



# The Summer List

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**Category:** Romance, Lesbian Romance

**Description:** One summer can change everything.

At least, that's what Naomi has heard. Personally, she's not interested in changing anything. With the start of university looming like the Ghost of Adulthood Yet to Come, Naomi is ready to spend the most uneventful summer of her life house sitting for her dad's boss.

Her friends might be making epic summer bucket lists, but to Naomi, two months alone in a giant mansion sounds like just the escape she needs from the anxiety that's spent her whole life telling her change can't be anything but bad.

Andrea is ready for a change. Sure, she might have taken things a little too far by dumping her boyfriend, quitting her job, and breaking into her dad's seemingly empty house to spend the summer plotting her next move, but Andrea has never done anything by halves.

When she discovers the house is not, in fact, empty, and that the mysterious house sitter with the biggest blue eyes she's ever seen is hiding a secret summer bucket list, Andrea hatches a plan to tick the items off together.

It's the perfect trade: Naomi gets an accountability buddy, Andrea gets an excuse to avoid planning her own future for just a little longer, and once the list is complete, they go their separate ways.

It's simple, it's effective, and it definitely doesn't leave room for them to fall in love—no matter how many times they stay up all night talking, or how good it feels when their hands touch, or how much they both wish September would stay far, far away.

**Total Pages (Source):** 100

## CHAPTER 1

Naomi

“Can you pull over? I think I’m going to puke.”

My mom glances at me from the driver’s seat. Her forehead creases with a few worry lines before she looks back at the road.

“You can do this, baby. Your dad said Sandy is so excited to meet you, and Peter has always been a good boss to him. They’re going to love you, and besides, they’re leaving in a couple hours, right?”

I shake my head, staring straight through the windshield with my arms wrapped around my stomach in a futile attempt to keep the nausea at bay. There’s a bitter taste in my mouth, and sweat is breaking out on the back of my neck.

“Exactly. That’s two whole hours of social interaction with Dad’s boss and Dad’s boss’s wife. How am I supposed to keep up a good impression for two hours? What if I say something stupid? What if I can’t say anything? What if I actually puke? Like, on one of their expensive...vases, or something. They collect art, right? What if I get Dad fired because I throw up in some priceless sculptural vase made by a Portuguese master artisan?”

I glance at her as she guides the car off the highway and down the exit ramp. She’s pressing her lips together like she’s trying not to laugh.

I'd laugh too, if I weren't so paralyzed by terror. I always know when I start to sound like I've gone off the deep end, but when it comes to socializing, there's this diehard part of my brain that insists on validating all my insane imaginary scenarios with a constant chant of, 'What if? What if? What if?'

It doesn't matter that I only have a couple hours of talking to get through before they head to the airport and leave me to spend the summer house sitting in blissful solitude. I've already come up with a dozen ways those two hours could go horribly wrong.

"Well, Naomi," my mom says once we've pulled up to the red light at the bottom of the ramp, "I'm not sure exactly how that situation would play out, but I know we could handle it. I know you could handle it. I also know you're not going to throw up in a vase today."

I hunch forward as my stomach does a particularly aggressive flip in protest of her confidence. She reaches over and smooths a hand down my back.

"I know you're nervous, honey, but I promise, you've got this. Do you want to try one of those exercises your therapist told you about?"

The traffic light turns green, and she puts her hand back on the steering wheel. I nod and straighten up in my seat, pulling a deep breath in through my nose as I prepare to tune into each of my senses one by one.

I start with scent. The sun-bleached cardboard pine tree dangling from the rearview mirror hasn't been switched out for at least a year, so mostly, the car smells like the stale air billowing on full blast from the air conditioning vents with a tinge of artificial lime bubbling out of my mom's sparkling water sitting in the cup holder between us.

I move on to touch. Even with the air conditioning on high enough to have goose bumps lining my arms, I can feel the backs of my thighs sticking to the fake leather seat. The late afternoon sun glaring through the windshield is warm on my cheeks.

Trying to focus on taste just reminds me how nauseous I am, so I steal a sip of the sparkling water and focus on the way the tiny bubbles fizz against my tongue. I take a couple more sips as I turn my attention to what I can see: a tree-lined street with wide sidewalks, a sprinkler dousing a vibrantly green yard, a shiny white truck glinting so bright in the sunlight I have to blink a couple times and look away.

We've entered one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in Ottawa, and the houses are all supersized. The lawns have that manicured look to them, with crushed gravel twining around tidy flowerbeds and symmetrically trimmed shrubs.

"Jesus," my mom says under her breath, "that one looks like it could be a hotel."

The house she's staring at is a sprawling two-storey brick mansion with a three-door garage. There are actual Corinthian columns holding up the roof above the entryway.

"I think it's an embassy," I say, peering at the unfamiliar flag fluttering next to the red and white Canadian one at the top of the two flagpoles adorning the yard.

"I haven't been to this neighborhood in years. I forgot how fancy it is."

I nod and focus back on my grounding exercise. I only have sound left, and with the windows rolled up, there's not much to focus on besides the hum of the engine and the constant rattle of the air conditioning. I tune into the whirring fans, letting them become a metronome in my ears as we turn the corner onto yet another wide street lined with giant houses.

"It says it will be on the left." My mom hunches forward over the wheel to get a

better look at the house numbers.

I was just starting to feel like I might not be on the verge of a truly horrific combination of vomiting and cardiac arrest, but as soon as I glance at the map on her phone and see we really are only a few meters away, I'm right back to where I started.

I let out a low moan and rub circles against my sternum, begging my runaway heartbeat to slow down.

"Oh, honey..." Mom pulls up to the curb just before we reach the house and shifts the car into park. "What can I do? What do you need?"

I rip my seatbelt off and crouch forward into the emergency landing position, forehead pressed to my knees and hands wrapped tight around my ankles.

"A new brain," I answer with another moan.

My voice is muffled by my kneecaps. My mom clears her throat and tells me she didn't quite catch that. I stay folded over but turn onto my cheek instead.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:44 pm*

“I said I need a new brain. I’m starting to think that’s the only option here. Full-on brain transplant. I think if we can get me an appointment in the next few days, the summer break should give me enough recovery time to be a functional human by the time school starts in the fall.”

The thought of starting university in September has been looming in my mind like a Dickensian specter of doom all year, but graduating from high school a couple weeks ago turned what felt like a low-level hum of agitation into a keening shriek I can’t ignore for longer than a couple hours at a time.

“Is that what this is really about?” Mom asks. “The university nerves?”

I nod. There’s no point denying it.

“Okay, how about this?” She leans forward to rest the side of her head on the steering wheel so she can look into my eyes. “I’ll go up to the house with you. It would be polite for me to say hi to Sandy anyway. Then you’ll have a buddy for most of the small talk, and by the time I leave, all you’ll really have to do is listen and nod while she gives you the instructions about the cats and the house.”

Part of me clutches at her words like a lifeline, but I still shake my head.

“That’s really nice, but...I don’t want to look like a twelve year-old. How are they going to trust me to look after their giant house for two months if I can’t even walk up to the door without my mom?”

She starts rubbing my back again, smoothing down the fabric of my t-shirt before she

traces a few circles along my spine. The slightest bit of tension melts from my muscles.

“No one’s going to think that, honey. Like I said, it would be polite for me to say hi to Sandy. I’ll make sure she knows that’s why I’m there.”

I close my eyes and take a shaky breath before forcing myself to let the air out as slow as I can. Once my lungs are empty, I open my eyes and sit up.

“Okay. Let’s get this over with, I guess.”

We pull into the driveway and are met by a solid metal gate in the low stone wall surrounding the property. From what I can see of the house, it’s more modern than most of the castle-style mansions around here. The grey and white building is made of interlocking modular sections, with more huge windows and glass walls than I can count.

“Wow,” Mom says as she inches the car up to the call box flanking the gate.

The ringtone sounds out a few times, and then a metallic popping noise emits from the gate before it swings open to reveal the rest of the driveway. She parks outside the two-door garage, and we both take a moment to ogle the gigantic in-ground pool in the backyard, complete with a hot tub that could fit an entire soccer team. There are stone pedestals topped with abstract statues in a variety of materials dotting the whole property.

“Wow,” Mom repeats. “Maybe I should have volunteered for the house sitting job.”

I jump when one of the garage doors starts rolling up. I follow my mom’s lead in getting out of the car, and a woman’s voice rings out from inside the garage just as I’m shutting my door.

“Hello, hello!” A short woman with curled, cherry red hair who looks like she’s somewhere in her fifties comes out and beams at us. She’s wearing sleek black leggings and a billowing pink tunic top. “Thank you so much for coming! You must be Naomi. The kids are so excited to meet you.”

My tongue feels too thick in my mouth for me to voice my confusion, but she must read it in my face. She lets out a tittering laugh.

“I mean the cats. I call them the kids all the time. I’m sure you’ll get used to it. Oh, we are just so glad to have you!”

I’m searching for the willpower to thrust my hand out and actually say something to her, but she closes the distance between us and pulls me into a tight hug instead. All I can do is stand there like a limp fish caught in her embrace. She smells like strawberry perfume, or maybe it’s just her shampoo. There’s a lock of her hair draped across my face, and I itch with the urge to flick it away.

She pulls back after a couple seconds and grips my shoulders while she continues to beam at me. “I don’t know what we would have done without you. After our regular sitter cancelled, I told Peter I refused to leave the kids with a stranger and that Italy would just have to wait until next year. Thank goodness he was at work when I called so your dad overheard.”

