather help them realize their sin before it's too late.

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Father Robert's words echo through my head, buzzing incessantly. His teachings clash in my mind with annoyingly vivid memories of my evening with Drew, my body wrapped in her embrace, my lips wrapped in her breath.

How could something that feels so right be so wrong?

Before I know it, I'm pulling out my phone and calling the only other person I know I can trust.

"Hey. Meet me at the cafe in ten?"

\*\*\*\*\*

When Thom walks up to the table I snagged in the far corner of the cafe—a safe distance away from everyone else who may have ears—he's carrying a briefcase and a plate with a singular miniature muffin atop it.

"What's that for?" I gesture to the briefcase as he takes off his trench coat and sits across from me.

"Well, ya sounded like ya had something quite important to tell me. I figured it would involve feelings, yeah? It helps me to draw out my emotions when I'm havin' big ones. Thought maybe it would help you too?" Thom pulls out a pen and a notepad filled with scribbles and turns to a blank page, sliding it across the table to me.

"Oh," I say quietly, taken aback by his thoughtfulness.

I'd never had someone do something like this for me before. Never had someone put this much thought into my feelings about things, considering I've always been forced into a go-with-the-flow mindset. "Thank you."

"So what's on your pretty mind, Laine? I'm all ears." He chuckles, playfully pulling at the lobes of his own ears.

My shoulders relax as the comforting aura Thom holds is making its way to my side of the table, and suddenly I'm telling him the words I never thought I would say to myself, let alone another person.

"I think I'm in love with Drew."

Silence overtakes the dimly lit corner I've stuck us in, and my chest drops, my breath holding as I try to quickly run through every possible response he could give.

"Oh," he says quietly, almost at a whisper.

I immediately regret opening my mouth to say anything at all.

"Well, have ya told her?"

My chest drops again, and my breathing slowly returns to a steady pace at the sound of his nonchalant reaction, like my confession means more than my identity to him. It's relieving to hear, and oddly surprising.

"Yes. Well, no. Sort of?"

"Sort of?"

"Technically, I told her with my lips, and my hands, and my-"

“OH!” Thom’s face widens as he repeats himself, no longer in a whisper this time.

I sit silently, watching his facial expressions and trying to read his reaction.

“And did her lips and hands and whatever else you told her with respond in a mutual way?” He raises an eyebrow, smiling giddily and nodding toward the pen and paper.

“Ugh! Yes!”

My brain melts at the memory of our kiss. The way she grabbed the back of my head and ran her fingers through my hair, pulling me into her as our lips communicated what we couldn’t out loud.

“Well, great, I’m happy for ya! What’s the problem then?”

The chilling feeling comes back as Thom asks, tapping the notepad with his fingertips. I feel safe with him though, reminded of his judgment-free comfort solely from the way he delicately uses his fingertips for everything from brushing granola crumbs off his desk the first day we met at school to holding the check still as he paid for our lunch the first time we hung out at this cafe to the way he taps the notepad now.

“I don’t know. The way I feel when I’m with her is like nothing I’ve ever experienced before. When I’m with her, I feel alive. Like I could accomplish anything as long as she’s by my side. I feel like a completely different person when I’m around her, different from the image I’ve always had for who I wanted to be as I grew up, except I actuallylikewho I am when I’m with her.”

“This sounds great, Laine. I’m happy for ya, really! Still not seeing the problem though.”

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“The problem is just that! Everything I feel about her is tenfold, and I can’t shut it down. I’ve lost who I was before her, which feels like a blessing and a curse at the same time. I didn’t like who I was before, but the version of myself that she brings out is the version I strive to be and then some.

“With Drew, I feel like I have it all, no matter what else in my world is crashing down, because she is my world. I can be messy, unapologetically, and emotionally raw, and she still sticks around.”

“Wow.” Thom raises his eyebrows and scratches his head. “So you don’t like that you love her?”

“I don’t know.” My head drops as I’m brought back to the doubtful thoughts. “I want to. I really do. But Father Robert says that people who feel like I do are confused, sinful even.”

“Well, do ya believe him?”

“I don’t know anymore.”

We sit in silence for a minute, his eyes searching my face, trying to think of what to say.

“There’s nothin’ wrong with ya, Laine.” Thom’s face goes serious. The most serious I’ve ever seen him.

It scares me.

“If ya want to believe in the church and your God, ya can. But please know there’s room for ya up there in Heaven. No matter who gives you the ol’ stomach whirl.”

Thom’s words are comforting, but I can’t shake the feeling that something is wrong with me. That I shouldn’t even be feeling this way in the first place, even if it weren’t a sin. The lifestyle those feelings bring is unorthodox, and nobody gets the life my mother would want for me to live an unorthodox life.

I don’t say anything back to him. Instead, I lightly draw a heart on his notepad, then draw a bold line across it diagonally, tracing over it several times to make sure it’s visible. Though judging by his reaction, I take it that I don’t need to do that for him to see my feelings on the paper.

Sliding the notepad across the table to him, I purse my lips and watch him stare down at the drawing. A soft smile grows on his face as his eyes relax, ripping out the paper and handing it back to me.

“Keep it. Hang it somewhere ya look at every day.” Thom taps his fingers on the table, studying my face again. I can tell he senses my confusion because he continues.

“Every time ya look at it, let it remind ya of your feelings. Moreover, let it remind ya that what you’re feeling is okay, yeah? That ya need to let yourself feel everything your head’s holdin’ ya back from.”

I give him a subtle nod as he gets up and scoots in his chair. As he walks toward the door, he glances back at me, a gentle smileplastered across his face. He leaves me at my small corner table with even more thoughts than I had coming in here today.

\*\*\*\*\*

I want to believe Thom, but I can’t help but wonder if there is truth to Father Robert’s



sermon as well.

Could confused people still go to Heaven? Or if Thom is right, would Hell be safer for people like me if people like Father Robert go on to reside in Heaven in the afterlife?

If God knows best, would He put me where I'm supposed to be? Where am I even supposed to be? And if I don't even know where I'm supposed to be, how could He possibly know me better than I know myself?

15

Drew

Laine and I don't have a label, but I don't care. She's

mine and I'm hers, and those are the only labels we need. For the next few weeks following our passionate evening at her house, we've spent almost every minute together.

Even Glibby has gotten used to having her around, running straight to greet her at the door whenever she comes over.

Things finally feel like they're back to normal, hanging out every day and constantly texting and calling, but this feels lighter, like the weight of our feelings has been lifted now that we've actually done something about it, and keep doing it.

It's crazy to think that a few months ago I was worried about whether Laine and I would stay close following her move to Holy Trinity, but here we are, doing the damn thing.

“Hey, cutie,” I say through the phone as soon as the ringing stops. “When can I see the painting?”

“It’s not finished yet,” Laine responds, sounding exhausted.

“When are you going to finish it, Laine? It looked like it was almost done the last time I saw it.”

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“The process takes time! You don’t understand.”

I’m trying to, I want to say.

Her words sting just a little, but we’ve finally got to what feels like the stability we had at the beginning of our friendship, so instead I pick my voice up and change the subject.

“So when can I meet your new friends from Holy Trinity?”

“I don’t know. They’re really busy.”

“Okay, when can I see you?”

I hear her sigh through the phone. “I’m also really busy, Drew. Between the project and this new leadership role in Youth Group I’ve taken on with Holy Trinity, I’m going to be really swamped for the next few weeks.”

I try to shut down the disappointment brewing in my chest because I know she means well, and I know how important this project is for her. It would be unfair of me to get in the way of it. But still, part of me wants to be let into her new life. To meet her new friends. To really mean something to her outside of our comfortable little bubble.

I will admit, as much as I’ve enjoyed this bliss with her, I can’t help but want more. Maybe that’s selfish of me, and don’t get me wrong, I am beyond grateful to even be able to see her soul in ways I never thought I would, but I want to be something beyond the playground or the walls of her house.

\*\*\*\*\*

Rain pours and thunder roars as Friday rolls around. As I make a quick run through the rain to get to my car and go to Jared's, I imagine what it would be like to bring Laine around my friends.

They don't know what we are, but they know that she and I are close, and I know that if they knew how important she was to me, then they would love her just as much as I do.

Loveher.

It's a new word that I've never used to describe her, but it feels so right.

When I arrive at Jared's, I go around to the side door leading to the basement, trying not to slip on my way downhill.

"Hey! Glad you could make it, Drew." Jared gives me a quick hug as I slip off my coat and take off my wet shoes. "Um, did you happen to bring any ice?"

"I did." Greyson's voice booms behind me as he steps into the basement, shoes squeaking with each step he takes.

"Great, thanks! You know me so well." Jared does the Guy Hand Smack Thing™ to Greyson and grabs the bag of ice.

"Jared! Why do you always have the booze but no ice?" Tatum barges in behind Greyson, her umbrella still open as she steps inside. Tatum has always been protective of her braids, as she explains that getting them is a whole day event. Apparently, protecting them from getting wet is more pertinent than avoiding bad luck.

“Listen, it’s easy to take a bottle or two from their parties and bring them down here. It’s not so easy to lug ice downstairs. Besides, what would I even put it in? It’s not like they have bags of it sitting there. They get their ice from our fridge.”

“Yeah, I guess that makes sense.” Tatum rolls her eyes in defeat and steps around me and Greyson, jumping on the couch.

Greyson and I join Tatum on the couch while Jared pours everyone cups of prosecco.

“Just water for me. I gotta drive home,” I chime in, standing to head to the sink and filling an empty cup with tap water.

“Suit yourself,” Jared responds, filling three cups and handing one to Tatum and the other to Greyson while balancing his own against his chest.

“You know, Jared, I feel very sophisticated drinking prosecco instead of cheap beer. I’d like to give a special toast to your parents for providing this.” Tatum raises her Solo cup, then takes a swig.

“Well, technically, they didn’t exactly provide it. I swiped it.” Jared laughs, still raising his cup regardless.

“Still, they’re cool for letting you do that.”

“They didn’t lethem, Tatum. Heswipedit.” Greyson’s brows furrow as he takes a sip from his cup.

“Oh, don’t be so dense, Greyson! You guys know what I mean. They’re cool for even having these extravagant parties every weekend.” Tatum nudges Greyson’s arm, causing his prosecco to slosh around in his cup.

“Soooo Drew...” Greyson turns to me, clearly deflecting the conversation. “I saw Laine and Thom at the cafe down the road from school. Do you know if they’re together?”

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“No,” I say, almost too quickly. Tatum gives me a side-eye, and I scramble to find anything else I know about Thom and Laine. “They’re good friends.”

“Yikes! He’s gotten to her!” Jared smacks his hands to the sides of his head facetiously.

“Hey, be nice! He’s actually a sweet guy.” I protest back.

“He’s gotten to you, too!” Jared’s jaw drops exaggeratedly.

“Wait, pause. Are you friends with him, too?” Tatum cocks her head and raises a brow at me.

“I don’t know if I’d say friends, but I’ve talked to him at the late-night ice cream parlor he works at.”

“He works at Starry Scoops? That little shop around the corner from Riverside Elementary?” Greyson chimes in, looking just as confused as Tatum and Jared.

“He not only works there, but his dad owns the shop as a second income, and Thom helps him out.” I nod.

Greyson throws his hands up. “See, I told you guys not to judge someone’s character based on rumors.”

“Okay, we get it. You’re right as always, Greyson.” Tatum scoffs at him, letting a small chuckle slip from her lips.

“He’s a good guy, and he’s a good friend to Laine as far as I know,” I add.

“You know what, speaking of Laine...” Tatum starts, giving me yet another side-eye.

My chest drops as her name is mentioned in that context. I should have known my friends would figure out something was going on. After all, they know me better than I know myself at times.

Jared picks up on my reaction, smiling cheekily. “Yeah, Drew. Don’t think we haven’t noticed how jumpy you get whenever we mention her. Or how you change the conversation every time.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say in defense, though I know they see right through me.

They all stare me down, and finally, I give in. “Okay, fine. She kissed me. There! Is that what you’re all dying to know?”

