



Rhythm

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Category: Romance, New Adult, Lesbian Romance

Description: "I don't know if I can do relationships anymore."

Kaitlyn has been struggling with her romantic relationships for awhile, but this last relationship was the straw that broke the camel's back. Now she is not sure if she wants to keep dating. Which isn't a huge deal, she's never been a very conventional girl and she'd like to focus on her passion for music. But when an old friend offers Kaitlyn a place to stay in the beautiful college town of Rosebridge, she meets someone who makes her want to give love one more shot.

"My educational success is the most important thing to me."

Emily worked very hard to get into a successful engineering program and she dedicates all of her time and attention to her schoolwork. Unfortunately, that means she has neglected to date any women during her time at college. Which isn't a huge deal, she never thought dating was very important. That is until she meets Kaitlyn, a free-spirited musician who challenges Emily to live a little.

"I didn't know this would be so hard."

As Kaitlyn and Emily's love begins to grow, they find hardships that threaten to tear them apart. And once again, Kaitlyn begins to doubt whether love really can conquer all. Emily loves Kaitlyn with all her heart but is it enough to bridge the gap?

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1

Kaitlyn

“You don’t have to do this.” She looked up at me sadly. “It doesn’t have to be like this.”

I took in a deep breath, glancing around at my packed bags. I had such a weird blend of suitcases, all hand-me-downs I’d collected from friends or thrift stores. One was mint green with a floral background, a pattern you’d expect to see in 1950. Another one was made of this shoddy, navy blue fabric, and it looked like it could burst at any moment.

But that wasn’t the odd part, the fact that they were all varying sizes and colors. No, the weird thing was, no matter how each of them looked, they all made me feel the same: lonely.

“We both know that I do.”

Julia shook her head in anguish, sinking down into the couch I was sitting on and resting a gentle hand on my shoulder.

“It’s going to hurt,” she whispered to me.

“Yeah,” I nodded. “It always does. But just because it hurts doesn’t mean it’s wrong. Sometimes the right thing and the painful thing are one and the same.”

I spoke so casually about it, as if it wasn't tearing me apart inside. But this was hurting me just as much as it was hurting her. The break-up was mutual, which theoretically would make the whole process easier, but it hadn't. If anything, it seemed to make it harder.

I still cared so much about Julia. We'd been together two years, and the first one had been amazing. Really, truly, brilliantly amazing. She was smart, funny, and very organized, which I'd admired. She was still in school to become an accountant when we'd met, though she'd since graduated and gotten a job at a local firm.

When she was in school, our relationship seemed to make sense. Though our personalities were drastically different, our lifestyles had meshed together well. I wasn't a student, never had been, but I lived a similar lifestyle.

I was always up late, constantly with friends, frequently going out, and always stressed about being dirt poor. I used to eat ramen in Julia's studio apartment at two in the morning and rub her back as she studied. Back then, we'd worked. Back then, neither of us had considered how much things would change in the future.

But they had drastically changed. And we went from that carefree, fun, college couple to a couple that was constantly in conflict. I loved her so much, but love wasn't enough when you woke up one day and found you were completely incompatible with your partner.

She didn't have late nights anymore. No, she went to bed early because she went to work early. Staying in, eating Top Ramen, and binge-watching television was no longer enough for her. She had money now, and she wanted to spend it eating at nice restaurants and going to culturally-enriching events I couldn't afford.

Suddenly the fact that I was a wayward musician waiting for her big break was no longer appealing to her. She stopped seeing me as this fun, adventurous, creative soul

and began to view me as unmotivated.

Which I wasn't at all. I was quite motivated to succeed with my music; I just wasn't motivated to find any other career paths. I knew my talent, I knew my calling, and it was music. I was going to make music work for me.

But now that Julia was this big corporate badass bringing in tons of money, poor musician was not enough. And while I would've liked to be angry at her for this, I really couldn't be. She didn't want my lifestyle, that was fine. I couldn't fault her for growing into someone new. Nor could I fault myself for not being what she wanted.

I stroked the outside of one of my suitcases, one with a velvety edge. Fiddling brought me comfort, and I could use a lot of comfort.

"Do you know where you're headed yet?" she asked me.

I nodded. "I've spoken to an old friend who has an extra room. She'll let me stay in it while I get back up on my feet."

"In town?" she asked.

I shook my head. "In Rosebridge."

"Rosebridge?" she gasped. "But that's, like, twelve hours away. That's in a completely different state!"

I looked at her suspiciously. "So?"

"So... you'll be so far from me."

I raised an eyebrow. "That's the point, isn't it? We aren't together anymore, Julia. Of

course I'm going to be far away from you. I mean, does it even matter? Even if I found a place in town, I might as well be twelve hours away. You'll never see me anymore."

She sighed. "I guess that's true, but... I don't know. In my head, I imagined you'd still be living in town. Maybe a small part of me was hoping that you'd..." She paused. "That you'd find your way back to me."

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“No,” I corrected her. “You were hoping I’d become someone different. Someone with goals, a plan, someone who would be compatible with your high octane lifestyle.”

She looked down guiltily, because she knew that I was right. She wanted the best of both worlds. She wanted to keep me, and at the same time, she wanted me to be totally different from who I actually was.

“I never asked you to change,” I reminded her.

She nodded. “I know that.”

“Don’t ask this of me, not again. I’m fine breaking up if that needs to be done, but I don’t want to do that. This isn’t what I wanted. So please stop pushing me to try and change, because I’m scared I won’t say no to you. And if I don’t say no to you, I’m going to give up on my dreams for you. I’m going to become someone I’m not.”

And, really, it wasn’t as if my dreams were that unrealistic. I wasn’t one of those naïve twenty-three-year-olds who believed I was going to make it somehow. I didn’t expect to rise to celebrity status or be discovered. I didn’t want fame. I didn’t want to be rich.

I only wanted to make a living with my music. With street performances, making beats for other aspiring musicians, doing live performances, just my guitar and me. I was even open to doing lessons for children in the future, to both teach them what I knew and have a steady stream of income.

So it wasn't as though I wanted everything to fall into my lap. I just wanted music to be a part of my career. Really, I wanted music to be a part of my entire existence. I wanted to live and breathe music.

No, that would never make me a rich woman, which I fully acknowledged. But I didn't need to be rich to be happy. I just needed to be a person who could pay her bills. A person who was free to live her life without the constraints of a job that she hated. My end goal was not to make a ton of money, and I was really, truly

fine with that.

But Julia never would be. She liked high-end, especially now that she was making a ton of money. She wouldn't ever be happy with a partner who made a meager living giving guitar lessons to kids.

"I just don't know what comes next, Kaitlyn," she said to me softly.

"Next comes both of us moving on with our lives. You finding a person who fits your lifestyle, me finding someone who fits mine. Before that will likely be a lot of heartache, but eventually we'll both find redemption in someone new."

She nodded but didn't say a word. Like me, she knew it to be true, but she didn't want to allow herself to believe it. She didn't want to truly believe it was over, because that meant the pain would begin. I felt similarly.

"Why Rosebridge?" she asked, seemingly only because she wasn't ready for me to leave.

Although I was being offered a temporary free room in Rosebridge, that didn't make my reason for choosing the location immediately obvious. Julia knew that I had plenty of friends from all around the country who I'd met while traveling. And, not to

toot my own horn, but I'd always been quite charismatic. I would have no problem finding a room with plenty of other people.

But I had chosen Rosebridge for a reason.

"I really liked it when I visited her. It had a nice vibe, as most college towns do. It seemed very liberal, and my friend said that there were quite a few popular street performance groups. And that's where I need to go, somewhere people might be willing to throw a couple bucks at me to hear me play some amazing music. I need to go where I could potentially make a living."

Although where we currently lived was a college town as well, it didn't have much of an arts community. It was where you went for a business degree or law school. I couldn't even think of a place where street performance might be appreciated. It just wasn't that kind of city.

"Right, of course, because you couldn't make money doing anything else..." she said bitterly.

Now I was starting to get annoyed. "What did I just say? Don't do this, don't guilt me for being me. I'm not the one who changed, you are. I've been the same person as I was the day you met me. I'm the same girl you fell in love with. So don't push me to be another person."

"And am I not the woman you fell in love with?" she asked.

I didn't know how she could ask it. I didn't know how she couldn't already know my answer. And I probably should have refrained from the answering the question, but I couldn't.

"No," I said softly.

Her jaw dropped. “But you said...”

“That I still love you,” I finished for her, “and I do. Because I continued to love you after you changed, but... you really did change. You’re the one who messed this relationship up, not me.”

It was quite the accusation, but it was true. I had refrained from saying it, because I hadn’t been looking to hurt her, but she didn’t seem to care about my pain. And, maybe, as I was walking out the door was the best time to express how I really felt.

“It’s really over, then?” she asked. “You truly don’t want what I do at all? Not even a little bit?”

I looked at her skeptically. “Did you really think there was a chance that wasn’t true? You really think I’d be moving out and on with my life if there was any way I could see myself fitting into your vision of the future?”

“I just don’t see what doesn’t appeal about it to you! What’s wrong with steady jobs? What’s wrong with steady income?”

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“Uh, I don’t know, how about working your life away for a corporation who doesn’t give a shit about you? What about wasting hours of your life doing work you hate?”

“And then, because you do the work you hate, you can provide for your loved ones! You can take long, extravagant vacations and buy whatever you want!”

I shook my head. “There’s nothing I need to buy. There’s no material item I could get that would make me feel good about my life. All I really ever wanted was you, and... and I know I’m not going to have that anymore, so... no.”

“You still could,” she pushed. “I really think you’d adjust and see how perfect it all could be...”

This was it; this was when I needed to excuse myself. Because I’d meant what I’d said. I wanted her, and I was scared of being alone, so I feared what I might give in to. And I didn’t want to be a different version of myself. I liked who I was.

“I’ve got a train to catch,” I told her as I stood up and started to collect my vastly different suitcases.

I could see tears welling up in her eyes. “I’m not ready for what comes next,” she muttered.

“And neither am I. But we’ll both get through it, eventually.”

I was not tearing up. I refused. I refused to cry in front of her. I was going to stuff these feelings down and not revisit them. Not on the train, not when I reached my

friend's apartment, not any time in the future.

I'd done enough crying. Now, I needed to move forward.

I gave one last glance around her apartment, taking it all in. It was perfection; it truly was. From the actual hardwood floors to the granite slab countertops, it was luxury as I'd always imagined. And I couldn't help but think about how this luxury was all she needed. This was what she wanted; this was what would make her happy.

But not me. I would never be happy this way.

I looked at her one last time before heading toward the door. "Goodbye, Julia."

She didn't say a word as I walked through the door.

2

Emily

I threw my textbook onto my bed, deciding that I absolutely had to be done for the night. As tempting as it may have been to continue to force myself to work, I couldn't do it. Not again.

There were only so many all-nighters you could pull before sleep deprivation hit you. And it was definitely hitting me.

It was my last year at Beasley, though, and I supposed this was just how the last year was supposed to go. After this year, I'd have my degree in civil engineering, and it'd all be worth it.

I collapsed onto my bed, feeling the soft blue blanket that sat atop my comforter

against my cheek. I could fall asleep right here and now, if I didn't still need to get up and brush my teeth.

Knowing me, after I brushed my teeth, I'd come back to bed and stay awake while having a minor existential crisis. At least, that was how every other night of my week had gone.

I'd always been a person who was prone to overthinking. I'd analyze every aspect of my life until I started to feel either very calm or very panicked, depending on the current state of my life. You'd think right now, I'd be feeling very calm, considering I was theoretically exactly where I'd always wanted to be in life.

I was about to get my degree. I had a pretty good job in Beasley's cafeteria in the meantime. I loved my living situation. There wasn't anything really going wrong in my life, nothing that should have been causing me real stress.

And yet, real stress had found me, as it always did.

It was like the closer I got to graduation, the more stressed I became. Graduation should've been a good thing, but the thought of transitioning from college life to real life was more than a little daunting.

It prompted me to ask some hard questions of myself. The biggest and worst question being, had I made a mistake? Was any of this really what I'd even wanted?

I used to think I'd enjoy civil engineering. And of course, civil engineers made good money, which had factored into my decision to become one.

But lately, I wasn't sure. I definitely didn't enjoy my classes; the subject matter didn't interest me whatsoever. My last year of college was probably the worst time to figure that out, but the closer I got to graduation, the less I was able to lie to myself. I didn't

like my major.

It wasn't the end of the world; plenty of people ended up discovering they didn't like their majors. Even more, plenty of people worked jobs they didn't enjoy

. In fact, I'd argue that most people ended up working jobs they didn't enjoy. So after college, I'd likely fit right in. And at least if I wasn't enjoying it, I'd be making good money doing it.

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It didn't change the fact that it was frustrating, though. It wasn't really what I'd pictured when I'd graduated high school. I'd always imagined I'd fall into a job I loved, a field I loved. Though I should've known better, because the things I loved didn't really make good money.

I'd always been naturally creative at heart. While I'd always been able to make myself more organized and focused for school, it wasn't my natural tendency. I'd always liked to do things like draw and, even more so, sing. Music had always been a passion of mine, though I hadn't learned any instruments, since it hadn't been something I had time to truly explore.

Music among many other things. Because of the push of my parents, I'd always been very driven in school and had done anything I could to find educational success. That was the only reason I'd even been able to end up at an Ivy League school like Beasley. If it hadn't been for my impeccable grades in high school, I likely would never have gotten in.

Because of this, I hadn't had many friendships either. And forget about relationships, I wouldn't even have known where to begin. My only real friend in college was my roommate, Abby.

She was my complete opposite, but she was an absolute doll to me. She didn't have the same focus for school that I had. She enjoyed going out, partying, living life to the fullest, while I stayed in and studied. But she had never made me feel weird about it. Unlike with other people, I'd never felt insecure about who I was around her.

I heard the front door bang shut, and I knew what that meant. Abby must have gotten

home. Very likely by the sound of the door, she was drunk again, too.

I decided this was the perfect time to force myself to brush my teeth and go to bed. That way, I could check on Abby at the same time and kill two birds with one stone.

As I opened up my bedroom door, I glanced down our narrow apartment hallway and called her name. “Abby?”

“I’m home!” she said excitedly, as if I hadn’t figured that out on my own.

“You don’t say,” I said. “How was your night?”

She came stumbling down the hallway, kicking off her high heels and grinning at me.

“Oh my god, it was so fun! I wish you’d come out. We monopolized the karaoke machine all night!”

She knew I didn’t like to go out, but she always pressured me to go with her whenever King’s Tooth, our campus pub, had karaoke. I had gone with her and her friends once, and she had never let up since then.

I rolled my eyes. “You know singing in front of people really isn’t my thing.”

“Unless you’re wasted,” she reminded me, “and it should be your thing! You’re so damn good. Like, you’re literally the only one of us that can sing, and you’re the most embarrassed. I sound like a dying cat, but I still go up there.”

“No, you don’t...” I said unconvincingly. And we both started laughing, because, yeah, she really was a very bad singer.

“It wouldn’t hurt you to loosen up every once in awhile,” she told me. “And, hey,

maybe if you went out with us, you'd find a cute girl and—”

“Stop,” I cut her off. “You know I can’t date right now.” And even though I’d never dated, I had told Abby that I had no interest in men. Unlike some people, she didn’t come back at me with some stupid shit, asking ‘how I knew I liked women if I’d never dated one.’ Uh, it could have something to do with the fact that I felt it in my bones. That no guy had ever caught so much as a two second glance from me, yet I had to force myself to stop staring at the cute girl in my calculus class.

“At some point, you’re going to have to actually live life, you know!” she reminded me. “School is going to end, life is going to begin, and you’re going to have little to no real world experiences.”

I wished she hadn’t said that, because she was compounding my worst fears right now. I was so good at school, but I was terrified I was going to be so bad at real life.

“Come on, let’s brush our teeth,” I said, changing the subject. I knew when she was drunk she often forgot about basic things like brushing her teeth before bed.

“Good idea!” she said. “I’m probably about to crash at any moment.”

Which I knew. She rarely lasted fifteen minutes before falling asleep when she came home from a night of drinking.

I stared in our white-framed bathroom mirror, looking at my tired eyes from over-studying once again, and I tried to avoid thinking about what Abby had just said. I couldn’t obsess over it tonight. I couldn’t have another late night when I spent too much time thinking about my future.

For now, I had to put it out of my mind and focus on the important things: getting through this last year with a good enough GPA to land me a decent job.

Kaitlyn

I'd been to Rosebridge before to visit my friend, but I saw it in a whole new light now that I knew I'd be living here. A much better light, I might have added.

It had a completely different feel compared to the town I'd lived in with Julia. It didn't feel as stuffy and as corporate as Englewood had. The buildings were more unique; the town seemed to be alive with college students walking around and laughing. And on just the walk from the train station to my friend's apartment, I ran into a quirky-looking art studio called the Shadetree Collective. Yep, this was my kind of town.

My friend, Ryan, seemed excited to have me. I'd thought he would be. It was another one of the reasons I'd reached out to him instead of anyone else. He had recently broken up with his live-in girlfriend and was living alone. I'd thought with him, my presence would be less of a burden and more of a comfort.

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When I arrived, he grinned and pulled me in for a big hug. We started immediately chatting about what we'd been up to, though unlike him, I hadn't been up to anything new since the last time I'd seen him. I was still just making music and trying to make a living from it.

He'd graduated from Beasley University since the last time I'd seen him. Although he wasn't as snobby about it as Julia often was, he also had a fancy new corporate job at a nearby law firm. It was very prestigious and paid well, which was why he didn't mind cutting me some slack financially while I got back on my feet.

Also unlike Julia, he hadn't moved apartments after he'd gotten his new job. He still lived in the same small place he had when he used to split the rent with college roommates. So he was still living pretty cheaply while getting paid quite a bit. My half of rent would probably be a drop in the bucket for him, a negligible amount of money he wouldn't even notice if it got deposited into his bank account every month.

I had to admit, on some level, I was jealous of that, though I'd never have admitted it to Julia. I wasn't materialistic, but I did occasionally fantasize about what it would be like to not have to worry about money. Not enough to get a regular job, of course. It was just one of those small desires you thought about now and again.

Ryan only had time to talk to me for about fifteen minutes before he had to head to work. But he showed to my room, which was fully furnished, thankfully, since I didn't have any furniture to call my own. Julia had bought every piece of furniture she owned; it was all hers.

"It's all stuff my girlfriend picked out, sorry if it's not your style," Ryan had told me,

as if I possibly cared about the style of the free furniture I was getting to use.

“Why do you get to keep it, then?” I asked. “If it was her furniture.”

“I said she picked it out,” he reiterated, “but I was the one who paid for it. Common problem in our relationship... I let her keep some stuff when she moved out, though. But she was going back to live with her parents, so she didn’t need all this furniture.”

After he left, I tried to get comfortable, though I was anything but. I didn’t think the furniture was too bad, actually. Everything was some version of teal or mint green... including the wooden desk that housed a computer in the corner of the room. But the teal comforter was extremely soft, and the bed was memory foam, which I’d grown accustomed to at Julia’s.

But that was kind of the problem. That was why I couldn’t get comfortable. No matter what, I kept thinking of Julia. Even here in Rosebridge, everything reminded me of her. Something as small as memory foam could send me into a spiral of thoughts of her. I hated it.

When were these feelings going to pass? I’d experienced break-ups before, but they’d never hurt quite like this. I’d never been with anyone as long as Julia, so that made sense. When would thoughts of her stop haunting me, though? When was I going to be able to feel comfortable in a place without having her by my side?

At the moment, it felt a long ways off.

After Ryan left, I knew I had to get out of the house. He likely wouldn’t be home until past six. I’d been planning on sleeping when I got here, even though it was the middle of the day, because it’d been a long trip. Twelve hours on a train was no joke.

But I’d managed to sleep for most of that trip, so unfortunately, I was feeling pretty

well-rested. Which only meant I was wide-awake and able to think about Julia way too much.

There were things I could do, though. I could go explore the city. Hell, maybe I could even take my guitar and try to make some money.

But, no, probably not today. I was a little bit worn out emotionally, so playing for people in public didn't feel like something I could handle at the moment. Maybe today, I'd just scout for possible locations where my music might be appreciated.

I grabbed my wallet and the house keys that Ryan had given me and left.

Rosebridge was like no city I'd ever lived in before. It was picturesque, exactly what you'd imagine when picturing a small artsy college town. It wasn't the first artsy college city I'd been to, but it was the nicest looking and the cleanest. Ot

her colleges I'd been to were downright dirty, with frat houses that had beer bottles out on their lawns and litter in the streets.

Not Rosebridge, though, Rosebridge was pristine. I'd been expecting I was going to have to spend some money to distract myself, but I actually didn't have to. Just walking around was pleasant enough for me. I'd glance into restaurants and window shop as I walked by, but I really didn't feel the need to go into any of them. I was enjoying the soft breeze and smell of freshly-cut grass. Seriously, why did it smell so much like plant life? I didn't care; it was my favorite smell.

The one unfortunate thing was that, on the streets outside Beasley and the town's Riverwalk, it was pretty bare. There didn't seem to be a lot of foot traffic, which was the opposite of what you'd want when you were performing for money.

So I decided to venture into the college to see if there were more crowded places.

Sure enough, as I walked closer to the college, things seemed to pick up. As long as I didn't get kicked out for soliciting, there were definitely a few good corners where I could hang out as people walked by.

The campus was bigger than it'd seemed from the outside and was about as picturesque as the rest of Rosebridge that I'd walked through. And, as weird as it sounded, the people looked picturesque, too. So many well-dressed college students were giggling with each other as they walked out of their classes. Why did this place feel so open and friendly?

I decided to stop when I came across the Beasley campus pub, King's Tooth. They had a sign indicating they had a lunchtime happy hour. I figured, why not? I could have used a drink... or twenty.

It wasn't what I'd been expecting. Usually campus bars are really kitschy, but this one was decorated very simply. It definitely wasn't over the top in any way, which I appreciated. In my experience, the simpler the bar, the better the drinks.

I sat at the bar and smiled at the bartender, a young blonde guy with blue eyes who was looking a little bored before he noticed me sit. When he did, he perked up immediately and put on his customer service smile.

"What can I get you?" he asked.

"Whatever lager you've got on tap."

He nodded. "You've got it."

He poured it and handed it over to me. The glass was cold as ice, which I always appreciated.

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I sipped it and knew immediately what it was. “Stella?” I asked.

“You know your beers!” He smiled at me, with a little bit of surprise on his face. “Is that fine?”

“Absolutely,” I nodded. “One of my favorites, actually.”

“Perfect,” he said, and turned his attention to someone who had just walked in. Given it was the middle of the day, it was pretty empty. There were two guys sitting over at a table sipping mixed drinks, but, besides them, it was just me and whomever had walked in.

I turned around to see a dark-haired college girl walking in, adjusting her glasses as she stepped up to the bar and sat a few seats away from me.

She was cute, no denying that. But pretty much everyone I’d seen so far was cute, so that was hardly a surprise. Even the bartender was a good-looking man.

“Could I get a Long Island, please?” she asked the bartender with a polite smile.

“Sure thing.” He nodded as he stepped away to make her drink.

She sighed and leaned her head on her hand as she tapped on the bar counter. Not tapping as if she was frustrated with having to wait or was impatient; it was more that she seemed to be fidgeting.

I glanced over at her, questioning whether or not I should start a conversation with

her. Before Julia, I used to be pretty upfront when I was considering flirting with someone.

But things were different now. I wasn't as secure as I used to be, not nearly as brave. I wasn't sure how to go about putting myself out there again.

Besides, I probably shouldn't be putting myself out there at all. I'd only barely broken up with Julia. I shouldn't have been trying to get involved with anyone else.

On the other hand, I had to start making friends at some point. If I was going to live here, I had to put myself out there. So, hey, maybe I would strike up a conversation with this girl, and she would end up being cool. Not like it had to lead anywhere.

In fact, it probably would lead nowhere, because I couldn't even be sure if she was a lesbian. I might have been sort of getting that vibe right now, but I couldn't be sure.

"Long day?" I asked her as the bartender handed her the Long Island and she started gulping it quickly.

"You have no idea." She rolled her eyes.

"Care to talk about it?" I asked.

She shrugged. "It's stupid. It's just that I stayed up late studying for this final, and then I forgot to set my alarm, so I woke an hour late for class and only had thirty minutes to take the test. Though I guess I'm lucky my professor even allowed me to take it at all."

"Yikes," I said, trying to imagine what that might feel like. I'd never taken school too seriously, and I'd never gone to college, so it was hard to imagine stressing over a test that way. "Were you able to finish?"

“Not even close.” She shook her head. “Hence, the drink.”

“Right.” I nodded. “Ah, that blows. I’d be drinking, too, if I were you.”

She nodded toward my beer. “Well, you are drinking. What’s your reason?”

I laughed. “Oh, no real reason for me. I was just wandering around the campus and decided to drop in. I’m new to Rosebridge, so I was doing some exploring.” I extended my hand. “My name’s Kaitlyn, by the way.”

“Kaitlyn, hello. I’m Emily.”

“Nice to meet you,” I told her, before feeling someone tap my shoulder behind me.

It startled me, so I jumped back a little bit before I saw one of the guys from the other side of the bar standing in front of me.

“Oh, sorry to scare you!” he said in a soft, deep voice. He was tucking his chin-length brown hair behind his ear and smiling at me. “I just had a quick question.”

This was a little weird, but I was an outgoing person, so I didn’t mind someone randomly initiating a conversation with me.

“Are you single?” he asked. “Because you’re very cute, and I was wondering if I could possibly get your number.”

Well, this almost never happened to me. I often was approached by other lesbians but pretty much never by men.

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Though I did date men now and then. I had a preference for women, but every once in a while, I met a guy who caught my attention. But in those cases, I was the one doing the chasing and not the other way around.

Without looking him up and down, I tried to assess if I was attracted to him. He was cute, no denying that. His dark, long hair perfectly framed his very symmetrical face. He was objectively pretty attractive.

But, eh, he didn't hold my interest. Not really. For a guy to win me over, there had to be some extra factor that drew me in. Or maybe I was just uninterested in him because I had a woman on the other side of me who I found way cuter. Either way, I didn't want to entertain this.

"Sorry, I'm taken, actually."

"Oh, that sucks," he said, frowning. "Well, couldn't hurt to ask. Have a good day."

"You, too." I smiled politely as he made his way back to his friend, shrugging at him as if to say 'oh well.'

"Taken, huh?" Emily asked me.

Right, I didn't really want her thinking I was taken because she was cute, and, even though I shouldn't have been looking at girls, I couldn't help myself. I didn't want her thinking I was totally straight, either.

"If taken means uninterested in him," I said, as I grinned mischievously at her.

She seemed to get my point, that I was a lesbian. Or, at least, mostly lesbian, I guess. Bisexual didn't feel like the right word to describe me, because while I was attracted to both genders, I so heavily leaned toward women.

She smiled back, and a look in her eye made me think she might have actually been interested in me, too.

“So, what brings you to Rosebridge?” she asked.

I had to think about how I was going to answer this. Should I lie so the conversation was kept more casual? Say I just moved for a change of pace?

Or did I answer honestly and admit I'd just had an awful break-up? It was too personal for a conversation with a stranger, but, at the same time, I wanted to vent a bit. And there was always the possibility I'd never see this stranger again, so, why not?

“Actually, just had a pretty bad break-up with my ex-girlfriend,” I said. “I mean, the break-up was mutual, but still awful.”

“Aw, I'm so sorry to hear that,” she said, sounding genuinely empathetic. “You wanna talk about it?”

I finished off my beer and turned to her. “You know, I actually do,” I said confidently.

I wasn't feeling super confident about pouring my heart out to a stranger, but whatever, alcohol would help that. I asked the bartender for another beer.

“So, mutual, but bad?” she questioned me.

I nodded. “Mutual, but bad. You know when you’re with someone, and you love them, you care about them, but you realize you’re just not going on the same life path? Like, you wish you were, and you’d do anything to make that a possibility, but, no matter how you try, you’re just... not?”

She frowned. “Actually, I don’t know what that’s like... though, it sounds terrible!”

I laughed. “You must have had pretty perfect relationships, then,” I answered as I sipped my beer.

“Something like that...” she said, continuing with her Long Island.

“Are you in a perfect relationship now?” I asked.

“No, actually, I’m in a horribly toxic relationship with Beasley University these days.”

“Ahh...” I smiled. “A relationship you’re not ready to end, I take it?”