I force out a chuckle. It sounds more like a gurgled cry for help than a laugh, but still, it’s a sound. Making sounds is the general goal of a conversation.

“Here I am!” I squeak.

My mom takes the opportunity to swoop in beside me. Sandy lets go of my shoulders and turns to smile at her instead.



“Mallory! It’s been too long. You don’t know how disappointed I was to miss catching up with you at the company Christmas party this year, but as they say, Fiji calls! Do you want to stay a minute, Mallory? I’m sure the kids would love to meet you too. Peter’s out at the store trying to find a new neck pillow in time for our flight, so there’s no rush. I swear, that man and his neck pillows. I found three other ones in his closet, but...”

Sandy keeps narrating the saga of the neck pillows as she retraces her path to the garage without waiting for an answer.

“Do you want me to come in?” Mom murmurs before Sandy can realize we’re not following.

Sandy has already proven herself to be every introvert’s dream come true, or what I call a solo-versationalist—meaning she really only needs a few nods and ‘mhmm’s in return for maintaining a whole conversation on her own.

I still nod and tell my mom yes. We step inside the cool shade of the garage, and I try not to let my eyes bug out of my head when we walk past a glittering silver car that even I can tell probably cost as much as my whole degree will.

“We have to be quick so they don’t get out,” Sandy says, glancing back at us while she grips the handle of the door into the house. “They’re strictly indoor cats, and the sun can do them a lot of damage.”

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:44 pm*

We shuffle inside and are met with a chorus of yowling meows almost as fast as we're hit by a blast of air conditioning. I only have time to gawk at the towering height of the entryway's ceiling for half a second before something soft slams into my legs.

I look down at what has to be the ugliest cat I've ever seen in my life.

"Oh, Bijoux!" Sandy gushes as the cat starts pawing at my shins, still meowing. "He loves you already!"

The cat is grey and completely hairless, with giant ears and pale eyes tucked amongst the wrinkly folds of its face. Without any hair to soften out the shape of its body, the whole cat seems to consist of wrinkly folds of flesh.

I've seen pictures of hairless cats before, but it seems nothing can truly prepare you for the shock of being face to face with an animal that's totally naked.

"And here's Aurora Rose. Hello, sweet girl!"

I glance over to see a second hairless cat, this one with marbled white and tan skin, rubbing against my mom's leg. She crouches down to give it a few tentative scratches, and it bumps its head against her hand.

"Poor little things!" Mom coos before looking up at Sandy. "Do you know what happened to them?"

Sandy cocks her head to the side. "What do you mean?"

“Oh, I mean to their fur. Is it a medical thing? It’s so great that you took them in. I’m guessing not a lot of people would.”

I glance between the two of them, and it clicks for me at the exact same time I see a storm cloud gathering on Sandy’s face.

My mom must not know hairless cats are a thing, and Sandy must think they’re the cutest thing in the world.

I watch as Sandy smoothes her features into a mask of the utmost dignity before she takes a few stiff steps over to my mom and bends to pick up Aurora Rose.

“Aurora Rose and Bijoux are Sphinx cats,” she says in a frosty tone. She tilts her chin up to emphasize the awe the end of that sentence is meant to inspire. “Sphinx cats are the premiere breed of hairless cats in the world. They both have immaculate pedigrees and have won several awards.”

My mom’s eyes widen, and she opens and closes her mouth a couple times, like she can’t settle on an appropriate response to finding out she’s mistaken the premiere hairless cat breed in the world for the victim of an unfortunate skin condition. I don’t blame her. We are way beyond the territory of any social script I know.

“Oh!” she says after blinking a couple times. “Hairless cats. Right. I am so sorry. You don’t, um, see them around too much, but now that you mention it, yes, of course. Hairless cats.”

Sandy stands there stroking Aurora Rose’s head like a queen deciding if she wants to grant a royal pardon or not.

“Their eyes are pretty,” I blurt.

Sandy's attention snaps to me. I bend over so I can avoid her eyes and pretend I'm focused on assuaging the desires of the cat still batting at my shins.

My comment seems to be just what Sandy needed to slip back into sweet and friendly mode; when I find the nerve to glance back up at her, she's beaming.

"Aren't they just? I'm so glad you think so. Something tells me you and the kids are going to get along just fine. I stretched out their bathing schedule a little so you and I can get a wash in together before Peter and I leave."

I freeze. "Bathing?"

Sandy chuckles. "Of course! I was so happy you still took the job after I asked Peter to ask your father if you were up for some high maintenance kitties."

That part of the conversation was not conveyed to me. One of the best parts of this job was just how low maintenance it sounded. In theory, it's every introvert's dream come true: two whole months in a giant house with nothing but feline companionship to interrupt my solitude—and maybe a couple peaceful sunbathing sessions with my best friend while we work through our summer reading lists together.

I just have to survive the rest of this conversation first.

"Sphinx cats' skin doesn't absorb oils, of course," Sandy continues. "After their baths, I'll show you how to clean out any earwax build-up as well. Oh, and between their toes. That can get a bit gunky."

She laughs like she's talking about a sweet and quirky cat habit like sleeping in a dresser drawer or hiding toys behind the couch.

"Of course," my mom echoes, letting out a laugh of her own that's tinged with just

enough sarcasm to let me know she's way too amused by the image of me cleaning out cat toe gunk.

“Peter will hopefully be back with his darn neck pillow sometime before our plane takes off, so we should probably get started on their routine.”

My mom claps a hand on my shoulder, and even though I can practically feel her holding back another laugh, the way she rubs her thumb over my shoulder blade is nothing but reassuring.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:44 pm*

“How about you and Sandy get started, and I’ll bring your bags in for you?”

I straighten up, and the cat lets out a yowl of protest.

“Oh, um, right. Yeah, okay. Thanks, Mom.”

She gives my shoulder a final squeeze. “I’ll say goodbye before I go.”

We’re only a twenty minute drive away from our house. I can go home for dinner with my parents and little brother any night I want. It’s not like we’re signing off for the whole summer or anything, which makes me feel extra stupid when a lump rises in my throat.

The longest I’ve ever been away from home was a week of summer camp in junior high. It was supposed to be a month, but my already moderate-to-severe social anxiety morphed into full-blown panic attacks that had the counselors begging my parents to come get me almost as desperately as I did.

I started therapy pretty soon after that.

I force myself to remember this isn’t camp. In a couple hours, I’m going to have this entire mansion to myself for the whole summer.

Just me, Bijoux, and Aurora Rose living our best introvert life.

I ignore the fact that these cats seem to be exceptionally extroverted and focus on the image of a still and quiet morning on the couch with them instead.

I take a deep breath and let it out.

I can do this.

“Shall we?” Sandy asks before leading the way into the rest of the house.

## CHAPTER 2

Naomi

“How are you going to go from this to living the broke student life next year?”

Water droplets splash against the surface of the mansion’s pool as Shal sweeps her hand out in an arc to indicate the luxury that surrounds us.

“Ugh, don’t remind me about student life,” I say with a groan as I wiggle around in my donut-shaped pool floatie. The material makes a farting sound that Priya giggles at where she’s sunbathing on a pool chair. “Don’t remind me about anything to do with university.”

Shal kicks her feet to steer her own floatie away from a collision with mine. “Fair enough. This is our last summer to be wild and free teenagers, after all.”

I snort, and I hear Priya make a similar sound from over in her chair. Neither of us are what you’d call wild and free, especially compared to Shal.

I met Shal and Priya on the first day of first grade. As twins, they always stood out in classrooms. Being South Asian students in a mostly white school just added to the amount of stares and uncomfortable comments they received. Add in the fact that their mom dressed them identically until they were almost eight years old, and you’ve got yourself what Shal calls a recipe for a childhood identity crisis.

Priya and I were the ones drawn to each other from the start. We were both used to being labeled ‘shy kids’ before kindergarten even started, and it didn’t take long for us to earn a reputation as nerds too.

I doubt I would have become friends with someone like Shal if she weren’t Priya’s sister. Whereas Priya spent her childhood wishing all the attention would just go away, Shal decided she was going to put that attention to work. She was head girl in our last year of elementary school, MVP of the high school volleyball team for three years straight, and a frequent attendee of parties Priya and I probably would have skipped out on to study, even if we had been invited.

Our little trio was more of a thing when we were younger, but Shal still makes time to hang out with us, and I know Priya and I would have had way more of a hellish time in high school if it weren’t for her influence on the popular crowd.

“Wild and free,” I say in a dreamy voice as I tip my head back to stare up at the cloudless blue sky. “What must that be like?”

I can hear a grasshopper buzzing somewhere in the grass close by, the high-pitched whining ringing out above the sound of waves lapping at the side of the pool. The air smells like wet cement and chlorine.

“Oh, don’t act like there’s some law of the universe that means you two can’t lighten up a little,” Shal drawls. “I work hard in school too, and I still manage to have fun.”

“Yeah, but fun has a different meaning for you,” Priya counters.

Shal sits up straighter in her floatie, which causes the plastic to make the same farting sound mine did. She ignores the indignity and pushes her huge black sunglasses up onto her head so she can squint at Priya.



“What exactly are you planning on doing with your summer?” she asks, only pausing long enough to indicate the question was rhetorical. “Reading through all the university textbooks you’ve already bought and taking extra clarinet lessons to get ready for the university band. Come on, Pri. This is literally your last summer before we’re, like, actually living in the adult world. There has to be something new you want to try out while you still can.”