“I knew there was something going on!” Tatum shouts a little too loudly.

“Is that all you guys did? Or are you leaving out more? Come on, Drew! Don’t starve us on the details!” Jared jumps in eagerly.

“Hey, have some respect, man.” Greyson shoots Jared a look from across the couch, and Jared’s wide clown smile softens.

“No, I’m serious, that’s it. We just kissed.” I pause, debating whether to tell them my recent reservations about Laine or just let them be happy for me. I decide on the latter. “A lot. Multiple times.”

“OooOOooh! You know what this calls for?” Jared shouts, standing too fast and



almost falling over. “Rain dance party outside!”

“Are you crazy?” Greyson exclaims, despite jumping from his place on the couch, looking like he’s ready to pounce out the door.

“MY HAIR!” Tatum coos.

“I have a sleeping bonnet you could borrow?” Greyson offers, awkwardly rubbing the back of his neck.

Jared pokes at Greyson’s chest with a chuckle. “A what?”

“I sleep with a bonnet. I’m into hair care, sue me!” Greyson deadpans, sarcastically throwing his hands up.

“I’ll take it,” Tatum says, running over to Greyson’s bag and grabbing a silky black hair cap from it.

“Well, now that that’s settled... YOLO!” Jared pushes past Greyson and beats Tatum to the door, tugging it open and sprinting outside.

I follow suit, running out into the heavy pouring rain, stopping only briefly to yank my socks off, because I’m not a psycho who enjoys putting on wet socks. Greyson follows shortly after me, tossing his socks neatly on top of his shoes by the door.

Outside, the thunder has stopped, but the rain persists, making for an exciting thrill of a feeling as we scream and dance and twirl around in it. I look up to the sky, closing my eyes and sticking my tongue out. I don’t care if the water’s toxic, as I’m basking in the moment with my best friends.

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Dancing outside in the rain with them reminds me that they never fail to provide me with a good distraction from whatever the world throws at me, and suddenly this day that started pretty shitty quickly turns into what I can feel will become a core memory of my teenage years.

At this moment, I am present. I am here. All of my problems feel so small, and although I think of Laine twenty-three hours a day, I'm thankful that I can let her slip my mind for just this one with my friends.

\*\*\*\*\* I'm exhausted once I get home, worn out solely from the one hour on my feet, having the time of my life in the rain. My clothes are dripping wet as I slip them off and ring them out over the sink in the laundry room.

Shivering, I run upstairs to my room in my bra and underwear and hop in the shower. My shower is quick, and I hum a little tune as I'm patting my hair dry afterward, still riding the high from tonight.

As I put on some comfy pajamas and head over to my bed, I notice an envelope addressed to me sitting on my pillow. My chest sinks as I read Roy Sterling in the top right corner, with a Maryland return address.

Immediately, the jubilant feelings from my eventful night turn into a knot in my chest as I open the envelope and read the letter enclosed inside.

01/23/25

Drew,

Hi sweetie, it's been a while. Dad here. I wanted to let you know I'm doing well! I started my own real estate firm and business is booming! I wish you could be here to celebrate the business's successes. We started very small, too small to survive a day in Georgia, but we finally made it to where I had hoped this business could go! We're looking to expand down south now, so maybe I'll see you soon.

I think of you every day. My greatest regret is leaving you and your mom down there and not being more a part of your life. But I would like to try, and I want to be more involved with you and your mom. I know you are achieving great things, and I want to hear about them! You were always a smart cookie, and I know you're going to go far in college. I hope you can find some time once you graduate to come visit me up here in Maryland. It's cold, but my business partner has a daughter around your age and she has plenty of warm coats you could fit in! Anyways, jokes aside, I really hope to see you soon, my ladybug.

Love you,

? Dad

Anger boils inside me as my eyes focus on the heart next to where he signed Dad, and see the old pet name he used to call me, ladybug, written in his handwriting.

How could he write to me nine years after leaving and act like everything was normal? Flaunting the bright, successful life he built for himself without the burden of me holding him back. How could he expect me to just fly out and visit him after all these years when he couldn't even bother reaching out?

It's even more stupid to think he sent a letter—IN TWENTY TWENTY-FIVE—because he couldn't even be bothered to ask my mom for my number to send me a heart-dropping message like a normal douchebag from this century.

Even worse, the letter is dated January 23, two days before today, meaning he paid extra for priority shipping. So he can pay extra to make sure this emotional bomb gets to me as fast as possible, but couldn't even scrounge up enough money to pay for child support?

Tears quickly fill my eyes and drop poetically onto the wrinkled paper, which I didn't realize I had been crumpling in my hands while reading. My mind races to the future in the hypothetical situation that I did visit him in Maryland or bump into him down South. Would he expect me to call him dad and run and jump into his arms, screaming that I missed him and was glad he came back into my life?

One thing is for sure: he is not my dad. Maybe he was for the past nine years while he was away. Maybe I referred to him as "dad" because I liked how easily the word rolled off my tongue, pretending to be a normal kid who just happened to have a dad she never saw. Sure, dads leave and abandon their families, but dads don't barge into your life after years of not giving you or the family they gave up a second thought, boasting about their beautiful new life that was only possible without you.

No, this was Roy. Roy, the man who left his family because love and stability just weren't exciting enough for him. Roy, the man who abandoned his only daughter, who already had abandonment issues from her biological parents, but finally felt wanted by him. Finally found a home with him, until he abandoned her, too.

Shoving the crumpled letter into the drawer of my bedside table, I reach across the bed where I threw my phone. Tears stream down my face as I hurriedly type in Laine's name, my vision blurred.

The phone rings out, each beep feeling twice as long as usual. When the ringing finally stops, I sniffle into the phone, trying to pull myself together.

"Laine?" I mutter softly.

There's no response, so I pull the phone away from my ear only to find the blurred call failed screen. Frantically, I click call again, hoping to at least hear it ring out. Instead, the line goes silent, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

16

Laine

"Laine, hija, come upstairs!" Mother calls for me at the top of the steps.

I race to the kitchen, tying my hair into a messy bun as

I run up the stairs. At the table, I anxiously spot two bowls of cereal ready and waiting for me, just like the last time

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my mother tried to sit me down and tell me all the ways

she was planning on uprooting my life again.

“Tell me, Laine, have you spoken to Father Robert

about getting involved with the youth group?” Mother asks

through a mouth full of crunchy Wheat O’s.

“Yes, he says he’s happy to have me, and since I’m a

senior, I’ll make for a good mentor to the younger kids.” I

parrot back to her exactly what Father Robert told me. “Good! I’ve also been speaking with the other moms,

and one of them has a son in your grade who’s in the

youth group. I want you to meet him, and he can guide you

in this position. He’s been at Holy Trinity since preschool.” “Mother, it’s okay. I can handle some kids on my

own.”

“It’s not just handling, hija! You’re new to the church

and the school. He knows how things are run.” A smirk grows across her face. “Plus, he’s a cutie!”

I scoff and get up to clean my dish, wanting this conversation to end as soon as possible.

I don’t need a reminder of the future son-in-law I’m potentially robbing my mother of by being with Drew. “Go shower and wear something nice! We are meeting with him and his mother today.” Mother calls after me as I try to escape to my room.

When I get to my room, I pick up my phone and long-press the side button until the logo contrasts too bright against the black screen. I’ve been turning my phone off recently to clear my head, and I figured that maybe turning it off and focusing on my art project would also turn off the overbearing thoughts that linger in my head. Unfortunately, I’ve found that switching off my phone and giving my mind complete silence only amplifies the

buzzing of unwanted thoughts.

When the screen lights up, I see a missed call from



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Drew late last night. She's been calling a little extra recently, and I can't blame her. I've been pulling away right when things were going well.

I can't say I'm proud of it, or that I'm even doing it on purpose. And it is true, I have been really busy with Holy Trinity stuff, especially with my mother pushing me into leadership roles in a house I've barely taken my shoes off in. I mean, I just memorized the route to the bathrooms last time we went to mass.

I can't blame the distance solely on Holy Trinity, though. I've been purposely missing some of her calls and keeping myself busy so I don't have as much time to be around her. To get closer to her. To let myself fully love her, even though it may be far too late for that.

But just as I experienced before with her, what is built quickly can be broken just as quickly, and right now our bond feels so sacred. The more time we spend together, the more chances we have to ruin it. I can't take that risk, but I also can't risk the opposite. I can't risk her becoming so much to me that it kills me when we have to inevitably split, and I can't help it if Holy Trinity gets to us before college does.

I shoot Drew a text asking to meet at the playground later tonight. I figure I owe her this much at least. It's not like I don't want to see her either. I want to see her so badly. I want to feel her warm skin against mine, and I want her to hold me and tell me everything will work out. I want to feel like all my problems are small, and time stops like it usually does when I'm with her.

I want to lay my head in her lap and fumble with the itchy grass beside my ear as she runs her fingers through my hair and tells me that neither church nor college could

pull us apart. That we're stronger than any external force. I want her to tell me she found a magic stopwatch

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somewhere that can take us to another dimension, and we

can live timelessly there forever, just me and her.

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People are shuffling around everywhere when we get to Holy Trinity. The band members are polishing their instruments and running cables back and forth in preparation for Saturday mass tonight.

Pastor Robert is jubilantly talking with some mothers in a corner. The children of those mothers are running up and down the stairs of the stage playing what I think is a game of either tag or King of the Hill; I can't tell.

The sun is shining through the Shaun-The-Sheep-designed stained glass, and the vibrant, colorful rays of light shine directly onto the microphone center stage.

Mother waves over at someone in the distance, and I follow her in that direction, my steps subtle and quick-paced behind hers.

“Eliza! So good to see you again.” Mother hugs the lady she waved at.

Eliza looks to be in her mid-fifties, scrawny and oddly wrinkly, but younger in the face. She has long, dirty blonde hair that reaches her inner elbow joint and green eyes that match the hue of a section of the light coming in through the stained glass.

Beside her is a boy with a far more boxy build than her frailness. His hair is dirty

blonde to match hers, but his eyes are a deep sunken brown, and freckles dance across the bridge of his squared nose.

“This is my son, Donovan.” Eliza introduces the boy to us, and he steps forward to shake both of our hands. His hand is rough and calloused, and his grip is firm. There’s a glint in his eyes as they linger on me for longer than I’m comfortable with.

“How do ya do?” I’m taken aback by the slight southern twang in his voice, but it sounds warmer than his gaze felt.

“Donovan! My daughter Laine’s been looking to join the youth group here at Holy Trinity. I heard you’ve played a major role in that?” My mother puts a hand on my shoulder, and it takes everything in me not to squirm away under her firm hand.

“Yes, ma’am! Proud to say I have.” Donovan turns to face Mother, that annoying glint returning in his eyes.

“That is fantastic! You wouldn’t mind showing her the ropes, would you? She’s already spoken with Father Robert, and he’s agreed to let her on board.”

“I sure do not mind.” Donovan raises an eyebrow and turns to face me, sliding me a polite smirk, as polite as a smirk can be.

“Oh, this is wonderful! Donovan could use a pretty girl like you to help him out.” Eliza claps her hands together, a huge grin plastered across her face. I’ve re-familiarized myself with the loose language of physical compliments when it comes to Southern formalities, but still, I subtly shudder at the way she pronounces a hard r when she says “girl”.

Eliza and my mother continue talking as Donovan leads me into a smaller room off to the side of the main atrium.

“This is where we hold Youth Group meetings. It looks kinda bland, but you get used to it.” He holds open his arms like he’s giving a grand tour, despite this room being smaller than my tiny basement bedroom.

There are a few bean bags near the front by the projector board, and across from that are long rows of carpeted open carriage independent stair units. It looks almost like a small meeting room of an office, but with the smell of a church. I go to sit down on the carpet of the second row.

“Those are what we call the mini pews. I don’t really sit on them ‘cause I’m praisin’ our lord from up here.” He points to where he’s standing beside the projector. “But I heard they’re kinda uncomfy. You can tell me if ya think so.”

I pat the area around me. “They’re fine.” “You don’t say much, do you?”