“Not yet, not quite. See, I’m a little financially dependent on the outcome of our relationship, so I’m waiting it out a year until I can get on my feet.”

I liked this kid; she was cute and smart. I liked a little wit with my flirting.

“A year until graduation, huh? And what degree, might I ask?”

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“Civil engineering.”

“Wow, nice. I’d always wished I’d had the brain for a STEM degree. Decent job security and good money.”

“That’s what I’m hoping for,” she told me, “but who knows how it’ll really turn out. What about you? What line of work are you in? Or, what degree are you going for, if you’re still in school?”

“Not in school.” I shook my head. “Never was, actually, and I have no plans. I’m a musician, actually. Yes, a starving musician, the stereotype holds.”

She looked me up and down. “Don’t look starving to me.”

“I guess you can thank my ex for that,” I told her. “She had the money. She kept me well-fed. I was the heart in the relationship, she was the function.”

“And that’s what killed it, I take it?” she asked.

“Pretty much. Eventually someone working at a big fancy corporation making ridiculous amounts of money isn’t going to have interest in a failing musician, no matter how creative and loving she may be.”

She frowned. “I’m sorry.”

“Oh, don’t be,” I said, trying to play it off. “I’m really looking for a change of scenery. And I’m excited to be a little more independent. Where my ex and I used to

live, there was no opportunity to do street performance and earn a little cash.”

“Is that how you make money, street performance?” she asked.

“Oh, that and other things. I plan to start offering guitar lessons pretty soon here, and I’d love to get a paying gig now and then. But, honestly, street performance is a love of mine. I love the bare-naked interaction you get with other people, you know? It’s just so raw and real. If I could get paid to do that for the rest of my life and just make enough money to get by, I’d be happy.”

She nodded, seeming to take all this information in slowly.

“I really admire that,” she finally said. “I’ve never been the kind of person who’s comfortable without security. I’m not really one to want a lot of money or luxury in life, so I’d be fine just getting by and paying my bills, but the uncertainty of it all would drive me crazy.”

I smiled. Usually, when I talked about my career ambitions or lack thereof, I felt like people were judging me. She seemed to genuinely appreciate my point of view. It was a nice change of pace.

“It certainly isn’t for everyone, but I’ve always been naturally spontaneous. I don’t know, it’s hard to explain, but something about a scheduled and certain life bores me to death.”

She laughed. “I’d bore you to death, then. Everything about my life is scheduled and certain.”

I looked at the way her mouth wrinkled softly in the corners as she smiled, and I was in awe of just how beautiful she was.

“I don’t think you could ever bore me,” I said, rather boldly.

She started to blush and smile but didn't say anything in return.

“Hey, I was going to order a shot, do you want one?” I asked her.

She paused, thinking on this for a moment. “Well... yeah, sure, that sounds good.”

“Perfect,” I said, trying to hide my enthusiasm. When I flirted so boldly like this, I really preferred to play it cool, to a degree.

I was about to wave over the bartender, who was out on the floor wiping off tables, when Emily’s phone vibrated. I glanced over at her and watched her read a text message. I knew it wasn’t good news for me when her face fell.

“Oh, no, I’m sorry... I can’t take that shot, I actually have to go.”

“Really? Right now?” I asked, hoping she could stay at least a few more minutes.

“Yeah, right now, sorry. Emergency with my roommate. But it’s been lovely chatting with you!” she said, as she grabbed her keys and stood up from the bar counter.

“Right, yeah, nice talking with you, too.” I nodded at her as she started to walk out of the bar. “Have a good one!”

“You, too!” she hollered back, as she left out the front door.

The second she did, disappointment and regret washed over me.

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Shit, why hadn't I asked for her number?

4

Emily

Shit, why hadn't I asked for her number?

Well, I knew why, of course. I'd been totally distracted by the text I'd just gotten from Abby.

>Abby: Hey, can you pick me up outside of Cake My Day? I'm okay, but I just got in a car accident.

Obviously she was fine, or she would be at the hospital instead of standing on a sidewalk waiting for me to pick her up, but still, it was stressful, because I knew she must be a mess.

Abby didn't have a lot of money, and she didn't get any from her parents. She really relied on her car, so depending on how bad the damage was, she may have just walked into a very stressful situation.

Still, as I drove over to Cake My Day, a bakery we had once picked up cupcakes from for a bachelorette party, I couldn't help thinking about Kaitlyn.

Despite being in college, I obviously hadn't dated around, and though I blamed that on my studies, the truth was that I hadn't really met anyone who'd truly caught my

attention. Except for Kaitlyn, right now, just a second ago in that bar. I truly believed that was the first time I'd been actually interested in another person.

It was weird; it wasn't as if I really knew her or anything, but for some reason, I'd been so intensely interested in the small talk we'd been making. I mean, she was damn cute, but I'd seen a ton of cute girls with whom I hadn't cared to explore conversation. I guess it was something in her personality. She was different, eclectic, not like any person I'd met before. Certainly not like me.

I pulled up to Cake My Day and Abby waved at me from the sidewalk, exasperation on her face. I pulled over quickly and she hopped in, groaning the second she stepped in the car.

"What happened?" I asked her.

"Some asshole rear-ended me." She rolled her eyes. "Then I rear-ended the person in front of me because they threw my entire car forward so far."

I looked around as I was pulling away. "Wait, where's your car?" I asked.

She let out a deep breath. "A tow truck already took it. I'm pretty sure it's totaled. There's no way the damages to the front and back are going to be less than what the car is worth. My insurance isn't going to pay for repairs, I know it."

I frowned at her. "Abbs, I'm sorry. But insurance will give you money for it, right? I mean, the accident wasn't your fault..."

"Oh, I'm sure they will," she agreed, "I just don't know if it's going to be enough money for another car. Insurance companies are so shady. I'm so not looking forward to dealing with this."

I glanced at her as I drove and put a hand on her shoulder. "I'm sure it'll work out." I really wasn't. How the hell would I know? I just didn't know what else to say.

"Yeah, yeah..." She looked out the window. "Anyway, how was your day? How'd your test go? Distract me!"

Now was my turn to sigh. "Well, I overslept..."

Her jaw dropped as she turned to me. "Overslept? Like, you missed it?"

"Not quite, but almost. I definitely didn't get there in time to finish it. I'm not even sure I'm going to pass."

"Oh my god, Emily, how are you not losing it?" she asked.

I didn't even know. Before I'd walked into the bar, I kind of had been. And it certainly hadn't been the one drink that had calmed me down. I hadn't even gotten a buzz going from that. No, it was definitely the distraction of Kaitlyn that had me not thinking about my impending academic doom.

"Well, you're having a worse day than me, so..." I told her.

"Uh, I'm not even sure of that!" she said in surprise. "I mean, you might have failed a test!"

I gave her a sideways glance. "Y

ou're not helping, believe it or not."

"Sorry, sorry." She shook her head. "I'm just so confused about how you're so... okay with all of this. Like, don't get me wrong, if I failed a test, I probably wouldn't

blink an eye, especially if I did as well as you overall, but... you care about grades more than you care about life.”

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“Not true!” I tried to defend myself.

She gave me a suspicious glance.

“Okay...” I said slowly. “I care about them the same.”

“Uh huh.” She shook her head and laughed.

“And honestly, I don’t know why I’m not freaking out,” I told her. “But I did kind of meet a girl at King’s Tooth, so maybe that’s helping.”

“You went to King’s Tooth?!” she asked, sounding shocked again. “In the middle of the day, and without me bugging you to? Like, totally by yourself?!”

“Yes... is it really that much of a shock?”

“Uh, yeah! It is! God, you failed a test, and you went drinking in the middle of the day... Who even are you? Wait, should you even be driving?”

I rolled my eyes. “You think I’d drink and drive? Of course not. I only had one drink.”

“Okay, didn’t think so. But I had to ask. You know my two fundamental rules in life: no glove, no love, and more than one beer, no steer.”

I laughed. I loved this about Abby; she was funny when she wasn’t even trying to be.

“Has anyone ever told you you're a little crass?” I asked her.

She put on a fake expression of shock. “Me? Crass? Why, I never!” she responded in an exaggerated accent.

I chuckled again. “You’re ridiculous, you know that?”

“You and me both! We haven’t even gotten to the most shocking part of your day yet!”

“Yeah?” I asked. “What’s that? What could be more shocking than me failing a test and drinking without you in the middle of the day?”

“You met yourself a woman!”

I raised an eyebrow. “And why is that shocking? I’m not attractive enough to pull women, huh?”

“Oh, no, you’re definitely cute. But I’ve seen you be attracted to literally nobody in the entire time we’ve been roommates.”

“I’ve been attracted to people...” I argued.

“Well, you’ve clearly been way too busy to act on it!” She said. “Always studying, no need for fun... I’m not even sure if I see you eat most days.”

That part was definitely an exaggeration, because she and I binge ate junk food and watched reality television together at least twice a week.

“So, about this girl...” she continued. “Tell me about her.”

I shrugged. “You know, I’m not sure what there is to tell... we talked for a bit, not too long or anything, but it just felt... nice. Like, we weren’t making small talk, you know? She recently moved here because of a bad break-up, and we were just getting into that and stuff. I don’t know, it was cool to talk so personally to someone new.”

“Is she cute?” she asked.

I could feel myself blushing. “Yeah... yeah, she really was.”

“And you know for sure she’s gay, right?”

“Oh, definitely. It was her girlfriend that she broke up with. And some guy actually came to ask her out, but she turned him down. He was a cute guy, too. I thought for sure when he walked over it would be the end of our conversation, but, nope, she had no interest.”

“Oh my god! Emily, this is so exciting. You actually like someone! I’m melting!”

To be honest, I was a little bit, too. It sounded dramatic, though. I barely talked to a cute girl at a bar, and now I was fantasizing about her like we were actually dating or something. Which, in reality, we never would be.

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But I couldn't help myself, because this was a first for me. I'd never ever had someone to fantasize about before. I was going to take advantage of this small burst of fun in my life.

"So, when's date number two?" she pressed.

"Well, there was no date number one, first of all. And probably never, if I had to guess."

"What?!" she said, in her usual high-pitched, whiny voice which she used whenever she didn't like something. "But why? She's cute, and you liked her!"

"Because I'll probably never see her again. I didn't get her number."

She pushed my shoulder. "Emily, how could you chicken out? This is the first girl you've ever liked."

"I didn't exactly chicken out," I defended myself. "The thought didn't even cross my mind until I'd walked out of the bar. I was too distracted by your text and worrying about what had happened to your car."

"Ugh!" She threw her head against the headrest. "My car accident ruined both our days."

"Eh, it's fine." I shrugged, "I really don't think it would've become anything. She was just a girl in a bar."

“A girl in a bar that you liked! I wouldn’t have wanted to waste the opportunity for you. Especially after you’d had such a shit morning.”

I’d nearly forgotten about that. “Right... well, now it’s your job to distract me.”

“Yeah? How so?”

“Pizza, wine, and trashy reality television?”

She smiled. “Deal. I’m due for a long night in. Especially when I no longer have a car...”

“Good. A night in with my best friend is just as good as any night with some random, cute stranger at a bar,” I told her.

I wasn’t so sure that was true. But I didn’t want to waste my time thinking about the cute girl I’d missed out on.

And clearly, I couldn’t have any distractions right now, anyway. After failing this test, school needed to be my life for the rest of the year.

5

Kaitlyn

I wasn’t really the type to get hung up on one person, unless I’d been dating them for a while, but for some odd reason, I was hung up on that girl I’d met at the bar.

Ever since a few days ago, I couldn’t get her off my mind. I wished I could have gotten to know more about her. There were a million questions running through my mind. What kind of music did she like? What was her favorite television show? Did

she like to read?

They all sounded like such mundane questions, but when I thought about her answering them, they suddenly became intensely interesting. There was no denying it; I had myself a little crush.

But it was totally useless, because I hadn't gotten her number. I couldn't help but wonder if maybe that was what she'd wanted. It'd seemed like we were vibing, but she'd run off so quickly.

I mean, she totally could've had an emergency, but she hadn't asked for my number, either. There was always that chance she was bad at saying no to people and had to come up with a reason to run out the door. Maybe she'd just been waiting to get a text to pull that act, who knew.

Either way, it didn't really matter. We were never getting together, that was definite. I probably should've tried to stop thinking about her.

On the other hand, it was actually really nice to be thinking about her, because it kept me from thinking about Julia. Since I'd run into Emily, Julia had barely crossed my mind.

In fact, speaking to Emily had reminded me of just how much I needed to move on from Julia. With Julia, I'd never felt any more than judgment for my choice to be a musician. Emily had actually seemed fascinated by it.

Even if I never saw Emily again, I was glad I'd run into her. She'd reminded me that there were people out there who would appreciate my good traits. People who would actually like my creativity, the way Julia used to.

As usual, I was woken up early by the sound of pots and pans banging in the kitchen.

Ryan was kind of a health nut and liked to cook himself eggs every morning, which he ate with whole wheat bread.

I didn't mind him being loud in the morning. How could I? I was an intruder in his world. I wasn't even paying to be here, so of course I couldn't complain.

Even beyond that, I app

reciated having something that woke me up early. I was the kind of person who really only needed six hours of sleep to function, but when I was depressed, I'd sleep in all day. That only made me feel more depressed.

With Ryan waking me up, I was able to force myself to get out of bed and say good morning to him. And after he left, I would make myself get ready to go out into the world.

Ever since my first day, I'd gone out with my guitar and performed on busy corners around Beasley. Surprisingly, it had been pretty decent money for the amount of foot traffic. I had quite a few people stop and listen to me, and I'd managed to rake in forty to sixty dollars every day. It had only been a few days, of course, but if things stayed like this, I could make a good little chunk of change for myself. Nothing amazing, but certainly enough to live on. I could offer Ryan rent money or get out of his hair, if he wanted.

And that was on top of what I'd make doing lessons. For the first time since the break-up, I was starting to feel happy. Like I could make a little home for myself in Rosebridge. One of the biggest struggles with a break-up after a long-term relationship was that you'd made a bunch of plans with your partner, so when you left them, it felt like your future left you, too. Everything you'd once imagined your life might be with them came crashing down, and suddenly, you didn't even know what was going to happen to your life.

That was what it was like for me, anyway. And the only way to heal from that kind of

pain was to start imagining a new life... imagining a new future, without that person. A future centered on yourself and what you wanted. I was starting to force myself to do that, as much as I could. I didn't want to continue pining for him pathetically. I wanted to be my own person again.

Here in Rosebridge, maybe I could do that.

I walked out into the kitchen to find Ryan dressed for work, hovering over the stove. Usually he cooked before he dressed, since he wore business suits to work, so this was different from the last few days I'd woken up with him.

"Hey, I made too many scrambled eggs. Do you want some?"

"Sure, that sounds great," I said as I grabbed a plate from the kitchen cabinets and sat down at his table.

"What are you going to be up to today?" he asked, scooping eggs onto my plate out of the skillet.

"Oh, just go play some more guitar, see where that gets me."

"Fun!" he said, and it didn't sound sarcastic.

Like with Emily, I didn't feel that Ryan judged me for being a musician. Or maybe he did, and his overly enthusiastic demeanor just masked it. Either way, I wasn't uncomfortable talking to him about it, even though he was pretty successful.

And though he was very successful, I never envied him. He went to work early, and he came home late, always exhausted, always eating baked chicken and broccoli on the couch after working out at the gym.

This was what I'd been talking about when I'd spoken to Emily about a scheduled life. Ryan's life seemed horribly, tragically boring. I knew he was happy with it, but still, the thought of living like him made me just the slightest bit nauseated. I just didn't know how the hell he could maintain his lifestyle and not get sick of it.

"Anything out of the ordinary for you?" I asked him.

"Nope, just work. Oh, I have an after-work meeting, so I'll be home later than usual."

"Are you still going to the gym after?" I asked.

"Yep!" he said, in his usual enthusiastic way. "Every day except the weekends!"

I smiled at him. "It might not kill you to let up a little, you know," I encouraged.

"And it doesn't kill me to keep going!" he said with a grin as he scarfed eggs into his mouth.

It was the first time this had occurred to me, but maybe his need to always be on the go wasn't because he was a total workaholic, but rather because he was trying to avoid the pain of his recent break-up. That would make sense... it was certainly a feeling I could relate to, though I handled it a bit differently.

He must have been running late this morning. That explained why he was already wearing his suit before cooking and was in a rush to eat. Normally he sat down and seemed to enjoy his food. This morning, he was stuffing his face at the counter as he poured coffee into his travel mug.

"Okay, I've got to go," he said as he started screwing on the lid to his mug. "I'll see you later. Oh, by the way, if you want to go grocery shopping, you know you can borrow my credit card for some food. It's in the drawer."

God, he was so generous. He had always been a seriously nice guy, but I'd never known just how nice.

"Oh Ryan, that's super awesome of you, but I've been making enough money playing guitar to get my own food. It's not a problem. And, hey, if things go as well as they have been going, I'll be able to contribute to rent next month, too, if you don't mind having me around still."

He squished up his face and gave a quick wave of his hand. "No, no, you don't need to contribute, it's not a big deal. I really don't mind having you around at all. Anyway, I'll see you later?"

"Yep," I said, nodding at him, "see you later."

After he left, I finished up my eggs at a much slower pace than he had and then got dressed, grabbed my guitar, and left.

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I went to the same corner I'd gone to the last few days. It'd seemed to get a lot of attention and so far nobody had tried to kick me off it, which did happen pretty often when you were street performing.

Although in most places, this early in the morning was not the best time to be doing street performances. Usually lunchtime was best, and that was still true here at Beasley, but I got more traction here in the morning than I would at other locations, so I didn't mind being here early at all.

I attributed this to the fact that most students had morning classes. Every hour or so, I got a burst of foot traffic from people going to and leaving from class, which was when I got the most attention.

I was close to the cafeteria, too, so of course, lunch was even better. A few people had even made it a point to sit at some benches across the way from me and listen to my music while they ate and hung out with their friends. That was really nice; it made me feel wanted around here. It was a much different vibe than I'd been expecting, and I couldn't have been more grateful.

It was during the middle of lunch when I was strumming along that I heard a voice yell 'hey' at me. At first, I thought maybe it was going to be someone telling me that I wasn't allowed to play here, but when I looked up, I saw a familiar face.

It was Emily.

"Hey," I said to her with a smile.

“You’re Kaitlyn, from the bar the other day.”

“That’s me.” I tried to contain my excitement.

“I know you mentioned doing street performance, but I didn’t realize you’d be performing here at Beasley,” she commented.

I set my guitar down and stood up. I didn’t like sitting on the concrete curb with her hovering over me. I wanted to be on equal footing.

“Well, I thought I’d give it a try. There seemed to be a lot of foot traffic around this corner, so why not?”

“And how’s it going out here?” she asked, glancing around.

“Good! I’m thinking I might stick around here for a while. See how it goes. I’m playing it all by ear.”

She seemed happy to see me, which was encouraging. That probably meant she hadn’t lied about having an emergency with her roommate the other day. And that she probably hadn’t specifically tried not to give me her number, but instead, really had to leave.

After all, she’d seen me while walking by. I hadn’t seen her. She easily could have walked past me and never said a thing, and I’d have been none the wiser. The fact that she’d stopped and talked to me meant she’d had a reason to, which made me feel considerably more confident.

“How’s your roommate?” I asked her.

“Oh, you remembered!” She seemed touched by this. “She’s okay. She got in a car

accident. Her car is a disaster, but she got out without a scratch. That's all you can really ask for when accidents happen, right?"

"Right," I agreed. "Really glad to hear she's okay."

"Me, too." She smiled politely.

The conversation was dying, and if I didn't want her walking away without making a move again, I had to step in and try to make one now.

"Hey, I'm really glad I ran into you. Because you left the bar in such a hurry yesterday, I didn't get the chance to grab your number or anything."

She started to blush, but I pretended not to notice. "Oh, right, yeah!" she said. "I wanted to get yours, too. Here, let me grab my phone, and you can program it in."

"Sure," I said. I reached in my pocket and grabbed my own phone to hand to her.

We exchanged numbers pretty quickly, and after that, I couldn't think of much else to say. It seemed she couldn't either.

"Well, I guess I should let you get back to playing. I'm sure you don't want to lose out on money standing around and talking to me," she said, laughing awkwardly.

Actually, that was exactly what I wanted to do.

"I was finishing up for now, actually," I lied. Before she'd walked by, I'd had no such plans. "I was just about to go grab some lunch."

"Oh, really? Me too."

“Nice! You want to eat together?” I asked, a lot more confident now that we’d exchanged numbers. That was a definite sign she was interested in me.

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“Sure, yeah! That sounds great! I was just going to go to the cafeteria, unless you have somewhere else you’d rather go? I have meal points there.”

“Oh, nope, the cafeteria is perfect with me. As long as non-students can eat there?” I questioned.

“Yep! We’re allowed to bring guests. Should be no problem at all.”

“Awesome, let me just pack up my guitar and we’ll go.”

I turned around to put my guitar back in my case and locked it up with the money I’d gotten today. While my back was to her, I let out the grin I’d been holding back.

6

Emily

I could

n’t deny that since I’d met Kaitlyn, I’d been thinking about her. She’d definitely been a constant fixture in my thoughts lately, though I’d been doing my best to avert my attention.

I’d been doing a pretty good job of it, too. I knew how badly I needed to be focusing on school right now.

Even though I’d been regretting the fact that I hadn’t gotten Kaitlyn’s number, I’d

told myself that was a good thing. That I needed to turn my attention to school and away from girls.

I hadn't realized how much of a blessing it was that no woman had gotten my attention before. It truly was. It was very hard to get someone off your mind once they got your attention. Like, extremely fucking hard.

And I barely even knew Kaitlyn! She was just a cute stranger from a bar. Imagine if I actually started dating someone... yikes.

So when I'd left class and seen Kaitlyn sitting on the curb playing her guitar, it had felt like both a blessing and a curse. It had been what I'd wanted to happen so badly, but really, I should've just kept walking.

That was what I'd told myself when I'd first seen her. Don't do it, don't talk to her, you're finding it hard enough to focus without adding her into your world.

And I really was. Even in class a moment ago, I'd found myself drifting off in my thoughts and fantasies rather than paying attention to my professor during a crucial lecture. I was less motivated than ever to study. One night this week, I hadn't even bothered. I'd just watched movies with Abby and eaten junk food.

I guess I was just so done with school. After years and years of making it my number one and, many times, my only priority, I didn't want to do it any longer. I was tired. I hadn't had enough fun in my life, and hanging out with Kaitlyn at the bar had reminded me of that.

And that was why I'd ultimately decided to walk up to her. Because I deserved to have a little fun, right?

But now we were walking to the cafeteria together, and I was starting to doubt

myself. I'd been planning to eat in the cafeteria and study. It was supposed to be my broccoli cheddar soup, my textbooks, and me.

That sure as hell wasn't happening now. I couldn't focus on anything but Kaitlyn as we made our way over there. Which was weird, considering it was a very picturesque walk, and I often found myself distracted by the flowers that surrounded the sidewalk and the lush greenery of the trees.

Today my surroundings might as well not have existed. Nothing seemed to exist outside of Kaitlyn's gorgeous face.

"So, how have your first few days at Rosebridge been?" I asked her.

"Honestly? They've been fantastic. I've been really enjoying this place, and I've been making somewhat okay money performing here at Beasley, so I'm happy. I mean, as happy as I can be, all things considered."

"Right." I nodded sadly. "How are you holding up with all that?"

It was selfish, but I was really hoping she'd say she was holding up well. If she wasn't and she still missed her ex, that meant I might not get a shot with her.

Which would be good, I guessed. I didn't need a shot with her. I didn't have time to date. I needed to focus on school; I absolutely had to. I could date when I got a job.

"You know, surprisingly well," she answered, to my delight. "I've been keeping busy here, and my ex hasn't called me, so I'm just feeling really free right now. Ready to build a whole new life, you know?"

"A whole new life?" I didn't know why, it just seemed like weird phrasing to me.

I knew that she was moving to an all new place, of course, but did moving towns really constitute having a whole new life?

“Yeah, I’m in the rebuilding stage of my break-up. You know, when you have to scrap all the plans you had with your ex so you can try to make some new plans of your own?”

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I didn't know. I'd never had to do that.

"What kind of plans did you have with your ex?" I asked.

She sighed. "Oh, I don't know. Just the general ones. Plans to get married, have kids, live in a nice house with the white picket fence, I guess."

"Huh... from what you said about having a scheduled, mundane life the other day, I would've guessed the settled, white picket fence life wasn't for you."

She gave me a crooked smile. "Yeah, I could see how you'd think that. It doesn't seem like the kind of lifestyle you'd choose if you're spontaneous, but... I don't know. The one thing I'm not spontaneous about is my relationships, I guess. I like to feel unbound by a steady life, just not in my relationships, in which I really like to be steady. I like the constant, regular support you get from being with someone you really care about. I always settle down in my relationships, I don't know."

I actually liked to hear this, and not just because I was fantasizing about us being in a steady, settled relationship... though I was. But I liked that she was multi-faceted. She was a mystery to me, hard to figure out, and that only made me more intrigued.

"That makes sense, actually," I told her. "You can't be free spirited all the time, right? You need something to ground you to the real world."

"Exactly," she agreed. "That's exactly what I want from my relationships. I want them to ground me. And I also just really want kids. I can't explain that desire, I guess. I just always have, I suppose it's biology."

“Well, and kids are spontaneous, too.”

She laughed. “Right? The funny thing is when people are making their settled, scheduled lives, they add kids into the mix, but they’re anything but. They’re like chaos in a small body.”

“I did a lot of babysitting of my younger cousins when I was a teen, so I can really attest to the fact that that’s true.”

She glanced over at me. “So you do or don’t like kids?”

“I do,” I told her. “I wasn’t really a fan of being forced to babysit or anything, but I really do like kids.”

“And do you like steady, grounded relationships?” she questioned.

“I imagine so,” I said accidentally.

“Imagine so?” she asked.

Dammit, this was something I really would have preferred to keep to myself for a while. I didn’t like the idea of seeming naïve or inexperienced to Kaitlyn. Though I couldn’t lie about it now.

“I actually haven’t had any relationships,” I admitted to her.

“Oh!” I could tell she was trying not to seem surprised by this fact. Trying to make her face as normal as possible.

“I know, it’s weird,” I said, as we got to the cafeteria doors. I held them open for both of us. “Someone at my age never dating? You don’t see that often.”

“Not really,” she admitted, “especially not with girls as cute as you. I can’t imagine you ever finding it hard to meet people who were interested in you.”

I blushed. “I mean, I’ve been hit on before. It’s not like people have been uninterested, but... I don’t know. Nobody has really caught my eye, you know?”

“Ahh...” she said softly. “So you’re the picky one?”

I laughed. “Yeah, I guess so.” I liked having this spin on it. That I was too picky for dating. Not that I was just some inexperienced, naïve dork who nobody had ever wanted to date.

“If I’d known you’d had such high standards, I might not have asked for your number,” she teased. “Wouldn’t want to waste my time or anything.”

She was definitely half flirting, half trying to get a read for whether or not I actually liked her.

I looked up at her as I scanned my meal card twice, once for myself and once for her. “You’re not wasting your time,” I told her honestly.

She gave a cocky smile and nod and then went to grab us some trays.

I got the broccoli cheddar soup I’d been craving with a side salad, and she grabbed some pasta that was on the buffet line before we took our seats.

Because I’d never done it before, I didn’t really understand the whole dating thing. I knew it came with a lot of rules

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. I'd heard about them from Abby and a lot of her friends, as well as observing it in pop culture and stuff.

There were dumb ones that seemed arbitrary, like don't sleep with someone until the third date if I wanted to show them I was serious. Some of them made sense, like always make the reach to pay even if you knew your date was going to insist on paying, so they knew you weren't a mooch.

The one that was ringing over and over again in my head was that you didn't get too personal on a first date or in the beginning of a relationship. Like, there were so many things you weren't supposed to say in an effort to not scare them off. You weren't supposed to talk about exes or speak about what you wanted in the future.

But before this date had even started, if you could call it one, we'd already broken those rules. We'd spoken very personally with each other from the get-go. And I liked it. I wasn't scared off by her talking about her ex or the future. I was interested in everything she had to say, and I appreciated her honesty. I liked that it felt like we weren't playing games.

Did that mean I could be just as honest, too? Because I wanted to be. I felt oddly comfortable with Kaitlyn, and I wanted to be able to just tell her what I was thinking. I had no interest in stressing myself out with the rules of dating. I just wanted to be myself with her as much as possible.