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:44 pm*

Priya is hunched forward in her chair now, a few strands of her thick, dark hair escaping from her ponytail to fall against the halter strap of her dark green bathing suit.

The amount of time I spent noticing how pretty Priya is was one of the tipping points that made me start Googling ‘Am I gay?’ quizzes once we reached junior high. I even had a little crush on her at one point, but I think mostly I felt like I had to have a crush on someone to make being a lesbian a real thing.

By the time I was ready to start coming out in the tenth grade, I knew I only saw her as a friend, but the fact that I’d even considered her as anything else made me feel like some kind of gross predator. The guilt was so bad she ended up being the last person I came out to on my list of People Who Should Know when she should have been the first.

Internalized homophobia kind of sucks like that.

“This is new and fun, isn’t it?” Priya demands. “We’re swimming at a mansion. Why do I need to do anything more exciting than that?”

Shal gives her a deadpan stare. “Use that big brain of yours to think bigger.”

Priya makes a face, and Shal retaliates by sending a splash of cold water over to douse her lap. Priya shrieks, and the two of them end up locked in a sibling battle that escalates to running laps around the grassy backyard while Shal snaps a wet towel at Priya’s legs and threatens to whoop her ass.

I make an ungraceful exit from my donut floatie and stand on the cement pool deck with my arms crossed. I shout at them to be careful not to knock Peter and Sandy's statue collection over, but I still end up laughing as I watch Shal nearly trip over a hose the gardener left out.

In addition to the gardener, I will also be getting regular visits from the lawn mower guy, the pool cleaner guy, and the lady who clips the cats' nails. Thankfully, the cat nail lady is the only one I actually have to talk to.

Priya hunches over and wheezes that she can't breathe anymore. Shal delivers a triumphant whack of the towel to her butt and prances back over to me.

"What about you, Naomi?" she asks. "Are you going to disappoint me with your summer plans too?"

My summer plans consist of floating in the pool, finding the best reading spot in the house, and getting in my hours at the part-time data entry job I applied to for the summer because the ad said I could work from home.

"And don't say you think the pool should count too," Shal adds with a fake glower, like she just read my mind.

"Um..." I eye the towel still coiled in her hands as Priya comes over and makes a show out of groaning and rubbing her butt. "What about skinny dipping in the pool? Does that count?"

I was just looking for a way to make the pool sound interesting enough to avoid getting smacked by the towel, but Shal turns the sinful smirk that gets her invited to every party on me.

"Oooh, who knew little Naomi Waters is actually a hardcore exhibitionist?"

My cheeks heat up. “I am not an exhibitionist. This property has literally been landscaped for maximum privacy. I just think maybe it would feel, you know, liberating, or whatever.”

Shal scoffs. “Sure. Okay. Liberating.”

Then she reaches up to cup her boobs and does a sensual swivel motion that somehow includes her hips and her chest.

Priya barks a laugh. “What are you even trying to do, you idiot?”

Shal keeps undulating as she walks over to pick up a dry towel and then leads the way back into the house. She makes a show out of tossing her damp hair around, and when she answers Priya, it’s in a dramatic, husky voice.

“I’m being a liberated woman. It’s not something you would understand.”

Priya rolls her eyes as we step up onto the wide wooden deck that spans the back of the house. Of course, the deck also includes a barbeque station that looks like something out of a prime-time cooking show. A canvas awning blocks the sun and casts the expensive-looking patio furniture in cool shade.

We enter the house through the sliding glass door to the kitchen. The appliances are huge and made of gleaming stainless steel, set among navy blue cupboards and marbled grey countertops.

“Watch for the cats!” I call as I step inside.

In the day and a half I’ve been here, the cats haven’t shown any interest in escaping the house, but Sandy made it sound like their flesh would burst into flames if even a single ray of direct sunlight touched their skin, so I’ve been extra careful.

Shal cranes her neck to glance around the kitchen after sliding the door closed behind me. “I don’t see them anywhere. When do we get to meet them?”

“They’re probably still asleep in the igloo.”

Priya pauses in the middle of climbing onto one of the stools lining the island. “The...igloo? Does this house have its own igloo?”

“That’s what Sandy calls their heated cat bed,” I explain. “It kind of does look like an igloo.”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:45 pm*

Priya shakes her head. “This house just gets wilder by the minute. I can’t believe it’s just the two of them and their cats in this mansion. Did they have kids living here at some point?”

I walk over to the fridge to pull out the pitcher of homemade lemonade Sandy told me to finish and pour us all glasses as I answer.

“I don’t know. They both had previous marriages, but it sounds like Sandy’s sons were grown up by the time they bought this place. I saw some pictures of a girl too, but Sandy didn’t say anything about her, so I guess she’s Peter’s daughter.”

I’m glad I’m busy putting the pitcher back in the fridge when I say the last part; the truth is that I didn’t just see some pictures of the girl.

I stared at them.

Hard.

For way too long.

Whoever she is, she’s stunning. There’s a graduation portrait of her in a black cap and gown next to similar photos of Sandy’s sons on the living room mantle. She’s got thick, dark brown hair, and her cheeks and nose are covered in a spray of freckles. Her eyes are a rich, deep brown, but what really kept me staring was the slight smile that barely lifts the corners of her mouth. Something about that shadow of a grin looks dangerous, like the snick of a lighter and the crackle of sparks in the dark.

“Um, hello? Earth to Naomi?”

I jump when Shal rattles her glass against the island. I realize I’ve been standing in front of the open fridge for so long it’s now beeping at me to shut the door.

“Sorry.” I set the pitcher on one of the shelves and swing the door shut. “The cold felt nice.”

“So pizza sounds good for dinner?” Priya asks. “Then movie night to wrap up the day?”

“With wiiiine,” Shal sing-songs.

Priya and I start to protest, but she cuts us off.

“You knew what you were getting into when you told us which bottles they said you could drink,” she says, referring to the stop at the wine cellar during the tour I gave them this morning. “So either I’m drinking it, or we all are, but either way, I’m having wine tonight.”

I’ve only had a glass and a half of wine, but that’s more than I’ve ever consumed in a single sitting. The initial reaction of getting all giggly was familiar to me from a few chaste, parent-approved indulgences on Christmas and New Year’s, but now my tongue feels thick in my mouth, and the whole world has gone soft and warm, like I’ve climbed inside a giant cat igloo.

A laugh bubbles out of me at the thought.

“This isn’t even a funny part,” Shal says with a snort from where she’s sprawled out on a nest of couch cushions, pillows, and blankets she’s made on the basement floor. Bijoux is nestled in beside her.

Aurora Rose is curled up into a ball on Priya's chest over on the other side of the massive couch we're sharing, both of them staring at the movie on the screen that takes up most of the wall across the room.

"I'm not laughing at that," I say, lifting a hand to point at where one of the goriest scenes in *Jennifer's Body* is being splattered across the screen. "I was just thinking how cool it would be to be in a giant cat igloo."

Priya giggles and kicks her feet like a little kid. Shal tips her head back and rolls her eyes.

"You two are officially lightweights."

"I'm not drunk. I barely had two glasses," Priya insists, but the hiccup that slips out of her mouth just proves Shal's point.

"Hey, I'm not judging. I'm the one who told you to live a little."

Priya juts her bottom lip out in an exaggerated pout. "How come only stuff like drinking counts as living?"

Shal shrugs. "Well, I didn't hear you offering any other ideas."

I glance back at the screen and realize we're missing one of my favourite parts of the movie, which just so happens to be my favourite film of all time. I may have guilt-tripped my friends into watching *Jennifer's Body* yet again when it showed up in the search suggestions, seeing as I'm their free ticket to a pool all summer.

I'm not even sure why it's my favourite movie; most of the other films I watch again and again are Jane Austen adaptations, but there's just something about the utter insanity of a bisexual demon cheerleader murdering her way through a small town's



teenage boy population that makes for an even more effective escape from reality than swirling petticoats and maidens running through fields.

With thoughts of university still buzzing in my brain, I could use the escape more than ever.

“You guys, we’re missing it!” I shriek, loud enough to make Bijoux’s ears twitch.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:45 pm*

Instead of showing Jennifer Check the respect she deserves, Shal reaches over to grab the remote off the couch and hits the pause button.

My jaw drops. “Did you just pause Jennifer’s Body?”

She waves me off. “You’ve seen this a million times. We’re having an important conversation here. Pri, come on, give me something. Naomi already came up with skinny dipping.”

Priya sighs and stares up at the ceiling for a moment. “Okay. Fine. If I had to pick something wild and free to do this summer, maybe I’d want to...to...go on a date.”

Shal gasps, and Priya risks disturbing the cat on her chest to grab the nearest cushion and toss it at her sister’s face.

Shal swats it away and shrieks, “My baby sister, a temptress in disguise!”

“Shut up!” Priya wails. “I knew you’d be a jerk about it. Also, I’m only younger by eleven minutes.”

Aurora Rose decides this is officially no longer a safe space and climbs off Priya to join Bijoux in his blanket nest instead.

“I’m kidding,” Shal huffs. “I’m actually so proud! A date is exactly the kind of thing I was talking about. Keep going!”

“What, are you making a list?” Priya asks.

I start to think Shal might be feeling the wine more than she's letting on when her eyes do this weird glittering thing. She kicks away the blanket covering her legs and jumps to her feet.