“I don’t really have much to say.” I shrug.

“Well, you gotta have somethin’ to say. After all, you joined Father Robert’s lil’ elite club.”

I wince at the way he says elite like he’s better than every other believer who comes to mass just because he feels he’s more outwardly passionate about it.

“I joined because my mother thought it would be good for me.”

He raises an eyebrow at me. “You call your momma ‘Mother?’”

“I do. It’s more respectful.”

“But she’s your momma. Ain’t she family?”

“She is, but she is also an elder to me. I was raised to address my elders respectfully.”

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“Interesting.” His brow drops, but I can tell he’s judging me. “Sooooo...”

“So,” I repeat back to him, unsure of what to say next.

“I think we should go see if Father Robert needs any help with the setup for tonight. You’re comin’ to the Youth Group meeting tonight, right?” Donovan starts for the door and opens it, beckoning me to go first.

“Thanks,” I say as he follows behind me. “And I don’t know, I might have plans tonight.”

He catches up and takes the lead as we head into the main atrium again, this time making a beeline for Father Robert.

“Hey, kiddo! I saw you were takin’ Miss Loveum to our Youth Group room.” Father Robert’s booming voice makes me jump a little.

He reaches his arm out and pats me on the shoulder.

“Yes, sir.” Donovan smiles cheekily. “I heard she’s gon’ be joinin’ us.”

“She sure is.” Father Robert turns to Donovan like I’m not standing right here with them. “In fact, we have a meeting tonight after mass. I’d like you to be there.”

Right as he says “tonight,” I think of Drew. I picture her gorgeous face and rosy cheeks in the cold. The way her lips turn inward when she smiles super big, and the way her hair falls neatly around her face, framing her jawline. How I want to run my



fingers along that perfect jawline and lift it up so her eyes meet mine and our lips are inches apart.

My thoughts are cut off abruptly by Donovan's loud voice.

"Well, are ya comin' to our meetin' tonight?"

"I, um, have other commitments tonight." I offer my best friendly smile like I'm really bummed I'm missing their meeting tonight, even though I'm still not completely sure what this "elite" group does that regular mass doesn't.

"Well, I suppose that's mighty fine." Father Robert shakes his head with a smile, although I can tell he's disappointed. "We just now told you about it, so it's not your fault you made other plans."

I nod in appreciation and head back over to where my mother is still speaking with Eliza, giving Donovan space to suck up to Father Robert without me holding him back, which I could tell he was getting annoyed by.

I don't mind missing this meeting. I'd much rather be with Drew, regardless of the fact that being around her eats me alive just as much as it soothes me.

It's no different than any other teenage girl skipping class to go hang out with her boyfriend, right? Mother wouldn't even have to know. It's not like she has a calendar of all Holy Trinity events and meetings ever planned. Besides, I think she likes Drew as a friend for me, even if not in the ways I like Drew for me.

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My mood instantly lightens when I see Drew making her way down the hill and to our playground.

Our playground.

It has a nice ring to it. I catch myself smiling too hard and quickly move my lips to a more subtle smile, not wanting to creep her out as she gets closer to where I'm sitting on my little blanket in the grass.

I jump up from my spot when she reaches my blanket.

"Hi!" I lean in to kiss her, but she throws her arms around me instead. I wrap my arms around her as well, burying my head into the crevice of her collarbone and taking in her warmth and sweet scent of earthly herbs.

I wait for her to say something back. Anything. A greeting, the latest gossip about people at school, something embarrassing Mr. Rickshaw said. She says nothing, but I don't mind. She's holding me, and I'm holding her, and that's all that matters.

Suddenly, my shoulder feels extra stingy cold, like the crisp air is whipping harder against that spot than anywhere else on my body. Then I hear a snuffle. I pull away from her embrace and take her face into my hands, holding her out in front of me so I can see her better.

She's crying.

"Hey! Hey, what happened?" I rush to wipe her tears as she drops down to the blanket, cross-legged. "Did I do something? I'm really sorry if I-"

"No," she interrupts, sniffing incessantly. "It's not you."

I look intently into her eyes with sympathy, trying my best to look like I, myself, don't want to break down crying at the sight of her crying.

“What is it then?”

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“My dad.” That’s all she says.

“What? What about him?” I ask, stalling for her by wiping her tears away while she tries to compose herself enough to get out a full sentence.

“He wrote-” she says between sniffles. “He wrote to me.”

Drew holds out a crumpled piece of paper. I take it and try my best to flatten it out, using the dim moonlight to make out the sloppily scribbled words on the paper. I would use my phoneflashlight, but right now feels like an awkward time to whip out my phone and admit my vision isn’t as good as I claim it to be.

The words hit me like a train, and it’s not even my father. I can’t imagine how Drew must be feeling right now, getting a letter from a man who hasn’t shown up for you for years, now claiming he’s finally ready to be back in your life.

I don’t say anything at first. I just gently bring her legs around and pull her close to me as I lie horizontally on the blanket. She buries her wet face into my chest, and I hold her head, stroking her hair and rubbing her back as she blubbers into my shirt.

We lay for a solid half hour in silence. At some points, I think she’d fallen asleep, but then I’m reassured that she hasn’t by a strong snuffle. I want to say something to her. Anything. Anything to make her feel better. To comfort her.

I wish I were the one with the magical stopwatch now, going on and on about the new dimension I found for us to live in. One without parents or religious guilt or colleges. One where the only inhabitants are us and the frogs and the rabbits.

I imagine what she'd look like coming home to our cozy little cottage in the middle of the forest with a basket of berries she'd just picked for our dinner while I was home teaching the birds that live in our flowerbeds to hum her favorite melody. Everything in that universe feels like pure bliss.

I know we can't, though. We can't just run away from all of our problems indefinitely. But we can forget them, just for tonight.

"I'm missing a Youth Group meeting right now." I finally break the silence. I hope we can laugh over Donovan's stupidly loud voice, his mother's oddly wrinkly figure—for a fifty-year-old, at least—and Father Robert's overexcitement that I can tell is way fake.

She chuckles through sniffles, even though what I just said isn't even the part of today I'd consider funny. I soften at the sound of her laugh. If there's anything I know about Drew, it's that she's the type of person to appreciate silent comfort, and then distractions right after. She's not one to talk out her feelings, or really even talk at all about the matter at hand during a crisis.

I keep going.

"Father Robert acted super okay with it. Almost too okay. He's always too everything. Too enthusiastic. Too excited. Too talkative." I meet her eyes with mine as she pulls her head up to look at me for the first time since we've lain down. "And Donovan! Don't get me started on Donovan! I think my mother definitely likes him more than I do. She called him handsome like a gazillion times on the ride home—"

"Wait, who's Donovan?" Drew perks up, sounding more alarmed than anything right now, like she wasn't just bawling her eyes out a minute ago.

I have to admit, jealousy is a cute look on her. Part of me wants to rave on about all

of his amazing qualities now, if I can even find enough, just to watch her get possessive. Unfortunately, I know better than to salt the wound, and I've always taken pride in my "high level of maturity," as my mother calls it.

"Donovan is an obnoxiously loud and charming—to adults—guy who thinks he's the leader of the whole church. And also happens to be my mentor for Youth Group."

Her body softens at the negative words I used to describe Donovan. "Doesn't that kind of defeat the purpose of a leadership role? You're supposed to be the mentor."

"Exactly." I deadpan. "I don't even know what that leadership position entails yet."

Drew shifts her body on the blanket so she's facing me, her head propped up on one arm, the other arm draped over her torso. She looks so beautiful tonight. Seeing her curves under the moonlight—the very curves I depicted on the project I've yet to finish—certainly doesn't help my conflicting feelings toward her.

This shouldn't be this complicated. She likes me, I like her—no, I love her. I'm in love with her. So why can't I let myself just be happy with her? Why do my thoughts make me question every bit of safety she's provided me? Why can't I let them go? Why does it feel like an ultimatum war in my head? Her, or the thoughts. The thoughts, or her. Only one gets to stay. I don't get to have her and Mother's—and Holy Trinity's—validation.

Tonight completely threw off any plans I had to slowly distance myself from her, to start the healing process now rather than later, if I was even planning on doing that.

I could be selfish. I could choose her. I could let everything the church told me roll off my back. I could be a non-believer because I'd have Drew to believe in. I'd have our love to believe in. I just couldn't seem to shake the feeling of disappointment that would come with that decision or the lack of presence of a thing that's been such a

huge part of my upbringing.

Honestly, it would be less selfish to break her heart now than to let her believe in something impossible between us, only to break it later.

My thoughts are interrupted by Drew clearing her throat quietly.

“Laine,” she says softly. “Do you actually, like, believe in that stuff?”

I take a deep breath, knowing where this is going but secretly holding out hope that maybe, just maybe, she means something else.

“In the Youth Group leadership program? No, I think all the people who come to mass are equal followers. I don’t believe in this elitist type club they have going on.”

“No, like, the whole church thing.” She pauses, my chest pounding, dreading what comes next. “Does Holy Trinity feel like home to you in the way that we feel like home to each other?”

Her words hit me like a weight. The person I care about most in the whole world right now is asking me the same question I ask myself every night. Except, I’ve been content not having an exact answer for myself for now. But with Drew, I want to answer right. I’m just not exactly sure what the right answer is, so I give her the best I got.

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“To be honest, I don’t know, Drew. I mean, of course, I believe in God, and Holy Trinity has the same values as I do for the most part. I should enjoy going there, truly. Usually, I love going to church. It’s my safe space outside of my art. I don’t know what’s different. I don’t know what changed.”

I conveniently leave out the part where I came to the realization, after sitting up for countless hours a night, that she’s what changed.

She’s the reason I’m questioning my values now.

Instead, I offer the faintest mumble.

“I think I’d like it to.”

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Drew

I would consider myself an empath. I understand where

Laine is coming from in the sense that Holy Trinity gives her a chance to redeem herself on her dad’s behalf. To follow the same path but change the narrative.

She wants that. She wants to be nothing like him. But she isn’t. Religion or not, I know she isn’t anything like him. She’s scared that having his blood in her veins makes her all the more likely to become destined for the same fate, but she’s stronger than he was, and she’s stubborn as hell.



Even if it was some sort of... temptation? Whatever compelled her dad to go down that path won't get to her. I know it. I need to make sure she knows it.

I pick up my phone and call her. I don't know exactly what I would say, which scares me because we had such a good night—or at least felt like it to me—at the playground, and I don't want to push her further away.

I need to be calculated with this. I need to reassure her that I see her. Really see her, without criticizing her coping methods, which is clearly what this is. Maybe I'm overthinking this. Or maybe overthinking this allows me to underthink my issues with my own dad. Either way, this is a message Laine needs to hear.

The line picks up.

“Hello?”

“Hey,” I start. “I’ve been thinking about something  
you said. At the playground?”

There’s a pause.

“Mhm.” Laine’s voice sounds groggy, like she’s just  
woken up, even though it’s mid-afternoon.

“Well, I just wanted you to know that I think you’re a  
good person. A very strong, independently-willed person.” “Drew... Where is this  
coming from?”

I can almost hear how disheveled she looks through  
the phone. I can picture her hair messily tied up and her  
long fingers stained with paint as always.

I stumble on my words. “I- I don’t know. I just wanted  
you to know that. I see you for who you truly are, Laine,  
and that person is capable of so much more than your dad  
was ever destined for. You don’t need to be all tangled up  
in a church you don’t like in order to be a good person.” I sense it click in her hard  
head over the phone, what

I'm saying.

"Oh, Drew." She lets out a breathy sigh. "Don't take

what I said so seriously. I didn't mean anything by it." "No, Laine. I know how you're feeling. And I'm

assuming that's why you've felt so distant recently." "I don't know what you're talking about."

I picture her shaking her head over the phone. It's

crazy how familiar I've become with her mannerisms. How

easily I can predict her motions just by the sound of her

voice. The idea that we've become so close for me to be

able to do that quickly brings me back to my main

objective of the call, and I decide to play it safe.