"Can I be painfully honest with you?" I asked her. "Even though we barely know each other, and there are probably things I should keep to myself."

She smiled at me. “I like painful honesty, I really do. Shoot.”

“When I say nobody has caught my eye before, I mean nobody. Like, I can’t think of a single person that I’ve been attracted to in all my life. Which, I know is, like, super weird, but... whatever. My point is, ever since I saw you at the King’s Tooth, I’ve been thinking about you.”

She looked up from her food, which she had just taken a few bites of. “You have?”

“Yeah... I have. Not that I really know you or anything, but you’re cute, sweet, and interesting, and I think I may have a little bit of a crush on you.”

She was grinning. “Well, I can’t say you’re the first girl I’ve ever been attracted to, but I may have developed a little crush on you, too.”

I tried to hide my elation. “You have?”

“Yeah, I have. I was really regretting the fact that I didn’t grab your number the other day. You’ve been on my mind ever since. Which I thank you for, because when you’re on my mind, that means Julia isn’t.”

So I was filling her head space instead of her ex... that felt nice.

“I’m happy to help,” I said, trying to match her same cocky nature when she flirted, though I wasn’t nearly as confident as she was.

I’d gotten what I’d wanted off my chest. She knew that I liked her, so now I was trying to think of a way to turn the conversation to something less awkward. Thankfully, she did it for me.

“You said you used to babysit your cousins. Are you close to your family?”

“Ha!” I laughed sarcastically. “No, not at all. I mean, I see them for holidays, but we have a very... odd relationship.”

“Yeah?” she asked. “How so?”

God, where to even begin...

“Let’s just say, my parents are very unemotional. They took a weird approach to child-rearing. They expected a lot of perfection from me but didn’t give a lot of affection. They aren’t the kind of parents you can go to and talk about how you feel. So, I kind of always just... did what they wanted of me, and that’s about it. They were proud of me when I did well. At least, they said the words ‘we’re proud,’ but there wasn’t a lot of emotion behind it. And when I didn’t do well, I’d be reprimanded. I think that’s the extent of our relationship.”

She frowned. “God, that sounds awful.”

I shrugged. “I do think they were emotionally neglectful, but there are worse situations to grow up in, right? It’s not as if they were ever very volatile or anything. They were... nothing, really. We just aren’t close. I guess I can thank them for my impeccable academic record.”

“Up until earlier this week, you mean,” she joked, letting me off the hook with talking about my family more. Which I appreciated, because I really didn’t care to.

“Ugh, yeah, I’m still not sure what I’m going to do about that. Got my grade back; I got a D. It’s really going to screw with my average in the class.”

“I’m sure being as good as you are at school, it won’t be a problem for you to make up for it.”

I sighed. “I don’t know. Lately, things are getting harder. Back in high school, I could get As in everything so easily, you know? I studied, I knew the material, and I passed with flying colors. Now things are complicated, and it’s like, the more complicated they get, the quicker I lose interest.”

“Lose interest?” she asked. “Shouldn’t this be the time in your education when you’re most interested, since you have all these classes focused on your major rather than boring gen-eds?”

I sighed. “Yeah, you would think. But, I don’t know, I’m starting to wonder if engineering was the right decision for me at all. I just don’t feel passionate about it lately. I’m really jealous of people like you.”

She laughed. “People like me? What could you possibly be jealous of?”

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I shrugged my shoulders. “Your free spirit, your ability to pick a job path you’re passionate about, regardless of the amount of money it may or not make.”

“You could do that, too,” she said. “Literally anyone can do that. I’m more jealous of people like you for being able to be disciplined about your education and ensure you have a secure future ahead of you. I’d love to be someone who could focus on my goals like that, but... I don’t know. I just can’t make myself care about security. I wish I could, but every time I feel inhibited by life, I just rebel.”

“Well, then, it seems like we could both get something out of spending time together, huh?”

She smiled. “I guess so.”

We continued to talk as we ate, dragging the meal on over the course of the next hour. She was so damn easy to talk to. And when we’d obviously finished all our food, I found it very hard to say goodbye.

“I guess we should probably get up and free up the table, huh?” Kaitlyn asked. “It seems like it's getting a fair amount busier in here.”

“Yeah... yeah, you're right. We should probably go. I was just having so much fun talking to you.”

She smiled. “Me too. This has been nice. Don’t worry, I don’t want it to end either, I just don’t want to be rude.”

I was almost never bold in this way, but I decided to take a chance for once. “Maybe it doesn’t have to end, then?” I asked her.

“How do you mean?”

“I mean... you can come back to my place?” God, I couldn’t believe the words were even coming out of my mouth. I had never asked a girl that wasn’t a friend to come back to my place before! This was all new territory for me. “You don’t have to, of course, just if you're not busy...”

“I’m not!” she said quickly. “Yeah... yeah, let’s do that.”

I had butterflies in my stomach.

7

Kaitlyn

I’d been wanting to have a mindless hook-up ever since I’d broken up with Julia. You know what they say, to get over one person, get under another. It was usually how I dealt with my sadness when a relationship ended. At least temporarily.

But hooking up with Emily would be anything but mindless, and I was starting to doubt that it was a good decision.

Not that I didn’t like her or anything, I absolutely did! Which really was part of the problem.

Because I liked her, I found myself worrying about her. I was the first girl she’d ever had a crush on, and we’d just hung out for the first time ever, if you didn’t count the bar. Should I really be going back to her place?

I didn't want to be the girl that took her virginity. At least not yet, not like this. I wanted it to be special and sweet because... I liked her. I actually really, really liked her. I couldn't mindlessly hook up with her. I couldn't have sex and not feel romantic about it.

Then again, maybe she wasn't a virgin at all. She'd said that I was the first person she'd had a crush on, but that didn't mean she'd never had a hook-up before. It was possible she'd had sex.

No, I just felt like that wasn't true. That was wishful thinking. Just the way she'd talked about not liking other people before... she was inexperienced, I knew it.

It truly didn't bother me. I didn't care at all. I just wanted to make sure she wasn't rushing into anything with me. And I didn't want her to feel like she had to do anything with me, just because I was experienced. I could wait for however long. It didn't matter to me.

Maybe she didn't want to wait. I mean, if I was her age and still a virgin, then I finally found a girl I was attracted to, wouldn't I jump on the chance to lose my virginity immediately?

Or maybe all of this overthinking was pointless, because really she had no plans to sleep with me at all, and she was just inviting me over as a friend. That was always a definite possibility that I was refusing to consider.

We'd been driving quietly for a few minutes, and she'd said her place wasn't far away. I decided to venture outside my head and stop over-analyzing the situation. We'd been very honest up until this point, and I didn't want to be the one to break that streak. If I had questions about what she wanted, I would just ask her. I liked the dynamic we had played out so far.

But not yet, not when we were still in the car. It was too awkward of a conversation to have in advance. What was I supposed to say? Are you hoping to sleep with me once we arrive at your apartment? Yeah, I didn't think so. I had to let things progress naturally, to a degree.

"Here we are!" she said eagerly as she pulled into a carport. "Sorry if it's a little messy. Between my studying and Abby's stress about her car, things haven't been getting done like they should be."

"Oh, trust me, it's no problem," I told h

er. "I'm a total slob. By the way, is your roommate home?"

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I was actually hoping for a yes, because that would mean I'd be able to avoid the awkward sex question. If she was home, we definitely wouldn't be sleeping together. I mean, not that people didn't sleep together with roommates around... but not the first time. The first time you're with someone, you want to be loud and enthusiastic, not holding back anything.

"Nope! She should still be in class."

Well, there went that easy out. But maybe it helped to answer the question the other way. Maybe she'd invited me because she wasn't home.

Ugh, why was I continuing to guess? Hadn't I already decided I'd just bring this up with her when it became appropriate to ask?

As we walked inside, Emily gestured around the room. "Welcome to my humble abode. It isn't much, but, you know, I'm a college kid."

"You won't get any judgment out of me," I told her. "Besides, the place looks nice."

"If it does, you can thank my roommate for that. She's the one that does all the decorating. I've got a blind eye for that kind of thing. You should see my bedroom."

"Maybe I should," I said flirtily, trying to gauge her reaction.

She smiled at me and took my hand. "Come on."

I followed her down the hall and into her bedroom. She wasn't lying... not that her

room looked bad or anything, it was perfectly neat and tidy, but the walls were completely bare, and she didn't have a single picture on her desk.

"You weren't kidding," I told her.

She flopped down on her bed. "Nope! Seriously, any decorating in our home is thanks to Abby." She patted the bed with her hand. "Here, sit."

"Okay..." I said hesitantly as I sat next to her.

Except, I wasn't hesitant to sit next to her. Because on the contrary, that was exactly what I wanted. But I knew now was the time to ask her how she wanted to go about this, and I still felt a little awkward doing so.

I didn't have time to ask, though. As soon as I sat down, Emily reached over and put her hand on my cheek, pulling me in for a kiss.

Our lips touched, and I swear, sparks flew across the room. Never had touching someone's lips felt so damn electric before. I sat there for a moment after, feeling simply stunned by her.

For a while, my mind was completely off sex. I couldn't think about anything but her lips. I would have been content to kiss her like this all night and nothing more.

Evidently, she did not feel the same. Because, only a few minutes later, I felt her slipping a hand up my shirt.

I pulled my mouth away from her. Her facial expression immediately sank.

"Oh, I'm sorry, should I not...?"

“No, no, it’s not that. I just want to take a minute to ask... are you sure this is fine? I mean, you haven’t had sex before, right...?”

“Ah, you’re worried about this being my first time and all, and us barely knowing each other...” she said as she processed my concerns.

“Right, exactly.”

She then gave me a cheeky smile I hadn’t been expecting. “Don’t worry, this isn’t going to be my first time.”

It took me a second to process what she meant but as she began to tug at my shorts, I slowly started to understand.

This was going to be all about me.

She hooked her finger around my panties so that as she pulled my shorts down, they came down too. Exposing my bare, shaven pussy for her.

She stared at it for a second, admiring me, letting one finger reach out as she traced down my lines and contemplated what she was about to do...

Then, all of a sudden, the contemplating stopped and she wasted no more time.

She pushed me back so I was laying down and immediately rushed her head down to my pussy. I first felt the cool touch of her tongue on my inner thigh, sliding up toward my pussy. It made my leg tremble, the tension of knowing her mouth was slowly nearing my pussy. But I loved every second of the build up.

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It made it that much better when I finally felt her tongue at the outer edge of my lips. She sent a chill up my spine. She had her hands pressed hard against my thighs, because she had to, if she didn't hold me down I'd be squirming too much for her to have access to my pussy. She was barely getting started and I was already writhing around.

She slid her tongue up the outer layer of my slit until she reached the top, and then she wriggled her tongue past my lips and into my clit.

And, oh my God, sparks were flying in my mind. As soon as her tongue was on my clit it was pleasure like I never even imagined was possible. I had never felt like this before. I wanted this to last forever but based on how much I was enjoying myself I already knew that wasn't going to be possible. My orgasm was going to come quick no matter how hard I fought it.

And did I fight like hell. Every circle her tongue did around my clit, I fought to stay focused enough not to cum. I didn't even need to orgasm, honestly, I wasn't craving it because what she was already doing felt so good that I didn't need anything else. This was the best I'd ever had and I would have been satisfied with that alone.

She let go of my thighs, her fingernails had left marks where she had forced my legs to stay down. She reached up for my breasts and I moaned as I felt her fingers on my bare breasts for the first time. One hand groped at the firmness of my breast while the other was rolling a nipple around in it's fingers.

It was too much. I no longer could focus on not having an orgasm. With her hands at my breasts and her mouth on my pussy, I was too stimulated to do anything but cum.

I couldn't even think, all I could do was feel the intense pleasure that was bestowed upon me.

I screamed out as my legs began to tremble. The orgasm ripped through me, sending jolts of pleasure into my clit.

I couldn't believe I thought just a few minutes ago I didn't need an orgasm. It was exactly what I fucking needed. This orgasm completed me. It was completely indescribable.

I laughed awkwardly. "Are you sure this is the first time you've ever gone down on someone?" I asked.

"Positive." She smiled at me.

"If you hadn't told me, I would have never known. I'd have assumed hook-ups were a regular weekend thing for you."

She gave a soft smile as she sat on the bed next to me. I could tell she liked that. I really wasn't saying that for her benefit. She'd truly, genuinely surprised me. That was the best sexual experience I'd had in a long time. I hated to bring it back to Julia, but damn, our sex had never come close to that. And we hadn't even officially had mutual sex yet.

She lay down next to me, her face inches away from mine, able to do nothing but smile at me. And I could only smile back at her.

"This is going to be fun, isn't it?" I asked her.

"I think it is," she answered. "I really think it is."

Emily

I came out into the living room to find Abby eating a bowl of cereal on the couch in her pink and green striped pajamas. She looked me up and down curiously as I stepped out of the room.

“What?” I asked, unsure of why she was staring at me like that.

“Oh, nothing,” she said innocently, “I was just wondering if it would be one or two of you coming out of the bedroom this morning.”

I laughed. “Just the one today.”

Kaitlyn and I had been dating about a month now, and I had to say, it’d been fantastic. I knew a month wasn’t that long, but I already felt like I’d known her forever.

She spent most nights at my place, which was great, not just because of the obvious sex factor (though we hadn’t had penetrative sex yet, we’d done other things) but because we spent a lot of late nights staying up and talking. We’d learned so much about each other so quickly. I didn’t want to say I was falling in love, but...

“I’m sorry,” I said to Abby. “Has her being over all the time been a nuisance? I mean, we could go to her place, but she’s

not paying rent there yet, so she feels awkward having me over too much.”

“Oh, no, no!” Abby said quickly. “I was totally teasing you. I think it’s great you’ve got someone in your life finally!”

I sat on the couch next to her and took the open cereal box that was on the table. I grabbed a handful and munched on the dry, fruity flakes.

“Really? You don’t think I’m maybe diving a little too fast into things?” I asked her.

“I mean, you two are spending a lot of time together, but I can’t see a problem with it. You’ve never dated anyone before, and now you’re all excited and looking forward to seeing her... it’s cute! And Lord knows I’ve brought enough guys back to the house that I couldn’t complain about it.”

I leaned back on the couch. “I really am enjoying myself. I like her so much. Maybe way too much...”

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“And there’s nothing wrong with that,” she told me. “You need some fun in your life. You’ve needed some for a long time. For you, your whole life has just been... school.”

Ah, yes, and of course she had to remind me of the problem.

Unfortunately, the more time I spent with Kaitlyn, the less studying I got done. So much for recommitting myself to school and studying. With her, it just didn’t work. There was nothing else I wanted to focus on besides her.

Which was actually the reason I’d asked her not to stay over last night and not to come over today, though not spending time with her when I knew I could be was absolute torture for me. I had a test in the evening, and I really had to spend my time studying.

The worst part was, I hadn’t even been getting that much of it done. I’d spent way too much time last night texting her, telling myself that it wasn’t too distracting, because I had time in between texts to work... when really I’d found myself zoning out of my textbooks often because I’d been thinking about what she was going to say in response.

It was really bad timing, because I had already been finding myself more and more uninterested in my schoolwork, and then I’d met Kaitlyn, who was the most interesting person I’d ever met. Of course my mind wanted to focus on her more than anything else.

“That’s actually kind of a problem for me,” I told Abby. “I haven’t been able to study

much lately.”

She laughed. “Welcome to my life.”

“Seriously though, Abby, I’m hardly able to keep up with my lectures anymore. I just zone out and think about Kaitlyn.”

“Well, just make sure you force yourself not to see her a few nights a week so you can binge-study. It’ll get easier with some time. The beginning is always hard, because when you’re in the honeymoon stage, all you want to do is spend time with your new love.”

“So, this is totally normal?” I asked her, because honestly, I was starting to wonder if I was a little too hung-up.

“Of course it is! I’ve been through it tons of times. Eventually, it gets less exciting.”

“I don’t know if I like the sound of that, either...”

I was having so much fun with Kaitlyn, more fun than I’d ever had in my life, and the last thing I wanted was for all of it to end.

“I mean, it’s not necessarily a bad thing. When the honeymoon phase ends, a new phase can begin. A stage with comfort and security... but don’t worry about it. Just let things progress naturally.”

I rolled my eyes. “Easier said than done for me. You know me... I’m not good at accepting things I can’t control.”

“Yeah, I know, but relationships aren’t like school. You’ve just got to give them room to grow and let things happen at their own pace.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “I’ll just try to learn to live and let live. I’ll take a page out of Kaitlyn’s book, I guess.”

“Is she a pretty relaxed person?” she asked.

It was weird, I felt like I was getting to know Kaitlyn so well, but Abby still didn’t know her at all. Like, obviously they’d met and talked a few times, but for the most part, we stayed in my room and hung out to stay out of Abby’s way.

“Very much so. She’s so free spirited and spontaneous...” I said a little dreamily.

“So, basically your exact opposite?” she laughed. “And you two get along?”

“They say opposites attract, right?”

“Right.” She nodded, taking another bite of her now soggy cereal.

“You guys really need to get to know each other,” I told her.

“I’m so glad you said that!” she said excitedly. “I wanted you to bring her to Alexa’s birthday party on Saturday!”

Alexa was an art major friend of Abby’s. I didn’t know her super well, but she’d always been nice to me, and whenever Abby’s friends were having an organized get-together, she always tried to get me to go.

When they had last minute, impromptu plans, I could always say no, but I had to try a little harder to wriggle my way out of the events planned in advance. It wasn’t that I didn’t like Abby’s friends; for the most part I did. It was just that I was so introverted, and Abby was often the life of the party, so I never had anyone to talk to.

This time, though, I wasn't going to try to get out of going at all. On the contrary, I was excited to go if it meant I could bring Kaitlyn! That meant I definitely wouldn't be left on my own with nobody to talk to, and I'd get to show off my incredibly gorgeous new girlfriend.

Okay, so maybe I wouldn't actually introduce her that way, because we hadn't made it official or anything. But still, I'd always been the geek without a significant other at these parties. Well, nobody had ever said that, but that was how it'd felt.

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“I love that idea! Yeah, absolutely, I’ll run it by her!” I knew she’d be eager to go. She was like Abby, very extroverted. She enjoyed meeting new people.

“Awesome. I can’t wait to get to know her better.”

“Can’t wait, either!” I grabbed one more handful of dry cereal and then got up to head to my room. “I better keep studying, not too long until test time.”

She nodded to me. “Good luck.”

Naturally, studying was even harder now that I had the party on Saturday stuck in my head. I forced myself not to text Kaitlyn about it, though I was excited to invite her to do something besides sit at my apartment.

No, regardless of my excitement, I had to focus. I had to do well on this test. I wouldn’t let my time apart from her be for nothing. Besides, we had plans to meet for dinner in the cafeteria after my test today. I’d tell her then.

And I truly couldn’t wait.

9

Kaitlyn

Even though we were just eating in the cafeteria, and it wasn’t exactly a fancy date or anything, I bought a bouquet of flowers on my way to see Emily.

If it was my choice, we would be going out on a fancy date, but that was just not in the cards for us right now. Emily was a college student who only worked part-time at the cafeteria to make ends meet, and because she got free meal points there, that was where she chose to eat most of the time.

I wasn't exactly loaded right now, either. Though I'd been making fairly consistent money with my street performances, it wasn't enough to drop a lot of money on a fancy date.

So the cafeteria would have to do. Which was disappointing, because when I asked Emily to be my girlfriend, I'd rather be doing it somewhere nice.

Yep, it was finally the night. We'd been dating a month, and I thought it was appropriate now to make things official with Emily.

Ryan seemed a little concerned that I was moving so fast with her and had expressed that when I'd told him I was asking Emily to go steady tonight. But I'd assured him this wasn't just a rebound or a way to get over Julia. Emily was something special, and I wasn't going to let her slip through my fingers just because I'd met her so soon after my break-up.

Honestly, it hadn't even felt like I was recovering from a break-up since I'd met Emily. And I'd had rebounds, oh boy had I had rebounds, and they'd never felt like this.

With a rebound, I'd only gotten relief when I'd actually been with the other person. When we'd been apart, I'd always found myself thinking about my most recent ex and reflecting on a dead relationship. Hell, sometimes I'd even felt that way when I'd been physically with my rebound. Sometimes we'd have sex, and I'd be lying next to them still wishing I was lying with my ex.

Not this time, not with Emily. Not only did I never think about Julia when I was with her, but I never thought about her when we were apart either. Instead of being fixated on Julia, all my spare time was spent fixated on Emily.

To think a big part of me hadn't even wanted to go through with the break-up with Julia. If I hadn't, I would never have met Emily, who seemed so much better suited for me.

I knew it had likely been too little time to really say, but I did believe we were more compatible than I had been with Julia. Only time would tell, since we were still in the honeymoon stage, but one thing was for certain, I'd never felt this way about Julia.

Even in the beginning of our relationship when things were supposed to be the most passionate, I'd never felt like this for her. Thoughts of Emily consumed me. After only a month, I felt like I was falling deeply in love with her. No feelings from my past had ever compared to this before.

If it had been up to me, I would have asked Emily to be my girlfriend weeks ago. But it'd been too soon, and the last thing in the world I wanted was to scare this girl off. With her, I was prepared to take it as slow as I had to.

When I walked up to the cafeteria, I saw that Emily was already waiting for me outside, sitting on a green metal bench that stood next to a bed of flowers. She didn't see me at first; her head was tilted to the flowers that were gently being pushed by the wind.

God, she was so beautiful. That was what I always thought when I saw her, but right now, with her head tilted, I got a perfect view of her amazing features, and it took everything I had not to jump the girl.

I didn't call out to her right away; I didn't want to distract her from her view when

she looked so peaceful. But she quickly heard my footsteps and looked up at me.

“Hey!” sh

e said with a grin, standing up to wrap her arms around my shoulders. “I missed you.”

I kissed her cheek. “I missed you, too,” I said softly in her ear before pulling away.

“How’d your test go?”

“Good!” she said excitedly. “I really think I nailed it.”

“I knew you would,” I said, fidgeting slightly because I was trying to casually hold the flowers behind my back. Apparently it didn’t look so casual, though.

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“Why are you standing like that?” she asked with raised eyebrows.

“I’ve got a present for you,” I told her.

“Oh?”

I took the bouquet out from behind me and presented them to her.

“Oh my god, it’s beautiful!” she said as she took the purple, red, and orange bouquet.

“Aw, babe, you didn’t have to do that!”

“I know,” I told her, “but you deserve it. Come on, let’s go eat, I’m starving.” I placed my hand on the small of her back.

I’d been planning to ask her to be mine as soon as I’d given her the bouquet, but I panicked a bit at the last minute. Ah, oh well, it would probably be better when we were both sitting down rather than awkwardly standing outside the cafeteria.

We walked in, she slid her card twice for two meals, and we grabbed trays to quickly get our food. They actually had burgers and fries today, and I went with that while she grabbed some pasta salad.

“I’ll grab drinks,” I told her as I went to get us two waters. Emily didn’t drink anything besides water, and lately, I’d been trying it out, too. It was healthier, so why not?

We took our seats, I handed Emily her drink, and we immediately started eating. At

least, she started eating. I kind of just picked at my fries and tried not to make it obvious that I didn't have much of an appetite.

Maybe the burger wasn't the best idea, because the fact that it was untouched was a big tip-off, but I had a feeling my appetite would come back as soon as I willed myself to finally pop the question.

"Babe, is something wrong?" she asked me. "Are you not feeling well? Because we could totally go home—"

"No! I'm feeling great!" I told her quickly, seeing the perfect segue into the conversation. "In fact, I've been feeling great for a long time, and I think I have you to thank for that."

She blushed slightly. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. And, I think when you find something or someone good in this world, you need to hold on to them. Because there just really isn't that much good out there anymore..."

She squinted at me. "What are you trying to say?"

"I'm trying to say that I like you. I've liked you for a month now, more than liked you, and I want to do something about it. I was wondering... will you be my girlfriend?"

A grin shot across her face. "Seriously?"

"Absolutely. If it's not moving too fast for you..."

"No, no, it's perfect!" She leaned over the short table, and I matched her lean, our lips

meeting in the middle.

She squealed for a second. “Girlfriend...” she said softly to himself. “I’ve never been able to use that word before. Not when talking about myself, anyway.... my girlfriend.”

I laughed. I couldn’t say I had the same feelings as she did about using the word girlfriend for the first time or anything, but I did feel the same elation. She may not have been my first girlfriend, but she didn’t need to be. She was something special for me. Something undeniably special... she was unlike any other person I’d ever dated, that was for sure.

“Oh my god!” she said suddenly. “I’ll get to introduce you as my girlfriend on Saturday!”

“Saturday?” I asked, wracking my brain for some kind of plans we had.

“Oh! Sorry! I didn’t even ask you... my roommate Abby invited both of us to her friend’s birthday party. Her friends really like to go out, and Abby wants to get to know you, so... you can totally say no, though, if it’s too much pressure or something.”

“No, of course not, that sounds great,” I lied.

It actually did sound like a lot of pressure, but I was also excited that she wanted to show me off to some of her friends. Or her roommate’s friends, I guess. The nervousness I was experiencing was outweighed by the excitement.

“I was hoping you’d say that! It’ll be so fun to finally go out and do something with other people. Not that I haven’t been enjoying our time together, of course. I have, but there’s only so much time that can be spent cooped up in the room.”

“Don’t worry, I get it.” I smiled. “It’ll be nice. Are her friends, uh, pretty nice generally?”

“Oh, yeah! I mean, there are a few I don’t care for. They’re art majors, and some can be a little snobby, but on the whole, they’re really nice, and the few snobby ones don’t even come to all the events.”

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“Why? Are some of them ‘beneath them’?” I teased.

“You joke, but I think that’s really the reason. Abby picks some trashy bars sometimes, and those are usually the events they skip out on. I know, they sound pretentious, but like, seriously, most of them are sweet.”

“Don’t worry, I can handle myself,” I told her. “Lord knows I met many snobs when dating Julia.”

She looked at me curiously. “Really? Why?”

“Uh, dating an accountant who worked for a major corporation?” I reminded her. “There was not one of Julia’s work friends who didn’t look down at me for not having a degree. They were constantly judgmental.”

“That’s so rude.” She frowned. “What would Julia do?”

“Keep her mouth shut.” I rolled my eyes. “Pretend they hadn’t just insulted me. Tell me when we got home that I was imagining things.”

“God... that sounds awful.”

“It was. Honestly, when I was with her, I’d thought I was so in love with her, but now that I’m out of that relationship, it’s hard to remember why I cared so deeply about her.”

I looked over at her to see her awkwardly smiling, unsure of what to say, like she

always was when I brought up Julia. I probably needed to stop bringing her up altogether.

“But with you, I don’t even wonder anymore.” I smiled at her. “I can’t believe I’ve already found someone I care so deeply about.”

She smiled, this time not so awkwardly. “Good. Because I’ve been waiting for you to come into my life for a long, long time.”

Now was my turn to smile. “And now that I finally have, what are you going to do with me?”

“Absolutely everything that I can.”

10

Emily

I kept staring at my watch, waiting impatiently for Kaitlyn to arrive. She wasn’t late, not yet, but she only had a few minutes to get here. Abby was getting a ride with me, since she obviously didn’t have a car, and I didn’t want to make her late.

Not that she was even ready to head out to the party herself. She was still in the bathroom, straightening her hair and doing her make up. Hopefully she still was when Kaitlyn arrived, so it wouldn’t be her making us late.

Of course, I couldn’t give a shit about being late. I just didn’t want to be late because of Kaitlyn. I wanted her to make a good impression with Abby, as well as everyone else tonight. Though mostly Abby, as it was really only her opinion that mattered.

I heard a knock at the door and jumped up to find Kaitlyn waiting for me, a bottle of

wine in her hand.

I raised an eyebrow. “A bottle of wine? You realize we’re going to a bar, right?”

“I thought Abby might want to pre-game with me,” she said casually. “If you guys aren’t heading out right away.”

Ah, yes, that was actually perfect! Abby would love her for the offer, and she was still getting ready, so she had time to start drinking. Of course I couldn't, I had to drive, but them both getting drunk would be good. It'd take away any tension from meeting someone new.

That was probably just me projecting my own feelings onto them. I hated meeting new people, but neither Kaitl

yn nor Abby seemed to. They were both extroverted, social butterflies. They were probably going to have no problem tonight.

“Where is she?” Kaitlyn asked.

“In the bathroom, doing her make up.”