"Now that is a good idea," she mutters before marching out of the room.

Priya and I sit there in silence for a couple minutes, straining our ears to catch the distant sound of Shal's footsteps.

"Uh..." I say once another minute ticks by. "Should we go find her?"

Priya shrugs. "She'll be fine."

We're quiet for a little longer before I slide further down the couch and prod her leg with my toes.

"So...you want to go on a date?"

She groans. "Don't tell me you're going to make fun of me too."

"Of course not! I just...didn't know. I mean, I knew you were curious about dating, but we've always thought of it as more of a for university thing."

She strokes her hand along the couch cushion, staring down at the fibers like they've suddenly become the most fascinating thing in the world.

"Well, it's almost time for university, and I just... I don't know if I want to be the same person there that I was in high school, you know?"

I feel like a rock drops to the bottom of my stomach. "Oh."

We might be going to different universities, but we'll both be staying in Ottawa. After spending first year living at home, we're planning on getting an apartment together. We've been talking about it since the ninth grade.

We never mentioned being different people in university. Of course, I expected us to change and grow and do all that other normal human development stuff, but still, I thought we'd be Priya and Naomi through all of it, the same way we've been Priya and Naomi since we were the weird girls who read *The Chronicles of Narnia* during recess.

"I just—"

She doesn't get a chance to finish her sentence; Shal storms back into the room, holding up a paper and pen like she's got Excalibur in one hand and the Holy Grail in the other.

"I found paper!" she shouts.

Priya and I blink at her.

"Uh...okay?" Priya says.

Shal drops her arms to her sides and gives us a look of the utmost disappointment. "For the list. We're making a summer bucket list!"

## Page 8

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She beams like that should be a revelation, but I just blink at her some more while Priya wrinkles her nose.

“Ew. What are we? A pre-teen BFFs club? That is so cheesy.”

“I don’t care if it’s cheesy. We’re doing it,” Shal says with a huff. “Plus, we’re only putting cool things on here, so it won’t be cheesy.”

Shal is now a woman on a mission. She sets her supplies on one of the black metal side tables flanking the couch and then picks the whole table up to deposit it in front of the empty spot between me and Priya. There doesn’t seem to be any stopping her, so the two of us just watch as she sits down and scrawls the words SUMMER BUCKET LIST across the top of the page.

“We’ll put ten things,” she narrates as she writes. “So we each get to pick three, and then there’ll be a bonus tenth one we all have to agree on.”

“Wait.” Priya scooches in closer. “Is this, like, a shared bucket list? We’re all supposed to do everything on it?”

“Duh,” Shal says like it should be obvious. “Solidarity, sister. We don’t have to do all of them all at the same time, but we do all have to do all of them.”

My wine-addled brain spins a little as I try to process that sentence. Shal writes out the first two items on the list while we continue to watch:

1. Skinny dip in the mansion’s pool.

2. Have a summer fling.

Priya starts to protest a single date escalating to a ‘summer fling,’ but Shal shushes her and says it’s her own turn now.

“Okay. Hmm. Something wild and free.” She taps her chin for a few seconds, and then her eyes light up. “I know! I want to try smoking a joint.”

“What? No!” Priya shrieks. “That’s crazy.”

Shal scoffs. “It’s not even illegal.”

“You have to be nineteen to buy it!” Priya insists.

Shal is already writing again. “And that’s always seemed really arbitrary to me. I know plenty of people who can hook us up.”

“It’s dangerous!”

Shal turns to stare at Priya. “We can literally watch them walk into a dispensary and buy it for us—”

Priya starts to argue about it being illegal for someone else to buy us weed, but Shal cuts her off.

“And if you really don’t want to do it, I’ll scratch it out.”

“But it’s—oh. Really?”

Shal nods. “Uh-huh. I want you to live a little, but I’m not going to freaking force-feed you marijuana, Pri. I just thought it might be fun to try together. I’ve never done

it.”

Shal has had so many firsts without me and Priya that it adds a note of vulnerability to her voice when she admits this would be new for her too.

“Oh,” Priya says.

‘Vulnerability’ isn’t a word I often associate with Shal, and I’m considering getting up from the couch to give them a private sister bonding moment when Shal turns her attention to me.

“What about you, Naomi? How do you feel about sampling the devil’s herb?”

None of us can keep a straight face after she says that, and by the time we’ve stopped laughing, I find myself nodding even though just the thought of touching a joint—never mind actually smoking one—makes a jolt of nerves zing through my chest.

“As long as we know where it came from, I mean...okay. I’d take a hit.”

The phrase ‘take a hit’ sounds so unnatural coming out of my mouth we all have to stop and laugh again.

“This is so crazy,” Priya wheezes after she’s caught her breath.

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I nod again. The air in the room feels charged with an electrifying sense of possibility, like Shal has somehow turned her pen into a magic wand that's inking destiny onto the page.

Either that, or I really am the world's biggest lightweight.

Whatever the reason for the sparks of potential skittering across my skin, I can't stop Shal's words from when we were out in the pool from echoing through my mind. This really is our last summer before adulthood kicks in. For the next two months, we'll be caught in this limbo of newfound power without the weight of all the responsibilities September has ready to dump on our heads.

There will never be another summer like this.

Maybe Shal is right. Maybe I should want more from this summer than long afternoons with my books and quiet nights alone in the house.

"I want to read something," I say before I have time to think about it. "Like, to an audience. Out loud. I want to get up on a stage and read something. Maybe I could pick one of my favourite poems or book passages or something."

I can almost feel the glare of a spotlight beating down on my face as I imagine standing with a piece of paper clutched between my fingers, a shadowy mass of people staring up at me as they wait to hear my voice.

Of course, that image is accompanied by a wave of nausea so intense I cross my arms and grip my forearms hard, pressing the tips of my nails into my skin until my head



stops spinning.

Priya gawks at my suggestion, but Shal turns back to the list and starts writing down the fourth item.

“Okay, open mic night!” she says when she’s done. “Let’s keep this momentum going. It’s your turn to pick something, Pri.”

It takes a few minutes and a lot of prompting from Shal, but I see the moment when an idea slips into Priya’s head. Her gaze shifts over to meet mine before darting away.

Something about her body language makes me feel like there’s a fist squeezing around my heart.

“What is it?” I ask.

She gives a little shake of her head. “Nothing. It’s stupid. It’s just...I think it might be nice to make a new friend this summer. You know, like, if we each made a new friend to practice for university, or whatever.”

She’s still not looking at me. My throat goes dry.

Her voice is pitched high with nerves as she rushes to elaborate. “Not that we aren’t going to be friends in university. Of course we will. We’ll be best friends. It’s just, we’re not even going to the same school, and—”

“I get it.” My words sound cold. I clear my throat and force my shoulders to lift in a casual shrug. “That makes sense.”

That’s the worst part. It does make sense—way more sense than the picture of

university life I'd created in my head. When we talked about studying in each other's school libraries and finding all the optimal lunch spots halfway between Carleton and Ottawa U, I thought that's what most of our days would consist of, not just some of them.

I knew we'd find other people to sit beside in our lectures, just like we did for all the classes we didn't share in high school, but Priya sounds like she's looking for something different.

"It's not like that, Naomi." She reaches over to grab one of my arms. "I just—"

"It's okay." I hesitate for a moment, and then I place my hand on top of hers. "Shal, put it on the list."

The mood lightens a little after Shal decides the next item on the list should be attending an insane pool party and Priya practically jumps on her back to try yanking the pen out of her hands before she can write it down.

The next round of list items only takes a couple minutes. I say we should go on a road trip, and Priya says we should film ourselves doing a dance challenge we have to post online. Then Shal says we should all get tattoos.

"NO!" Priya shrieks. "I call veto!"

"What?" Shal taunts, wiggling her eyebrows. "Are you scared?"

Priya tilts her chin up. "Actually, no. I'm just smart enough to realize that something I put on my body at eighteen years old probably isn't going to be something I want on my body for life."

"Yeah, that's what makes it risky," Shal shoots back, "and thus badass, and thus fun."

I can't help chuckling when Priya crosses her arms and asks how it's possible she and her twin share the same DNA.

"How about this?" I suggest. "We make the category body modifications in general. That way we can get piercings instead if we don't come up with any tattoo ideas."

Shal snaps her fingers. "Yes. I like it."

## Page 10

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Priya still has her arms crossed. “You better be ready to face Ma’s wrath if you get anything besides a nose piercing.”

“There are other things I can get pierced that Ma will never see.”

Priya’s eye literally twitches as she processes what those options might be, but she lets Shal write the ninth item down on the list.

“One more to go,” Shal says. “This is the grand finale we all have to agree on. Got anything to start us off?”

She turns an expectant look on us.

“Uh...have the best summer ever?” I joke.

Shal glares while Priya laughs with me.

“You two are idiots,” Shal informs us.

“Well, what’s even left?” I retort. “We’ve covered public nudity, drugs, and tattoos. What other wild and free summer girl activities are there? Breaking and entering? Grand theft auto?”

Priya and I keep laughing, but Shal ignores us and picks up her pen again.

“Hey, wait!” Priya protests when she notices Shal is writing something. “We’re supposed to pick this one together.”

The pen goes still.

“I can cross it out if you want. I just...didn’t want to say it out loud,” Shal says in a quiet and very un-Shal-like voice, her chin tilted down and her hair falling forward to hide most of her face. “Just promise you won’t laugh when you read it, okay?”