"Laine, I know you're scared. I know you have a lot

running through your mind right now." I say in a softer

tone, hoping to get through to her. To get her to let her

guard down around me like she did so easily the first time

she cried in my arms at the playground.

“Just forget I said anything, okay?” She sounds worn.

“I have to go. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Wait-” I start, but the line clicks and all I hear is

silence.

Great. I’ve gone and messed it up again. I pushed her

further. I don’t know why she’s choosing to distance herself now after all we’ve been through. After she opened up to me so easily when we barely knew each other. Now, we’re closer than ever, yet she feels so far. So guarded.

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I’m tired, and my head hurts after staring at a Krebs cycle diagram for two hours, trying to memorize all the steps. Iscoot my chair back, pushing off my desk with my feet. There’s nothing an apple and a bit of Advil can’t solve.

When I reach the top of the steps, I hear my mom talking to someone. She’s angry; I recognize her stern voice that comes out only when I’ve gotten in serious trouble. Then, I hear a man’s voice. Stealthily, I take each step on the stairs with great precaution, extra slow on the steps I know squeak. When I round the corner, my eyes shoot to the living room, then the front door.

That’s when I see him.

My chest drops as I take in the man standing in the foyer. I almost don't recognize him immediately.

Roy is in my house.

"Hey, ladybug." Roy catches my eye and beckons me over. He holds out his arms, and I can't tell whether he's presenting himself overenthusiastically or expecting a hug.

I don't walk over. I don't move from the bottom step. I don't step onto the kitchen floor that connects with the living room that connects with the foyer. I don't dare stand on the same ground as him. Instead, I book it back upstairs.

Slamming the door behind me, I slump against it using all my body weight. I hear my mom's footsteps rushing toward my room, but I keep my back to the door.

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My heart pounds incessantly, and my head feels ten times heavier than it did minutes ago. Suddenly, I wish I were staring blankly again at complicated words I know I could never pronounce, arranged around a circle constructed of arrows in my APES textbook.

“Sweetie...” My mom’s voice is quiet on the other side of my door. It breaks mid-sentence, and I can tell she’s been crying too. “Can I come in?”

I don’t respond. Even if I wanted to say anything, my throat feels tight, and nothing but exhausted gasps escape my lips when I open them.

“He’s downstairs, honey. It’s just me, please let me in.”

I crack the door, poking an eyeball through the opening to check if she’s being truthful. She is, so I open the door wider, letting her in but closing it quickly behind her.

“Look, I don’t know why he’s here. Or why he chose to show up and be a part of our lives now. But he is. He’s making the effort now, and he wants to take you to lunch today. He wants to talk to you.”

“No,” is all I manage to get out.

“Drew, I’m angry with him, too, okay? But he’s trying. He just wants one lunch with you. After that, you can decide how much of your life you want to let him into.”

I’m taken aback by how reluctant she is to his arrival. I know what I heard

downstairs, and I know I heard her upset with him, so why is she pushing it on me now?

“I said no,” I respond firmly, finding my voice again.

“I take it you got his letter?”

I nod.

“You don’t even have to talk to him. Let him do the talking. He just wants to explain some things to you.”

“I SAID NO!” I scream, shoving my mom out of my room.

Part of me feels bad for taking it out on her. For not listening to her. But listening to her would mean listening to him, and I wasn’t about to do that. Writing a letter as if we live in the fucking 1800s was one thing. But showing up at my doorstep? He had already crossed the line, but now he’s built a wall along it, making it so that he can’t cross back and nobody can push him back.

It took so long for me to live with myself in his absence after he left us. This whole house became a shrine for him. Every corner was one he’d stubbed his toe on at some point because he was always too clumsy and unbalanced to walk straight. Every loose nail dented in the walls was once a happy family portrait that had been taken down.

Every inch of the kitchen counter was one my little butt once sat on when he let me stir the batter as he baked my favorite cookies before doctors’ appointments because he knew I’d always get anxious beforehand. Every room in this house held his memory as if he were dead, and every memory was a reminder of how good a dad he was when he was present.

A reminder of everything I lost.

Perhaps it would have been easier to lose him if he had been a terrible dad. But he wasn't. He gave me everything I could ever ask for in a parent, and then he took it all away.

To me, that's far worse than a terrible parent who stays.

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For the rest of the day, I curl up in my bed and stare at the ceiling. On it, there are faint marks of sticky residue from all the times I threw squishy toys up there as a kid, and my dad had to rip them off after I cried to him that my toys got stuck and I couldn't get them to come back down.

The more I stare, the more those residue marks become blurry, almost blending in with the off-white shade of the drywall ceiling itself.

Suddenly, my wallowing is interrupted by a loud crash coming from the kitchen. I jump out of bed and run to the top of the stairs, fearing the worst. I'm stopped by the sight of broken porcelain, scattered across the tiled kitchen floor. They haven't noticed me, but I've definitely noticed them.

It's unclear who threw the plate, but it's Roy who starts sweeping up the pieces as my mom berates him. Against my better judgment, I decide to sit on the top step and listen in. I know it's wrong to eavesdrop, but between Roy showing up out of the blue—sort of; the letter doesn't count—and my mom trying to convince me to give him a chance, they owe me at least this much.

“What were you expecting, Roy? That we were going to welcome you back with open arms and dig up the old family photos to slide into the empty frames on the



coffee table? That you could take Drew to lunch and be sitting across from the same eight-year-old girl you abandoned?" Mom says angrily, throwing her arms in the air.

"I don't know, okay? Maybe I was! Maybe I thought you guys would still have it in your hearts to be happy for my successes? I finally have the life I always wanted!" Roy responds firmly, on the verge of tears.

"Wow." Mom deadpans. "So we weren't enough? Your own family, Roy! I should have known we were never what you wanted. You always wanted more. More, and more, and more, and-"

"You know that's not true! I loved you and Drew with everything I had in me, but I just couldn't sit here and pretend I was happy with myself. It had nothing to do with you two and you know it!"

"How does it not? How could you say you led an unhappy life when you had a wife who loved you and would do anything for you? When you had a daughter who looked at you like you hung the stars in the sky every night just for her?"

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A single tear drops down Roy's cheek. "You cut me off when I left, remember? You told me not to contact you guys! I tried to take you guys with me! It wasn't you or her that I was leaving. It was my career."

"Well excuse me for not wanting to uproot our daughter's whole life and move to fucking Maryland on an unrealistic whim!"

My chest drops at Roy's words.

He wanted to take me and Mom with him. He wanted us. He wanted me. He just wanted his career more.

"It wasn't that I was unhappy with you or our family! I was unhappy settling for what everyone told me I should want. We fell in love with each other before we were able to fall in love with ourselves!

"We were so young, and I never got to figure out who I wanted to be because all I knew of myself was who I was with you. I wasn't happy with the predictability and stability of our lives. I felt like I was just surviving, and I wanted to live."

Full tears are now streaming down Roy's face, and his brows are furrowed down. I can't tell if he's angry or sad. Or maybe both? Mom's face is blubbery too, but my sympathy for her is gone.

All these years, she made me think he left us because he didn't love us enough to choose us over his unrealistic career aspirations. But he tried to take us with him. He loved us enough to want to include us in his endeavors, but my mom didn't want to

be a part of it, so instead, she held me back with her.

All of a sudden, I feel the strongest urge to hug him. I don't know why, or what's come over me. I know I won't actually do it, but it's the wanting to that scares me.

I want to hug him and squeeze his torso like I did when I was a kid before he went to work. I wanted to squeeze him again, but harder this time, to make up for the last time I squeezed hugged him, not knowing it was the last time I would have seen him in almost ten years.

I want to squeeze him and never let go, so he won't be able to leave again, even though I'm still beyond livid with him right now. I try to hold back the tears now falling down my face, sniffing ever so quietly so they don't hear me.

"You left us, Roy. You left for what, a fever dream?"

"Again, it wasn't a fever dream! Look where the company is now. You didn't believe in me when you should have. You were my wife, my life partner for fuck's sake! You were supposed to be my biggest supporter."

"Supporter in what? We had everything set for the rest of our lives. Why would I support you destroying that? Destroying everything we built!"

"Because I didn't even want that in the first place! I never wanted to be a lawyer, but I wanted to be with you, and I wanted to make you happy."

"Bullshit."

"It's true. I loved you, and I still do. But I also really fucking love real estate. I love the gamble, the smell of a new house, the satisfaction of being able to provide someone with the foundation to start their lives!"

“You left me.” Mom’s eyes narrow as she reiterates, seeming to really want to nail this part into Roy’s head. “You left me with her. You left me to raise her all on my own. With no child support!”

Roy goes quiet, but I can still barely make out his words. “I didn’t have the money for that. We were just starting up the business, building from the ground up and all that.”

“Do you know how hard it’s been raising Drew as a single mother? Getting her through her teenage years. Missing work meetings to drive her around town to hang out with her friends, just so she could feel at least half normal. Picking up your slack. Hell, I was both parents for a whole decade!”

“I’m sorry about that, Anne.” Roy hangs his head.

Then it hits me. He left her with me. Mom was left with me. Stuck, even. This must’ve been why she pushed so hard for that stupid lunch with him. It was his turn to deal with me. I was a burden that neither of them wanted, and my mom lost the battle. I robbed her of a normal motherhood, and instead, she had to be two parents at once.

Their life together was perfect until I came along. The only issue they ever encountered was infertility, but maybe they were infertile because they weren’t meant to have children. Maybe by going against nature, by adopting me, their perfect world fell apart.

I ruined their picturesque life.

They were destined for a happy ending, had it all laid out and everything. If I weren’t a factor in the equation, Mom would have gone to Maryland with him. With her seniority in the legal field, she could have easily found a job there, and they would have continued their lives together there. They would have stayed on the path

projecting the happy ending they were always meant to have.

I can picture them now, maybe on their fourth cat together, rocking on reminiscing on their a porch swing together and good days in Georgia, but appreciating their better days in Maryland. Now, because of me, they're having a screaming match and throwing plates in the kitchen of a house they could have moved out of together, starting the next chapter of their story.

A story with a happy ending.

18

Laine

“The Lord is a powerful, all-mighty being if only we

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welcome Him into our lives.” Father Robert shouts from the stage. “We must allow Him to speak to us, and He will speak his truths in glorious ways.”

He goes on, clenching his fists in the air as he speaks. “Tell me, do you pray over every meal? Pray for your family, friends, and neighbors? Pray with your family, friends, and neighbors? Or do you give in to temptation? Temptation to give in to sin and lose sight of our Lord?”

Temptation. Something my father became very accustomed to in his last days with us. Hell, probably even last months. I grew familiar with temptation through him, but ironically, I had only ever experienced it once I met the one person who made temptation feel like it could be a good thing. Once I met Drew.

But now, I don’t know anymore. Drew makes me feel things I know I shouldn’t. She makes me feel conflicted, because how could something so wrong feel so right? Every moment spent with her felt so easy. But then I come to Holy Trinity, and everything immediately feels wrong. My feelings feel wrong. Is it possible to have wrong feelings? Unnatural, sure. But wrong? God has a plan for everyone, doesn’t he?

I’m tired of feeling like there’s something wrong with me. I’m tired of feeling like a screw-up. I’m not sure whether I really fit in at Holy Trinity yet, but I know I want to. That’s got to count for something, right?

Perhaps if I follow what Father Robert says, and pray every day and all, maybe I won’t feel so conflicted. I won’t feel like I’m messed up somehow. Drew and I were friends before we were anything else. We could go back to how it was before.

How we were before. If only I could find a way to pray the feelings away, God would know I'm trying. He would take away the sin. He could fix me.

I could fix me.

As soon as Father Robert finishes preaching, I excuse myself to the restroom. My heart is pounding as I run my hands along the textured walls in the long corridor to the restroom.

Once I get there, the restroom reeks of petunias and acorns, an oddly pleasurable smell for a room that people excrete their waste in, but then again, Holy Trinity gets an insane amount of funding from its congregation.

I head into the biggest stall at the end and press call.

"Hello?" Drew sounds stuffy, like she's been awake for far too many consecutive hours.