“Hey, Abby!” she called out into the hall. “I have some wine, do you want some?” she asked, as if they’d been friends forever. See, no problem at all.

“Oh, yes! Bring me a glass!”

She got two out of the kitchen cabinet and poured them both ample amounts of wine before heading back to the bathroom. I didn’t follow her. I didn’t want to hover over both of them all night, feeling like I was facilitating their conversation. I wanted them to get to know each other without me.

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Which they seemed to be doing. Kaitlyn stayed back in the bathroom to drink with her as she finished getting ready. I couldn't hear all of the conversation, but I did hear her coo about how sweet she was to bring wine. She was right; it was a nice touch.

"Are you almost ready, Abby? We're going to be late," I called out to her about five minutes later, getting bored in the living room by myself but still not wanting to interrupt.

"Done right... now! Okay, let's go!" she said.

They had both finished their wine by the time they walked out, and we all headed to my car, Kaitlyn sitting shotgun. It felt a little awkward, because that was where Abby would usually be, but she didn't seem to mind.

We all made small talk on our way to the bar. Abby filled Kaitlyn in on some of her friends, and then they talked about Abby's job for a little while. I couldn't help but smile as I listened to their conversation flowing so freely. Not that I had any reason to suspect they wouldn't get along, but it would have really, really sucked if they didn't.

We arrived at the King's Tooth, and there was already a little table set up for Alexa's birthday. Alexa wasn't there yet, but there were about ten people sitting around it, and they already all had glasses of beer in their hands. There were a few pitchers on the table next to a white and blue cake that had 'Happy Birthday Alexa' written in cursive.

"Hey!" Abby waved at everyone as she came up to the table. "You guys remember my roommate, Emily?"

I got some smiles and a few hellos as I sat down at the table with Kaitlyn by my side.

“Hey, everyone,” I said sheepishly as I sat down, Kaitlyn pulling up a chair next to me. “This is my girlfriend, Kaitlyn.”

“Hello!” she said eagerly. “Nice to meet you all.” She reached out to shake a few of the hands nearest to her.

I caught a few people’s glances, and the smiles they got on their faces when looking between Kaitlyn and me. Yep, that’s right, I thought to myself. She’s goddamn cute, and she’s all mine.

Naturally, Kaitlyn slid right into the conversation. I wasn't even paying attention to what everyone was talking about; I was totally zoned out.

It was a weird feeling, not like any I’d experienced before. I usually felt so awkward at events like this, but right now, I just felt completely at peace. Like everything in my life was falling into place, and it was right where it should be. I was completely at home in this moment.

I was jolted from the moment when everyone started squealing and shouting ‘happy birthday!’ I turned around to see Alexa had walked into the bar.

“Oh my god, you guys, this is so sweet!” she hollered as she walked over. “Look at this adorable cake! Oh my god, you totally didn’t have to do this!”

She started doling out hugs and cheek kisses, and I said a quick hello then sat back down as the commotion commenced.

“Hey, Emily, you and your girlfriend can go grab glasses from the bar. They need to ID you, but then you can grab some beer,” a girl named Randi said to me. She was

one of Abby's closest friends, so I knew her better than most in the group.

"Right, perfect, thanks." I nodded to her and looked at Kaitlyn before motioning with my hand that we head to the bar.

I wasn't going to get drunk tonight, but I could have at least a beer and hope it'd work as a social lubricant.

We both showed our IDs and made our way back to the table, frosty glasses in hand. Kaitlyn poured my beer first and then one for herself. I barely had the glass to my lips when I heard a rather annoying voice pop up.

"So, Kaitlyn, is it?" Brianne said.

Ugh, I really was not a fan of Brianne. She was one of the few snobby art majors with whom Abby was friends.

Even Abby didn't really like her most of the time, actually. She was part of the group, but she and Abby weren't close.

She wasn't too bad most of the time, which was how she was able to maintain a place in the group. But if you got her started on anything musical, she'd be a total snob. She was a music major, played the violin, and wanted to get into the fine arts side of music.

Though, actually, hopefully that meant if music did come up, then she and Kaitlyn would have something to talk about, and she wouldn't be able to turn into a total snob. Whenever one of us non-music majors talked about liking a song that came on, she had to comment on what was wrong with it and how we would 'get it' if we had a background in music. But Kaitlyn actually did! And she was damn good at it, too.

“Yeah, and what’s your name?” Kaitlyn responded, and I felt bad I couldn’t warn her about Brianne’s behavior.

“I’m Brianne. Nice to meet you. Are you a student at Beasley?” she asked.

“Oh, no,” Kaitlyn said casually. “I actually haven’t been a university student anywhere, don’t have my degree.”

“Oh,” she said slowly. “So what is it you do for a living?”

“I’m a street performer. At least, for the time being. I hope to soon start teaching music lessons in town to make my income a little more steady and secure.”

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I could see immediately what Kaitlyn had meant when she'd said most people did not envy her choice of career at all. I could see it in Brianne's eyes—she was judging her for this already.

“Oh, really? You want to teach music with no formal background?”

Kaitlyn didn't even seem to realize at first that this was an attack. “Well, just guitar, actually. I'm more than proficient in it, though I was never formally trained. I've been playing since I was twelve.”

“I see. I've been playing violin since I was six, so I understand the importance of a strong background.”

She was one-upping her, and again, Kaitlyn seemed clueless to it. Or maybe she was just playing clueless in order to avoid a confrontation. I couldn't really tell.

“Oh, that's awesome! I love the violin. I've always wanted to learn.”

“Well, it's certainly not the kind of instrument you can learn without formal training,” Brianne told her.

“Yeah, I imagine so. Though I wouldn't mind getting lessons as an adult.”

“Just make sure they're from someone with credentials,” Brianne said quickly. “I really can't stand when someone takes on a role of teaching in music when they don't have any college experience in a musical discipline.”

Ugh, I'd been totally wrong. Kaitlyn having musical experience didn't lower Brianne's pretension, in fact, it seemed to have made it worse. She was tearing apart the exact thing Kaitlyn had said she planned to do moments ago.

Kaitlyn gave a crooked smile, not giving in to the confrontation. "Right, well, I don't think you necessarily need a college degree to become an expert in an instrument."

Brianne shrugged. "Well, I never had any interest in the guitar, so I don't know about that specifically. But with the violin, you'd never be able to get by as a teacher without a very strong formal education. Anything you could learn by ear wouldn't be sufficient. Natural talent only gets you so far."

It was funny that Brianne said that, because I'd always guessed that was a point of insecurity for her. She was clearly very strict in her mastering of the violin, but she didn't act like most music majors acted. She didn't seem to have the same natural creativity that a lot of music majors I'd met had.

A lot of music majors I'd met were more like Kaitlyn. I mean, they were a little less free-spirited than she was, because they were going to college to expand their experience and they had schedules to deal with, but, outside of that, they seemed like your typical fun-loving, creatively minded artists.

Brianne seemed less artsy and more focused, disciplined—the kind of personality you saw in STEM degrees. I wondered if this was a point of insecurity for her, though, I wasn't rude, so I'd never ask, even if she was being a bit of a twat right now.

"I guess that's where guitar and violin differ," Kaitlyn said coolly, like Brianne's antagonistic behavior wasn't bothering her at all.

I felt so bad. I had told her that Abby's friends were mostly all nice, with only a few snobs, but of course, the first one she had a real conversation with was the bitchiest

one.

“Right, well, that among many differences. You’d never see a violin in a street performance.”

“Oh, I have, actually!” Kaitlyn said quickly. “Yeah, over on the west coast, in some of the more liberal cities where performance art is booming. I actually saw a few violins as part of different groups.”

Brianne bunched up her eyebrows. She wasn’t used to someone telling her that she was wrong, certainly not about something that was even vaguely violin-related.

“I can’t imagine doing something like that with my violin career. I’d like to be a part of a performance that means more than just a crowd on a sidewalk.”

Again, she was just directly insulting Kaitlyn. But she still didn’t bite.

“I don’t know, I think there’s a lot more depth in street performance. I’ve done a lot of shows from behind the stage, and they don’t feel the same for me. It feels like I’m detached, performing for an audience, just putting on a show. When I’m on the street, I’m performing with the audience. We make a direct connection. I’m a part of their world, they’re a part of mine, and there’s something beautiful about it. It’s my favorite way to play to people.”

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This was more free-spirited, artsy talk. I didn’t think Brianne cared if she felt connected to the audience. I think she pictured herself up on stage with some beautiful orchestra, being commended for her amazing skill. That was what her art was for her, a skill, not something to be felt.

“Right...” Brianne said, as she reached for the pitcher and poured herself some more beer. She didn't seem to have more to say at the moment, though I was sure in just a moment she'd be able to figure out something else to insult Kaitlyn with.

After Brianne poured herself a beer, the pitcher was nearing empty, and I saw a way to get out of the conversation.

“Kaitlyn and I will go get the next round!” I announced.

“Thanks!” a few of Abby's friends said as Kaitlyn and I made our way to the bar.

“Another pitcher of whatever they were already drinking, please?” I asked the bartender, forgetting to ask what beer it was as I left the table. I was just too eager to get out of that awkward conversation.

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“Oh my god, I’m so sorry,” I said to Kaitlyn, as the bartender walked off to fill another pitcher. “I swear, most of her friends are not like that at all.”

Kaitlyn laughed. “It’s fine, really. She’s not the first music snob I’ve ever met. I’ve seen it a lot with other classical instrument players. I’ve learned to just shrug off all the annoyances until they eventually stop bragging.”

“Well, you did an amazing job,” I told her. “I don’t know if I would’ve been able to keep my cool, the way she was just directly insulting you like that...”

She shrugged. “I’ve told you before, I’m really used to the judgment. It doesn’t faze me. Besides, it usually comes from the person’s insecurity rather than something I’m doing wrong.”

I fell more in love with her everyday. She was so patient, calm, so willing to look at the world with an open mind. I loved every bit of her personality.

We walked back over to the table. Thankfully Brianne was locked into a different conversation, so I sat down next to Randi and Abby with Kaitlyn by my side.

“So, Emily, how’s school going?” Randi asked.

The one thing Randi and everyone else knew about me was that I was dedicated to school. They knew because I was constantly not joining in on group events because I was at home studying instead.

“Well, not as great as usual,” I admitted, before nudging Kaitlyn. “This one has me

really distracted lately.”

“Ahh, I know that feeling.” Randi smiled at both of us. “When I’ve got a new love interest in my life, I swear, school is the first thing to fall by the wayside.”

“Tell me about it,” I agreed, “which is rough, because it’s my last year and everything.”

“Hey!” Kaitlyn said quickly. “I let you study any time you need to.”

I smiled and kissed her on the cheek. “Babe, before you, every damn night was studying. No matter how much space you give me, I’m taking a step back in my studying. But don’t worry, I love it.” I turned back to Randi. “And actually, I was disciplined earlier this week and took some time away from her to study for a big midterm.”

“Oh, how’d it go?” she asked.

“Actually, I don’t know!” I said quickly. “I think the grades were posted today, now that you mention it.”

I couldn’t believe I’d forgotten to check my grade online. I normally never forgot when grades were coming out, because I was a little obsessed with it. I guessed it was just another side effect of dating Kaitlyn. Which I guessed was a good thing, because I tended to stress in the days before grades posted, thoughts of my tests coming to my mind every few hours.

Now that I was reminded, the one thing I wanted to do was go home and check my grade. This had been a big midterm. I was pretty sure I’d done well, but if I didn’t, I was going to have to do perfectly the rest of the semester to make up for it.

I could see that Kaitlyn was sensing my agitation. “Can’t you check on your phone?”

‘Right, yeah!’ I said, super grateful that she’d reminded me. “I’ll just do that now.”

I pulled my phone out and attempted to log into the online gradebook for my class, but the page just wouldn’t load.

“Ugh, stupid internet,” I groaned.

“It’s the bar!” Abby said loudly over Randi’s shoulder. “I never get good reception here. You can step outside for a second in the courtyard if you really want to check.” She also knew me well enough to know this would become an urgent matter for me.

“Yeah, is that fine? I’m not being rude, right?”

“Nah,” Randi answered. “Alexa’s busy chatting it up, so nobody’s going to notice you’re gone. Go ahead.”

“Perfect, I’ll be right back,” I said. I gave Kaitlyn a quick peck and stepped outside.

Sure enough, the second I was out the door, my phone started to slowly load the page. The further out into the courtyard I got, the faster it seemed to load. I put my log-in info in and sat on a bench while I waited for my gradebook to pull up.

I almost did a double take when I saw it. No, that couldn’t be right... I couldn’t have possibly...

But I did. I had failed. The worst I was expecting had been a C, but I couldn’t even manage a D! It was an actual freaking F.

I couldn’t remember ever getting an F in my life. It sounded dramatic, but I felt

nauseated. I was in a state of disbelief. How could I have been so confident and so wrong about how well I'd done?

Because I was really that clueless... I knew so little that I hadn't even had any idea of what I hadn't known! How could I have let this happen?

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I knew how, though. Because of Kaitlyn. Because I was so absorbed in her that I couldn't focus on anything else. And I let myself fail because of her.

I was doing math in my head, trying to figure out if there was a way I could salvage this. And I could. As long as I got mostly A's and a few B's for the rest of the semester, I would pass this class.

And that was doable. At least, it was doable with my old study schedule. If I gave it my absolute all. It wouldn't be doable if I continued to half-ass things with Kaitlyn on my mind.

So, fine, I'd have to put her out of my mind. I'd be more focused. We'd spend less time together. I'd absorb myself in work, at least until I could finish school...

But I knew that wasn't going to work. There was no focus with Kaitlyn. I had no willpower when it came to her. I couldn't make this work and keep her at the same time. As much as I wanted to, as much as I cared about her, I just... couldn't.

I had to break up with her.

11

Kaitlyn

I didn't ask Emily how her midterm had gone, because I could tell from the expression on her face as soon as she walked back into the bar that it had not gone well.

Not that she was looking overtly sad or anything. On the contrary, she had a smile on her face, but I could tell it was forced. If she'd done well, she would have had the genuine grin she got when she was actually happy. This was her put-on-a-show face I had seen so many times when I'd visited her at work.

If she'd wanted to talk about the test, she would have brought it up. She had no problem venting to me about things in her life. So I gathered she didn't want to discuss it. At least, not here, not with everyone around, which I understood.

I felt pretty bad that she wasn't able to drink, though. I wished I'd offered to be the DD, because she really seemed like she needed to get wasted. I thought of offering to drive home, but I realized I was already in too deep. Abby, her friend Randi, and I had all gone to the bar to take two shots while Emily had been out checking her grade.

Thankfully, the party didn't go too late. Emily, Abby, and I left around ten, and I suggested we get some wine on the way home to continue drinking. I expected Abby to love the idea, but I wasn't expecting Emily to be super enthused, as she wasn't that big of a drinker.

The fact that she was ready to drink only solidified my theory th

at her grade hadn't been so great. I wished I could comfort her in some way, but if she wanted to avoid thinking about it, I'd do that with her for the rest of the night.

We grabbed a few bottles of wine on the way home and popped them as soon as we got through the door. I made sure to pour Emily a big glass and brought it to her on the couch, where her fake smile had slid off her face. She looked only unhappy.

"What's wrong with you?" Abby said suddenly to her.

“What? Nothing,” she said with a shrug.

Abby was a little drunk and bold, so she continued. “You’re totally lying. What is it? Did you not have fun?”

“Yeah, no, the party was fine... it’s nothing,” she said.

Now I knew for sure she didn’t want to talk. I decided to try and defuse the situation a little more.

“Nothing that wine can’t fix. Here, babe,” I said, handing her a glass. Abby already had hers in hand.

“Thank you,” she sighed. She immediately started drinking it.

“And Abby, the party really was fun,” I told her, both trying to give her some gratification and change the subject. “Thanks so much for inviting me.”

“Oh, no problem!” she said excitedly. “And I’m so glad I did! You’re an absolute blast! Everyone at the party totally loved you.”

“Really?” I said with a smile as I looked over at Emily. She’d already finished her glass and was getting up to get another one. She was definitely not smiling.

“Truly! And I love you, too! I’m so glad that Emily is dating you, seriously. I mean, I think I’d love anyone new who came into her life, but I’m so glad it was you in particular. You are perfect for her. She needs someone extroverted who’ll push her outside of her comfort zone. And you’ve definitely done that.”

Emily came back to sit with a new glass of wine. I expected her to give me a cheek kiss as she sat down, as she often did. When that didn’t happen, I found myself

suddenly worried.

Maybe it wasn't her grade that had her irritated, maybe it was me. But what had I done? I couldn't think of anything that would make her irritated with me.

Or maybe it was nothing I'd done. Maybe it was just the way I'd been acting at the party. Maybe she hadn't liked the attention I'd received. That would be understandable. She'd been with this group of friends for a long time, and then here I came, swooping in and acting like the life of the party.

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I couldn't be sure what it was exactly until I got to talk to her, and I wasn't going to get to talk to her until we were alone. I liked Abby, I really did, she was a blast to hang out with, but I was suddenly wishing she'd go away. Not just because I wanted to talk to Emily, but it would also stop Abby from raving about me and possibly making the problem with Emily worse.

As if reading my mind, she stood up suddenly. "I'm going to take a shower. I feel super gross. Is that rude?" she asked me. "To go shower while you're here?"

I laughed. "Of course not! I'm the one intruding on your space. You go about your life as you normally would."

"Okay, perfect, thank you," she said, as she walked down the hallway, stumbling just a little bit. "I hope you feel better, Emily!" she hollered down the hall as she left.

"I'm fine!" she said in an obviously annoyed tone, indicating she was anything but.

I looked over at her as soon as I thought Abby was out of earshot.

"What?" she asked.

"Are you really? Because you seem... kind of upset."

"Not you, too," she grumbled.

"I mean, you don't need to talk about anything you don't want to talk about, but you're not like mad at me or anything... right?"

She looked a little sad when I asked this. “No, no, of course not. I couldn’t be mad at you.” She looked down the hall, and I could tell she was thinking about Abby still being able to hear us. “You want to go to my bedroom?”

“Sure,” I said, taking her hand and making our way into her room.

She plopped down on the bed as soon as we got in there.

“So, you want to talk about it?”

She was quiet for a second before answering softly, “No.”

Okay, that was weird, I thought we’d come in here specifically because she’d wanted to discuss things. So if that wasn’t the case... she must have come in here for another reason.

“You wanna do sexy stuff about it?” I asked her cheekily.

Emily and I still hadn’t hadn’t done anything more than oral, not yet. And, of course, I didn’t push it. It didn’t even matter to me. What we did on our own was plenty enough for me.

“No,” she said coolly.

Okay, now I was really confused. What was even the point of coming in here?

“Okay, so what?” I asked.

She smiled at me. “I want to fuck about it.”

Emily

What the hell had I just said? What was I thinking?

Clearly, those two large glasses of wine were a little much for me. And when I say large, I mean large—it was probably like four glasses of wine, so I shouldn't have been too surprised.

But still, I was making a mistake here. That was not what I should have said. This wasn't what I should have been doing.

I should have been talking to Kaitlyn. I should have been explaining to her what I'd been thinking to myself all night... that I couldn't possibly stay with her. At least, not for the remainder of the semester. Not until I got my academics back on track.

I'd been mulling it over at the bar and on the way home, and I absolutely hated it, but what else could I do? I couldn't fail! Not when I was so close to graduation! Not for any woman... not even her.

And failing for her was truly tempting.

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Yet I still couldn't bring myself to talk about it. As soon as I uttered the words, it would become real, and when it became real, my heart would break.

It would be easier to fuck her than deal with my emotions right now.

I was planning to have sex with her for the first time tonight anyway. I needed it. I had waited to get to know her before I lost my virginity, but I was done waiting. I wanted her so badly. And if I broke up with her first, how long would it be until I got to do that?

I felt like an absolute selfish bitch for even thinking like that. She deserved to know first. I couldn't use her to get my jollies and then ditch her.

But it really wasn't like that. I wasn't using her for sex. I just wanted to have our one good first time together before things fell apart.... and I was dreading them falling apart.

I didn't have time to continue to think about how shitty of a person I was for doing this, because before I knew it, her lips were on my neck.

There was no way I could resist her now. She was always too damn sexy when she kissed on me like this. So it was decided.

I was going to lose my virginity to her right now.

And, knowing this was going to finally be our first time, she didn't waste a minute. She started pulling my shirt over my head as I unclasped my bra. The entire time, she

was still sucking on my neck, periodically drifting down to my chest and then back up.

I did the same to her, ripping off her clothes as she continued to kiss me until we were both completely naked in front of each other. She was laid up on top of me, her breasts pushed against mine, which they never had been before. I'd only had her grasp my breasts with her hands... This was so much fucking sexier. Her nipples on my nipples had my eyes rolling in the back of my head.

My entire body felt so much more sensitive to sexual touch because the tension of knowing what was about to happen. We were about to pleasure each other both, at the same time, and it made me ravenous for her.

As good as her breasts felt on mine, I couldn't wait. I had to taste her right now. I had to have her in me at the same time. And only position was going to make that work.

I rolled her over quickly, catching her off guard, but she went with it. My body was on top of hers now but I flipped over so that my head was at her pussy... and my pussy was at her head.

And we wasted no time.

After giving her oral a few times now, I knew exactly what she wanted. I knew that when I ran my finger nails up her thigh as I rolled my tongue around her clit, she trembled. I knew the motions that got her to scream. I had learned her and I was damn good at pleasing her.

But I had yet to enter her and she had yet to enter me. And because that's what I wanted, I took the leap first. I slid a finger down from her clit to her entrance. I felt her, assessing how wet she was, and she was soaking. I knew that she was going to take my finger easily. Still, I slowly inserted it, giving her plenty of time to protest.

Of course, she didn't protest. She moaned softly as my finger entered her. I began to bring it in and out of her as I continued to suck at her clit.

I could tell she loved it by the way it made her begin to go crazy on me. She was running her tongue faster than she ever had before. She put just the right amount of pressure on my clit, she had me moaning as my mouth was on her pussy.

And then I felt her move from my clit to my entrance. Not with her fingers, not yet, just with her tongue. I thought surely her tongue wasn't long enough to actually be able to enter me this way.

But it was. I felt her move past my entrance until she was as deep in me as the length of her tongue would allow.

I screamed for a moment, overwhelmed with the feeling that she was finally inside me. It wasn't as solid of a feeling as her fingers would've been. But I didn't care. Finally, a piece of her was in me. A pretty fucking sexy piece, at that.

The feeling was so overwhelming it had distracted me temporarily from what I was doing, so as she tongue fucked me I got back into it, moving my fingers rhythmically in her as I licked at her.

She began to rub my clit as her tongue slid in and out and it was so intense having her pleasuring these two

places that I worried I was going to cum. And I didn't want to... not until I had more of her inside me.

i pulled my mouth from her pussy for only a moment. "Finger fuck me, baby," I moaned.

She obliged, switching the positions of her tongue and her fingers. I was soaking wet for her so she didn't have to ease into me at all. one second I was empty and the next, she had two fingers into me to the knuckle.

This time, the amazing pleasure of having her penetrate me did not distract me from what I was doing. I used it to motivate me as it had motivated her moments ago. I began to pick up the pace with my fingers and my mouth, going as fast as I could.

And she did the same, running her fingers back and forth inside me quickly, taking my virginity and making me love every second of it. It was more than I could take... More than either of us could take and soon we were cumming.

Both of us, at the same exact time. It was magical. As I was screaming from my orgasm, she was moaning from hers. As my body tensed up I could feel the muscles of her pussy tightening around my fingers. We were both in pure ecstasy at the exact same time.

I wanted to pause this moment and live in it forever.

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But slowly the orgasm passed for us both and I pulled my fingers out of her as I panted heavily. I got off of her and laid my hot, sweaty body down next to her. She grinned at me.

“Holy shit, that was good.” She murmured softly.

“For me too... like, more amazing than I ever could have imagined. Thank you for this, you’re absolutely perfect!” I kissed her forehead quickly.

“You’re not too bad yourself.” She smiled at me and kissed my cheek back. “I’m so glad I met you.”

And just like that, I was brought back to reality. My orgasm was enough to pull me away for a bit, but not now... now I remembered what I had to do.

It felt harder than ever.

I looked at her sadly.

“What? What is it? You liked it, right? I mean, you’re not lying to save my feelings—”

I cut her off. “It was perfect. I’m not lying. In absolutely every way, it was perfection.”

“Alright, so what’s wrong?” she asked.

“I...” I didn’t know how to say it.

“Just spit it out, Emily,” she insisted, “you’re scaring me.”

And I was about to scare her a lot more.

“I have to break up with you.”

13

Kaitlyn

My heart was pounding in my chest. I thought for sure I’d misheard her. She couldn’t have possibly been saying what I thought she was saying... right?

“You... what?”

“I have to break up with you.”

The second time she said it, I had to accept it was the truth.

“But... but why? I mean, I thought everything between us was going so well...”

“It was,” she said. “It is. But I got my grade back today on my midterm...”

“And you didn’t do well,” I finished for her. “Yeah, I could tell by the way you came back that you hadn’t done well.”

“But it was more than that,” she said. “I didn’t just not do well, I failed. Like, I got a freaking F, Kaitlyn.”

I ran my hand through her hair. “Baby, I’m so sorry...” I said softly, though I still didn’t understand what exactly this had to do with me.

“Don’t be sorry,” she said. “It’s not your fault, it’s mine. I’ve just been so obsessed with you lately that I... I just let myself get wrapped up in you instead of school. But I can’t anymore.”

Now I got it.

“So you’re going to dump me because of one bad grade?”

“You don’t get it, Kaitlyn,” she sighed. “It’s not just one bad grade. I have to make this up, and if I don’t, I’m totally fucked. I’ll fail the entire class. And I can’t focus with you around.”

“Right,” I said coldly.

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“Please, Kaitlyn, I’m sorry... maybe once I graduate.”

“In a year?” I snapped. “Please, Emily, tell me you’re not asking me to wait an entire year? A whole year without you? How the hell am I supposed to do that?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted, “I just know that I really like you. Really, truly like you, and I hope that one day we can figure this out and end up finding our way back to each other.”

I was so hurt and wasn’t even trying to hide it. I knew that school was important to her, of course it was, but this felt so damn extreme.

I was already in love with her. Truly, madly in love with her, and there was literally nothing that could keep me from being with her. So she needed to study more, that was fine! I could give her more time! But no, the first thing she jumped to was breaking up.

Which made me think maybe this relationship wasn’t as important to her as it was to me. And that was what really hurt. That she was willing to give up so easily. All it took was one bump in her road to success to make her want to totally forget about me.

“I really love being with you, Kaitlyn. I really do,” she said softly.

But there, it was even in her words. She loved being with me. She didn’t say she loved me, though... if she did, if she felt for me what I felt for her, she wouldn’t be able to do this.

“I can’t just wait for you,” I said suddenly. “We’ve only been together a little over a month, and... and I’m not going to spend a year waiting for you.”

She looked dejected. “Yeah... yeah, I guess that would be pretty unreasonable of me to ask.”

“Yeah, it would,” I said coolly.

I stared at her, she stared at me, and for a moment, we didn’t say anything to each other. I didn’t know what I was waiting for. I guess for her to take it all back, to say she wasn’t really going to do this. That she couldn’t break up with me over one bad grade, and we’d make it work.

But she didn’t say those words. And as I waited, more thoughts ran through my mind. Then, something suddenly clicked for me.

“How long ago did you realize you wanted to do this?” I asked.

“What?” she asked. “Today, of course. You think I’ve been planning this for a long time or something?”

“No, no,” I corrected. “I mean when today.”

She looked at me confused. “When I realized how badly I’d done in my class...”

“So, back at the bar?”

“Yes...” she began slowly.

“You’ve known since the bar, but... you just had sex with me for the first time?”

Her expression fell flat. She looked immediately guilty. “Well, yeah...”

“You didn’t care?” I asked her. “It didn’t bother you that you were going to sleep with me for the first time and then dump me? You didn’t think that might be kind of shitty in any way?”

“I did...” she said softly, “but, I also just thought, you know, I really like you, and I wanted to be able to do it at least once before we broke up...”

“Ah!” I said with a sarcastic laugh. “So this was my parting gift!”

“Kaitlyn...” she said, exasperated.

“No, Emily, seriously. You didn’t think how shitty that was? You didn’t think maybe I was going to fucking grow more attached to you if you slept with me? That my feelings might intensify before you dumped me?”

“I mean, I thought my feelings might intensify... but it’s not like it was your first time. I didn’t really think it would have a very big effect on you or anything.”