Priya and I exchange a look before we promise not to laugh and then peer over her shoulders as she peels her hand away from the paper.

“Fall in love,” Priya murmurs.

Those three words are spelt out on the page in the same bold and steady handwriting as the rest of the list, but something about them looks softer, even timid.

“I said don’t laugh,” Shal says with a huff, even though Priya and I haven’t made a sound.

I can name at least half a dozen people from school who fell in love with Shal in the past year alone, and even though she’s gone on a couple dates with some of them, she always brushes them aside sooner than later. She always says she’s got bigger things on the horizon than crushes and boys.

“It’s not even that important,” she adds, her voice brisk. “I just want to know if it’s all bullshit or not. I mean, who even knows what falling in love means, anyway?”

She bends over the paper again and scrawls the words ‘whatever that means’ at the end of the last sentence.

Priya and I share a look.

“I like it,” Priya says.

I nod. “Me too.”

Shal holds the paper up where we can all see it, and we take a moment to read over whatever the hell we’ve just committed ourselves to:

## SUMMER BUCKET LIST

1. Skinny dip in the mansion’s pool.
2. Have a summer fling.
3. Smoke a joint.
4. Perform at an open mic.
5. Make a new friend.

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6. Attend an insane pool party.
7. Go on a road trip.
8. Post a dance challenge.
9. Get a tattoo or other body modification.
10. Fall in love (whatever that means).

I watch the paper shake a little in Shal's hands. We've gone so quiet I can hear the slight snores of the cats where they're still nestled in a pile of blankets on the floor.

"This is so cheesy," Priya mutters.

The silence of the basement makes her voice sound extra loud.

"Oh, it is, but..." Shal rests the paper on the table and then gets up to hunt around until she finds the nearly empty bottle of white wine and holds it up like she's making a toast. "There's no backing out now, bitches."

## CHAPTER 3

Andrea

"Is this where I turn?"

The car lurches to a stop at an intersection. Brayden blinks at me from the driver's seat, waiting for directions.

I do a quick scan of the area and then point towards my window. "Yeah. Go right. I think."

I've only been to this house a handful of times since Dad and Sandy moved in—just a couple awkward Thanksgiving dinners and one very strained week-long visit for my seventeenth birthday. Dad always came to pick me up from the train station in whatever his midlife crisis mobile of the year was, so I have a vague sense of the route to the house, but my memories aren't much help in the pitch dark, when one looming mansion looks much the same as the next.

"Big houses," Brayden says as he swings the car into a turn that's a little too wide for the road.

The engine pops as he accelerates down the street, but after two hours in this junk heap of a car, I don't flinch at the sound anymore.

Beggars can't be choosers, as they say.

"Is your dad, like, rich?" Brayden asks.

We pass by a huge grey brick estate I think I remember my dad pointing out as an embassy, and I figure we must be on the right track to the house.

"Uh...I guess," I answer.

People tend to get weird when they learn my dad is whatever is just underneath a C-level employee at one of the biggest banks in Canada. They get even weirder when they learn my mom is the founder of the biggest Pilates studio chain in the country



and was previously the star of a very famous set of workout DVDs that everybody else's mom seemed to own when I was a kid.

You'd think they would have been the perfect power couple.

You'd be wrong.

"Turn here," I tell Brayden when we reach the end of the street. "Please."

We arrive at my dad's street. Brayden brings the car to a halt in front of the house's gate and lets out a low whistle as he hunches over the steering wheel to peer up at all three storeys of the house silhouetted against the dim scattering of stars in the night sky.

I stare up at the sight too, searching for any sign that my dad and Sandy are not in Italy like they're supposed to be. The last time my dad called me under what I'm certain were strict orders from my mom to try talking some sense into me about my life choices, I'm pretty sure he mentioned he was leaving at the start of July. I didn't want to risk texting him tonight to confirm. There's a slight chance he'd suspect something was up and call my mom, and she'd definitely know something was up.

Namely, that I broke up with my boyfriend and ended up alone in Montreal at the age of nineteen, just like she said I would. She'd count it as more proof that I should just come back to Toronto already and start my impending internship at her business early, but that's not something I wanted to deal with today.

Hence, Dad's house.

There are no lights on in the mansion that I can see, just some glinting reflections of the sky in the huge, floor-to-ceiling windows.

## Page 12

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I take a deep breath. Whatever happens, I'm here now. I'm not about to crash at whatever sketchy locale Brayden is visiting to do his usual sketchy deeds, even though he's repeatedly offered me a place to stay, so into the house I must go.

I dig my phone out of my purse and scroll through all my saved notes until I find the codes my dad gave me that time I visited for my birthday. Brayden rolls his window down and punches the number I give him into the call-box. The gate makes a click that sounds extra loud in the silent street before swinging open.

"Hardcore," Brayden mutters before inching the car forwards. "This would be a sick location for one of my events."

I don't know if he actually thinks something about the gate is hardcore or if that's just his favourite adjective. He's said it at least six times during this drive.

I've never been able to tell if Brayden is some kind of drug dealer or if he actually organizes heavy metal music events like he tells everyone he does. Either way, he's always driving between Montreal, Ottawa, and Toronto. Despite his general sketchiness, he's one of my freshly-ex-boyfriend's nicest friends, and he offered me a free ride to Ottawa even after learning I'd just dumped his buddy.

We come to a stop in front of the garage. Brayden cuts the engine and asks if I want help bringing my stuff in.

I glance over my shoulder at the back seat, which is filled with my guitar, a bulging suitcase, and two trash bags stuffed with all the random objects I managed to grab while stomping through the townhouse as Nick and I screamed at each other a few

hours ago.

There was probably a lot more in the house I could have claimed as my own, but after spending almost a year sharing that place with my ex-boyfriend and an ever-changing number of his friends, not much of the stuff was in a state worth saving.

I'm all for smashing gender stereotypes, but damn, they made it hard to believe boys can clean anything.

"Thanks, but I can manage," I tell Brayden.

"You sure? I don't mind carrying stuff."

I shake my head. "It's fine. Thanks again for the ride."

He chuckles and gives the dashboard a few pats like it's the neck of a horse. "Wouldn't be the first time I've been someone's getaway car."

I decide it's better not to ask any follow-up questions to that. When I'm standing in front of the garage with my guitar case slung over my back and a garbage bag clutched in each hand, Brayden circles the car around so he can lean out the window to talk to me.

"Good luck, Andrea. You know, I always thought you were a hardcore chick."

I cough to cover up a laugh. "Oh, um, thanks, Brayden. You're, um, hardcore too."

I lift one hand in a devil's horn sign—because how could I not?—and he lets out a whoop of appreciation before doing the same as he speeds down the driveway.

I drop my arm to my side and stand there for a minute, letting the sounds of the night

rush in around me. I can hear crickets chirping and the faint gurgle of the pool filter in the backyard. The air smells like wet grass.

That's something that always strikes me about Ottawa: how quiet most of it is, how you can actually hear yourself think without every sentence getting interrupted by wailing sirens and cars clogging up the street outside your door. At my mom's place in Toronto, I always felt like the city was filling up my ears and nose, seeping into my system like a toxic gas.

There's no rumbling traffic here, even though we're not that far from downtown. Dad's neighborhood is like a wealthy little island unto itself, complete with two Oxford-esque private schools within a couple blocks of each other.

I drop one of the garbage bags and then flip up the cover of the garage's keypad before pressing what I hope is the right code. The little light flares green and the door in front of me jerks to life, sliding up with a metallic creak.

The two vehicles currently in use out of my dad's extensive roster sparkle even in the low light. I rearrange my grip on my stuff and then waddle into the garage, edging around the cars to get to the door to the house.

Inside, the entryway is chilly and dark. I set all my things down in a heap and don't bother turning any lights on before I head over to the control panel for the house alarm. I glance at the screen, expecting some kind of countdown informing me I have approximately eight point five seconds to enter the correct code before a full SWAT team parachutes down onto the roof, but as far as I can tell, the alarm isn't on at all.

A shard of ice shoots up my spine.

There's no way they wouldn't have set the alarm before leaving. My dad is obsessed with the alarm system.

I back away from the panel like a SWAT team really has caught me in the middle of a crime. I glance around the room, searching for some evidence to tell me whether or not anyone's home.

There's nothing out of order, not even a stray pair of shoes or a forgotten takeout coffee cup. I kick my own shoes off and then pad into the kitchen in my socks for maximum stealth. The stove light is on, casting an amber glow across the countertops, but I figure that's a normal thing to leave on when you're on vacation. The counters are clear, and there are no dishes in the sink.

No signs of life.

My shoulders relax at the same time my stomach growls. Besides the cardboard-flavored panini I got at a highway rest stop, I haven't eaten all day. I should probably scope out the house more first, but my stomach rumbles like it can sense my proximity to snacks.

A beam of bright fluorescent light streaks the kitchen when I pull both sides of the double-door fridge open. There's more than I expected inside, considering they're supposed to be gone for most of the summer. As I peruse the shelves stuffed with condiment jars, yoghurt, eggs, and some bags of veggies, I wonder if they've got a housekeeper coming in who keeps food here.

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The hunger pangs in my stomach are getting too intense for me to put much thought into that. I spot a half-finished wheel of brie way down at the back of the bottom shelf and can't resist the call of my favourite cheese.