"I don't think we should see each other anymore," I say with a weak voice, trying my best to hold back tears. I remind myself that this is in both of our best interests. It's what I need to do. "At least not in the way that we do."

"What?" Her voice comes in soft, hurt. The sound of it makes me want to hurl right here in the pristine toilet beside me.

"We can still be friends!" I rush to clarify. "I mean, I'd like to still be friends."

"Where is this coming from, Laine?"

"I've just had a lot of revelations recently, and I think it's for the best."

“Laine, you don’t mean that.”

“I really care about you, Drew. I do, I promise. It’s nothing like that.”

“Then what’s it like? What revelations could you have possibly had that told you that this... that we were something you didn’t want anymore?”

Her voice cracks through the phone, and I want this call to end. I can’t take it. I can’t handle hearing her like this. Knowing that I’m the one who’s caused her tears this time, except I have no choice. I have to do this. For both of our sakes. It feels difficult now, but sometimes restoring things to how they were before and choosing peace can’t coincide, and I’m going to have to be okay with that.

“That’s the problem! You’re all I want.”

“I don’t see how that’s a problem.”

“Because I shouldn’t!” I yell, too loudly for a public restroom.

“Wow. Okay, I see what this is about. I didn’t think you could be so easily swayed to believe everything they tell you there. I guess I was wrong about you.”

Her voice is direct, and her anger pierces through the phone like a dagger straight to the heart. I need this call to end.

“I haven’t been swayed! I shouldn’t have even gotten into this mess with you in the first place! I shouldn’t have let you get so close. I shouldn’t have let you wiggle your way into my life, and I sure shouldn’t have let you become so important to me!”

“Wiggle my way into your life? Need I remind you that you came onto me first? You kissed me first!”



The way she says the word “you” like I was the only sinner in this situation twists the knife I stabbed into my own heart.

I end the call.

I can't take it anymore. The whole reason I ended whatever we had in the first place was because of how she made me feel better about myself, but now, I only feel worse.

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Tears now fully stream down my face. I can't keep it in anymore. I can't hold in the months of feelings I'd kept stashed away. Feelings about the move. Feelings about my father. Feelings for Drew.

The air feels heavy, but not like the way it did when I half skinny-dipped and stargazed with Drew. This time, the air feels filled with a different kind of tension. The kind of tension that comes with unfavorable emotions. I rest my head in my hands as the tears flow, no longer caring how obnoxiously loud my sniffing is.

Suddenly, I hear a knock on the bathroom door. I let out a sigh of relief as I peek out of my stall to find the bathroom still empty. However, the knocking from the outside persists.

"Heya! You alright in there?" A man's voice bellows.

I quickly wipe my tears and snot onto my sleeve and pick myself up when I recognize it's Donovan's voice.

"Donovan! What are you doing out there?" I shout hurriedly.

"I heard a shout and then some cryin'. Wanted to make sure everything was all right."

I scurry to open the door. Grabbing the collar of his shirt, I pull him inside.

"Woah! What's the matt-"

His eyes widen as I put my hand over his mouth, shoving him gently so his back is to

the wall. I'm not sure what I'm going to tell him, but there's no way I'm letting him go before I get my story straight. Especially not now that he's seen me like this.

"Hey! What's wrong with you? I can't be in here! This is the girls' room!" He whisper shouts immediately after I release my hand from his mouth. He darts for the door, but I reach a hand out, holding the door closed.

"Listen, you can't tell anyone you found me like this, okay?" I shake my finger in his face.

He puts his thumb and pointer finger together and pulls them across his lips.

"I won't tell a soul, I promise. I'm a man of my word." I'm slightly surprised, although terribly thankful, by how reluctant he is. "Now, are you gon' let me outta here?"

"No! I mean, just wait."

"Well, if you're gon' keep me here, are ya at least gon' tell me what all this fuss is about?"

"It's nothing." I look to the ground, studying the floor tiles ever so intensely.

The embarrassment kicks in again.

"Well, it ain't nothin'. Else you wouldn't be messin' up your pretty cardigan durin' mass."

"Really, it's nothing, Donovan. Just a fight with my best friend."

"Aw, I heard friend breakups are the worst. I'm sorry, Laine." He puts a hand on my

shoulder.

Friend breakup. Could this really be a breakup if we weren't officially together to begin with? Was she really ever even a friend? Could I call her that anymore?

"Look, it's not a big deal, I'll be over it tomorrow. You know how girls are." It pains me to play on this stereotype, but it's the only way I know that will get him to leave it alone.

"Ah, I see. Well, it's not tomorrow yet; it's today. Clearly, you're still hurtin'. Can I give ya a hug?"

I let him. I appreciate his gesture and his comfort, even if not for the reasons I truly need it. His body is warm against mine, and his arms feel hard and blocky as they wrap around my upper back. He pats my back, and I let myself sink into his embrace. Maybe Donovan isn't as arrogant as I once thought him to be.

"Now let's get ya cleaned up and head back out there, alright?"

\*\*\*\*\*

Despite still feeling uneasy about my call with Drew earlier today, I know I need to finish this project. I need to just work. Work for hours even if it pains me to do so. Now that Drew is out of the picture, I need to try and give this painting a new meaning.

I rush to my room and pull out the canvas from under my bed, grabbing my oil paints and laying down an enormous cloth tarp on my floor. I get to work on the hair first, then the eyes, then the neck.

After about two hours of straight painting and blocking out every other emotion I

have right now, I make the final few strokes and then take out a Sharpie to give it a title and sign my name. It's not my best work, but I needed for this project to be done. I needed it to no longer loom over me, carrying the same feelings I tried so hard to suppress. I needed to turn it around.

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Pleased with my final result, I call up the community exhibit near Holy Trinity to let them know I have the next greatest addition to their gallery.

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Drew

Just when I thought things couldn't get worse for me, it

did. I shouldn't have been so stupid to let myself believe Laine could be someone who stays. I should have known she would change. Everyone in my life changes for the worse.

I was right. Laine was never going to stay long enough for us to have a happy ending. She stayed long enough to give us false hope for one.

How brainless of me to think I could even talk her out of falling into the traps of religious guilt. How ignorant of me to believe that if anyone were to stay, it would have been Laine.

If there's anything I learned now, it's that there are no exceptions when it comes to people in my life changing and leaving me behind. Becoming new, better people. People who prefer the version of themselves that they become without me. People who decide that their better versions don't include me in it.

Even my own mom fantasizes about the life she could've had without me. One where my dad didn't leave her with the burden of being a single mother to a child she

wasn't even supposed to have.

It was clear in her argument with my dad that she idealizes the version of herself that didn't raise me, even though he took away the chance of her ever meeting that woman. The woman who wasn't held back by a child whom she only wanted with him.

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I've spent the past couple of weeks bedrotting, endlessly scrolling on social media, and trying to find a distraction from everything. After today's hours of mindless scrolling, I've seen it all, from hippos chomping on watermelons bigger than their heads to little dachshund puppies choosing their collar colors.

Glibby can sense something's going on, because she's been curled up at the foot of my bed ever since Roy returned, only getting up to eat and poop. I'm not complaining, though. It's been nice to have the company of someone who can't exactly disappoint me. At least someone's loyal.

I slowly start to doze off but jerk myself awake, knowing that if I nap now, I won't be able to fall asleep later.

Just as I begin to think I've seen it all, Tatum texts. I jolt my head up from my pillow and try to get my drowsy eyes to focus on the screen long enough to swipe up and ignore her text. My head is far too foggy to respond now, and I know if I do, I may say something I'll regret later.

I start to doze off again, but then jolt myself up and stare intently at yet another hippo mukbang video to stay awake.

Tatum texts again, and then again, and then again. Before I know it, I have seven

unread texts from her. This must be urgent because usually, Tatum doesn't spam like this.

As I force myself to open our messages, I'm greeted with a long string of text bubbles containing too many exclamation points for any sane person to type.

Tatum

5:46 pm

drew! did you see the local news??

DREW!!

laine's in the news, drew!

apparently her painting has broken some sort of record!

HELLO!!

earth to drew!!

DREW!! LAINE. IS. IN. THE. LOCAL. NEWS.

Me

5:52 pm what??

for what?



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Tatum

5:53 pm

it says she's the youngest artist in fifty something years to make it on this gallery wall  
they even included a picture of her painting!

Me

5:53 pm

okay good for her i don't care

Tatum

5:54 pm

wait

it kinda looks like you...

My chest sinks.

I raise my phone and reread Tatum's message to make sure I read it right. Then, I press the call button.

“What do you mean it kinda looks like me?” I ask her when she picks up.

“I meaannnn...” Tatum drags out her words. “It kinda looksjustlike you, Drew. The face, the body shape, the hairline-”

“The hairline?”

“Don’t you be weirded out! I’m your best friend. I may not knowyour current favorite color or newest food obsession, but I’d recognize your hairline anywhere. That’s definitely you.”

“Are you sure?” I ask, hoping with everything in me that she forgot to put her contacts in today.

“Drew.” Tatum’s voice deadpans. “I’m one hundred percent positive this is you, girl. We’ve got to go see it!”

“Um, absolutely not.”

“Um, absolutely yes! Aren’t you at least a little curious to see what it looks like in person?”

‘I’ve seen it in person,’ I want to say. I literally modeled for it. In fact, the night I modeled for it was the night that Laine first kissed me, so I think it’s safe to say the image of that painting is ingrained in my brain. There’s no need for me to see it again when I know the sight of it will bring all the feelings back up. All the feelings I’ve spent hours drowning out in dumb animal videos on the internet.

There is no way I’m going to see it in person.

“Oh look!” Tatum’s loud voice booms through my phone speakers, and instantly, I’m

reminded she's still on the phone. "The article included the address and the name of the exhibit."

"Cool."

"I'm going to send it to you, and then I'm going to meet you there in an hour, okay?"

"No, I'm not-" I start to protest, but she's already hung up.

As much as there's no way in hell I want to go see this painting, to show my face anywhere Laine may be, there's also no way in hell I'm letting Tatum show up on her own, free to say whatever impulsive thoughts come to her mind. I have no choice but to go.

When I type in the address of the exhibit in my navigation app, a community gallery near Holy Trinity pops up. My breathing accelerates as I click the "start navigation" button, and I almost turn off the ignition and go back inside. Back to wallowing under my covers and crying more.

But I don't. The fear of what Tatum's big mouth may say once she sees the painting brings me back to earth, and I release the brake and start the long drive to the gallery.

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After about forty-five minutes of anxiety-ridden driving, I pass what must be the most gigantic mega-church I've ever seen. It feels surreal to finally see the very building that pulled Laine away from me. The building that stole her from me. The building that changed her.

I take a minute to sulk, but then stiffen my posture and keep driving. I'm not letting this affect me right now. I can't. I just need to get to Tatum, let her think I'm actually taking it in, and get her out of there.

As soon as I arrive at the gallery, Tatum bounces toward me, wearing her usual toothy grin across her face as she goes to hug me.

The gallery smells woodsy, and the floors and ceiling are covered in vibrant swirls of what must be every single color to ever exist.

"Come on, I think it's over here!"

Tatum grabs my wrist and leads me down a dimly lit hall to the left of the main entrance. The walls are littered with paintings of medieval-looking cats, women by grand water fountains, and olden-day circus jugglers in super tall hats. I divert my eyes from the walls and focus on Tatum's braids swinging as she walks with a pep in her step.

Eventually, we reach the room number listed in the news article. Tatum dramatically opens the double doors, and I follow her inside. As we walk in, a putrid smell hits me, and the room feels stuffy. It's evident that nobody's been in this room in years until Laine's painting got hung. The drywall has spots that are peeling off, each of the

floor tiles creaks when we step on them, and the whole ceiling appears to be moist from a leak that never got fixed.

“You’d think with the amount of money this area has, they’d keep everything up to date. This room looks a gazillion years old.” I pull the collar of my shirt over my nose and keep my eyes toward the ground, afraid that if I look up, dripping water may fall into them.

“Look, over here!” Tatum beckons me over, ignoring my obvious comments about the exhibit room.