“Of course not,” I said bitterly, “because you didn’t think about me at all, did you? I barely crossed your mind. God, this is so fucking unbelievable.” I stood up off her bed.

“Kaitlyn, wait!” she begged, as she grabbed my hand. “Please try to understand.”

“Oh, I do,” I assured her. “I understand completely. You just worry about school, Emily.”

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“School’s important...” she said softly.

“So is life! So is love! When you have that degree that you don’t even want and you start wo

rking a job you hate, who is going to be by your side? What are you going to have outside of your work? Nothing, Emily! You’re going to have nothing! What’s the point in having the perfect grades, the perfect job, and the perfect perfectionist lifestyle if you have to do it all alone?”

“So, don’t let me be alone!” she pleaded again. “Come back to me! In a year, when I’m done with school, just come back to me.”

I shook my head. “I care about you, Emily, I really do. But I won’t put my life on hold for you. I’m not going to let you break my heart and then become the girl who just waits around for you. No, sorry, you either have all of me or none of me. And, right now, you’re picking none of me, right?”

She looked down at her floor, unable to even make eye contact with me.

“Right,” I said bitterly. “Good luck with your perfect life, Emily. I hope it’s everything you ever dreamed it could be.”

“It won’t be,” she said quietly, still unable to look up and make eye contact with me. “Not without you by my side.”

“Then I guess you’re really making the wrong choice.”

I walked through her door and shut it quickly. Not quite slamming it; I didn't want to be completely disrespectful of her and Abby's home, but it was sharp enough to make it clear I was storming off.

Even after she'd said we were breaking up, even after this whole conversation, I didn't want to believe it was true. A big part of me imagined that she was going to change her mind. She was going to come out of her bedroom, ask me to stop, and keep me from walking out her front door.

She didn't chase after me, though. She didn't even open the door to her room. I was able to walk out that big red front door without any interference.

And tears welled up in my eyes when I thought about the fact that I wasn't going to be walking back through it.

14

Emily

I felt like such a selfish bitch.

When I'd thought about breaking up with Kaitlyn, I'd thought about my heartbreak. I considered what it was going to feel like to have to live without her for a while. Hell, I'd even deluded myself into thinking it would only be a temporary thing.

And I never once considered how it was going to feel for her. Didn't for a second think about how this break-up was going to tear her to pieces and how she wasn't going to want to wait a year for me to finish school. I didn't think about how having sex with her for the first time and then leaving was going to affect her. Nope, never thought about any of it, because I was a total and complete asshole.

How could I have done this to her? We had this great, intense, passionate relationship, and I'd just dropped a bomb. She'd probably been thinking we were going to be a long term-thing, like I'd been thinking, and I'd just pulled the rug out from under her.

I fell to my bed, face first, my head hitting my white feather pillow. I screamed into it, desperate to get all my pent-up emotions out. But in my drunkenness, I completely forgot about the fact that Abby was still home. A moment later, she burst into my room.

"Is everything okay?!" she asked quickly, followed by, "Where's Kaitlyn?"

"She left," I said bitterly, "and yeah, I'm okay..." I sighed. "I'm kind of okay."

"Why'd you scream?" she asked as she wrung her wet hair into a towel.

"I just needed to get it out."

"So, something has been bothering you tonight?" she asked.

"Something's definitely wrong," I told her vaguely.

She looked at me expectantly. "Well?"

"Well, Kaitlyn and I are through."

"What?" she gasped. "But... how? You two seemed so happy tonight, and... oh my god, you poor thing, I'm so sorry. Did she give a reason?"

She clearly didn't get it at first. "What? No, she didn't break up with me, I broke up with her."

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Now she looked less empathetic and more angry. “You did what? But... but why? Why would you ever break up with her? She’s like totally perfect in every way.”

I rolled my eyes. “Thanks, Abbs, that really helps.”

“Well, I’m sorry, Emily, but I just don’t understand. You two seemed so happy. Did she do something or... what? You’ve got to give me more to go off.” She sat down on the accent chair I had near my door, still wringing out her wet hair.

“I got my grade back today for that test,” I told her, “and I completely failed it. And it just hit me because it’s the first time I failed a test besides, like, that test I was late for and didn’t get to finish. But that didn’t count, it was just because I’d slept in. This was like a real test I’d studied for and finished and was confident that I’d done well... and I still just failed.”

“Aw, Emily,” she said softly, knowing how much this meant to me, “but you’ll do well on the next one, I’m sure. It’s not the end of the world.”

“I have to do well on the next one,” I told her. “If I don’t, I might fail the class. I wouldn’t be able to graduate, and... I just have to. But unlike you, I’m not so sure I’ll do well next time. And that’s why I broke up with her.”

She shook her head slightly, sending little droplets of water onto the floor. “But I don’t understand... what does your failing have to do with her?”

“It has everything to do with her. If it wasn’t for her, I would’ve studied way more. With her, I don’t focus, I don’t study, I don’t have the drive I once did. She is such a

major distraction for me, and I just can't force myself to be attentive to school when she's around. I want to, but I just... I can't. It fucking sucks. And I can't see myself succeeding in this class and for the rest of the semester unless I take time away from her."

"Oh..." she said quietly, clearly not wanting to pass judgment.

I took in a deep breath. "What?"

"Nothing," she said quickly. "So, how'd she take it?"

"She was heartbroken, of course. Couldn't understand, of course." I didn't add the fact that we'd just had sex for the first time before I did and that it'd added to her pain. I didn't need Abby judging me for that, too.

She looked sad. "I feel so bad for her... for the both of you, really. You two seemed so happy."

"We were," I told her, feeling like the butterflies in my stomach were threatening to come up.

"Well, maybe at some point in the future, after you're more stable in school, you two can reconnect."

I shook my head. "I thought that, too. That's the first thing I thought, actually. That she and I could be together eventually, but no. She doesn't want to wait a year for me to graduate, and I understand. We haven't been together very long, so that's a pretty big ask of me, but... I don't know. I just can't imagine her being gone from my life for good."

I could feel the tears welling up in my eyes. I absolutely hated crying in front of

people, even people I loved and trusted like Abby. It just made me feel too vulnerable, so I did my best to hold back actual tears. But I was pretty sure Abby could see my eyes reddening anyway.

She got off my accent chair and joined me on the bed, rubbing my back softly. “I’m so sorry you’re hurting. You want to hang out? Drink more of that wine? Watch a movie together?”

I shook my head slowly. The last thing I wanted to do was drink more of the wine that Kaitlyn had bought. I didn’t need to be reminded of her any further.

“Abbs, am I doing the right thing?” I asked her.

She didn’t answer me right away, so I knew her opinion immediately. She didn’t think I should have dumped Kaitlyn for this. I knew her well enough to know when she didn’t approve.

But she had the decency not to say that.

“I can’t answer that for you, Em. That’s a choice you’ve got to make on your own. School’s your future, so if you need to prioritize that above your relationship, then you do that.”

This was why I loved her so much. Even when she disapproved, when she thought I was wrong, she knew how to be comforting. She just was tuned in to people’s emotions and was very emotionally nurturing.

This time, it didn’t help much. I couldn’t think of a single thing that really would help. But I decided to relent and watch movies with Abby at her insistence, so she wouldn’t worry about me too much. Plus, I had nothing else to do, and I couldn’t sit here and wallow in my pain all night.

The worst part was, I did all of this so I could guarantee I wouldn't ruin my education. But now? With this level of pain, I still couldn't even imagine studying.

15

Kaitlyn

I felt stupid for how long I stayed in disbelief.

It was one thing to be in disbelief when it'd happened. I'd been surprised; of course I couldn't believe it right after she'd told me. Hell, it wasn't even that unreasonable for me to have expected she might have followed me as I'd left her house so she could tell me she regretted her decision already.

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But to continue to be in disbelief for the next several weeks? That wasn't even the tiniest bit reasonable. When she hadn't followed me, when she hadn't called me that night, that should have been my biggest hint. She'd meant to do what she'd done.

She wasn't coming back.

For the first week, I just kind of wallowed. I was tempted to text her, call her, go over to her house, and just beg her to not end us over a failing grade.

But I didn't. I stayed away. And she never called me in return... it was clear where I stood.

I couldn't believe how painful this all felt compared to breaking up with Julia. You'd think a relationship of years would have hurt me more than a relationship of barely over a month, but it didn't. This relationship with Emily already meant so much more to me. And Julia seemed to mean so little these days. I'd only spoken to her once, and that was only to tell her my address so she could send me a few things I'd accidentally left behind. When I had, she'd seemed to want to talk more. I didn't allow it, though.

Which only solidified my strong feelings for Emily. I felt like I was missing out on something wonderful with her. Something I wasn't going to be able to get with anyone else. I'd

never believed in soulmates before, but... I don't know. Emily just felt very different.

After my first week of wallowing, I had to start trying to move forward. It felt nearly

impossible, but I couldn't just continue to sit around Ryan's apartment and contribute nothing.

Plus, I felt like I looked like a mess to him and was a little insecure about it. The only reason I'd even moved in with him was because of a break-up, and then I jumped into a new relationship and broke up with that one, too? I always judged people's stability by how fast they jumped from relationship to relationship.

Not that Ryan had ever said anything or judged me. On the contrary, he'd been really nice and supportive lately and had spent a lot of his free time hanging out with me. I really appreciated it.

Still, I wanted to show him that I was not a walking disaster, and I was going to do that by immediately jumping back into my work. After that first week, I started doing my street performances in the morning. I went earlier than I used to and stayed later than I used to, and when I came home, I spent my energy learning new songs. I threw myself into my music.

Staying busy was the only thing that helped. If I was constantly working, I couldn't think as much about Emily. Every spare moment I had, she popped into my mind.

Hell, sometimes even when I was working, she still popped into my mind. It didn't help that the best spot on campus to play was near the cafeteria. Thankfully, I hadn't seen her going to it or coming out of it. I figured that was no accident... she was probably taking the back entrance to get into work specifically so she could avoid going to my corner.

Which was reasonable, I guessed, but it still hurt me to think about. I hadn't thought she'd be able to avoid me so thoroughly. I'd really, truly thought she was going to miss me too much to stay away like this.

One day I was playing on the corner, and a few girls from across the way were staring and smiling at me, and I'll admit I was putting on a bit of a show for them. I was still in a raw place emotionally, and I didn't plan on looking for any hook-ups or dates or anything, but getting attention from attractive people still felt good. It was a small stroke to my ego.

I was so fixated on playing well for them that I didn't even notice when there was a familiar face standing off to my right.

It wasn't Emily, but it was someone who made me think of her instantly. And who I truly did not want to see.

When I saw Brianne, I was sure to extend the song I was playing in order to avoid having to have a conversation with her. She'd been such a bitch to me at the bar. I didn't want to hear whatever she had to say about my playing.

I was kind of hoping that she'd walk away before I ran out of stamina, but she didn't. She sat there, watching me with a serious face, and eventually I was forced to stop playing. I had to take a few minutes' break in between songs, or my hands started cramping, and I was reaching that point.

When I did finish, I did my best to avoid her gaze, acting like I hadn't even seen her, though we both knew I had. She didn't allow that, though.

"Kaitlyn, right?" she said suddenly.

"Yes, hi." I forced a smile at her.

At the bar, I'd been really cool about how snobby she was. It'd been easy to be cool, because she'd been rude, and I'd just been enjoying my time with Emily. It was the first, and subsequently last, time I had met Emily's friends, and I'd been ecstatic

about it.

I wasn't ecstatic anymore, though. I was mostly miserable. And I wasn't sure if miserable Kaitlyn could stay as calm as happy Kaitlyn could. I braced myself for the back-handed compliments.

To my surprise, they didn't come.

"You're good." She smiled at me and dropped a twenty in my guitar case.

I waited for the 'but.' I didn't even know what to say. I was wracking my brain for where the insult was... was it the twenty dollars? That was way more money than anyone normally left me, so maybe she was trying to show off or something.

"Oh... thank you," I said softly.

She nodded. "Haven't seen you or Emily around at any of the bars the last few weeks," she said.

"Ah... yeah," I said slowly. Apparently, Abby hadn't announced our break-up to her group of friends. "We're kind of not together anymore."

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“Sorry to hear that,” she stated very matter-of-factly, but it didn’t sound sarcastic. “Would’ve been nice to talk music with someone.”

I had to keep myself from laughing. Last time we’d hung out together, it had been anything but nice to ‘talk music’ together, if you could even call it that. But she wasn’t actively being a jerk, so I wasn’t going to be, either.

“Yeah... too bad.”

She nodded. “Too bad. Well, see you around. Good luck with your performance.”

“Thanks, girl. Yeah, see you around.”

She walked away without another word, without insulting me once, and I wasn’t really sure what to make of the encounter. She was coming off as oddly genuine. It had been a weird conversation.

Despite her not being a bitch, though, it wasn’t even remotely pleasant to see her. She reminded me of Emily, and, even worse, of the night we’d broken up.

I couldn’t keep playing after that. I was emotionally drained. Sometimes, even staying busy wasn’t enough.

I went home, hoping Ryan would be home from work so I could have someone to distract me, but he wasn’t. I decided to send him a quick text.

>Me: Hey, man, what time are you going to be home tonight?

>Ryan: Pretty soon, probably ten minutes away. Want pizza?

>Me: That'd be awesome.

Normally I refused food from him because, even though I always tried to give him cash, he never took it, and I ended up feeling like a mooch. Today, I couldn't care less. I just wanted to drown in my sorrows and eat my feelings.

Ryan was pretty punctual, so, just as he'd said, he showed up about ten minutes later with a smile on his face.

"So I was feeling lazy and didn't feel like picking anything up. I called for delivery on the way home, so hopefully it comes fast."

"Not a problem," I told him, "I'm not super hungry or anything."

Actually, I had brought a fair amount of snacks with me to eat throughout the day, and I wasn't really hungry at all. I didn't want to stuff my face out of hunger; I wanted to do it out of gluttony.

"You okay?" he asked casually. I hated that I always wore my emotions on my sleeve. It was always so obvious what I was feeling.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I told him, "just tired."

I liked Ryan, I really did, and I'd done some superficial venting to him after my break-up with Emily. But I just didn't feel close enough to him to confide any deeper feelings. I didn't want to tell him how just seeing the face of one of Emily's friends had sent me into a spiraling despair that I couldn't get out of.

He wouldn't know what to say, anyway. He was a totally nice person and very

generous, but he wasn't the kind of guy who was very tuned in to his or others' emotions. He kind of just agreed and said 'that sucks' when you vented to him. I didn't mind, but it didn't exactly help me.

Ryan went to put his briefcase down in his room and change out of his formal work clothing. While he did, the doorbell rang.

"I've got it!" he yelled as he quickly came racing out of his bedroom in a t-shirt and some gym shorts. Damn, that guy could change quickly.

"Hey, man, I've got cash for half that pizza!" I told him. No matter how many times he turned down my money, I was still going to offer.

He walked back into the room, confusion on his face.

"What is it?" I asked.

"It's not pizza. It's someone here for you."

My heart leapt in my chest. I didn't have friends here in Rosebridge. There was nobody who could be here for me except the one person I wanted so desperately to see... the one person I knew wasn't going to be able to stay

away from me. Finally, finally, she came to talk.

I jumped up off the couch, trying to control my smile, but failing. I didn't want her to see me thrilled. She'd hurt me badly, and I didn't want to seem weak and desperate in how much I wanted to talk to her. But I was weak and desperate, and, like I'd said, I didn't hide my emotions very well.

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I ran to the door, and as soon as I did, the smile dropped from my face. Because it wasn't Emily standing there.

It was Julia.

16

Emily

To my surprise, I actually got a fair amount of work done after I ended things with Kaitlyn. Mostly because I had to bury myself in work to not feel completely and totally depressed.

I studied even more than I had before, which I didn't think was possible. I studied while I ate, on my breaks at work, every moment I wasn't in class. I was frequently turning down Abby's invitations to go out, because even hanging out with people was not enough to keep my mind off Kaitlyn.

No, I had to occupy my brain completely. Studying was the only thing. I guess the one pay-off was that, in the last several weeks, I'd gotten As on pretty much everything.

There was a time I couldn't avoid thinking about her, though. Every time I fell asleep and woke up, she was on my mind, because I couldn't have a book in front of me in those moments. Not to mention while I actually slept, since I was bombarded with constant dreams of her.

And, in those moments before and after sleep, the same question popped up in my mind every time... had I made a mistake?

I had to get started on working again, because I knew that I had.

What Kaitlyn had said to me the night we'd broken up had been right. When school was over, when I had an engineering job that I'd likely hate, I was going to have nothing else. I was going to be alone. Hell, eventually even Abby was going to move out and live on her own, and I wouldn't even have friends to keep me company. So was this worse?

Though she hadn't said it, I still knew Abby had thought I'd taken an extreme approach to fixing this situation, and that was something I couldn't forget either. Because I was starting to think I'd taken an extreme approach, too.

I'd be lying if I said that I didn't think of calling her every night as she crossed my mind. Telling her I was sorry, that I wanted her back, that I'd do anything to make it up to her...

But every night that I didn't do that, I felt like I lost my opportunity. I'd let too much time pass without reaching out to her and admitting my mistake.

If I were her, I wasn't sure I would be able to forgive me. Especially with the whole having sex with her before dumping her thing. Not the most sensitive decision on my part. I hadn't been trying to hurt her; on the contrary, I'd wanted to have one beautiful moment with her before things had ended. But it was selfish to not consider how it was going to make her feel.

And that was what I was, selfish. It was my first relationship, and I didn't yet know how to consider another person's feelings. Relationships were a learning process, and while I was usually pretty good at learning, I had obviously failed here.

I heard a knock on my door, and I looked up from my textbook.

“Yeah?” I asked.

“Hey, can I come in?” Abby questioned.

“Be my guest,” I told her as I glanced down at my textbook.

She opened the door and peeked her head in. “Hey, just checking in. I’ve barely seen you all week.”

I shrugged. “I haven’t been anywhere, been home the whole time.”

“Yeah, holed up in here.” She motioned around to my plain room. “You’re, like, eating, right?”

I laughed. “Of course I’m eating. You think I’m just stuck in here, wallowing in all my misery and starving myself?”

“Well, maybe,” she said seriously. “You haven’t exactly seemed very happy.”

I leaned back in my chair and took in a deep breath. “I’m not, I guess. But I’m not depressed to the point of not eating. I’m just studying... since it’s the whole reason for all my misery right now.”

“Right,” she said, and nodded. “Okay, then...”

I could tell she had more she wanted to say.

“What?” I asked.

“Can you spare just, like, an hour for me? I brought home a pizza, we can eat and talk and stuff.”

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Just the idea made me nauseated. I knew the kind of pain that could potentially bring.

“I don’t know, I’ve got a lot of work...”

“Oh, Emily, come on! I know you’re studying nonstop, and I know you can spare an hour. Please? I miss you. I’ve barely seen you in weeks. And I want to make sure you’re okay, so just humor me?”

“Okay, yeah, sure,” I acquiesced. I didn’t know how I could say no to her. She was my best friend, and all she wanted was to eat with me.

I followed her out of the room and into the living room, where the pizza box was already open on the coffee table. She had two plates laid out as well as two glasses of wine.

I smiled at her, though I didn’t feel like smiling at all. “You know the way to my heart.”

“Always,” she agreed. “So, how have you really been?”

I didn’t want to talk about my feelings; I was afraid I might fall into them and be unable to dig myself out. But I guess that was the only healthy thing to do. I couldn’t continue to bury myself in my emotions.

“Not so great,” I admitted.

“Do you want to talk about it?” she asked.

“I’m not even sure what there is to talk about,” I said as I took a greasy slice of pizza and slid it onto my plate. “Like, I’m sad for an obvious reason, and it was my decision, so I don’t know if I can really complain about it, you know? Who else did this besides me?”

She grabbed her own slice of pizza. “That’s not the measurement of whether or not you can be sad, Emily. You have a right to vent even about choices you make. People are sad about necessary choices all the time, and about things they regret...”

She said that a little weird, ‘things they regret.’ There was an odd inflection to it.

“Are you trying to imply something?”

She sighed. “Okay, Emily, you know I’m your best friend, and I’m here for you, so I’ve mostly kept my opinions to myself, because it’s none of my business. I’m here for you no matter what. But now, I’m thinking maybe you might need to hear this...”

“Hear what?”

“Hear that you’re allowed to have regrets,” she said boldly.

I still wasn’t sure what she was getting at. “Okay...”

“In life, in relationships, we all make mistakes. Especially when we’re getting out into the dating world for the first time. Nobody’s perfect. And I don’t think you’re used to not being perfect.”

“What do you mean?” I asked as I took a bite of pizza. “I know I’m not perfect.”

“Yeah, but you always strive for perfection, and you always beat yourself up when you can’t reach it. You’re a perfectionist to your core, and I know it’s hard for you to

focus on things you've done wrong. And I'm not saying that you were wrong to break up with Kaitlyn, necessarily. It's not my choice to make, I have no idea if it's right. But you do, and you've seemed... not very happy with your choice."

I glanced off to the side, staring at the white wall of our living room. She was right; it was hard for me to deal with my failures. And because I didn't deal with or face my failures, I just... didn't know if this was a failure.

"I can't even be sure that I made the wrong choice," I told her. "I'm unhappy about it, but does that mean it was wrong? I'm also doing better in school, which is what I wanted, but..."

"But you're still not sure," she finished for me, leaning against the arm of the couch.

"Still not sure."

"Well, for once, maybe you need to stop thinking with your head. How do you feel about the choice? How do you feel about Kaitlyn, and how do you feel about school? Love and relationships can't be all about logic, not when they pertain so much to our emotions."

"I mean... I just feel bad. I love Kaitlyn, and I don't love school, but it's a necessity. I don't know when is the right and wrong time to put necessity over love."

"Maybe never," she smiled, "but you know me. I'm a true romantic."

"And you know me," I responded. "I'm not."

"Are you sure? Because with Kaitlyn, you were sure starting to seem like it."

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Again, she was right. Kaitlyn had flipped my entire world around. Everything I'd thought I'd known, everything I'd thought I'd felt, it'd all changed when I'd met her. And my values began to shift. I had always valued school above everything else, and no doubt it was important, but was it more important than love?

"But how could I even admit the mistake now?" I asked Abby. "It's so late... I've already hurt Kaitlyn so badly..."

"Is that the only thing keeping you from admitting it was a mistake?" she asked. "Just that you're afraid she won't forgive you? Because, I've got to be honest, Emily, that doesn't sound like a good enough reason. If you want to take it back, if you want her back, you have to at least try. What's the worst thing that can happen?"

"She rejects me, hates me, says she never wants to be with me again..." I muttered.

"And? If you don't try, she's never going to be with you again, either. So, if you want her back, you might as well try."

I did want her back. I never let myself fully admit it, but I wanted her back so damn bad. She meant the world to me. I could figure out the school thing along the way. Maybe we'd have to spend less time together, maybe I'd have to be more focused, but whatever!

I couldn't live like this anymore... I couldn't live without her.

"You're right," I told her suddenly.

She raised both eyebrows. “I

am?”

“Absolutely. If I don’t take the chance, I’ll never know. If she rejects me, I’m in the same position I always was in.”

“So, you do want her back?” she asked.

“Absolutely!” I nearly shouted. It was the first time I had admitted it out loud, and I could never deny it again. “Yes, yes, I really want her back!”

“Then go get her, tiger,” she said, grinning at me.

I jumped off the couch and went to slide on my shoes and grab my keys.

“Wait, right now!?” she asked. “I meant, you know, maybe give her a call and see if she wants to meet up...”

“No!” I yelled from the hallway. “No, I’ve got to just go see her myself! Right now, I’ve got to tell her.”

It was crazy how urgent it all felt now, considering moments ago, it hadn’t fazed me at all. I hadn’t even been sure I wanted to get back together with her. But now, I’d never been surer of anything in my life.

I guessed that was what happened when you finally confront your issues. You figured them out, figured out how you really felt.

I knew what I felt now.

“Bye!” I said quickly as I ran out the door.

“Bye, good luck!” Abby shouted back at me. I shut the door on her last word. I didn’t want to waste any time.

I hopped in my car and, admittedly, sped over to her place. I almost never sped, but I couldn’t help myself this time around. I needed to see Kaitlyn. I needed to see her now.

I couldn’t help but smile on my way over. I felt a weight had been lifted off my shoulders. I knew Kaitlyn hadn’t agreed to get back with me yet. And at the moment, I didn’t need to.

Hell, even if she rejected me, there would be a weight off my chest. Because, for the first time I could think of, I’d dealt with one of my mistakes. And I felt okay about making one... it was something everyone experienced now and then.

I fucked up, I knew it, and I was going to do my best to make amends. If my amends weren’t enough, fine, I could live with that. I’d be sad, but I’d live. But not even trying? I absolutely couldn’t live with that. I had to at least try.

The sun was starting to go down as I pulled up at Kaitlyn’s place. The red gleam of the sunset was shimmering over the top of her building. It looked absolutely perfect, everything felt right.

This was right.

I parked and immediately ran into her building and to the elevator. It was a nice apartment complex, but not super fancy or anything. Kaitlyn’s friend Ryan had money, but apparently, he didn’t feel the need to chase luxuries, because it was mostly an ordinary place to live, from what I could see.

When I got to their floor, I ran down the hallway and made a right like I always had to get to her place. But once I turned the corner, I stopped in my tracks and took a few steps back so that I was once again hidden behind the adjacent hall.

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I could feel my heart pounding. I had just seen Kaitlyn standing in the frame of her apartment door, and she was talking to some girl. Seeing her talking to someone else had totally thrown me off.

But it was probably nothing, I told myself. She was probably delivering food or something... or maybe she was a friend of Ryan's! But it couldn't possibly be someone she was dating...

That was what my jealous mind went to first, though. I hadn't spoken to her in weeks... she very well could be dating. I knew it was a little soon to date, but we had only been together one month, and Kaitlyn had dated me mere weeks after breaking up with her ex. And they had been together for years!

Still, I had no reason to suspect this was a new woman in his life. And what I heard come out of Kaitlyn's mouth next assured me it wasn't a new woman...

It was an old woman.

"Julia, you really didn't have to do this," Kaitlyn said.

Julia... the name rang out in my ear. I knew who Julia was, and my heart sank.

But Julia didn't live in Rosebridge. They couldn't be dating again, right? But why else would she be here? Why else would she come all this way... just, why?

"I wanted to," Julia said softly, "I really wanted to."

Kaitlyn sighed. “Julia, I just—”

It sounded like there was an end to that sentence, but she stopped talking abruptly. I didn’t want to be seen, but I couldn’t help myself. I peeked very slowly around the corner to see if they had walked inside. I didn’t know what I’d do if they’d gone in. I’d be all but sure they were dating again at that point.

But they weren’t inside. No, her sentence had ended abruptly for an entirely different reason...

Her lips were locked in Julia’s.

I immediately covered my mouth to suppress a gasp and hid back behind the hallway wall.

I felt like I was going to throw up. I just couldn’t fathom it... Kaitlyn was kissing her ex. I came to get her back, but she didn’t want to be got. She’d already moved on...

And it was all my fault.

I was going to burst into tears, I knew it in advance, and I had to leave. Because if I started bawling now, I wouldn’t be able to control myself. I’d start crying loudly, Julia and Kaitlyn would hear, and they’d very likely see me. I couldn’t have that.

So I suppressed my tears all the way until the elevator. But once those doors closed, the tears burst out. Thank god nobody was around to see me embarrass myself.

And once they started, they didn’t stop. I was crying all the way to my car. In fact, for a while, I just sat in my car and cried before forcing myself to put the keys in the ignition and pull away.

I had been ready to get rejected. I'd accepted that Kaitlyn might not be ready to forgive me, I knew that was a possibility.

But I'd never imagined this as a possibility. I'd never thought she'd move on already. How could she move on while I was still feeling totally, completely empty inside? These last few weeks had been hell for me. I'd had to study non-stop just to avoid thinking about her. And she was getting back with her ex.

God, why was I so shocked? They'd been together for years. I may have had a lot of feelings for her, since I'd been her rebound and all, but she did not have a lot of feelings for me. I'd just filled the void that Julia had left.

That was not what she'd said, not what she'd claimed, but now I knew better. I'd been naïve when I'd believed I'd meant more to her than Julia had.

And I didn't even have anyone to blame but myself. I was the one who'd chosen to leave her. I was the one who'd let a good thing go. I'd practically sent her running back into her ex's arms. If I'd just held onto her, she would have one day loved me like she'd loved Julia. One day, we would have had time on our side.