I drop to my knees so I can shuffle a few packages around to get at the brie. I've just stretched my arm out towards it when a noise from the other side of the kitchen makes me freeze.

That noise could only be described as a pitter-patter. It continues coming closer as I stay glued to the floor, too shocked to even pull my arm out of the fridge.

A yowling meow fills the kitchen as Sandy's felines from hell slink underneath the fridge door and barrel right into me, head-butting my legs and pawing at my thighs to demand immediate petting.

I can't move. My brain is whirring like I'm working my way through a math equation that doesn't make sense.

Sandy would never leave her precious hairless monstrosities alone. She'd either try to sneak them into Italy or send them to some elite cat boarding institute for the summer. They keep brushing their saggy bodies against my legs and mewling for attention as I struggle to process what's going on.

I've just come to the conclusion that someone has to be in the house when I hear a gasp from the other side of the room.

Everything clicks into place: the food, the cats, the disarmed alarm system. I don't

know how I was stupid enough not to consider them hiring a live-in cat sitter.

A cat sitter who probably thinks I'm a murderer making a pit stop for a midnight snack.

I clear my throat and brace for an extremely awkward conversation. I pull my arm out from where it's gotten covered in goose bumps in the fridge and push myself up to my feet. I'm about to swing the doors shut when a high-pitched yelp interrupts me.

"DON'T MOVE!" a woman's voice orders.

At least, I assume she's a fully-grown woman. Her voice is thin and shrill enough to be a child's, but maybe that's just the terror.

"I'm—"

"I SAID DON'T MOVE!" the voice interrupts, insistent enough despite its squeakiness that I actually stop moving. "I'M ARMED AND I'M CALLING THE POLICE!"

Armed?

A hard lump forms in my stomach as my pulse picks up speed. I need to get an explanation out before we involve the emergency services.

"I'm Peter's daughter," I blurt, the fridge door still keeping me concealed.

I wonder if the door is thick enough to stop a bullet.

"YOU—wait, what?"

The shift in the woman's tone is so abrupt I almost burst out laughing. I can practically see her doing a double-take in my head, even though I still have no idea what she looks like.

"I'm his daughter," I repeat, my voice shaking with what I realize is shock. "That's how I got in the house. I'm...visiting. I didn't know they had a cat sitter. You're the cat sitter, right?"

I glance down at where one of the cats has now lain itself across my feet to start purring. The other one slips back under the fridge door and takes off towards the woman.

"Oh. Oh. They didn't tell me you were coming."

I can't help smirking. "Yeah, it was, um, a last minute thing."

"Oh. I see."

Her voice has turned so quiet and reedy I start to worry she might be about to faint.

"Oh my god, I almost attacked you," she says in a horrified whisper.

"Yeah, uh, about that. You think I could close the fridge without provoking your wrath?"

She lets out a squeak I interpret as a yes. I take a slow step back from the fridge and then swing the doors shut.

My eyes are still stunned from the glare of the fridge light, and I have to blink a few times before I can see her in the near-darkness. Once I get my first good look, I can't help it.



## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:45 pm*

I grip the fridge handle for support as I laugh so hard my knees go weak.

She doesn't have a gun. She has an ornamental table lamp clutched in one hand and what I'm pretty sure is a miniature version of the Venus de Milo in the other.

She blinks at me with huge, round eyes while I laugh, which just makes me crack up even harder.

I only realize just how much tension has built up in my body over the course of this insane day when I feel it seeping out of me as I laugh and laugh and laugh. I'm not even laughing at her anymore. I'm not even laughing at anything funny.

I'm laughing because I'm nineteen and everything I own in the entire world is sitting in two garbage bags on the floor of my dad's house. I'm laughing because five hours ago, I had a boyfriend, and now I don't. I'm laughing because I thought I loved him, but it only took a few seconds of looking at him—really looking at him—to realize I never did.

I just wanted to believe I'd finally found something that mattered to me.

"Sorry," I choke out when I can speak again. "Weird day. Also, what were you gonna do with those? Venus de Milo me to death? Strangle me with a lamp cord?"

A rogue snort explodes out of me at the thought. The girl's eyebrows pinch together like I've offended her.

"They were the closest blunt objects to my bed."

That doesn't help me stop laughing. Of course my dad would have a mini Venus de Milo in one of his guest rooms. He and Sandy decided amateur art collecting 'with a focus on sculpture' was going to be their new thing a few years ago. The whole house is full of kitschy reproductions and weird, absurdly expensive originals their art advisor convinces them they should invest in.

"How come you didn't call the cops right away?" I ask. "Wait, did you call the cops already? Do we need to, like, deal with that?"

She shakes her head. "I thought it was probably just the cats making noise. I only brought these as...precautions."

She raises both objects a few inches higher and then glances back and forth between them like she's only just realized how ridiculous she looks.

"I must have scared the hell out of you." I release the fridge handle so I can lean against the edge of the island instead. "You come down here expecting to break up a cat fight, and you find me crouched in front of the fridge like that scene in Jennifer's Body."

Her eyes get all gigantic again as she stares at me.

"Never seen it?" I ask.

Those same creases form between her eyebrows like I've insulted her again. "It's my favourite movie ever."

"No way." I laugh again, but this time it's more out of surprise. "It's my favourite movie too."

For a moment, the air in the room seems to shift, or maybe it just gets thicker,

clouded with something I only manage to catch a taste of before it slips away.

I take a few seconds to actually look at her. Even when she's not gawking at me in horror, she has some of the biggest, roundest eyes I've ever seen. It's too dark for me to be sure of their colour, but I can tell they're some shade of blue or green. She has thin, dark blonde hair that falls just past her shoulders, but her blonde eyebrows are light enough to make her eyes look like they take up even more of her face than they already do.

She's wearing a matching pajama set, the pale purple t-shirt and cotton shorts dotted with a pattern I have to squint at for a moment before I realize what I'm seeing.

"Are those...pickles?"

She drops her gaze to where I'm pointing at her shirt and then blushes so hard I can see a trace of pink on her cheeks even in the dim lighting.

"Oh, um, yeah."

I prop my elbow on top of the island and rest my chin in my hand. "Interesting choice."

"I like pickles," she blurts.

I snort again. Her cheeks flush even darker as I let out a suggestive-sounding, "Ohhhh."

"Not like that," she squeaks, avoiding my eyes. "Definitely not like that. I'm a lesbian."

I blink. That was way more information than I was expecting.

For some reason, hearing her say that makes my heart pound a little louder in my ears. I've known I'm bisexual for a couple years now, but there weren't a lot of queer women to hang out with at my high school or among Nick's circle of friends. I don't think I've ever heard anyone say 'I'm a lesbian' in real life.

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“I mean, I—I don’t know why I just said that,” she stammers, staring down at the floor tiles like she wants to singe an escape hatch into them with her eyes. “I mean, I am a lesbian, but it’s not like you needed to know that. I mean, it’s fine that you know that. Most people who know me know that. Not that you know me. I’m babbling. I should stop. I—”

“Hey.”

Her sentences are starting to run together so fast she sounds like a glitching android about to combust. I push off the island and walk over until I’m standing right in front of her.

Her jaw clamps shut. She’s breathing hard enough that her nostrils flare, her chest heaving under her pickle shirt.

It is pretty cute that she has a pickle shirt.

“May I?” I ask, pointing at the ‘blunt objects’ in her hands.

She holds them out to me without saying a word, those big eyes of hers flaring wider, and I set them down on the nearest counter. I come back over and stick out my hand.

“How about a proper introduction? I’m Andrea King.”

For a moment, I think all she’s going to do is keep staring. Then her hand wraps around mine, her grip limp and tentative for a second before tightening into a surprisingly firm handshake.

“Your hand is cold,” she murmurs.

I glance down at where our palms are pressed together, her skin warm against mine.

“From being held hostage in the fridge,” I answer, my voice lower now too.

She winces. “I am so sorry. I—”

“Make it up to me,” I interrupt. “Tell me your name.”

“Right, right. Yeah.” Her eyes lock with mine, and we’re close enough now that I can tell her irises are the same deep blue as a swimming pool on a hot summer day. “It’s Naomi. Naomi Waters.”

## CHAPTER 4

Andrea

I wake up to find seventeen texts and three voicemail messages from Nick waiting for me. I groan and flop back down onto my bed instead of heading for the bathroom. I ignore the voicemails, but I do scan through the texts. They started just after midnight last night and petered out around two, which means he’s probably still sleeping after a round of consolation binge-drinking with his buddies.

I guess I can’t judge him too hard. I didn’t even drink last night, and I’m only waking up at ten.

The messages are pretty status quo: requests that we talk morphing into pleas for me to come back that eventually become typo-ridden statements about how he’s better off without me.

They're not even particularly mean or rude texts. They're just the normal things you'd expect a regular twenty year-old drunk guy to send to his ex-girlfriend a few hours after she dumped him and left the city in one of his friend's cars.

I drop the phone onto the comforter that reeks of rose-scented dryer sheets and blink at the piercing daylight streaming through the room's sheer curtains.

I think that was the worst part of yesterday: when I looked at Nick and realized just how damn regular he is.

When I met him at a party a few weeks after my high school graduation, I thought he was the most exciting thing to ever happen to me. I thought he'd whisk me away in the car his cousin helped him build from scratch—which barely ran well enough to legally be on the roads, but which seemed like the coolest thing in the world to me at the time—and make everything better. So when he asked me to go back to Montreal with him for a week, I said yes.