I join her in the far left corner, where the picture of me is hanging. I take a good look at the face, then the body, all the way down to the feet. I can tell the girl in the painting is me, but I hardly recognize her. In the painting, her eyes are narrowed, and there’s a smirk across her face.

She looks to be seducing someone. Who? The painter, perhaps? Either way, she looks like a panther ready to pounce. I hate every bit of it. My eyes scan the canvas from left to right in disbelief, until finally, they reach the name and description placard beside the thin frame. The placard reads *Temptation* by Laine Loveum.

I can’t believe it. I can’t believe how she would just change the whole meaning of the painting. It hurts even more now, knowing that she’s changed even her depiction of me to temptation of all things. The very thing she was afraid of most. The very thing she tried so hard to avoid.

This painting, the thing that brought us closer together, was now one of a villain. The painting that was supposed to be—or at least I felt it was—a symbol of us. A symbol of the significance of who we were together. Laine had turned our love, and technically, my body, into something universally frowned upon.

Politely, yet dismissively, I tell Tatum I have to go and then book it to my car. I can't be here anymore. I can't stand here looking at the aftermath of a fallout with the one person in my life besides my mom who felt stable, looking at a painting that became a symbol of what broke us just as fast as it became a symbol of what bonded us.

I need to leave. I need to get in my car and drive and cry and yell.

Once I reach my car and get in, I fight against my better judgment and call Laine.

To my surprise, she picks up.

"Are you serious?" I ask hastily, anger boiling in my chest.

There's a silence through the line, but I can just barely hear her breathing, so I know she's there.

"What changed, Laine? Why are you doing this?"

Still, she doesn't talk, so I hit her with what I know will get her to say something.

"You know, maybe you are just like your father."

There's a faint whimper that comes through the phone speaker. I can tell I've landed right where I wanted. Right where she's most vulnerable.

"What did you say?" Laine responds through gritted teeth.

"I said..." I bite my lip, calculating my next words carefully as the anger is now completely taking over me. "Maybe you will end up just like him. I mean, you're doing exactly what he did. You're following this extremely rigid path for perfection and leaving no room for imperfections."

Her breathing gets heavier as the volume of my voice rises.

“You’re expecting to live this perfect, picket-fence lifestyle to avoid becoming like him, but you’ve failed to realize that that’s exactly how he started off, isn’t it?”

“You had this picture-perfect family until the pressure of keeping up with it became too hard, and he cracked. You said it yourself ! So why are you so goddamn hellbent on following this path so intently when you know how it ends?”

There’s a long pause. Suddenly, my car feels just as stuffy as the outdated exhibit room, and it becomes hard to breathe.

“He cracked.” She swallows a big gulp. “Because he gave in to temptation.”

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“And what temptation are you giving in to, Laine? You’re not a fucking drug addict or a murderer like him! What could possibly be more sinful than that?”

“YOU!” Laine’s voice has now reached the loudest volume I think I’ve ever heard from her. “You’re the temptation I gave in to, Drew! You make me feel things I was never supposed to feel! You’re the first person I think of when I wake up and the last person before I go to bed.

“You make me feel so conflicted because you make everything feel so easy in your presence, but once I go home, I’m hit with this terrifying guilt that there’s something wrong with me for feeling that way about you. You’re the song that’s stuck in my head that just plays nonstop on repeat again, and again, and again, and again, and I can’t turn it off !”

The familiar feeling of streaming tears feels numb on my face after weeks of crying and wallowing away in my room. I can’t feel my shaking limbs, only static in them. My head feels uncomfortably pressurized, and when I go to open my mouth, nothing comes out.

My heart pounds abnormally fast, and the whole parking lot feels like it’s spinning. Soon enough, I can’t tell whether the moisture on my face is sweat or tears.

Then, she hits back.

“I’m going to start seeing Donovan, so out of respect for him, please don’t text or call my number again.” Her voice returns to normal volume but turns firm. “I need to forget you, and I think it would be best for you to do the same.”



The line goes static, just like the rest of my body.

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The drive home feels ten times longer than the drive over. And of course, since the universe absolutely fucking hates me, a Folklore song comes on from my shuffled playlist, the same one I teased her about on the drive up to the mountains. I let it play, cursing myself and the world under my breath for the entirety of the song.

Finally, it ends, but then another song from the album plays. The lyrics start to blend together, and I can't audibly piece together a single line.

Normally, this would be the moment the waterfall flows again, but this time, I have no more tears left to cry. Only stale numbness fills my eyes.

All she's left me with are songs that remind me of her. Now that she's gone, I don't know how to listen to them anymore.

20

Laine

"I like it." Donovan smiles as he stares at my painting,

putting an arm around my shoulder.

"Thanks," I mumble, subtly flinching at his touch. "It's got a funky look to it, ya know. Like, I can tell

she's tryin' hard to tempt the painter she posed for, but ya almost feel pity for her. Like she don't even know the power of her own seduction." He cocks his head to the

side as if staring from a slightly different angle will help him unlock all the painting's hidden easter eggs. "Something like that." My gaze reverts back down to my shoes as I awkwardly try to think of what to say.

It's officially been two weeks since I told Drew not to contact me, and one week since Donovan and I started talking more than regular friends should. He's a nice guy, and my mother likes him, which means I like him. It means I'm back on the right track. Although I can't help but feel like everything with him feels so forced.

I've been reminding myself that maybe we're just in the awkward part of the talking stage and that it'll probably feel more comfortable once we spend more time together. After all, that's what happened with me and Drew, and that wasn't planned. I could like Donovan if I tried. I want to like him, I really do.

Father Robert smiles at us as we arrive at Holy Trinity and make our way into the main gathering room. Donovan and I got roped into decorating the stage for Valentine's Day, which no doubt was a ploy that our mothers set up.

I'm not complaining, though, because this is the perfect opportunity to spend time with him without having to make awkward small talk about the project I'm trying so hard not to think about. It's not that I'm not proud of my work. After all, I managed to change the trajectory of it to not make me feel so horrible when I look at it, but deep down, I know the origin of it, and that origin is exactly what I'm trying to push out of my mind.

"Take that end over there." Donovan points to the end of a long sheet of heavy-duty poster paper and takes the other end, dragging it along the side of the stage. "Right there."

I tape my end of the paper to the stage, and Donovan tries to do the same, struggling

to get a knotted wad of tape untangled using his only free hand. Eventually, he gets the tape unstuck and sticks it to the stage.

“Alrighty.” Donovan smacks his lips and rubs his hands together like some sort of mosquito. It icks me out a little, but I try to ignore it, grabbing a paintbrush and dipping it in the red paint to draw hearts along the edges of the poster paper. Donovan follows suit, painting smaller hearts in pink.

When we finally meet in the center, hearts neatly scattered, bordering the poster, I reach over him and dip a clean brush into the black paint to spell “Valentine” in the center.

“Woah, Laine!” Donovan grabs my arm and holds it above the paint bucket, black paint dripping from the brush back into the bucket. “How are your hands already covered in paint? All we did was paint some lil’ hearts.”

“Oh, yeah, sorry. I tend to get paint everywhere when it comes to art.” I laugh, awkwardly trying to ease the tension.

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“You’re one messy girl.” He shakes his head.

When he lets go of my arm, I see a faint red mark where his hand gripped it. I was so caught up in defending myself that I failed to realize how hard he had been holding on. Surely, though, he didn’t mean any harm. He probably didn’t even notice his own strength. I rub the red splotch on my skin and return to work, eyes focused intently on the poster, trying not to make eye contact with him. I don’t want to see whether he realized he’d made a mark on me. I don’t want him to feel bad.

When we finish the poster, Father Robert comes around to see it, praising us on the precision of the lettering, even though I did most of the work. He insists on taking a picture of me and Donovan standing next to our poster, which is most definitely something our mothers put him up to as well.

I offer a friendly smile and hand him my phone, posing with a thumbs up for the picture my mother will likely ask me to post on my social media. You know, for all of her friends who follow me to see how involved I am in my church community.

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I asked Donovan to hang out after decorating, hoping he’ll eventually grow on me if I just give him a chance. To my surprise, he accepted my offer. To my demise, I now have to fill close to an hour’s drive with small talk.

I take Donovan to Starry Scoops. I hadn’t seen Thom in a good month or two, so I figured this would be a good way to knock out two birds with one stone. Besides just getting things done, Thom just has a way of making me feel comfortable, and with

Drew out of the picture, I could use some of that feeling.

“Laine!” Thom waves as soon as he sees us enter the shop.

“Hey, Thom! I’m sorry I haven’t been around much. I’ve been pretty busy with church things, but I figured I’d pop in and see you.”

I walk up to the counter, gleaming from ear to ear. It’s nice seeing Thom’s familiar face again, especially since it feels like I’ve been living in a completely different world after moving to Holy Trinity.

Don’t get me wrong, everyone there has been overly polite and welcoming to me, but it’s still nice to have an old friend who doesn’t have to ask your favorite color for lack of better conversation topics.

“This is Donovan, a frie-” I start, but decide not to outright friendzone him like this. “He’s from Holy Trinity.”

“Hey.” Donovan gives a half-wave and a smirk to Thom.

“Nice to meet ya, Donovan. I’m Thom, a good ol’ friend of Laine’s.” Thom nods and smiles.

“So uhh, you work... here?” Donovan looks Thom up and down and then takes in the parlor.

“Yeah, ma Pops owns the place. I help him run it.”

“It’s um... well, what do you have?” Donovan scans the flavors behind the horizontal freezer window, a distasteful look plastered across his face.

“Er- well, this week’s special is red velvet. For the ol’ V day!” Thom turns to me, excitedly tapping the scoop on the counter.

“I’ll take a small cone of red velvet then!” I say, pointing at the tub in the front row filled with soft red ice cream.

“One cone of red velvet comin’ right up!” Thom scoops my ice cream and hands it to me with a smile.

“I guess I’ll just have a cup of vanilla,” Donovan says, still side-eyeing the array of flavors behind the glass.

Thom nods and scoops Donovan’s cup.

Although my old elementary playground is a five-minute walk from Starry Scoops, I just can’t bring myself to take Donovan there. Instead, I drive us to a nearby nature trail.

“So, you’re a granola girl, huh?” Donovan asks, walking close by my side.

“I don’t know if I’d say that,” I respond, carefully watching my feet follow one after the other on the concrete path.

We walk in silence for a good ten minutes, occasionally pointing out average-looking birds and kids stumbling on the ropes course. Finally, Donovan starts a conversation.

“Can I ask you a stupid question?” He turns his head to look at me, possibly for the first time since we got here.

“Yeah, go for it.”

“Are you a true believer?”

I stop in my tracks. “What? Of course, I am.”

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“See, I told you it’s a stupid question! Sometimes it just feels like your heart’s just not in it like mine is.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I don’t know, just forget it, okay?”

“You know, being a believer can look different ways. I may not express it like you do, but I am still a proud follower.”

“I know,” he says quietly, averting his eyes back to the ropes course.

We walk in silence for a few more minutes until Donovan opens his mouth to drop another bomb on me.

“Can I ask you another question?”

“I’m not so sure I want to say yes this time, but go ahead.” I laugh, trying to ease the tension.

“What happened with you and that girl you were cryin’ ‘bout in the restroom the other week?”

My chest sinks at the sound of Donovan asking about Drew, like my two worlds are colliding, or at least acknowledging each other.

“What?” I say, using every ounce of my breath to do so.



“I don’t know, I’m just checkin’ up on ya. Ya seemed pretty distraught.”

My breathing quickens, and I try to calm it down, hoping he won’t notice. “Well, it’s exactly what I told you when you found me. We just became friends a little too fast and then had a normal friend fallout. That’s it.”

“Are ya sure that’s it? Ya know you can tell me if somethin’ else is botherin’ ya.”

I really can’t, I want to say. Instead, I bite my tongue and shake my head.

The rest of the walk feels unbearably long and heavy with uncomfortable tension.