But no, I'd given us only a month. I'd pushed her away. I'd ruined the one thing that had ever made me happy.

I hated myself for it.

17

Kaitlyn

“Julia?”

“Hey...” she said softly.

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I immediately felt paranoid. How the hell had she gotten here? How did she know where I lived?

“How did you... how did you find me?”

“Find you?” she asked cluelessly.

“How do you know this is where I live?” I clarified.

“Oh, you sent me your address, remember? To get your stuff back to you?”

“Uh, right,” I said, still so confused. I’d never expected to see her again, let alone see her here, in the flesh, right in front of me. In the new city where I lived.

What weird twilight zone had I entered?

“And that’s what I did!” she said quickly.

“Huh?” I questioned, not even remembering what I’d last said. I just felt dazed. “You did what?”

“I brought you your stuff!”

I stared at her for a second, taking this in. Was this what she thought I wanted? For her to bring me my stuff in person? Hadn’t she known I’d just wanted her to mail it to me?

“Julia, you really didn’t have to do this,” I told her.

/>

“I wanted to,” she answered, “I really wanted to.”

What the hell did that mean? That she did know I didn't want this? And she just brought me my stuff anyway? I didn’t understand.

I sighed. “Julia, I just—”

And then, without warning, she leaned in to kiss me.

I was so shocked by the act that I didn’t pull away at first. I didn't like it. I felt absolutely nothing, but it felt like everything was moving in slow motion. When I did finally pull away, I wiped my mouth, disgusted.

“What the hell are you doing?!”

“Just... kissing you,” she mumbled.

“Julia, what the fuck?” I snapped. “What are you doing here? You didn't think I was seriously asking you to drive my stuff to me, right? You understood I just wanted you to mail it to me?”

“I understood,” she admitted.

“Then what the fuck are you even doing here?!”

Tears started welling in her eyes. “I miss you, Kaitlyn. I miss you so much. Breaking up was a horrible mistake.”

For a second, I felt bad for her. Because I could absolutely say that I did not feel the same in any way.

“Julia... I’m sorry you're sad, but—”

“I’m more than sad!” she answered quickly. “I’m heartbroken! I’m completely, totally heartbroken. I’m depressed. Life hasn’t been the same since you left.”

I didn’t understand any of this. “Then why did you never try to call me? Why the hell did you think it was cool to just show up here? I live hours and hours away from you.”

She shrugged. "I didn't think a call would make a difference. I thought you’d just brush me off, and I didn't want that.”

I rolled my eyes involuntarily. “You should have called, Julia. Actually, you shouldn’t have called, because it would’ve been pointless. But this is equally as pointless, and now you have to drive hours to get home.”

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She shook her head, more tears welling in her eyes. “No, no, I can’t leave here without fixing things with you.”

“Julia, there’s nothing to fix! It’s been two months since we broke up. I didn’t fit in with your friends. I didn’t fit in with your lifestyle. And we both know I never will. I am always going to be an embarrassment to you, so just do yourself a favor and focus on something or someone else.”

She wiped tears from her eyes. “I know. I know I was shitty, and I didn’t stick up for you, and I acted like you weren’t good enough... but you were. You always were the best thing that ever happened to me, and I don’t know how I lost sight of that. Dating has reminded me of that. No girl comes even close to you. I don’t care about the money anymore or that you don’t have a serious job, that’s fine, it’s all fine with me.”

Ahh, so she was only coming to me after she’d failed in dating other people... romantic.

“You’ll find someone eventually,” I told her coldly.

“I don’t want someone, I want you.”

I was already so sick of this. I’d been filled with disappointment the second I’d realized it wasn’t Emily, and now I just wanted to be alone to deal with those feelings. How the hell was I going to get Julia off my porch?

“Look, it’s seriously inappropriate for you to be here. You abused the information I gave you. You knew I never intended for you to come here, and you didn’t even

bother calling before you did? Why? Because you knew I wouldn't let you come?"

"...I feared that you wouldn't, yes," she admitted.

"Julia, that's so freaking creepy. It's been two months, and we've hardly spoken! Good God, girl, get a grip! Move on with your life! This was just as much your decision as it was mine."

She reached out for my hand. "One more chance, please. I know you can't possibly be happy here. I know that you can't possibly be happy without me. I haven't had a second of happiness since we ended things. We could be together again."

I jerked my hand away. "Well, I have had happiness! Like, a lot of fucking happiness without you in my life."

Her jaw dropped. "You... you have?"

"Yes," I said definitively.

She took a second to take this in. "You're lying."

"No."

Her eyes were full of hurt as she suddenly realized what I meant. "You met someone."

"Yeah, I met someone."

"But... but we've only been apart for a couple months," she said sadly.

"And that's a long time," I told her, not bothering to add that I'd met Emily mere

days after our break-up.

I also wasn't going to add that how I felt for Emily was so much different than how I had ever felt for Julia. That she did something for me that Julia never could, and I felt I'd finally found my soul mate. No, I was livid at Julia for showing up this way, but I didn't feel the need to hurt her any more than I'd already had. I just wanted her to go. Right now, that was all I needed... for her to just leave.

"I'm sorry, Julia, but you've got to go," I told her, a little less coldly but still very seriously.

"No!" she snapped. "No, I can't! I can't just leave you! We need to work this out, we absolutely have to work this out... if we can't, then..."

"We can't," I told her. "I just told you, I've moved on. I'm in a different place in my life. You need to move on, too."

"I won't!" she bit back. "Whoever you think you've moved on to, they're just a rebound from me! You can't truly love them. They're not going to make you feel the way I made you feel."

She was so wrong. Again, though, she was just hurting. I wasn't going to make it any worse by pointing out the flaws in her argument.

"If you don't leave, Julia, I'm calling the cops. You can't harass me at my house like this. I'm asking you to leave."

She looked taken aback that I would even make that threat.

"You're serious? You'd call the cops on me?"

“If you won’t leave, yes, absolutely,” I answered.

“...So, you’re seriously over us?”

“Yes,” I said again.

She nodded slowly. She looked completely dejected, but she seemed to finally be starting to get it.

“Okay... alright, fine. I guess I won’t bother you anymore,” she said. She put my box of stuff on the ground and turned away from me.

She walked slowly and, oddly, I knew what she was thinking. She was expecting I might chase after her, the same way I’d thought Emily would chase after me. I guess that was a disappointment we’d both experience.

As she turned the corner down the hall, something caught my eye. Ryan’s apartment was the very last one in this hall, and on the wall adjacent to our door was a window that showed outside the front of the apartment building. I saw a car pull up which normally wouldn’t catch my attention, but it was a brightly colored yellow one which I recognized as the pizza delivery.

I was about to call out to Ryan to let him know food was here, and then something else caught my eye.

Next to the pizza delivery was a car I knew all too well. It was the same car that Emily had, and it immediately made me reminisce about her.

But no, it wasn’t just the same car Emily had... it was her actual car. And she was

inside it!

I stood there, stunned, unsure of what I'd seen at first. Was it really her? Was she really here? But... why would she come here?

There was only one possible reason. She wanted to see me again. She came to talk to me...

She wasn't coming up, though. She wasn't leaving her car. I waited for a few minutes. Her head was buried in her hands, so I could only assume she was stressed about coming to talk to me, but even minutes later, she hadn't lifted her head.

My heart was pounding. I absolutely had to know what she was here for. And I couldn't wait any longer for her to come to me.

I ran inside to the apartment for just a second to yell to Ryan, "I'll be right back!"

"Wait, where are you going?" he asked. "What's going on? Was that your ex?"

But I was already out the door, and I had no time to answer him. I had one focus and one focus only... to get to Emily.

I felt pathetic running to her like this. She was the one who'd dumped me, and again, I really didn't want to seem this desperate. But this was what I had wanted, for her to come to me. How could I not run to her now?

I didn't even think about running into Julia again until I was already in the elevator. I was rushing down the hall, and if she continued walking as slowly as she had, there was a good chance I was going to run into her. So, when the elevator doors opened, I was sure to peek through the corners to see if Julia was walking down them. To my relief, I didn't see her in the building at all.

I got outside and started running to the parking space where I knew Emily had been. But I was stopped in my tracks when it came into view and she wasn't there any longer.

But how could that be? She was just here. I had just seen her... she'd driven all the way to my apartment and had just left without talking to me? Why would she have done that?

She must have had regrets. She must have felt torn about it and doubted whether it was a good decision to come see me.

And once again, she had me heartbroken. That girl knew how to break me without even talking to me, wonderful...

I didn't know what to do here. I was standing in the middle of the parking lot to my own apartment, having just seen the ex I didn't want to see and missing the ex I did want to see.

I had to rectify the situation. Emily may have driven off, but she couldn't pretend like she hadn't come here. She had. And, after everything that had happened, the least she could do was tell me why.

As quickly as I'd run downstairs, I ran upstairs, seeing Ryan holding a pizza as I passed into the living room.

"Kait, what's going on?" she asked.

God, how could I sum this up even relatively quickly?

"Uh, well, my ex Julia just showed up at our door for no damn reason, and I had to tell her to screw off. Then, as I was telling her to screw off, I saw that my ex Emily

was sitting in our parking lot. And I don't want Emily to screw off, so I had to run downstairs to see what she wanted. But by the time I got there, she was gone. So now I'm grabbing my

keys to drive over to her place and ask why she was here and hope that it was a good reason, because I really, really miss her." I spit all that out at the speed of light as I scooped my keys from the coffee table.

Ryan just blinked at me for a moment.

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“So... yeah, I’m gonna go chase her now.”

Ryan laughed. “Yeah, okay, you do that. Please let me know how this dramatic saga ends, I’ve got to know.”

I laughed back. “Yeah, not sure what my life has turned into, but pretty sure it belongs on television. I’ll keep you posted.”

I shut the front door behind me, took a deep breath, and forced myself to walk more slowly downstairs this time. I needed a breather, needed a moment to think things through. I’d just experienced the biggest rollercoaster of emotions. But I was sure of one thing...

I wanted to know how this would end, too.

18

Emily

I wiped the tears from my face before I went inside. At least, to the best of my ability. My eyes were puffy, and it was very obvious that I’d been crying, which I didn’t want Abby to know.

If she saw me, there’d be no avoiding it. I decided I’d just walk in and hope she was in her room or something rather than the living room.

To my dismay, she wasn’t. She was still sitting on the couch eating pizza. I tried to

walk straight to my room, but she wasn't having it.

"Oh my god, Em, what happened?" she asked, easily reading my face.

"Nothing. I've got to go," I told her as I started walking to my room.

"Emily!" she called out after me, but I didn't answer, nor did I give her time to say anything else. I shut my bedroom door and started to cry some more.

She didn't come in after me, either. I was grateful for it. I wasn't surprised, though. She was good at reading people. She knew the right time to stay close and the right time to stay away. Now was the time to stay away, at least for a bit, and let me be sad on my own.

Although sad didn't even begin to describe how I was feeling at the moment. Devastated was more like it. As well as guilty, ashamed, unable to cope with my actions... really, the vast expanse of negative emotions that existed in the human psyche all could have been used to describe me right now.

I just felt awful.

But I couldn't blame Kaitlyn, not really. What had she done? Moved on? She'd told me full well if I was breaking up with her she wasn't going to be able to wait for me. I knew that going in. And I'd still left her. That hardly seemed like her fault.

The real question was, what was wrong with me? What was my problem that I constantly needed to get in my own way? Why did I have to destroy my own happiness? For someone who strove for perfection, I was pretty self-destructive.

I wanted to collapse onto my bed and wallow in everything that was making me upset, but I didn't do that. I refused. I was going to handle this pain the same way I'd

been handling all of my pain so far, by studying. Admittedly, the pain I felt now was much worse than anything I'd felt in the past few weeks. I supposed that was because, in the past few weeks, I'd avoided thinking about things. Maybe in a small way, I'd even convinced myself there was a chance that things could still work out with us.

Now, I knew they never would.

I buried myself in a textbook, even though I was completely caught up on all my chapters and had been reading ahead these past few weeks. For this textbook in particular, I only had a few more chapters left. I might as well finish them. Nothing else was going to distract me.

Unfortunately, compared to the last few weeks, reading did little to help me. I still felt all my pain, all my misery, welling up inside my chest. It was like all the pain was physically building up inside me and threatening to burst out. I understood why it was called heartbreak now... it felt like my heart really had broken.

When I'd gotten a few pages into this chapter, I heard the doorbell ring. I decided not to get up and get it, since I knew that Abby was already in the living room. And I had no energy to get up, nor did I want some stranger to see my puffy, streaky face.

I was mildly curious who it could be, though. The only people that ever came to our door were Abby's friends and people delivering food. Obviously she already had a pizza, so it wasn't food. And when her friends were dropping by, she usually told me. Although, I guessed she'd expected I'd be out of the house going to talk to Kaitlyn, so it made some sense that she wouldn't mention it.

I heard the mumbling of voices and then footsteps coming down the hall. Okay, so it probably was one of her friends, I thought to myself. Then, unexpectedly, my door opened, and Abby stood before me.

“Uh, hey, someone is here to see you...”

What the hell? Who could possibly be here to see me? I didn't have any friends, didn't have anyone I knew who knew where I lived... there was nobody.

“I don't want to see anyone,” I told her.

“Not even Kaitlyn?” she asked.

My head shot up to her. “What?”

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“Uh...” She looked incredibly awkward. “Kaitlyn is here to see you? Do you want to see her, or should I tell her to go away?”

My head was spinning. Why would she be here right now? Right after I’d gone to her house? The timing was too weird to be a coincidence.

Had she seen me? And even if she had seen me, why would she be here?

“Yeah... yeah, I’ll see her,” I told her, though I wasn’t sure I wanted to. But I had too many questions on my mind. I had to have them answered.

“I’ll send her your way, then,” she said. She shut the door and went back out to grab Kaitlyn.

My heart was pounding in my chest. I still couldn’t understand why she’d come here to me if she had already moved on to someone else. Why embarrass me further if she’d seen me run away?

Just seconds later, my door creaked open again, and Kaitlyn was standing in the hall.

“Hello,” she said softly.

“Hi,” I said back, equally as quietly.

We stared at each other in silence for a moment, taking in one another’s presence. At least, I was taking in her presence. I hadn’t seen her in weeks, so seeing her now felt so odd.

“Uh, come in.” I motioned to the bed as I stood up to shut the door behind her. I wasn’t sure what she was going to say, but I knew I didn’t want Abby hearing it. Not before I got to explain things. She took in a deep breath but didn’t say much.

“So... you should probably be the first to talk,” I began for her.

“I should?” she questioned. “Why?”

“Uh... because you’re the one who came here?”

“Yeah... right,” she said, nodding. “I, uh, just.... were you at my apartment?”

Great, so she had seen me. And for some reason, she’d decided to rub that in my face.

“Is that all you came here for?” I asked. “To ask me what I was doing at your apartment complex?”

“Uh, yes,” she said coolly. “I see you at my place, and I’m not allowed to ask you why you were there?”

No, of course she wasn’t allowed to ask! If she’d moved on, the last thing she should be doing was asking me about my business. Wasn’t it hard enough for me to see her kiss a new girl? And she saw me run away, and she didn’t think that was a clear sign I was hurt?

“You can if you want to be a bitch,” I answered equally as coolly.

Her expression turned sour. “A bitch? Really? I’m a bitch just because I want to know why you were at my place?”

“Yeah, if I made it obvious that I regretted going, maybe you should have left it at

that. Maybe coming over here and rubbing my nose in my mistakes isn't the best idea."

"Right, and I'm the mistake, right?" she asked, looking a little hurt.

"This time, yeah! You are! Like I said, it was obvious that I didn't want to see you anymore so—"

"How was that obvious?" she cut me off. "Look, clearly coming here was a mistake. Almost as big

of a mistake as I am to you, apparently."

God, why was she being so bitter to me?! She'd moved on with her life, she was happy again, and I was obviously not. Why couldn't she just show me some kindness? This was so unlike the Kaitlyn I used to know. The Kaitlyn I used to know had been so compassionate, caring, sweet... maybe she was still bitter about how I'd broken up with her. But if she was with someone she cared about, I didn't see why that shouldn't even matter anymore.

"Why are you doing this?" I asked her.

She furrowed her brow. "Doing what, Emily? You act like I'm torturing you just by coming here. And, fine, maybe to you, I am. So, I guess I'll go," she said as she stood off the bed, "but that was not my intention. And had I known you didn't want to see me, I wouldn't have come. I don't know how you think I was supposed to read your expression through a car window, but clearly it's been some giant grievance on my part."

"Through a car window?" I asked, not processing that part.

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She looked confused. “Yes... obviously? How else would I have been able to see you?”

So that explained all of it. She didn’t even know what I’d seen. She didn’t know that I knew she was now in a relationship with her ex. She’d seen me in my car....

That still didn’t completely explain why she’d come, if she was with someone new. But it did make the visit a little less cruel.

“Sorry...” I said quietly. “That’s not how I thought you saw me. I wouldn’t expect you to know I didn’t want to see you through a car.”

“So how did you think I saw you?” she asked. “What other way was there to see you?”

I probably shouldn’t have said anything. Had I not said anything, I would have been able to save myself the grief of explaining what I knew. But there was certainly no going back now.

“You would have seen me... in the hallway.”

“In the hallway?” she asked. “No... I couldn’t have. I saw you in your car, and I waited for you to come upstairs, but you never did, you just sat there for minutes. And, when I was looking through every hallway when I went downstairs to talk to you, you were nowhere.”

“Yeah... I didn’t come upstairs because I already had come upstairs. You saw me as I

was leaving.”

I thought saying this would make everything click for her. She’d realize I’d seen her kiss her new (and old) girlfriend, and she’d know why I was so upset. But she seemed equally clueless.

“If you came upstairs, why didn’t I see you? Why didn’t you come to the door? Did you change your mind about wanting to see me?”

“I did. After I saw you kiss Julia.”

She looked shocked. She fell into my accent chair, mouth agape, it all clicking together for her.

“You saw me kissing my ex...” she said slowly. “That’s why you’re so mad at me.”

“Yes... I mean, no. I don’t care that you kissed her, Kaitlyn. I understand completely. We’re not together. I broke up with you. You have a right to be with whoever the hell you want. I only cared because I thought you knew I saw you, and I thought it was rude of you to come over here and ask me why I came over, even though you’d seen me run away. Because obviously, it hurt me, though that isn’t your fault, and the kind thing to do would be leave me alone. Especially if you’ve moved on to someone else. In fact, why are you even here if you moved on to someone else?”

“Moved on to someone else?” she asked with a furrowed brow. “So... you saw us kiss, and you didn’t hear any other conversation between us?”

“I mean, briefly, I guess. She said something about ‘she really wanted to,’ though I don’t know what she wanted to do.”

She suddenly burst out laughing. It caught me off guard, because nothing I’d said

seemed too humorous to me.

“Is that what all this is about?!” she asked. “You’re just mad because you think I’ve moved on and am back with my ex? And that’s the reason you didn’t come talk to me?”

“Yes...” I said, still waiting to hear the humor.

“Emily, I’m not back with my ex!”

“You’re... you’re not?”

“No! Of course not! Even with you and me broken up, I’d never go back to her! Being with you showed me how much better a relationship could be. I could never go back to second best.”

Second best... the words made my heart soar for a brief moment. Her ex was second best, but I was first.

“But I saw you kiss her...” I said, still trying to fit the pieces together.

“No, you saw her kiss me. Very suddenly and a little forcefully, and as soon as the shock wore off, I pulled away. She came to my place totally unexpectedly. I had no idea she’d even be visiting. She just showed up, and I very coldly told her there was no hope for us and to leave.”

I couldn’t believe how wrong I’d gotten it. God, and to think, if she hadn’t seen me in my car in the parking lot, I never would have figured any of this out. I would have stayed clueless and believed her to be back with her ex and probably would never have reached out again.

“So you came here only because you saw me in the parking lot, and... and why did you come here, again?” I questioned.

“Uh, to know why you came to me, I guess. I saw you, and I really regretted missing you, so. Look, I know it’s kind of pathetic for me to be here. You dumped me, and the last thing I should be doing is coming to your house and asking why you wanted to see me, but I have to know. Why did you want to see me?”

This was it, this was my moment. This was the point when I could possibly change things, maybe even change the direction of my life.

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“I came to see you because I had to...” God, how did I even word it? How did I even begin.

“Yes?” she pushed me.

“I had to apologize to you. I had to tell you that... that I was wrong to break up with you. Really, unbelievably wrong, and I’m so sorry for that. I guess, when I saw that failing grade, I just got so wrapped up in my perfectionism. I’ve always striven toward it, and the thought of being held down by anything, even you, seemed like an unbearable thought.”

“Is it still unbearable?” she asked.

“No,” I said definitively. “No, since leaving you, only one thing has been unbearable, and that’s been living without you.”

A smile appeared on her face. “Really?”

“Really. I’ve been studying every moment of the day. I’ve been in a constant state of busy, because it’s the only way I can cope with my feelings without you around. There hasn’t been a spare moment when I haven’t thought about you. And I know maybe it’s too late, maybe I can’t come crawling back to you now, but I’m not sure what else to do. I can’t not come crawling back, because maybe this is my only chance. Maybe this is the only shot I have to be with you, and if it is... I’m going to take that shot. If you can’t forgive me, I understand completely, but... Kaitlyn, will you take me back?”

She stared at me seriously for a second, and my heart began to sink. I thought from her smile a moment ago there had been a good chance she'd take me back, no questions asked. But the way she was looking at me now, I wasn't so sure.

Then suddenly, she leapt from the chair and into my arms, planting kisses all over my neck and cheek.

"Yes, yes, absolutely yes! I've been so unhappy without you, Em, I really have."

And just like that, in just a moment, it was like all of my problems had vanished.

"Can it really be that easy?" I found myself asking the question that was in my head out loud.

"Can what really be that easy?" she asked back.

"This... all of this. Can it really be that easy to just have you back into my life? We can just get back together just like that? No resentment, no pain between us?"

She shrugged. "I'm sure we might have some issues to work through, but what couple doesn't? And there is still the issue of you and school, which is the whole reason we broke up."

"Right... yeah, speaking of that, I'm probably not going to be able to hang out with you as much as we had been before we broke up. I'm going to need to set aside more time for studying. The good news is, I've been doing a ridiculous amount while we were broken up, and I'm already almost through most of my textbooks, so that should make the rest of the semester easier. But still, school is still important to me. Maybe not more important than you, but a close second."

She grinned. "Baby, I will support you one hundred percent. I promise I won't tempt

you to hang out with me extra nights. I won't so much as text you while you're studying. I'll totally push you to do your absolute best."

As she said that, I felt guilty. Because, really, it likely could have been this easy from the beginning. We could have been like this from the start, had I not messed it up.

But I wasn't going to dwell on it, not now that I had her back. Like Abby had said, we all made mistakes in life. I couldn't be a perfectionist in everything. I had to accept that I was going to make mistakes like everyone else. This was definitely one of them, but I was fixing it. It was all going to be better from here.

"Thank you," I said to her softly.

"For what?" she asked.

"For being you. For forgiving me, for loving me, for everything you've done in the past and everything I know you will do in the future. Thank you for all of it."

She kissed me on the cheek. "You're welcome for all of it."

And with her arms by my side, with the warmth of her kiss on my cheek, I knew we were going to be okay. It was all finally going to be okay.

Epilogue

Kaitlyn

I looked over at Emily in the driver's seat, decked out in her graduation gown and cap that she hadn't taken off, even though the ceremony had finished an hour ago. But I didn't mind. She was excited, and she looked so good in the black robes.

“Congratulations, baby. I always knew you could do it. Even with a giant distraction like me by your side.” I was mostly teasing her about that time she’d broken up with me because I was setting her back in school, because really, ever since that break up, I’d been anything but a di

straction.

She rolled her eyes. “If anything, you helped push me to this. By constantly denying me extra date nights and reading flashcards to me, you kept me focused.”

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“I know.” I grinned cockily, as she took the keys out of the ignition.

“And I really thank you for that,” she told me. “With my disinterest with school this past year, I don’t know if I would have done without you.”

“Speaking of that disinterest,” I said, “how do you feel about getting out into the engineering world?”

“Not bad at all!” she said quickly. “I’m not sure how I’m going to love it, only time will tell, but even if I don’t adore my job, I think it’s going to be okay. I mean, I’ve got you to keep me company at night, whether my job is good or bad. For now, I think that’s enough for me.”

I kissed her softly, letting my lips linger on hers.

“You know what’s so great about this day?” I asked her.

“No, what?”

“Well, on top of you being a student superstar and getting out into the job market, I never have to deny you date nights again. I never have to say we can’t spend time together, because there’s no more studying! It can just be me and you all the time.”

“Trust me, baby, that’s all I’ve been thinking about this week,” she said, as she kissed me back.

“Come on,” I urged her, “let’s go inside. I’m sure everyone’s waiting for you.”

“Ugh, do I have to? You know how I hate being the center of attention.”

“And you know how Abby loves putting you there! So yes, for her, you have to.”

Abby had insisted on throwing Emily a graduation party. It really wasn't her style, and honestly, it was going to be mostly her friends and only a few people from her engineering program. But this kind of thing made her happy, and she'd blown off way too many of her events to blow this one off, too. Especially when it was for her!

“Come on, I'm the designated driver tonight. If you absolutely hate it, just get drunk.”

“Can't argue with that. Alright, let's go.”

We entered the King's Tooth and saw Abby had had them put a few tables together to accommodate all the people who had come. There were cupcakes on the table and pitchers of beer waiting for us.

She squealed when he finally came in. “Finally! You took forever! Congratulations, Em!” She gave her a cheek kiss, and she was then bombarded with a series of congratulations.

I took a step back and let her be in the spotlight, though I knew she didn't want to be. Ah, well, she'd be able to deal with it for just a few hours.

I grabbed two glasses from the bar, one with a straw for me and Emily, though, in order to start drinking, she'd need people to stop talking to her, which they hadn't yet. So I pulled up a chair at the table and poured a beer for myself, the only beer I'd be having for the night.

“Hey, Kaitlyn,” I heard a familiar voice from behind me.

“Hey, Brianne.”

Over the past year Emily and I had been together, we’d spent a fair amount of time with Abby’s friends, including Brianne. Not only had she become significantly less obnoxious since that day she’d seen me perform, she and I had actually become friends! Like, of all Abby’s friends, she and I became the closest.

And we didn’t just hang out at events with Abby’s group of friends. Brianne came up to me one day and told me how much she’d respected my street performance and how she really wanted to see what it could be like to connect to an audience that was so close to you. So I invited her to perform with me, and to my surprise, she took me up on the offer. We played together twice a week when she didn’t have classes.

Honestly, they were two of my favorite days of the week, too. It was really fun to experiment with different song covers together, and I made double the money when we played together. She wasn’t too bad for conversation, either.

“So, since I’m also going to be graduating here pretty soon, I had a proposition for you,” Brianne told me.

“Oh, what’s that?” I asked.

“Well, now that my schedule is going to be free, I was wondering if I could perform with you every day.”

“Yeah!” I said excitedly, eager about the proposition of more money and some company. “Absolutely, that would be awesome.”

“Perfect!” she said, “because there’s a part two to this proposition.”

“Part two?” I questioned.

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“I was wondering what you might think of trying to recruit some other people into our performance group. You know, see if anyone else would be interested in going out and playing with us. We could possibly make more money... we could set up flyers, hold some auditions, I think I already know some perfect fits from my music program.”

I hadn't even considered this before. And I didn't know why; the thought should have entered my mind as soon as I'd learned I made more money playing with Brianne. Of course, adding more instruments and being an actual band might bring in even more attention.

“That's not a bad idea, Brianne!” I said, as I patted her on the shoulder. “I mean, who knows if we'll find the right people for us, or if there's even that much interest, but yeah, I'm totally down to try. And I think if it works out, it could totally work in our favor.”

“Awesome!” she said with a grin on her face.

Our conversation ended abruptly when Emily came to my side, clearly done with the excess conversations.

“Beer, please!” she said with a cheeky smile.

“So bossy,” I teased her.

“You love it,” she shrugged.

I did. She was adorable when she was making demands.

“Alright, one second.”

I took the beer with the straw in it and turned my back to him to pour it so he wouldn’t see me pull something out of my front left pocket.

“Here you go!” I said, handing him the icy glass. She immediately laughed.