A week turned into a month, which turned into a whole summer, which turned into a phone call that nearly gave my mother an aneurysm when I told her I wanted to take a gap year before coming back to Toronto to start my internship.

I thought maybe after a year, I'd know why even just the thought of the internship I'd been working towards my whole life was starting to clog my lungs like the smog of Toronto until I couldn't breathe at all. I thought falling in love with Nick would help clear all the confusion out, but when we got into yet another one of our stupid arguments yesterday, I stopped and just looked at him, and somehow, I knew I never loved him at all.

I blow a lock of hair off my face and then push myself up to my feet again. I dragged my suitcase and guitar up here last night but left the garbage bags full of random household crap in the entryway. The suitcase sits at the foot of the double bed like

evidence reminding me yesterday did indeed happen.

I really did bum a ride all the way to Ottawa and then nearly got bludgeoned to death by some random girl living in my dad's house.

I can't help grinning at the thought. As hard as I try, I can't imagine Naomi actually doing anything with her makeshift weapons. After we introduced ourselves, she got so flustered she could barely form words. I told her I was crashing at my dad's place after breaking up with my boyfriend in Montreal and then tried to get some more information out of her. All I managed to extract before we said goodnight is that she's the daughter of one of my dad's employees and is staying here all summer to look after the house and the cats.

I can't decide if my body is craving breakfast or a shower more, so I settle on a quick rinse. I wipe the steam from off the full-length mirror once I've stepped out of the glass shower in one of the several guest bathrooms. I drop the thick white towel to the floor and stare at my hair.



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The purple dye job I had a friend help me do a couple weeks ago has mostly faded. It was only semi-permanent, but I liked the look enough that I'd do it for real next time. All that's left is a slight burgundy tint.

I throw on some denim cutoff shorts and a plain white v-neck t-shirt before traversing the route to the kitchen. As soon as I walk in, the putrid scent of wet cat food makes my nose wrinkle.

"Oh, hey," I say when I spot the source of the smell.

Naomi is peeling the lid off a can while the cats try to climb up her legs, making desperate mewling noises like they haven't seen food in weeks.

She glances at me with the can still in her hands, and her whole body freezes when our eyes lock. I wait a couple seconds for her to shake off the startled sensation, but if anything, her posture seems to get even tenser when I take a couple steps forward.

"Did I scare you?"

She blinks, and that seems to break her trance. She turns to hunch over the can, her hair falling over her shoulders to hide her face.

"They're really noisy cats, aren't they?" I ask when she still doesn't show any signs of making a sound.

It's possible I'm going to be carrying this entire conversation myself, but considering I did make her fear for her life last night, I probably owe her that.

“My dad’s been with Sandy for almost six years, and I still can’t get over the fact that she named her cats Bijoux and Aurora Rose.” I snort as I head over to the pantry and start scanning for breakfast options. “The first time I met her, she thought we could have some kind of daughter and step-mom bonding session by cleaning the wax out of their ears. Does that seem like a bonding activity to you? I guess maybe trauma bonding, but like seriously, who suggests that as the first thing to do with your new boyfriend’s daughter? Oh my god, wait, is she making you clean their earwax while she’s gone? Please tell me they hired a professional for that.”

I step back from scanning the shelves and look over at Naomi. The cats are now swarming their bowls on the floor, and she’s leaning against the island above them, watching me with her chin propped in her hand.

She looks cute like that, kind of like she’s waiting for someone to walk over and slide their arms around her from behind.

For a second, I can almost feel it: the warmth of her back pressed to my chest, my nose buried in her hair and my hands gripping the edge of her faded blue t-shirt. She pushes off the island and whirls around like she’s embarrassed I caught her staring. I watch her open and close what seems like a random selection of cupboards with her back to me. Then I shake my head to clear it as I turn back to the pantry.

I’m not actually into her. I’m just not sure what the hell I’m doing with my life at the moment, and checking out a random cute girl seems like the perfect way to avoid thinking about that.

Thankfully, she’s acting like she’s going to burst into flames if she speaks so much as a single syllable around me today, which is going to make it a lot easier to focus on my next move—namely, figuring out where to go from here before either of my parents discover I’m currently living out of trash bags or that I will most likely be unemployed by the end of the day.

It's safe to say I will not be making it in for the lunch rush at my waitressing job in Montreal this afternoon.

It's also probably safe to say I will not be returning to Montreal at all, considering my internship in Toronto starts at the end of August and I don't even have anything left in Montreal to go back to.

A jolt of dread makes my chest tighten, but I grab a bag of bagels off the shelf in front of me and do my best to ignore it as I head for the toaster.

"I do."

The murmur of Naomi's voice pulls me out of my thoughts. She's facing me now, her gaze pinned to the tiles under my feet.

"Uh, clean their ears," she adds before I can ask her what she's talking about. "Their ears aren't actually that bad. The grossest part is cleaning between their toes. There's some scary stuff in there."

I chuckle. "I can only imagine."

"But they're still cute," she goes on. "Once you get used to the whole hairless thing, they start to grow on you. It's sweet that they like to cuddle so much, which I guess is more about my body heat than me, but still, it's cute."

I laugh again, my eyes scanning over her face as she continues to stare at the floor. "Oh no. The Stockholm Syndrome is setting in already."

"Yeah, maybe," she says with a sound that can only be described as a giggle. The noise makes the corners of my mouth lift.

She lifts her head, and I get my first good look at her eyes since last night. They're a lighter blue than I thought and streaked with sea green.

I start to wonder what they'd look like outside, where the sun is already beating down on the yard like it's trying to dry up the whole pool. They look like the kind of eyes that are always shifting between shades, never giving you the full story but always making you want to read another page.

We both jump when the toaster pops.

I grab a plate and fish my bagel out. I can hear blood thundering in my ears, and I don't know when my heart started beating so fast.

"I'm going to go, um, read," Naomi says, already retreating to the other side of the kitchen. "Oh also, sorry if you already did this, but your dad told me to tell you to call your mom, if you haven't yet."

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I freeze, the bottom of my stomach dropping as the floor seems to tilt underneath me.

“You told my dad I’m here?”

Naomi blinks. “I...yes? I mean, he texted about twenty minutes ago to ask how things were going, and I said all good since you arrived last night, and he—”

I swear.

Loudly.

If he wants me to call my mom, that’s because he’s already called her to ask her what the hell I’m doing here.

I glance around the kitchen and then realize I left my phone up in the bedroom. I swear again before abandoning my bagel and gearing up for a sprint through the house.

“Was I—I mean, did I—I mean, I’m sor—”

“It’s fine.” I hesitate for a moment as I stride past Naomi. Her face has turned pale, and I realize I must look like I’m ready to bite the head off of anyone within a five meter radius.

I screw my mouth up into what’s supposed to pass for a reassuring grin, but it must make me look a few shades closer to homicidal instead. Naomi takes a step back and bumps against the wall behind her.

“It’s just that he...technically didn’t invite me here,” I say, “but it’s fine. You didn’t know.”

“O-oh.” She opens and closes her mouth a couple times like she wants to say more.

Even though I feel weirdly certain that whenever Naomi Waters does decide to speak, it’s worth dropping everything to listen, my feet are itching to bolt for my phone.

“I have to go call her,” I shout over my shoulder as I run.

Up in my guest room, my phone is sitting on top of the haphazard pile of clothes heaped in my open suitcase. I swipe to my notifications and find that not only has Nick risen from the dead to start assailing me with texts again, but my mom has also jammed up my voicemail and gotten started on flooding me with texts too.

I don’t bother reading the messages. She’s just going to yell the same things at me over the phone.

I pull up her number, my thumb hovering over the call button as I stare down at the screen.

She didn’t call me when I told her the restaurant finally moved me up from bussing tables to being an actual waitress. She didn’t call me when I told her Nick and I reached our six month anniversary—my longest relationship milestone ever. She didn’t even call me when I told her I’d almost saved up enough to buy my own car and thought maybe we could check out some secondhand lots together during her next business trip to Montreal.

I squeeze my free hand into a fist, fighting against the stupid burning sensation in the back of my throat, and then I hit the button. I flop onto the bed, reaching for a pillow to keep close by in case I end up needing to smoosh my face into it and scream during

this call.

The line clicks halfway through the second ring, and my mom's high, clear voice starts demanding answers without even a 'hello' to ease into things.

"What exactly do you think you're doing trespassing at your father's house?"

Something in my jaw clicks, but I force my voice to sound breezy.

"Is it trespassing if he's given me all his alarm codes?"

She doesn't miss a beat. "You know very well that sneaking in there when he isn't home without even telling him you're coming is not an acceptable way to behave."

"If he's got a problem with it, why isn't he the one calling?"

That does make her pause, if only for a second.

This is all playing out exactly as I thought it would if the misfortune of my parents finding out I'm here came to pass: my dad turning all responsibility over to my mom with his usual 'as long as you ask your mother' apathy, my mom getting extra fired up after realizing she'd be handling me without backup, and her taking all the frustrations of their failed marriage out on me.

It's the theme song of my childhood, back for another refrain.

"Because he's in Italy, Andrea."

"Which makes it even less of a problem that I'm staying in his house." I lift a hand to shade my eyes from the beam of mid-morning sun streaming in through the window.

"I don't know why you're upset."

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“I’m not upset. I’m disappointed.”

The disappointment card is a favourite of hers to play. You’d think its effectiveness would wear off with time, but I still feel a sting somewhere deep in my gut, like there’s a thread knotted around my insides she can manage to tug on even from a few hundred miles away.