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After my walk with Donovan, I realized how badly I missed Thom’s presence. He was the one person besides Drew that I felt like myself around when I first moved back. I liked the girl I was with him, and it feels like I lost her. Since Drew is out of the picture, I only have him now.

Thom’s smiling face brings me comfort as I walk up to his table at our cafe. He’s wearing a ridiculous trench coat again and carrying the briefcase I’ve become all too familiar with. There are two cups of tea and my favorite muffin already on the table, only furthering my appreciation for his friendship.

“Heya, Laine! Been a while.”

“Thom!” I hug him, startling him out of his seat. “Good to see you too!” He laughs.

I take the seat across from him. “So, what’s new with you?”

“Eh, not much. Business has been booming, so that’s  
always good! Actually, ma Pops and I were able to buy all  
ma little siblings Christmas presents this year.”

“Oh my gosh, Thom, that’s amazing! I’m so happy for  
you.”

Thom’s grin spreads ear to ear. “Thanks, Laine. Pops  
worked really hard this past year, so I’m mostly just glad he was able to see their lil’  
faces light up Christmas morning.

It's what he always wanted."

"Thom..." I reach out and touch his hand, suddenly  
feeling like a horrible friend for not asking him about  
himself sooner.

"Uhh, anyway! How are things with you? How's the  
new church?"

"Good, I guess."

"You guess?"

"I don't know, I feel like a completely different person  
ever since I started going to Holy Trinity. I usually feel  
really good at church, like I belong, but at Holy Trinity, I  
only feel good about myself when I'm there, but once I go  
home, I miss the person I used to be."

"Ah, I see. And are ya sure that's the only person

you're missing?"

I furrow my brows at him.

"What do you mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean, Laine. Don'tcha

think I haven't noticed you and Drew stopped hangin' out

and coming 'round Starry Scoops."

"Oh, that-

"Ya also didn't grin when I brought 'er up just now.

You're usually so giddy, kicking your feet like an idiot in

love."

"Nothing happened. We just drifted with the distance,

you know?" I try to sound casual, like it doesn't bother me

that suddenly everyone feels the need to bring her up today, but my heart is pounding and my chest tightens,

making it very hard to do so.

"Laine, I think it's safe to say I'm familiar with your

dynamic well enough that I know distance could never pull

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the two of yous apart. You were practically attached at the hip!”

I take a deep inhale, then decide to tell him everything.

Out of all my new friends, Thom feels the most

trustworthy. Plus, he already knows how I felt about it all

before. That part just makes it all the more comforting. “Okay, maybe you’re right. I broke it off, it being

whatever we had.”

“Alright, well, did she do somethin’ to ya?” Thom

leans in across the table, taking a sip of his tea.

“No!” I rush to say. “Not at all. Not exactly, at least.” “Look, if you’re not comfortable tellin’ me, I

understand.”

“No, it’s okay. I want to tell you. I just don’t know

how.”

“Do ya want me to pull out ma notebook?” He

chuckles, reaching his hand into his briefcase.

“Maybe, yeah, that would be nice.” I take the

notebook from him and start scribbling on paper while I

organize the thoughts in my mind.

“She made me feel things I didn’t want to feel. Things

that I wasn’t supposed to feel.” I say, pressing the ink

harder into the paper. “She made me feel like there was

something wrong with me, even if it felt like I was doing

everything else right by the church.”

Thom’s eyes widen, then soften. “Are ya sure it was

her that made you feel wrong, or was it your own doin’?” “What do you-”

“Ya know exactly what I mean, Laine.”

I pause, taking in his words. I think back through my

time with Drew, from the moment we met to the dreaded

phone call that ended it all.

Everything was initiated by me. Everything that



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strengthened or furthered our relationship was a result of something I did or said. Like the first time we met at our playground and I opened up to her about things I'd never told anyone else, the first time I ever took initiative and felt in control of anything in my life and convinced her to half skinny dip with me when I invited her to model for me and kissed her because the feelings grew too strong to ignore when Father Robert's sermon terrified me so badly that I immediately ran to the bathroom to break her heart. Drew didn't do anything to make me feel what I felt for her. The only sin she was guilty of was being too easy to fall in love with.

Loving her was the easy part. It was hiding how much I loved her that was the hard part.

“Look, I know how much she means to ya. Everyone has that old flame that they’ll never completely get over, and she’s yours.” Thom adds, studying my face with an empathetic look on his.

Thom was right about everything he said, except for one part.

Drew wasn’t just an old flame, she was the whole damn candle.

My biggest regret is blowing it out.

21

Drew

Finally, it feels like I’ve reached the end of scrolling. The videos actually start to repeat, which only makes me feel worse to think I’ve gotten to the point that there are quite literally no brainless videos I haven’t seen.

This whole month I’ve been wallowing away in my room. Mom thinks it’s because of Roy’s unexpected arrival, and I don’t bother correcting her. After all, she is half right.

She and Roy have been arguing nonstop, and sometimes, only when I choose to listen

in, I'm instantly transported back to when I was eight, and every day, there were nonstop screaming matches between them right before he left.

Luckily for me, my head is constantly stuck replaying the argument I had with Laine in the car, so I mostly drown out their voices now.

Since there's nothing left to scroll on, I decide to do the next worst thing I could ever decide to do. My finger gravitates toward my photos app. I click on it, giving in to the urge I've been holding back from for weeks.

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Glibby prances up my bed and curls up next to me, catching my tears in her fur as I scroll up to the very first photo Laine and I took together. Then, I scroll through each picture onward and replay the memory of the moment in my head.

It starts on the drive to the cabin. Just a photo our moms took of us accidentally falling asleep on each other's shoulders. Then, at the cabin, a candid shot of the wild expression on her face right as her Jenga tower collapsed. Next, a photo of our pumpkins. Mine, terrible. Hers, a work of art, of course.

My eyes scan the grid for a photo from the lake until I realize we forgot to bring our phones when we went half skinny dipping, living only in the moment like time really had stopped, because without phones or watches or anything outside of us, it truly felt timeless.

The photos then transition from all of the Christmasy things we did to the night we went stargazing. As I run through our months together, I let the pictures become a visual progression of our story. The events play through my head, and I come to the most soul-crushing revelation.

I'm romanticizing our time together because I don't know if I have it in me to hate her.

I want to yell at her and tell her all over again how she broke my heart and left me with a pain that feels impossible to overcome. How I can't wait to get over her. How I can't wait until I no longer fear that I won't be able to find someone prettier than her.

But worst of all, I want to curl up in her arms and ruin another one of her shirts with my tears. I want to feel the comfort in her smell, the familiar way her body feels against mine, the pressure of her bony, paint-stained fingers on my back as she gently scratches my favorite spots.

Once I finally decide to stop torturing myself with my camera roll, I go to her social media page. I know I shouldn't, and maybe it's my own masochistic form of emotional self-harm, but I can't help it. I need to know what she's up to, or if she's doing okay without me.

I know there's nothing new since the last time I checked, and I'm never going to heal if I keep the old what-ifs in my mind, but after a month of avoiding this, I feel like I deserve it. Just one check. Even if I already know the answer, I need to make sure again anyway.

To my surprise—and detriment—there's a new post. It's a photo carousel of her time at Holy Trinity. The first photo is of her standing next to the community gallery exhibit sign. She's smiling, the same gleam in her eyes from the photos in my camera roll. The next photo is the very painting I despise, hanging on the filthy exhibit walls by a small, thin frame. Next, she and a few other girls giggling in a circle, each with an open bible in their lap.

When I get to the final photo, my chest sinks. It's her, grinning with the same toothy grin I had grown to love. Except there's a blonde boy standing on the opposite side of a Valentine's Day banner, a toothpick hanging from his mouth like he belongs out in the sticks instead of in Holy Trinity's predominantly wealthy area code. I immediately recognize it's that Donovan kid she'd been talking about.

Because my mind hates me, it reminds me of the possibility that she probably still carves our initials together all over town, except the D stands for Donovan instead of Drew. Instantly, any anger I had pent up in my stomach turns to straight-up

numbness.

In her new post, I can't help but notice pieces, remnants, of her that I fell in love with before. Behind all the fake smiles, behind the bible clutched to her heart, behind her smile toward him so openly in the way that she never did toward me, I know the girl I love and the girl who once made me feel loved back is still in there somewhere. I think that's what hurts the most. Knowing she's still her, but I've lost her to the Lord.

I click on the last photo slowly, careful not to double-click it, and pull up the tagged account. Donovan's profile picture is of him in a bulky jersey, holding out a football like it's a trophy. The bio includes his birth year, a fish emoji, a smiling emoji, and then a bible verse. Right above the bible verse reads God first. Below the verse, he's tagged Laine's account, and there's a heart next to it. My anger returns as I think of what could possibly make this idiot football boy more deserving of getting the girl than me.

He loves God, then he loves her.

I just love her. I don't want to believe in a God that tells me I can't.

I sigh, clicking back to Laine's original post. Just as I'm about to click out of the post altogether, I decide against my better judgment and open the comments. I expect to find Donovan spamming cringey heart emojis or the girls from the giggle circle commenting so cute, girly!

Instead, however, the comments are flooded with messages like I'm so sorry! and You didn't deserve any of that! and Why must awful things happen to such sweet people! I scroll faster, but it's only the same comments over and over again from different people who all share the same beach wave haircut and awful fake spray tan.

Immediately, my mind goes to the worst-case scenarios. Laine got hurt. Someone

spread a false, nasty rumor about her around the church. Everyone found out about us and thinks I'm a predator who preyed on poor, sweet, innocent Laine. Someone ran her over. Okay, maybe that last one is a bit far-fetched. But still, any of the first three could have happened.

Just as I'm running through all possibilities, Tatum texts in the group chat, almost as if she's reading my mind.

Tatum

2:52 pm

DID YOU GUYS SEE WHAT HAPPENED TO LAINE'S PAINTING?

Jared

2:52 pm

wait no????

what happened??

Greyson

2:53 pm

Hey guys, touchy subject okay? Don't poke the bear.

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Me

2:53 pm the what?

Greyson

2:54 pm

That came out wrong...

I just meant that they should be respectful of your feelings when bringing up Laine.

Tatum told us what happened.

Me

2:55 pm

what?

i don't think i told tatum

Tatum

2:55 pm

yeahhhh about that



your car speakers are like really loud

i happened to be in the parking lot during your little call

but i figured id give you some space and let you tell us when you're ready

Me

2:56 pm

but you told jared and greyson?

Tatum

2:56 pm

i just told them something happened between you two so they don't bring it up

Jared

2:57 pm

yeah she just told us what she knew which wasn't much btw!

Greyson

2:58 pm

Wait but what happened to the painting? If you don't mind us talking about it, Drew.

Me

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2:58 pm

no, please do

i'm not sure what happened either

Tatum

2:59 pm

someone vandalized it!

Jared

3:00 pm

WAIT WHAT??

DO YOU HAVE A PIC??

Tatum

3:00 pm

they didn't release a picture

i just read it on the local community news

Jared

3:01 pm

you and that damn community news page smh

Tatum

3:01 pm

what??

i like to stay informed

As Tatum and Jared exchange banter, I turn off my phone and space out, staring intently at the ceiling, trying to process what this means. To be honest, after everything, I don't even know how to feel.

Part of me is disappointed for Laine because I know how big of a project that was to her, and I can't imagine someone just going in and destroying something that took over a year to create.

The other part of me is somewhat glad karma hit her, almost relieved that maybe this is a sign that the lifestyle she's chosen to take isn't what the universe had in store for her. Selfishly, I'm leaning more toward the latter.

After about an hour of quiet reflection, my phone buzzes. I ignore it, not really having the energy to socialize anymore. A few seconds later, it buzzes again. I reach for my phone to silence it, but as I turn it over and the screen lights up, my heart skips a beat at the notification.

Laine

4:07 pm

Hey.

Can we talk?

22

Laine

I'm not at all a bold person. Maybe it's out of fear of

rejection. Maybe it's because I know if I don't go for it, then I can't be let down. But if there's one thing I've learned this past month without Drew, it's that even if you try to physically block out whatever you're hiding from, you can't escape it in your mind.