“A straw? Babe, why the hell would I need a straw to drink a beer? Am I a kid who—”

But she stopped teasing me suddenly when her eyes caught a glimpse of what was hanging off the straw.

Before she had a chance to react, I got down on one knee in front of her. Abby’s group of friends gasped.

“Emily, I know you have to have everything on your schedule, which was how I knew that I didn’t want to propose to you until after you graduated. But, now that you have, I want to make this official. I knew from the moment I met you that you were someone special, that I had to hold onto you. And a year later, I’m more sure than ever. You’re the one for me. Will you do me the honor of marrying me?”

“Yes!” she chirped and jumped up and down, spilling her beer slightly.

I stood back up and took the ring from around the straw and slid it onto her finger. The rose gold seemed to gleam even in the dark lighting of the bar.

Everyone erupted into claps and cheers. And not just Abby’s friends, but bystanders from the bar, as well. The room seemed to fill with warmth and joy as I kissed Emily.

When I pulled my lips from hers, I could see a tear dripping down her cheek, and I took my thumb and slid it away.

“I can’t believe this! Seriously, babe?”

“Seriously. You wouldn’t have wanted me to propose before you graduated, right?” I nudged him.

“Of course not! And you’re right. This timing is absolutely perfect. But, uh, you’ll understand I need to settle into a new job first and improve my savings before we start wedding planning.”

I rolled my eyes. “Of course I know that, my little type-A personality. I wouldn’t expect anything less than perfection when it comes time for us to marry.”

“And you’ll get nothing less,” she said with a smile, “at least during our wedding. Expect a little imperfection in the actual marriage, because, as I’ve proven, I’m not the best at avoiding mistakes.”

I kissed her cheek. “Baby, I love every small imperfection you throw at me. And I?

I’m prepared to work through all the bumps in the road of our relationship for the rest of our life, as I always have been.”

She set her beer down for a moment so she could wrap her arms fully around me, more tears welling in her eyes.

“I love you. I really love you so, so much.”

“And I love you. From now until the rest of my days. I will always love you.”

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More from H.L. Logan

More From H.L. Logan

All of my stories can be read by themselves, but if you'd like to stay in the loop and see which characters are going to be next to get their very own happily ever after, be sure to sign up for my newsletter! <http://eepurl.com/cx0keT>

Want more? Check out my first F/F novel:

Reunited

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Preview of Lost Hearts

Chrissy

I'd driven west across nearly the entire country to leave my hurricane flooded home behind, and of course I end up smack dab in the tail end of the biggest monsoon that Arizona had seen in over fifty years. That was just my luck the past month, I guess. My "career" was going nowhere (if an entry-level job working in a soul-sucking call center could even be called a career), my apartment complex had turned into a submarine, and my parents stopped returning my calls ever since they found out the reason why I wouldn't be getting a boyfriend any time soon. But hey, at least I had Henry.

“Right, Henry?” I stole a quick glance down at the space in front of the passenger seat where the little black cat was huddled, his eyes like giant saucers and the fur poofed up on his arched back. The poor guy was terrified of the rain, which was drumming madly on every window of the car, seeming to pound in from all directions. We hadn’t encountered any rain at all in the four days since leaving Georgia until today, when we entered the northern part of Arizona. Not only was it a surprise to get soaked, it was a shock to go from miles and miles of flat desert, to seeing trees and forests again. I hadn’t done much research before setting out on this journey, and so I’d expected to see nothing but barren landscape in the west all the way to California.

I found Henry a week ago—five days, actually—when I was wading through waist deep water, lugging my duffel bag on my head. I heard a tiny meow and saw this black bundle of fur, soaking wet, clinging on to a tree branch for dear life. I figured the poor guy had to have been up there for at least a couple days without food. I sloshed over to him, and he just jumped right on down onto my bag and stayed there as I made my way to the higher ground where I had parked my car before the storm hit.

Henry hadn’t had a collar or tags, and I guessed he was a stray. He was small, and was probably about four or five months old. Driving out of town, I’d thought about finding a shelter to turn him over to, but seeing him sleeping soundly on my passenger seat, with no home or family to go to, I fell in love with the little guy. We were both in the same boat, after all.

I’d always been a dog person my whole life, so I named him after my childhood dog, who’d also been small and black. The funny thing was that Henry (the cat, Henry) had almost dog-like responsiveness. He was completely relaxed being in the car, and at the first rest stop just outside of Atlanta, Henry jumped out of the car, strolled around, did his business, and then came back when I called to him. I’d been scared he was going to disappear somewhere, but at every single stop we’d made he’d always

come back when I called.

Thunder rumbled overhead and Henry let out a stressed out yowl as he pressed himself further into the passenger foot well. “Sorry, baby,” I said, my fists gripping the wheel so hard that I wouldn’t have been surprised if it snapped off in my hands. My wipers were slapping madly, barely doing anything to clear away the torrents of water coating my windshield. The beams of my headlights only illuminated the wall of rain in front of me and not much more.

I cringed as I passed through a large section of standing water on the highway. Don’t spin out, don’t spin out, I thought as I felt the back wheels losing traction. Trees shot by on the right, and a pair of headlights seemed to appear out of nowhere on the left. I managed to regain control of the car just before smashing into a spin that would’ve either wrapped me around a tree or sent me into opposing traffic.

“Holy shit,” I muttered. My heart threatened to burst from my chest and I knew that I really needed to find a place to pull over. What I should’ve done was stayed back in Flagstaff. There wouldn’t be another city for a quite a while, and driving through this storm at night was just a terrible idea.

Henry meowed sadly.

“I know,” I said. “The next exit, I’ll turn off.”

Lighting flashed in the distance, throwing a stark light across the pine and fir forests towering on both sides of the two-lane highway, and casting them in a jagged silhouette. My headlights flashed across a sign that read “Armstrong Rd, 1 MILE”, with a smaller blue sign below it showing symbols for gas and food.

Thank God, I thought. If there were a gas station and places for food, it would probably be a good place for me to stop for the night. I’d found that café parking lots

were fairly decent places for me to park my car to sleep, especially if they were the all night variety that attracted truck drivers. Parking right in front of the entrance of the restaurant where people could see me always made me feel safer. I could stay here until morning and hope that the storm would let up a bit.

The headlights of another passing car dashed across my windshield, glimmering through the thick blanket of rain, and I braced myself for the tidal wave of water sent up by its wheels. It battered the entire length of my car like a hundred angry fists, and Henry meowed again. I was beginning to realize that leaving this journey up to the winds of fate had been a very naïve idea. My cash reserves were dwindling, and were only enough to pay for a month's worth of food and gas. The road wouldn't just take me to where I needed to be. That sort of thing didn't happen in real life.

What would I do once I reached California? One big city was not much different from the rest, and if I were lucky enough to find a new job there, it'd likely be as fulfilling as the last. I really had no plan. I didn't even like city life.

The Armstrong road exit sign appeared suddenly out of the storm, and I quickly jerked the car off the ramp as lightning lit up the sky like a flashbulb. The road was small and worn, and in the downpour and darkness, it was hard to see where it ended and the forest began. I brought my speed down to barely a crawl. There were spots where small streams had formed and were pouring across the road, carrying debris with it, and every time I drove through one, I prayed that it wouldn't somehow be much deeper than it looked. After a couple minutes, I passed a wooden sign that was carved with green painted trees and the words "Welcome to Armstrong, Arizona." Ahead, I could see the glow of the gas station's sign and the lights from its overhead canopy. It was a small, locally owned station that had an attached minimart and garage, and the parking lot was empty except for a single pickup truck. I pulled up underneath the canopy and stopped by one of the pumps, thankful to be finally under shelter. The light inside the minimart was on, and through the window, I could see the attendant watching TV, his legs kicked up onto the counter.

“Okay, Henry,” I said to my frightened furry friend, who was still lodged underneath the dash. “We’re here.” I silently prayed that I’d be able to find a place for him to do his business—I really didn’t want to wake up in the middle of the night to a smelly mess in the car.

I opened the door, but Henry refused to come out from underneath the dash. “Henry, you gotta come out. Come on, do your business.” I crouched down on my haunches and held my hand out to try to beckon him over, but he only stared at me wearily, his pupils huge. I sighed. I’d been lucky with him, I realized. Extremely lucky. If he were like most cats, this journey would’ve been over a long time ago. “Sorry, Henry, I’m gonna have to pull you out of there,” I said, and I reached in and grabbed him under his arms and lifted him out. He didn’t fight me, but his fur was still puffed up and he didn’t look happy at all. I looked around for a dirt or grass place he could go to the bathroom, but the only spot was off away from the gas station and out in the rain.

Maybe if I go over to the trees, I thought unhappily. They were swaying in the wind and I wasn’t in the mood to get wet or hit by a falling branch, and I knew that Henry wouldn’t be very eager about it either. Suddenly, a huge bolt of lightning streaked across the sky above the station, lighting the whole place up stark white. The immediate thunderclap was so loud that it vibrated the metal canopy. I shouted and dropped to a crouch, and Henry leapt from my arms and bounded right back into the car. I’m sure if he were able, he would’ve shut the door and locked it right behind him, too.

“Shit,” I breathed. “Please don’t poo in the car.” I shut the door, pulled out an umbrella from the back seat, and walked toward the gas station market’s entrance. A huge lake of water seemed to stretch out between the overhead canopy and the front door, and the ground was so dark that I had no idea if it was an inch deep or a swimming pool. There was no getting around it. I sucked in a breath, opened my umbrella and fought to keep it under control from the wind, and went for it.

It was definitely not just an inch deep.

Water sloshed over the top of my shoes and I cursed under my breath as I did a weird little dance trying to touch the ground as little as possible, but it was no use. By the time I reached the entrance, my feet and the bottom of my jeans were completely soaked. I should've worn shorts. One more item to my list of stupidly poor planning.

A chime dinged as I pulled open the door. I closed my umbrella and plodded inside, the wet soles of my sneakers squawking noisily on the tile floor. The clerk, an older man with white hair peeking out from beneath a worn baseball hat, looked up from the small TV that was playing "America's Got Talent".

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“Good evening, young lady,” he said. “Wasn’t expecting anyone in here. You got in just at the right time. I was about to shut the pumps down and close up shop.”

“I’m sorry to bother you, sir,” I said. “I’m doing a little cross c

ountry road trip and am gonna be sleeping in my car tonight, and I wanted to ask if I could park underneath your canopy there to keep out of this storm.”

The man turned and looked over his shoulder out the rain-streaked window to get a look at my car. “Sleep out there, by yourself? In this storm? Keep driving a ways to the next town and there’s a motel, you know?”

I smiled sheepishly. “Well, I didn’t exactly budget for lodging. Plus, I’ve got a cat.”

“Hm.” He looked me up and down and seemed to be sizing me up. “Listen, I’ll do you one better than the overhang. You can go ahead and park your car in the side garage here. Safer than keeping it out to the elements, plus you can let your cat roam around, too. I used to have an old cat, Pinky—she passed away couple years ago now, but I still got a bag of her kibble and a litter box.”

I hesitated. Of course I was thankful and surprised by his sudden offer, but... A girl on the road had to be cautious. He sensed my concern and smiled.

“Take a look at the place first and see what you think. If you don’t feel comfortable, I can give you directions to the police station. The sheriff wouldn’t mind you parking in the lot there. He’s a good man, I know him well. What’s your cat’s name?”

“Henry,” I said. I immediately felt more at ease.

“Henry can use all that stuff, if you decide to stay. How long you in town for?”

“Just till tomorrow, if the storm lets up a bit. Thank you, sir,” I said with no restraint of gratitude in my voice. I’d honestly been the closest I’d come to the end of my rope since those hellish last few days in Atlanta—even then I’d gone through everything with a kind of zoned out acceptance. Today’s events had really dug in deep. “I’d love to stay in the garage. You have no idea how much that means to me. My name’s Chrissy Seitz. Sorry if I seemed suspicious.” I gave him a sheepish smile.

“Reynold Golden,” he said, shaking my hand. “It’s nothing. I can’t have you sitting out there alone in this monsoon. Then it’d be on me if you washed away, or something.” He laughed. “Well, go ahead and pull your car in. I’m gonna lock up soon. You hungry, Chrissy?”

“I’ve got some food in my car,” I said. Really, I just had half a turkey sandwich and a snack bag of chips, but I wasn’t going to let the old man offer anything more to me, and I wanted to save as much cash as possible. I could deal with being a little bit hungry tonight. I ran back into the car, my pants getting doubly soaked as I splashed through the lake outside the front door. Henry had gone back to his spot lodged underneath the dash.

“Guess what, buddy? We got a place to stay tonight.” Henry just stared back at me with his saucer eyes. I started up the car and swung it over to the garage where Reynold was standing with his hands on his hips. He flagged me forward onto the car lift that sat in the middle of the small garage, and then pulled the rolling door closed. The place smelled of grease, metal, and gasoline, and it brought me back to the garage at my parent’s house where my dad would work on his car. It made me nostalgic, and slightly sad as I remembered that my parents had refused to speak to me since I’d come out to them. I had to wonder if Reynold still would’ve offered all

this hospitality to me if he knew I was a lesbian. Thinking that way made me feel bad—I'd much rather think the best of people—but I couldn't really help it. Small town folk tended to be on the conservative side, after all.

“Just a second,” Reynold said, opening up a tall metal cabinet. “I still use the kitty litter to soak up oil spots.” He pulled out a bag of litter and a rectangular box, and filled it up halfway with the stuff. “Kibble’s inside. It might be a little stale, but it should still be fine. I’ll be right back.”

I opened the door, and Henry finally poked his head up over the side to look around. His nose twitched as he sniffed, and when he seemed certain that everything was A-Okay, he hopped out onto the concrete floor of the garage. I slid the litterbox over to him with my foot and then crouched down next to it and tapped it on the corner to draw his attention. His yellow-green eyes were still wide and curious, and he slowly trotted over to the box, sniffed at it, and then hopped inside. I smiled with some relief as he immediately began to chuff at the sand to do his business.

“Things are okay,” I said to him, though really I was talking to myself. I walked around my car to inspect the garage. It had enough room to work on two vehicles, the other spot unoccupied except for a dark patch of grease in the middle of the gray concrete floor. A few long fluorescent tube lights hung overhead, and one of them flickered occasionally, a moth flitting around it. Tools lined the walls, along with shelves of spare parts, tires, jugs of oil and other fluids, and other mechanic things that were foreign to me. There was a small desk with a chair and one of those office water dispensers next to it. It was definitely a garage. Not glamorous at all, and the rain pounded noisily on the roof, but to me the place felt like a five-star hotel. I could even lay my sleeping bag on the floor if I wanted—it’d be nice to stretch out completely instead of sleeping in the front seat.

The door that connected the minimart opened, and Reynold came in lugging a big bag of kibble on his shoulder. I hurried over to help him with it. Henry, who was

cautiously exploring the area around the litterbox, looked up at the sound of the food bag and meowed.

“Oh, he’s hungry, isn’t he?” Reynold said. “Do you have a bowl for him?”

“Yeah,” I said, and pulled out two small metal dishes from the back of the car. Reynolds opened the kibble and scooped out some food into the bowl, and then filled the other with water from the dispenser. Henry immediately went for the food.

“Sorry, buddy,” I said, stroking his back. He raised his butt up into the air and allowed his tail to slide through my hand. I normally would’ve fed him much earlier, but the storm had made it difficult.

“Well, I’m gonna lock up here,” Reynold said. “Restroom is back there. I’ll leave the door to the store open, just in case you do get hungry. Just leave a couple bucks on the counter. Another fella named Lee will be opening up shop tomorrow. I’ll give him a call to let him know you’ll be in here. I just live right down the road here, if you go east off Armstrong and then take your first left. Only house on the street.” He walked over to the desk and jotted something down onto a post-it. “Number’s here, in case of emergency.” He smiled. “Well, good night, Chrissy. I’ll see you when I come in tomorrow, if you haven’t left yet.”

I nodded and shook his hand. “Thank you, sir,” I said. I was in a slight daze from his kindness and willingness to help me. “I really appreciate this. Really.”

“It’s nothing,” he said. He left through the minimart, and a moment later I heard the roar of the pickup’s engine outside, just barely noticeable over the drumming of the rain on the metal roof of the garage. Headlights crossed over the small window slits of the garage door, and then it was just me, Henry, and the sound of the storm. Henry was still chowing down on the food when thunder boomed overhead like a bomb going off, rattling the metal garage door and vibrating all the parts sitting on the

shelves. I winced and fought the instinct to drop to a crouch, but Henry must've leapt ten feet in the air. He hit the ground running and darted off to hide beneath one of the shelves, his eyes the only thing visible.

I pulled out the little towel that he had adopted as a bed, and laid it down by the front of the shelf where he was hiding. Then I changed out of my wet pants, pulled my sleeping bag out along with my half sandwich, and spread my bag out by the front of my car. I ate the sandwich as thunder continued to rumble and the rain kept up its relentless downpour. It was nine thirty, and I was exhausted. I stretched out in my sleeping bag, and thought about what the gas station owner had done for me. Reynold had let a complete stranger stay in his place of business, without even a second thought. A product of a time gone by, maybe. Or maybe I'd just gotten used to the way people treated each other when living in a big city. Whatever the reason, it was a nice change from what I was used to.

I looked ov

er towards the shelves where Henry was still hiding. "You sure are lucky you're a cat," I whispered. Then I closed my eyes, and drifted off to sleep.

* * *

I woke up the next morning to the sound of the garage door rolling open. At first, I thought it was thunder. It had rocked the building so many times during the night that I had started to dream about it, but when gray daylight poured over my eyelids, I sat up and rubbed the sleep from my eyes. A robust silhouette filled the garage entrance by my car, and when the figure walked forward, I saw a man around Reynold's age, with a full white beard and big belly. The first thing I thought was that he looked awfully like Santa Clause.

"Morning there," he said. "You must be Chrissy. I'm Lee."

“Morning,” I said, sleepily.

“Care for some coffee? Gonna get the machine started up.”

“Sure.” I rubbed my eyes again and got out from my sleeping bag. I was surprised to see that the rain had stopped.

I glanced back behind me toward the shelves. Henry’s towel was still empty. Crouching on my knees, I peered beneath the shelf. “Henry,” I called. Nothing. He must’ve found another spot somewhere and was sleeping soundly.

Lee came back with a paper cup of coffee and a donut, and held them out to me. “Thank you,” I said, taking them gratefully.

“That storm must’ve kept you awake,” Lee said.

“No, actually. I was exhausted. I’d been on the road for seven or eight hours when I hit it, and driving through that thing absolutely wore me out.”

“You’re lucky you’re in one piece,” Lee said, sipping his coffee. “So you’re just passing through, huh?”

“Since it seems like the rain has finally let up, yeah, I think I’ll be moving on. I’m heading to California.”

Lee nodded. “Not much for a young person like yourself to do here. What do you have going on in California?”

I thought about it for a moment. “Nothing,” I admitted. “Guess I just picked it because it seemed like the furthest from home.”

“Where you from?”

“Georgia,” I said, and Lee laughed, his cheeks going pink.

“Out of the frying pan, into the fire. Lucky the flooding didn’t hit Armstrong—sometimes we get mudslides and such, but we were lucky this year. You should see what happened to Phoenix.” He whistled. “Be careful on the road, I’m sure you’ll encounter some hairy shit out there. And you’re bound to encounter more rain. It’s not over yet.”

“Oh, great.”

“No rush. Stick around for a while. Reynold wouldn’t mind having you stick around for a few days, I’m sure.”

“Thanks,” I smiled, “But I probably should get going. Sooner I get to California, the sooner I can figure out what the hell I’m doing.”

“Right.” He juted a thumb towards the minimart. “I’ve gotta get the shop all set up and the pumps turned on.”

Lee went off to do his thing, and I stood in the garage doorway and surveyed the town of Armstrong in the daylight. Dark gray clouds hung overhead, and with the forest of pine trees surrounding the station and Armstrong road, the little sunlight barely made it to the ground. It almost felt like it was reaching evening rather than the morning. The pavement was scattered with debris and trails of muddy water flowed down the road carrying branches and pinecones and other things ripped loose from the storm. I heard thunder rumbling off from somewhere in the distance.

Further up the road, I saw a crossroads with a bent stop sign, and past that I could just make out what looked like a few shops or other businesses lining either side of the street. That was probably the entire town right there, if it could even be called a town. A community, more like it. A stop for people on the way in to the national forests to refuel and maybe get something to eat, and for people to retire to.

I went back inside and found the big bag of cat food that Reynold had left out. “Henry,” I called, shaking the bag up and down. He always seemed to meow when he was about to be given food, and I listened out for his call—but heard nothing. “Henry?” I filled up the bowl and then shook it, but he still didn’t show. I frowned, and crouched down to peer beneath all the shelves and cabinets. I looked under the car, then popped the hood to see if he was hiding up in the engine. Nothing.

“Henry!” I called. Now I was getting nervous. I walked around the garage, searching for places he could hide. Surely, he wouldn’t have gone outside. He’d never wandered away from me before—I mean, I’d only had him for a few days, but every time I’d let him out of the car he’d always stick close by. I ran to the garage door and took a quick peek outside. Again, nothing.

“Hey, Lee,” I said, peeking into the minimart. He was watching the TV.

“They’re talking about the CEO of that company BluTech who resigned,” Lee said, gesturing to the TV. “Can you believe she just up and left? Must be nice to be a multi-millionaire if you can just quit your job.”

“Oh, really?” I wasn’t distracted, and not really interested in the news at that moment. “Hey, you didn’t happen to see a cat when you opened the garage, did you? Small, black.”

“A cat?” He shook his head. “No. You have a cat with you? I was wondering why Pinky’s old litterbox was out. No, I didn’t see any cat coming in. But I wasn’t exactly

paying attention..."

"Okay," I said. "There are no ways a cat could escape, are there?"

Lee frowned, slowly getting to his feet. "No... Not other than the garage door. You can't find him?"

"No," I said, the panic starting to show in my voice. I hurried back to the garage with Lee following behind me. I dropped back down to my hand and knees and did another look under the shelf and the car. "Henry? Henry where the hell are you?"

Grabbing the bowl of food, I went out front, shaking it and calling his name. Lee was rifling around the garage in all the same spots that I had checked before, but Henry wasn't there. He must've gotten out somehow. This whole time I'd thought that he just wasn't the kind of cat to wander off on his own, but I'd assumed way too much.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:12 pm

“Henry!” I shouted desperately as I ran around the gas station, dropping down into the mud to peer under bushes and the big propane tank that was out back. He wasn’t there. I’d only had him for four days, but I loved the little guy like he’d been with me for years. That little black ball of fur had trusted me and looked to me for help when he was in trouble. I’d rescued him, but in a way he’d rescued me too, when I was at the lowest point in my life and thought that nobody would ever need me. I’d wrapped him up in his towel and fed him canned tuna, and silently promised him that he’d never be cold and wet again. And now...

I came back to the front of the garage, where Lee was still looking around for Henry. “Anything?” I asked. He shook his head. Suddenly, thunder boomed overhead, and I flinched as fat raindrops began to patter down noisily onto the roof of the garage.

Lucy

I stood in the old sunroom that I’d designated as my new pottery room and stared silently at the empty wheel, its surface completely spotless. Nothing had been made on the thing in over a year now. Even in New York, when I was still able to produce work, I’d barely touched it. My ex-husband, Charles, ran the company and it seemed like all the clients wanted clean, clean, clean—ornate but in a completely predictable, cookie-cutter way. It was all stuff that was simpler to design on the computer than to throw by hand on a wheel, and so that’s what I’d done.

The rain drummed down on the roof. It’d been going for about an hour now, and the forecasts said to expect another storm shower later in the day. It was a good thing I’d moved back in and done so much needed upkeep. With my parents long out of the place, and none of my siblings willing to take care of it, the old Duncan home had

basically fallen to shambles. With this crazy storm, it probably would've washed away if I hadn't come back.

I set up all my supplies by the wheel and pulled up a stool, exhaling as I sat down. I rubbed my face and stroked my chin, eyeing the clay and willing it show me its hidden form. It'd been a week since I'd had the courage to sit and try again, and a year since the block had firmly settled into my body, preventing me from doing anything meaningful with my work. Or maybe it'd been much longer than that—when Charles and I had formed Lucy Duncan Ceramics and I'd been churning out those shelf-stocker pieces. The thing was, despite my traditional education and background, despite all the awards I'd received for my pottery, I'd felt completely happy with what I was producing. It was paying the bills—no, far better than that, truthfully—and it was still somewhat creatively fulfilling even though I wasn't pushing any boundaries. Challenging, though? Perhaps not.

After tying my hair into a bun, I started the wheel and wet my hands in the reservoir of water, and then, with a moment of hesitation, started to work the clay. It formed in my hands, slowly pulling upwards before I pushed it down into a more spherical shape. I worked at it, doing my best to create

something interesting, something beautiful, and after twenty minutes, I realized I was breaking out in a cold sweat. I wiped my forehead with the back of my forearm and continued to work at the shape, willing it to become something better than what was sitting there in front of me, but at this point I knew it was like I was wrestling with a wild animal. I didn't think I'd felt this kind of frustration even when I'd first started learning ceramics.

“God damnit!” My vision blurred with a flash of anger, and the side table went flying across the room, the plastic bowl of water tumbling over the floor. I stared down at the wheel and the horrible little mess that sat on it, and I took deep breaths, trying to calm myself down. “God...” I muttered, and looked around the room, embarrassed. I

never got angry, not like this, but what good was an artist if she couldn't make her art? What if I'd lost my ability entirely? How had this even happened?

I went inside the house, the old wood floor creaking beneath my shoes, and retrieved a mop from the closet. It was probably the gloom from the storm, but house seemed to be extra empty and lonely today. I mopped up the water on the sunroom floor and straightened up the side table, when a random urge struck me to go outside and stand in the rain. That was probably what I needed—a good soaking to cool my head. I tossed the mop aside and without any further thought, pushed open the sunroom door and stepped outside.

It was really coming down now. I was immediately drenched, but I had to admit that it did feel liberating. When was the last time I did something like this?

I walked out from the back, through the woods in the direction of the street that ran up to Armstrong Road where the gas station was. I didn't know where I was going, I guess I was just aimlessly wandering. At thirty-four years old, strolling in the rain just for the sake of getting wet and enjoying it somehow felt rejuvenating. Was that what I was lacking? Youth? Had middle-age sucked up my talent and inspiration? Or was it because I'd married a man nearly twice my age?

Or was it because I hadn't loved him?

No, that wasn't true. I loved Charles—as a companion, a friend, a mentor... but just not as a lover. Not in a romantic way.

I made it through the short sprawl of pines that sat at the edge of the property and came out on the street. There was so much water flowing by the curb that a trash can had been carried down all the way from where Richardson's house was. I chuckled and craned my neck back to the sky to taste the rain. Right at that moment, thunder exploded from what seemed like just a short distance away, so loud and intense that it

set off a car alarm. I nearly collapsed to the ground in shock, instantly knocked out of my little dream world.

“Shit,” I muttered, spinning around and hurrying back towards the house. “Shit, shit.” I really didn’t want to get struck by lightning—not unless it would somehow wake me up from my creative block and didn’t fry me to death.

A noise stopped me in my tracks.

At least I thought I’d heard a noise—I could’ve just been hearing things. The pines stretching above me dampened the rain some, but it was still loud enough to distort things. I looked around, saw nothing, and then started toward the house.

Then I heard again. It was definitely there; I wasn’t imagining it—a cat’s meow. I glanced around again, walking back in the direction I thought it had come from. “Kitty?” I said. “Where are you, kitty?”

It came again from above me, and I peered up into the tree, surprised to see a small black cat clinging to the lowest branch. What is this, I chuckled to myself, some kind of bad luck omen? I didn’t need any more poor luck, but I also wasn’t going to just leave a scared little cat outside in the rain. “Stay there,” I said, and reached up to grab it. It allowed me to take it beneath the arms and lift it down. He meowed to me again.

“Poor guy. Better get you inside.”

Where had he come from? The Richardsons lived about a quarter mile up the street, and I knew they didn’t have a cat. The next closest neighbor was Reynold Golden, who owned the gas station, but his house was over a mile away, and he didn’t own a cat either.

Thunder boomed again, and I felt his tiny body tremble against my chest. He

squirmed, trying to get loose, but I held him tight and picked up my pace until I was back at the house. “Lucky that I was out there,” I told the cat as I sat him down on the floor of the sunroom. I stripped off all my clothes and carried the sopping bundle to the laundry room. When I turned around, I was surprised to see the little guy had followed me, water dripping from his fur. He immediately flopped onto the floor and started to lick himself. I laughed and then went upstairs to put on some fresh clothes, and pulled out a towel from the closet. The cat was still sniffing around at the base of the stairs, and I quickly scooped him up with the towel and carried him up to the bathroom.