Sure, you can try new things in an attempt to forget the old. You can force yourself to look for the good in subpar situations. Sometimes, you can even find it. But you'll always be stuck wondering what could have been. You'll always be left with the why nots and the what ifs.

With Drew, however, I always find myself taking the leap, taking control of situations I normally would have just written off as not meant to be. As much as I'm a believer in the what's meant to happen will happen mentality, I couldn't just let what happened with Drew be what happened to us.

I'm sure, in time, I could get over her, but I could never get over our story. I could never get over how we left it. Most importantly, I could never get over the fact that I lost the best thing that's ever happened to me.

She was the person who made me feel alive when I had been just surviving. The person who added life to my days while I was only focused on getting through them. In all the uncertainty in my life right now, the one thing I know I want is to start living every day, not just surviving, and I don't want to live that life without Drew in

it.

I suppose that's why I find myself at her doorstep right now, ready to do the boldest, most adrenaline-rushing thing I've ever done.

My hand is shaking as I reach toward the door, and I'm contemplating whether it's too late to run back to my car and speed off. I could probably make it halfway back to California by tomorrow and never show my face in Georgia again.

Unfortunately, as appealing as that may sound, I know it's too late. I'm already standing here at her doorstep, probably looking like the sickest, most pathetic idiot in love. So instead, I ring the doorbell and give four weak knocks to her door.

Instantly, I'm transported back to the memory of the first time I knocked on her door. My hands were shaky then as well, but only from the nerves of seeing someone again that I hadn't seen in a decade, hoping I could pull off one night of not being awkward and make small talk. Now, they're shaky from the nerves of seeing someone I'd seen for months straight every day until I decided she didn't fit into my rigid plan for an average, planned-to-a-tee life.

"Laine!" Her mother answers the door.

"Hi, Ms. Sterling. May I speak to Drew?" I twiddle my thumbs around each other by my waist, nervously anticipating what it would feel like to see her again. To speak to her again after everything.

The familiar scent of Drew flows out from her house and into my nose, instantly making me weak in the knees.

"Let me go get her. Come inside." Ms. Sterling leaves the door open, but I don't go in.

She walks over to the bottom of the stairs, leaning over the banister. Drew must not have told her anything that happened between us, because she doesn't seem surprised to see me, and the way she calls for Drew sounds easy, instinctual even, like we're having a normal hangout.

My ears are ringing from the pressure in my head, and my hands are still shaky as ever. Drew murmurs something that I can't quite hear, and then Ms. Sterling turns to me, brows furrowed in what I can't tell is confusion or anger.

"Well, it seems that she doesn't want to see you."

"If I could have just a few hours of her time, I'd like to show her something."

"Look, Laine, I'm not sure what happened between you two, but if she doesn't want to see you, I'm not going to make her."

She grabs the front door and starts to close it, but I reach a hand out to stop her. Right now, I'm about to make the greatest decision of my life, or fall straight on my face.

Either way, at least I'll know I tried.

"Ms. Sterling, your daughter is the best thing that's ever happened to me." I start, my voice trembling. "Every day spent in her presence has been my best yet. She's always teaching me new things about myself that I didn't know I had in me, which is one of my favorite qualities of hers, and one of the reasons I was such an idiot to let her go so quickly. Hurting her was the last thing I wanted to do, and it's my biggest regret, so please, let me see her."

Ms. Sterling glares at me through her oval-shaped glasses, like she's trying to read between the lines of what I'm saying, even though I'm truly giving it to her straight out.

I continue, voice shaky as ever. “We had such a whirlwind friendship, and maybe that’s because God had other plans for us. Maybe Drew was the lesson I needed to learn. The person I needed to lose in order to appreciate, even if it’s too late. I don’t care if she never talks to me again after this. Honestly, it would be better if she didn’t because I don’t deserve her in my life. Just please, let me give us both the closure we need. Let me apologize for-”

The steps creak, and I look up to see Drew standing at the top of them. My heart skips a beat the moment I see her, and I’m instantly reminded of how she makes me feel. How much I missed her. How easy she is to love. How hard it was to feel like I lost her, even if just for a month, or depending on how this goes, possibly forever.

Drew’s hair is a rat’s nest, and she’s in a stained, horrendously blinding neon green shirt with bright purple sweatpants, a color combination that would make Ms. Bardot start convulsing at the sight of.

As an artist myself, the sight of it pains me. As the girl standing here, hopelessly in love with Drew and about to pour her whole heart and soul out in a desperate attempt to fix what she’d broken, I don’t care.

Drew could wear a skinned cow rug for a shirt with garbage bags for pants, and I would still think she’s the most beautiful person I’d ever seen.

Drew looks just as disheveled as I usually am, and this time, the roles are reversed.



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I'm put together, and she's the messy one.

23

Drew

The last thing I expected was to see Laine standing on

my doorstep. Her hair is neatly tied back, not a single strand of hair loose. Her shirt looks ironed, and her pants are pressed.

I almost don't recognize her, which makes me all the more sure I don't want to talk to her. After all, she's a completely new person now, not the one I fell in love with. I have nothing to say to the stranger standing in my doorway.

I take her in, looking her up and down. Her shoes are tied in perfect bunny ears, but as my eyes make their way up to her hands, I notice they are still stained with paint. Except now, the paint is plain black instead of pastel.

My eyes dart to the floor, part of me hoping she chickens out and walks away, but knowing Laine, I know she's far too stubborn to even consider it. Though I have to say, I am slightly grateful for her stubbornness, because the other part of me doesn't want her to go, afraid that if she does, it will actually be for good this time.

Honestly, how could I blame her for doing what she needed to survive in that world? Why do I blame her anyway? Is it because she didn't fight for herself? Because she didn't fight for me? For us?

Catholic school changed her.

“Drew,” she says softly. “I just want to show you something, and if you don’t ever want to talk to me after this, then fine. But please come with me. I think you’d like to see it.”

Laine’s eyes water as she whispers my name, and her face falls dormant. She looks helpless, just like she did that very first night at the playground, and consequently, the memory replays in my head.

I can vividly picture the way the dim moonlight shone on her disarranged chestnut hair, parallel to the way the sun shines on her neat, slick back as she stands in front of me now. The waves in her hair are straightened, but they still gleam from the same angles as they did before.

As much as I want to be angry with her, shove her out the door, yell at her for breaking my heart, for being able to leave everything we had so easily, I find myself steadily descending the stairs and toward her. Almost as if she’s tied a magnet around my waist, and the attractive charge around hers. The way I always seem to gravitate toward her feels like sorcery, like she’s the irresistible kryptonite I can’t turn away from.

Before I know it, I’m in the passenger seat of her car, staring so intently at the road, careful not to meet her eyes. I expect her to say something, but the drive is painfully silent. My eyes occasionally gravitate toward her hands, and I notice she’s wearing a fitness watch, which displays her heart beating at one hundred and one beats per minute.

I don’t know where she’s taking me, but for some reason, despite the fallout, I trust her.

“I’m sorry to hear about your painting being vandalized.” I finally break the silence.

Even though I’m not at all happy about how it turned out, I know how hard she worked on it and how important it was to her.

“Wait, you didn’t see it?” Laine responds, her head turning between facing me and the road.

“I saw it a few days after it was put up, the evening I called you.”

“Hold on.” She swerves into a parking lot, and I realize she’s taken me to the site of the crime.

Laine puts the car in park and comes over to my side, opening the door excitedly. She grabs my hand, which I almost jerk back, but don’t, and leads me inside.

“You have to see it again, then.”

She takes me down the hall and opens the door to the exhibit, beckoning me inside.

“I really don’t think that’s necess-” I start, but then I see it.

Her painting has faint scribbles all over it. Over the head, the hair, the stomach, the hips. It looks to be marked with black paint, each line etched with careful precision despite them being squiggly and all over the place.

There are holes punched into the canvas where the eyes used to be, and the corners are imprinted by tire track marks, almost like they’ve been run over.

I look sympathetically at Laine, who’s watching me look at her painting. I go to say something, but then she nods toward the title and description placard. There’s a thick

piece of paper superglued to the original placard, and on it, the title reads Drew Sterling.

I look at Laine again, worried that someone found out about us and vandalized her painting in protest. She only smiles, then turns her head toward the paper placard for me to keep reading. Under the title, a new description has been written in Laine's uncluttered handwriting.

The epitome of messy, who allows herself to be messy, and in return, allows me as well.

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“What is-” My voice trails off as I turn to Laine, looking for some sort of verbal explanation, which she has yet to give me this whole time we’ve been here.

“I was the one who vandalized the painting.” She says with a soft inclination in her voice, almost light enough that I can hear her heart pounding in her chest.

“But... you messed up your picturesque painting.” “Drew.” Laine takes a step toward me, and I don’t back away. “I liked who I was far more when I was messy with you than when I was picturesque without you.”

“Oh,” is all I can get out.

“I’ve realized a lot of things in the time we spent apart. Like how, as much as I wanted to want to be away from you, it killed me every day not seeing you or talking to you. How I can become something more than my father ever was, and I can do it with you by my side. I want to be with you, Drew, but I do also want to follow God’s path.” That’s it. There it goes again. I’ve played out this story before, and I know how it ends. I turn to leave, but she grabs my shoulders and meets my eyes with hers.

“Wait! I’m not done. Please.” Her eyes never leave mine, and it’s like she put me in a trance.

As much as I want to run out and never look back, to block out whatever she says next and go back to wallowing in my room, playing out our story in my head a million more times until I forget what her face looks like or the feeling of her lips against mine or the sound of my name whispered off of them, I don’t move.

I stay.

“One of the things I’ve realized recently is that two things can be true. I can follow God and still feel what I feel for you. I don’t believe that loving you is a sin because sins are wrong, and nothing has ever felt more right than the feeling of being in love with you.”

Hearing those words come out of Laine’s mouth feels like a wave crashing over me. It hits me hard, but it’s also refreshing in a way. It feels so surreal, I’m almost positive I misheard her.

“Wait, you love me?”

“Yes.” She breathes out a heavy sigh, the kind of breath that holds all of the emotions I’d been feeling while she’d been bottling them up.

“Of course, I love you, Drew. And it’s incredibly scary because, for the longest time, I felt like I couldn’t. Like, there was something wrong with me because I loved you. Like I was a sinner. But then I realized that sins are meant to be condemned. There are so many awful things in the world to be condemned, but love shouldn’t be one of them.”

I stand for a moment, staring at her, unable to piece together the jumble of thoughts in my brain right now. Could she really mean it? I want to trust her, and I think I do, but she’s hurt me before, and I don’t know if I can chance getting hurt again.

Attempting to stall while I gather my thoughts, I glance over at the messed-up painting, and then back to Laine. My eyes gravitate toward her hands again, fixated on the freshly dried black paint running along the sides of her fingers. Looking at them now, clouded by the emotion she just threw at me, I see that they’re the same hands I grew to love, even if they’re stained with a different color.

And then it hits me.

My dad never up and left us. He wanted something more than the rigid life he and my mom created together, and he still wanted her in the process.

Maybe change is inevitable, but it could also result in something good. When people change, you get the opportunity to discover more parts of them you didn't know you could love.

In the end, my dad didn't abandon us. He changed as he grew from the teenager my mom fell in love with, and she didn't give herself the chance to get to know the new version of him, and grow with him instead of apart from him.

I wasn't going to let that happen to me and Laine. I want to fall in love with all the new parts of her while only further intensifying the parts I originally fell in love with. Maybe Laine's right; two things can be true. She can become more devout to her faith and still be the same girl I loved before.

Before I can stop myself, I lean in until our lips barely brush, holding her face with my hands so delicately, like if I push too hard, she may break and shatter into a million tiny pieces. She closes the gap between our lips and wraps her hands around my waist, pulling me into her.

Her kiss is soft, just like everything else about her, and time stops again like it does in every other moment spent with her.

Laine may not have given me the guaranteed happy ending I thought was only possible in my dreams, but she did give me hope for one, and maybe that hope was the happy ending all along.