He definitely wasn’t a fan of the shower, and he meowled and struggled, clawing at my arms as I cleaned the dirt and mud from his fur. Eventually, he seemed to realize that I wasn’t letting him go anywhere, and gave in to the bathing, sitting there with a pissed off look on his face. When he was clean enough, I pulled him out and rubbed him down the best I could with the towel. He struggled free and scampered back down the stairs to the living room where he plopped down onto the Persian rug that lay in front of the couch, and set to grooming himself vigorously.

“Don’t piss on that rug,” I told him. “It was my mother’s, and she didn’t like cats very much.”

I crouched down next to him and scratched his ear. He meowed and licked my hand, apparently forgiving me for my offenses against him. I smiled. “Though maybe she would’ve liked you. You’re a sweet one. What the hell were you doing out in that tree?”

In the kitchen, I pulled out a small bowl and filled it with water, and then looked through the fridge to find something a cat might like. I had some roast chicken leftover from dinner, so I shredded off some of the meat into a bowl and brought it back to the cat, who was still making himself presentable. He immediately flipped onto his feet and made a beeline straight for the chicken. He scarfed it down.

“You were starving, weren’t you, little guy?” Had someone passing through town dumped him? We did have a small pet store up the street on Armstrong that occasionally sold dogs and cats, but it seemed unlikely that they’d lose track of one of them. I crossed my arms over my chest and watched him clean the bowl, and afterwards he licked his paw and wiped his face. Then he padded over to the couch and hopped up on it to gaze out the window. He turned his wide eyes over to me and let out a drawn out meow. It sounded sad and longing somehow, though maybe it was just me projecting onto him.

“Sorry,” I said, sitting down on the arm of the couch. “You’re not going back out there and besides—”

Thunder rattled the windows, sending my furry guest tumbling off the couch and scrambling for cover beneath it.

“Yeah. That.”

I went back to the sunroom to try my hand at the pottery wheel again, slapping the mound of clay back in the center and starting my routine. I'll just do something simple, I decided. A present for my new friend. After fifteen minutes I'd made a plain bowl with a flat bottom, about twelve inches in diameter. Using a slip mixture, I added some texture to the outside of the bowl, and then designed the inside with concentric circles emanating from the center, like ripples in water. I examined the work, and thought that it was acceptable. It'd been a while since I'd had a reason to make something. Every time I'd tried to make something different or new, something that surpassed the art I'd created during the time I'd felt was my peak, I'd come up empty. Literally unable to make anything. My inability to create was the whole reason why I'd moved back to my family home. Well, besides from rescuing it from ruin. I'd thought that the peace and quiet and familiar atmosphere would help lift my mental block and nurture new inspiration... but all the move had done was bring even more frustration.

Maybe this was my fate; the cost of sacrificing my creative soul to the corporate gods. A lonely existence in my childhood home

with nothing but the companionship of a cat. Maybe I should get five cats. Or six. I could make bowls for all of them.

I chuckled to myself and put the bowl into my electric kiln, fired it up, and set the shutoff timer. Back in the living room, my guest had come out from his hiding place and was lapping at the bowl of water. I gave him a scratch behind his ears, and he let out another long meow.

“Tomorrow, I’ll see if I can find out where you came from, okay?” I figured that I would go in to the pet store, buy some supplies, and see if the owner there knew where the little black cat had come from. If she didn’t, well... maybe I would keep him. Something about him had grown on me; maybe because I’d rescued him, or maybe because he’d helped me complete the first piece of pottery I’d done in ages.

I went back to the kitchen, pulled some more breast meat off the leftover chicken, and brought it out to my guest, who was pacing around the room, rubbing his face up against the sides of furniture and stopping occasionally to inspect things of interest that were apparently invisible to my eyes. I set the dish of chicken down on the floor next the bowl of water, and smiled as he dashed to it and went to town. I was grateful to the little guy for giving me a reason to make something. Maybe that was what had been lacking—a reason. Artists created their best work when they had something to say, whether they knew it or not, and maybe I’d just run out of things to say.

I rummaged around in the garage and found a shallow, unused plastic storage bin, and filled it up with shredded newspaper as an impromptu cat box. I brought it inside, and set it in the sunroom. “Shit in here,” I said to the cat, picking him up and placing him inside the box. He stared at me, batted at one of the strips of newspaper, and then hopped back out. “Shit in there, you hear me?” I called after him as he strolled back into the house like he belonged here. I huffed a resigned laugh and followed him.

My old childhood bedroom upstairs, along with my Dad’s old study, was packed to the brim with moving boxes filled with things from my old New York apartment. Charles and I had lived there together for five years—the duration of our marriage. We’d been together for seven, though the definition of “together” was a bit up in the air. He’d been somewhat of a mentor during my last years at Beasley University, managing at the gallery that I’d showed and sold my ceramics work in, and after I’d finished my masters he’d taken me under his wing. I stayed at the gallery, and it wasn’t long before he’d pitched her idea to me for starting a ceramics design firm. We’d start small, with me as the lead designer until we could bring on others, and

we'd sell work to people interested in limited, high quality pieces that weren't quite one of a kind, but felt that way.

I was a fan of money—still am—and so I saw the value in doing the commercial stuff. And hey, I could still retain some of my artistic integrity. I was head designer after all, and I could make what I thought was good. It didn't stay that way, though.

The company grew, my work's reputation grew, and soon we were getting offers from big corporations requesting designer features to use in their catalogues. Being a fan of money, it didn't take much convincing for me to start making my work more and more mainstream, and more consumable. By this time too, Charles and I had decided to move in with each other. He'd been the one to suggest it. I was hesitant, but my mother was sick at the time, and she was so concerned that I wasn't married yet, so... to ease my dying mother's concern for her youngest daughter, I asked Charles if he wanted to get married.

Was he in love with me? I don't know. Like I'd said, we'd made a great partnership, and he was a great friend. Maybe Charles was the type of man who normally wouldn't have been interested in marriage. He was forty when we married, and he'd never mentioned any prior marriages or girlfriends. Business and art was his life. He knew the advantages of our marriage, and he knew why I'd asked him. He'd never been interested in my body.

I'd been back here for two months now, and I still hadn't unpacked most of my things—just the tools, mostly, and some necessary clothing. I didn't know how long I would be staying here. Just until I got over this creative block, I'd told myself, but I'd begun to wonder if that would ever happen.

Chrissy

Lee had offered to put me up at his and his wife's house until the storm lifted enough

that we could mount a proper search operation for Henry. I'd spent over an hour trudging around in the mud and rain in the woods surrounding the gas station, but I'd found no sign of him. It was when the lightning started to strike that I'd decided Lee and Reynold were right, and it would be safer for me to wait, but the thought of Henry scared and lost somewhere out there during that thunder and lightning tore me up inside. That night, Lee's wife, Margery, made a big lasagna dinner and gave me a slice of apple pie. It was the best I'd eaten since I'd left Georgia, but it was difficult to enjoy it knowing that Henry was out there hungry somewhere.

I was responsible for the little guy, and I'd let him get lost right under my nose. I figured he must've wandered outside when Lee had opened the garage, and gotten startled by the thunder and ran off somewhere to hide. The other possibility, which I really didn't want to think about, was that he had gotten snatched up by some coyote or hawk out there. He was small, so it was possible...

I lay awake in the guest bed, my eyes blurry with tears. Damnit, I thought. Please let me find him. The thought of moving on to California without Henry just killed me, and the thought of going back to Georgia was even worse. And there still remained the problem of what I would do next. Get another soul sucking job? Same shit, different town?

Maybe I could stay here. It was a weird thought, but at the same time, a pleasant one. All the people I'd met here were so nice, and there was a real sense of community. Of course, I doubted there were any apartment buildings I could move into, and the nearest city was an hour's drive, so staying here was probably not going to happen. I'd find Henry, and then move on.

Please let me find him, I thought again.

I was sad and couldn't stop thinking about him, but my body was exhausted and relieved to finally have a proper bed to sleep on, and I quickly fell asleep.

I woke to another dreary day, the sun hiding behind grey clouds. Margery had made pancakes, and the news on the kitchen television said that the storm was passing east. “Worst of it’s over for us, I think,” she said, drizzling maple syrup onto her pancakes. She was robust as her husband, with an appetite to match her size, and her stack of pancakes towered over mine.

The stairs groaned and creaked with Lee’s heavy footsteps. He appeared in the kitchen wearing a rain jacket and holding two pairs of rubber boots. “Good morning,” he said, dropping the boots by the front door. “You have a raincoat, Chrissy?”

“Yes, sir,” I said.

“Finish up your breakfast and we’ll get looking. It’s just a drizzle right now. I’ve got a pair of boots you can borrow.”

“Okay,” I said, scarfing down the rest of my pancakes. “What about you? Aren’t you going to eat?”

“I’ll be fine. I’d like to get out there as soon as possible. It was eating at me all night. I’d feel better the sooner we get out looking for Henry.”

“It’s not your fault, Lee. But I appreciate your help. I appreciate what both of you have done for me.”

Margery smiled. “We do what we can to help folks in need around here. The world needs a little more kindness in it, I think.” She picked an apple out from a basket on the table and handed it to her husband. “It’ll tide you over for now.”

“Alright, you ready to go?”

I nodded and quickly brought my plate over to the sink. “Thank you for breakfast,” I

said. “Hold on, let me grab my raincoat.” I dashed upstairs to the guest room to dig my jacket out of my bag, then jogged back down and pulled on the spare pair of boots. They fit me perfectly.

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“Belonged to our daughter,” Lee said. “She’s in Phoenix now. Programmer.”

We pulled up our hoods and headed out the door. The rain was light—not much more than a scattered pattering. We hopped into Lee’s car and drove the short distance to the gas station. My eyes scanned the trees in a shallow hope that I might spot Henry, but of course, I saw nothing. The woods spanned wide areas between houses and the chances of spotting him from the car were slim.

The chances of spotting him in general are slim.

I pushed the thought from my mind, and we pulled up to the gas station. We went up to the minimart, and I was surprised to see a paper flier taped up to the glass on the inside of the front door that said, MISSING: Henry. Black Cat, five months old. Call Reynold at 555-346-2311. Reynold was watching TV, his feet propped up on the counter, and he stood up when he saw us walk in.

“Morning, you two,” he said.

“Morning, Reynold,” I replied. “No sign of Henry?”

“I’m afraid not, Chrissy. Sorry. Hey, I printed out these fliers. If you can’t turn him up looking around in the woods, then you might try distributing them up in the town. We’ve got a pet store here, so if anyone found him, they’d probably go there.”

“I’ll do that,” I said. “Thanks Reynold.”

“Hey,” he said, giving me an encouraging smile. “Keep your head up.”

I smiled back. “Yeah.”

Lee and I moved out from the gas station and started to comb the trees surroundi

ng it. Lee split off from me to cover more ground, and he carried Henry’s bowl filled with kibble to shake and entice him out if he was hiding. Every dozen feet or so, I would call Henry’s name, stopping to look up into the overhead branches and beneath shrubs. I realized that the chances of just happening on him were pretty slim—he would need to come out and find us. There was just too much ground to cover, too many places he could be hiding.

After fifteen minutes of walking, I checked the map on my cell phone and saw that I was quite close to a street, and I followed the GPS until I reached it. I called for Henry again, and then stood there silently, straining my ears hoping to catch the sound of his meow. All I heard was the steady patter of rain on soil and asphalt, and the light rustle that came from thousands of trees caressed by the wind. I walked up the street a little ways until I reached a large wood paneled house with a white BMW parked in the front. I was surprised to see that it had New York plates.

Guess I’m not the only one from out of town, I thought, and turned to head back to the gas station. I’d have to depend on the fliers—they’d be more effective than walking around by foot, and I didn’t want to keep Lee. He hadn’t eaten breakfast, and he’d already done a lot more than he needed to just to help me. So far, everyone had.

I felt my eyes getting hot with tears. It was a weird mixture of disappointment in myself for losing Henry, sadness knowing he was out there scared and hungry, and amazement for how these strangers had gone so out of their way to help me and show me such kindness and hospitality. It was something that had been sorely missing from my world.

“Anything?” Lee asked, back at the gas station. I shook my head, and he patted me on

the shoulder. “Nothing on my end either. We’ll drive up into the main part of town, and put the fliers up in the pet store, the bank and the market. If anybody’s seen Henry, they’ll pass through one of those places for sure.”

I nodded and smiled. “Thanks, Lee. Really. I’m just blown away at how kind everyone has been to me since I’ve arrived. Is everyone this nice here?”

“Well, I don’t know about everyone,” he said, shrugging. “But I suppose most. There are a few that keep to themselves, but for the most part, Armstrong is a pretty close-knit community. We’re a small place, and we’re all the type of people who like simple things, so we all share something in common. Some folks have lived here all their lives.”

“Have you?”

“Oh, no. We moved here when we had our daughter. Wanted to raise her away from the big city life. Of course, that’s where she is now, but I’d like to think she has a wider appreciation for things after growing up here. And it’s not so bad, you know? We’re only an hour or so out from a city anyway. I’ve been retired for a while, but I still work at the gas station to keep busy. Reynold has been here his whole life; his father was the one who opened that gas station.”

Lee opened the door to the minimart and we went back inside. “There’s a few others on our side of the town,” he continued. “Oh, the Duncans. Their property was unmanaged for a while after the husband and wife passed and their children moved out, but recently one of the daughters came back. She kind of keeps to herself though.”

“No luck?” Reynold asked, sipping a coffee.

“None,” Lee said. “Fliers?”

Reynold pushed them over the counter to us. “Hey, Chrissy.”

“Yes, sir?”

“So, Lee filled me in a bit on your situation. He said that you’re headed to California, is that right?”

“That’s right. Though I don’t really have much of a plan once I get there.”

“Any reason why you chose there?” He paused and scratched his chin. “Sorry, I don’t mean to pry, that wasn’t my intent.”

“Oh, no problem,” I said, waving my hand. “You all have been so welcoming to me, you have a right to know why I left Georgia and all.”

“Well, your business is your own, if you want to keep it. I just wanted to know if you had a specific reason why you were going to California. What your end goal was, that is.”

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“I left Atlanta because of the hurricane and flooding there—I know, ironic, isn’t it? But that was more of a catalyst. I’d been thinking about leaving for a while. Or rather, I just wasn’t happy with my life there. I was working a call-center job where I was supposed to be helping people, solving problems for them, but with corporate BS, all I could do was ruin days and put people in bad moods. It was the only work I could find after school, and well, frankly, I don’t even know what I want to do with my life.”

“I see,” Reynold said. “A journey of self-discovery.”

“Nothing like a quarter life crisis,” Lee chimed in, fishing a frosted donut out from the plastic box of donuts and bagels.

Reynold nodded thoughtfully. “You’re young, so it’s a good time to be thinking about that stuff. You’ve got choices available to you, so you might as well explore them. Broaden your horizons.”

“Exactly,” I said. “That was my thought.”

“You have any family in Atlanta, if you don’t mind me asking?”

My thoughts immediately went to my parents and the hateful tirade they’d went on before excommunicating me from the family, and again I wondered if I would be as welcomed here if they knew my orientation. It made me feel terrible, thinking that, especially of people who had been nothing but the kindest to me, but the wounds my parents had given me had cut deep.

“Um,” I said, feeling slightly uncomfortable for the first time. I chewed my lip. “Not really.” It was all I could think of saying, but Reynold seemed to catch on that it wasn’t a topic I wanted to discuss.

“Well, sometimes it’s necessary for a person to venture out far from home to get to know themselves,” he said. He tapped his finger onto the stack of fliers. “Come back here and see me after you go give these out, okay?”

“Sure.”

Lee and I took the stack of fliers and went out to his car. It wasn’t raining and the shops weren’t too far up the road, but Lee suggested we drive anyway in case of a sudden downpour. I had no complaints with that, so we piled into his car and drove the short minute up to the center of the town.

Armstrong reminded me of one of those frontier towns you might see in an old western film, with the single main road lined with the general store and the saloon, and horses tied up to posts all along the way.

The drive really was only a couple of minutes, and we pulled up to the curb in front of the small pet store called “Pampered Paws”.

“I’ll go drop some fliers off at the market,” Lee said, pointing down the street. “You go ahead and take care of the pet store.”

I nodded, and went inside the shop. The woman behind the counter was probably in her mid-forties, with red hair, red lipstick and a stone washed denim jacket and jeans bedazzled with metal star sequins and tassels. She had her nose stuck in a tabloid magazine.

“Hi there,” she said, perking up. “Welcome to Pampered Paws, I’m Patty. Is there

anything I can help you with?”

“Hi,” I said, surprised by her bubbiness. She made me think me of one of those overly hyper lap dogs that seemed to be vibrating from too much pent up energy. “Yes, there is something you can help me with, Patty. I’m from out of town, and yesterday my cat escaped from me.”

She threw her hand to her mouth. “Oh, no! That’s horrible, I’m so sorry to hear that.”

“I’ve got these fliers here...” I pulled out the stack and showed them to her. “And I was wondering if it’d be alright to hang one in the store?”

“Of course it would be alright! I’ll put them up on the window, and have a few on the counter too. You don’t have a picture of, uh...” She skimmed over the flier for his name. “Of Henry?”

I shook my head. “I rescued him just a few days ago from a flood back home, so I never got a chance to get any photos of him.”

“Oh, poor thing, one storm to the next. Well, I’ll keep an eye out for Henry too.”

“T

hanks, I really appreciate that.”

She smiled and nodded, then went to stick up one of the fliers onto the window. I went back outside, and met up with Lee who was walking down from the market. The wind started to pick up again, pushing the trees into a sway and sending leaves and other debris tumbling down the street.

“Did the lady know anything about him?” Lee asked, and I shook my head.

“No... How about at the market?”

“No. Put up all the fliers though, on the bulletin board and right up at the checkout. If someone has seen Henry, they’ll know he’s missing for sure.” He looked up at the sky. “Seems like we’re gonna get another bout of it soon. Let’s head back to the station.”

As we drove down the road, a sudden flash of hard rain hit, and pounded down for a minute before letting up to a light sprinkle. Again, I could only think of Henry somewhere out there. I hoped that maybe he hadn’t gone too far, and had just found shelter and was hiding out from the storm. Maybe he would just stroll back in once the rain was gone.

Reynold was tidying up the shelves when we came inside. “How’d it go?” he asked.

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“Put out the fliers,” Lee said. “Nobody’s spotted Henry, but I’m sure if somebody’s seen him, they’ll call about it.”

“Well,” Reynold said, finishing up with the shelves. “Chrissy, if you feel like you need to keep moving on with your journey, I’d be more than happy to keep you updated, and take care of Henry when he comes back. But, um, if you feel like you don’t want to move on just yet, I understand that too.”

“I don’t feel right about moving on at least until the storm is completely gone and I know that Henry isn’t just hiding out somewhere,” I said. “But I don’t want to burden you and your wife, Lee.”

Lee shook his head and held up his hand in a gesture that said, “no trouble at all.” Reynold slung his hands into the pockets of his jeans.

“Well, you don’t have to worry about that,” Reynold said. “This old market has an upper attic, which actually used to be a living area back in my father’s time. It’s just a small space—you could call it a studio—but if you want you can stay there for as long as you feel a need to be in Armstrong. All I ask is that you help out around the gas station.”

His offer completely overwhelmed me. “Wow, sir, I mean, Reynold. That’s incredibly generous of you. Yes, I think I’d like that. Truth is, I do like Armstrong, and I think that maybe there’s a reason I ended up here. Hopefully it wasn’t just to lose my cat.”

“You’ll get him back,” Lee said confidently, patting my shoulder. “I feel that.”

Reynold smiled. “You’ll need to clean up the place. It hasn’t been used for anything except storage in decades. I’ll bring in a cot from my house for your bed. If you can handle all that, the place is yours.”

“You sure you’re not just getting Chrissy to do your tidying up for you, Reynold?” Lee laughed.

“I’m more than happy to do it,” I said, brushing a lock of my bangs behind my ear, and then tying the rest into a ponytail. Such a strange mixture of emotions rushed through me. I was excited to stay, but still broken up about Henry’s disappearance. He’ll be back, I thought hopefully. It was all I could really do—be positive. So many bad things had happened recently, but finally some good was coming my way, and I just had to believe that this was only the beginning of it.

Reynold took me to the back of the shop where, behind palettes of beer and energy drinks, a narrow set of stairs rose up to a pull-down attic door. He undid a metal latch on it and swung the door open, and then continued up inside. After fumbling around in the dark for a moment, he switched on a single lightbulb that hung from the ceiling. The place was definitely not much to look at—it was dust and cobweb ridden and packed with stacks of old storage boxes, but it was at least dry.

Reynold went over and pulled back the curtains on the room’s single window, a small rectangle that sat on the far wall opposite the entrance door. Cloudy sunlight streamed in, slanting through the sparkles of dust dancing in the air. Lee, who followed up behind us, let out a monster sneeze.

“You can just move all the boxes into one of the corners,” said Reynold. “The old bed used to be over there.” He pointed to a side wall, and I could see that the wood floor had a slightly different color where the bed was.

“Well, I’d better get to work,” I said, putting my hands on my hips. “If I want a place

to sleep by tonight.”

Reynold laughed. “I’ll get you a broom and a vacuum.”

Lucy

I stepped outside from the sunroom to get some fresh air and enjoy the sunshine that was finally starting to peek through the clouds. I’d meant to go to the pet store the day before to buy some supplies for my furry guest, but I’d ended up getting caught by a rare burst of inspiration and spent the day churning out bowl after bowl. The cat didn’t seem to mind—he was using his newspaper cat box and was perfectly happy with being fed scraps of chicken, and spent the whole time lounging around nearby. The little guy was really growing on me, and he’d given me inspiration to work on something again, even if they were just simple bowls.

Plus, it was just nice to have some company.

When I’d found him, I’d had no intention of keeping him. After all, I was only here to try and get my mojo back, not to actually become a crazy cat lady. Now, I was starting to wonder how I could not keep him. I’d held off on naming him—I’d only get attached if I gave him a name—but I didn’t know what options there were for my little guest. I could keep him, or bring him in for someone else to adopt him.

I went back into the sunroom, and the cat bounded up to me, nuzzling his face up against my leg. I crouched down and stroked his head, scratching behind his ears and at his whiskers. He mrrred and pushed against my hand, and I smiled. I couldn’t just get rid of you.

A timer dinged. I went over to the kiln, opened it, and pulled out the first bowl I’d made, which was now cool and ready for a glaze. I opened the cabinet with my custom glazes and chose something simple. I wanted to give it an overall dark stain,

but with shimmers of opalescent green that would peek out around the interior of the bowl, exactly how my guest's green eyes contrasted with his dark fur.

He nuzzled up against my leg again and let out a long meow. "What's the matter, guy?" I said. He looked up at me and meowed again. "Shit," I said, looking at my watch. It was already getting to be the late afternoon, and he was probably hungry.

I got up, went to the kitchen, and pulled open the fridge.

Double shit. I was out of the leftover chicken.

The fridge was pretty much void of anything else desirable to be eaten by cat or human. I turned around and saw that he'd followed me. "Good thing you're here," I said, "otherwise we might've both starved to death." It was a good sign, actually—it'd been a long while since I'd gotten so absorbed in working that I forgot to eat.

"Keys, keys," I muttered, searching around the house for my car keys until I found them in a random spot in the living room, and then repeated the routine with my wallet.

"Don't burn the house down," I said to the cat, who stared at me as I walked out the door, his tail swishing curiously.

I drove down the street until I reached the corner with the gas station and saw Reynold, the old-timer who'd operated the place ever since I could remember, standing out front cleaning debris from the driveway and the sidewalk. He looked up, saw me, and waved. I waved back. A girl, maybe in her early or mid-twenties, came out from the gas station with a push broom and started to help Reynold clean. Reynold didn't have a kid, so she must've been someone from town. It wasn't usual to see another younger person around Armstrong, so I found myself staring with a

little more interest than I normally would've. Not to mention, it'd been a while since I'd seen such a pretty face.

No, stop it. I looked away and quickly took the turn, driving off up the street towards the grocery market.

I hated when girls made me feel that way. I felt guilty about it, and I didn't want to believe that I could feel that way about another woman... but it happened so often.

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Still, the thought of that girl at the gas station trailed in my mind, like an image burned into my retinas from staring at a light for too long. She was tall, with dirty blonde hair that hung in a long ponytail and bangs that swept her face. She'd had on a green, military style jacket over a v-neck shirt and ripped jeans that hugged long legs. She was very slim and fit. Younger girls were able to burn the weight so easily. 22 was when I started to hit the gym hard, because I found that the repetition and the mental discipline required was quite similar to the skills I used to create my pottery. These

days, at 34, it was becoming an uphill battle to keep the weight off. I knew I was in pretty damn good shape, but it was hard not to feel flabby constantly, especially because I hadn't been in a gym in ages.

There was something else about her that stuck in my head. I'd only seen her for a second and from a distance, but there was something about the look she carried on her face... She was pretty, but that wasn't the only thing. I couldn't put my finger on it. It wasn't so much the expression, as something that lingered behind it. Maybe it reminded me of myself. I wasn't sure. I'd only seen her for a moment, after all.

I wandered around the market in a bit of a daze, not really thinking about anything in particular, but still had that girl's image bouncing around in my head. I forced myself to divert my thoughts to my new furry friend, and the bowls that I was making. The first—the one that I would glaze the moment I got home—I'd made to use as a food bowl, but it was probably too large for that purpose. I'd made four others, all of varying sizes. One was probably a more fitting size, and the three others were just sort of random and likely would end up in the trash can later.

It'd been so long since I'd produced work that I wasn't immediately smashing into a lump.

I picked out a whole chicken that was on sale and put it in my basket, along with some fresh vegetables. The meat was pretty expensive, but the vegetables were cheap and much better than anything I could've gotten in a store back in New York. It was one of the perks of living out here—we did have access to some great produce.

Who was she?

I put my groceries on conveyor belt and stared off into space as the elderly checkout lady scanned the items.

"Sixty-nine," the woman said, pulling me out of my thoughts.

"Uh, sorry?" I asked, smiling apologetically.

"Twenty-two sixty-nine. Your total."

"Oh, right."

I paused and frowned, reading the text. And that's when I saw it.

"Um," I said, pointing. "I think... you overcharged me for the chicken. It said it was on sale for \$3 a pound."

She straightened her glasses and double-checked a little binder of coupons she had next to the register. "Oh, you're so right. I'm sorry."

I smiled, paid the new price, and then bagged the groceries myself. It was quite warm out, so I put the bag in my trunk and drove the short distance down to the pet store. I'd just be in and out to grab some kitty litter and pet food.

“Hi there, welcome to Pampered Paws, I’m Patty. Anything I can help you with?”

The woman behind the register smiled a dazzling smile that was outlined with bright red lipstick that seemed to be twenty years out of style, and the loudest outfit I’d ever seen. “I’d like to buy some kitty litter and cat food,” I told her.

“Sure thing, that’s right over there.” She pointed.

I selected a small bag of generic kitty litter and a small bag of dry cat food, paused, and then put them back and exchanged them for larger bags. Why shouldn’t I keep him? Turn him over to Pampered Paws and he probably would never be adopted, considering the customer base here probably changed every 50 years.

I lugged the bags onto the counter, and the lady scanned them. “You a new owner? I’ve never seen you around before,” she said, smiling brightly.

“Yeah, something like that,” I said. “Actually, I found this cat just out in the storm the other day.”

Patty’s smile disappeared. “Really? Is he a black cat?” she asked.

I frowned. “Yes?”

“Oh my goodness! That young lady is going to be so relieved. Ma’am, I think you rescued this cat that’d been reported missing just the other day!” She whipped out a piece of paper and handed it to me.

“Missing: Henry. Black cat, five months old,” I said, reading the paper. My heart was already beating fast, but then I read the number to call. Reynold? Young lady?

My mind immediately went to the newcomer I’d seen at Reynold’s gas station. My little guest is her cat? My vision blurred out for a moment as I registered what it all

meant.

“Does that sound like your rescue?” she asked hopefully.

“Ah,” I replied, blinking. “Yeah... I guess it does. I guess I’d better call her. Or hell, Reynold is just down the road. I’ll just stop in.” Stop in and meet that girl too.

I had to. After all, I probably had her cat.