“Did that boy kick you out?”

I chew on my lip to hold back all the swear words just begging to be let out and squeeze the edge of the pillow instead.

“His name is Nick,” I say, “and he did not kick me out. I dumped him.”

“I see. So now you don’t have an apartment. What’s the plan here, Andrea?”

I wait for her to ask what happened, or even just ask if I’m okay, but she stays quiet while she waits for my answer.

“I’m figuring it out. I just needed...a break.”

She lets out a sharp sigh. “That’s what you said when you moved in with him. What exactly are you taking a break from, Andrea? Responsibility? Being an adult? Just because you decided you needed this whole gap year thing does not mean you get to opt out of being a grown-up, and grown-ups do not break into their father’s house.”

I let out a sigh of my own and throw my free hand up in the air, waving it around for



emphasis like she can actually see me. “I can guarantee Dad doesn’t care that I’m here. He doesn’t really care what I do at all, and we both know it.”

I wait for her to protest. I wait for her to tell me that couldn’t possibly be true, but even if she did try to convince me he actually cared enough to get involved in my life, we’d both know she was lying. I’ve seen him joking around with Sandy’s sons at holiday dinners enough to know he’s found something with his new family that he never had with us.

He let his marriage with my mom slip right through his fingers, and she’s spent her whole life since then building a company she’ll never have to lose the way she lost him—something I’ll never have to lose either. That’s why she’s had my internship waiting for me for years.

“Well, I do care,” she says. “That’s why you need to come back to Toronto tomorrow. I’ll book you a train ticket. You can spend the rest of the summer getting ready for your internship. We can even look into you starting early, although I suppose it’s not really early when you’ve delayed it for a whole year of doing nothing with that boy.”

Tender moment over.

I roll my eyes and press my lips together to hold back a groan.

“I wasn’t doing nothing,” I tell her, “and I have money saved up. I’ll book my own ticket in a few days. I just need to process things ending with Nick.”

“Andrea...” I can imagine her pressing her fingertips to her temple as she trails off for a moment. “You can’t keep doing this. I can excuse a gap year. I can excuse all the ridiculous things you got up to in high school, but you’re nineteen now. By the time I was nineteen, I already knew exactly where I wanted to be in the next ten

years, and every day, I worked hard to make that happen. That's what I raised you to do too, but the past few years, you've been...not yourself, and I just don't get it."

A knot forms in my stomach as I listen to her.

I don't get it either. For years and years when I was a kid, I knew I wanted to be just like her when I grew up. I loved the way she looked at me whenever I said that, like I was the brightest, shiniest thing she'd ever seen. I don't know when the weight of all that shine started to become too much, like a suit of golden armor I was supposed to carry through life, when really all it did was sit so heavy on my shoulders I couldn't breathe.

"Mom, I just—"

"I have a meeting," she says at the same time I start to speak. "I have to go. Send me your train details as soon as you book the ticket."

I swallow down whatever I was about to say. Even if she did give me the chance to speak, I'm not sure I could put it into words.

"Yes, sergeant," I drone instead.

She ignores my sarcasm. "Andrea, one last thing. I'm...I'm glad you're somewhere safe."

A different string, tighter than the last, loops around my insides and pulls so hard I actually press a hand to my stomach.

Then she hangs up.

## CHAPTER 5

Naomi

“Naomi, you—”

Whatever Priya was about to say gets cut off by Shal’s yelp from behind her as the two of them come barreling into the entryway, a few grocery bags clutched in their hands.

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“Sorry,” Shal says. “It’s just those cats really are terrifying when you’re not expecting to see them.”

I look over my shoulder and see Bijoux and Aurora Rose trotting into the entryway to greet our guests, their skin looking particularly wrinkly in the afternoon sun streaming through the windows.

The light also brings out the thin film of grease that has started to collect on the bottoms of their bellies, which means I’m due to give them their first bath without Sandy’s help. Considering the fact that we had to put on protective gloves that went all the way up to our armpits just to get them in the water without our skin being shredded, I’m not exactly looking forward to it.

The cats seem blissfully unaware of the less than warm reaction from my friends and pad straight over to them, twining around their legs to demand body heat in exchange for snuggles. It only takes a couple seconds before both Priya and Shal have set their bags down to hunch over and give them scratches.

Once you get over the whole shapeless folds of flesh thing, they’re actually very sweet cats.

“So what exactly is this crazy news we need to hear?” Priya asks while she strokes her thumb over the top of Bijoux’s head.

“Yeah, Priya said your texts sounded like there was some kind of national emergency,” Shal adds.

I wouldn't call it national, but the fact that there's an extremely attractive girl in this house who I almost clobbered to death with a table lamp last night and who may or may not hate me after I broke some unspoken code about not telling her dad she's here definitely feels like an emergency.

I still can't think about what an idiot I was last night without my stomach tying itself in knots, and I have absolutely no idea what I'm supposed to do now. This is not a social interaction I have ever handled before.

I don't know if this is a social interaction anyone has ever handled before, but maybe together, the three of us can decide if I should follow through with my urge to flee the house and never face the beautiful yet terrifying Andrea King again.

"Yeah, about that. Um, I don't really know where to start."

Shal straightens up and reaches for her bags again. "Sounds like I should get this ice cream in the freezer before we begin this conversation."

"Ice cream?"

For the first time since they walked in, I realize just how much stuff they have: two grocery bags each, all of them filled to the brim.

"What's with all the food?" I ask.

"For the munchies, duh," Shal answers before stepping past me to head for the kitchen.

I give Priya a look to ask if she's as confused as me, but she responds with a pointed tilt of her head.

“You know, for the...weed,” she says, dropping her voice on the last word like the police might have wired the whole house to pick up on any admissions of illegal teen mischief.

I start whispering too.

“Ohhhh, right.”

We’re getting high today—or at least, that’s the plan. Some guy who was a year ahead of us in high school is supposed to meet us outside a dispensary in a couple hours. Shal went out on a couple dates with him before he graduated, and I’m pretty sure she’s dangling the possibility of another one over his head as motivation for being our weed supplier.

I guess she could also pull a two birds one stone if she really does go out with him some more and knocks the ‘summer fling’ item off the bucket list.

Priya and I haven’t even taken a full step into the kitchen before Shal lets out a gasp. Her grocery bags land with a thunk on the tiled floor, and she sprints straight over to the sliding doors that open onto the deck.

“Naomi,” she says in a breathless voice, her nose literally pressed to the glass, “there is a girl out there.”

My face heats up. My tongue already feels thick in my mouth, like Andrea is standing right in front of me instead of lying in a pool chair halfway across the yard.

She’s been out there for almost two hours, headphones in her ears and huge sunglasses shading her eyes while she lounges in a striped black and pink bikini—a very tiny striped black and pink bikini that literally made me tuck and roll away from my bedroom window after I realized how long I’d been staring when I first noticed

she was out by the pool.

“Don’t let her see you,” I hiss. “Come on. Let’s go to the living room before she notices us.”

Shal doesn’t listen. If anything, she presses the tip of her nose even harder against the door. Her breath has started to fog up the glass.

“Oh my god, Naomi, did you hook up with that girl?” she demands.

Priya lets out a choked squeaking sound. Her eyes are wide, her mouth hanging open.

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I start to splutter a reply that doesn't turn into actual words, which makes Priya squeak again and drop her own bags before running over to slam up against the door beside her sister.

“We did not hook up,” I choke out.

Shal snorts and doesn't bother turning around to answer me. “What? A girl just randomly appeared in the backyard in a bikini? Damn, Naomi, I must say, I was not expecting you to make the fastest progress on the list, but I'm impressed.”

I groan and then speed-walk over to the other side of the kitchen, sparing a glance at Andrea on the way. As far as I can tell, she hasn't moved or looked up to notice my friends giving her creepy pervert stares.

Or maybe I'm the only one doing the creepy pervert thing.

My burning face flames even hotter.

“Get over here,” I squawk at Shal and Priya. “Quick.”

Shal lets out a peal of delighted laughter tinged with pure evil as she takes her sweet time joining me in the living room—or sitting room, or whatever this one of several rooms filled with couches and sculptures worth more than my college tuition is called.

Priya trails behind her, her face stricken like she's witnessed a gruesome murder scene and not a living, breathing woman chilling out by the pool. I can't blame her.



I'd be just as shocked if I walked into her house and saw some random shirtless man she'd never even mentioned before lounging around like he'd just spent the night in her bedroom.

"We did not hook up," I repeat as Shal sprawls on one of the couches while Priya gingerly takes a seat on the edge of the cushion beside her. "She broke into the house last night."

At least now they both look horrified.

"What?" they demand, in one of the rare instances when they fulfill the twin stereotype of looking and sounding exactly the same while speaking in perfect unison.

"I mean, she didn't break in," I add, still on my feet as I face them like I'm giving a boardroom presentation. I wish I had some charts and diagrams to back me up; it's hard to remember last night when most of my brain is still on high alert, wondering if Andrea caught us staring and is about to burst into the room and confront me. "She's my dad's boss's daughter, so she has all the door codes and stuff. I thought I heard something in the kitchen, so I grabbed a lamp and—"

"Wait, hold up." Shal lifts a hand. "You grabbed a lamp? To, what, confront a robber?"

"I mean, I was pretty sure it was just the cats, but I didn't want to take any chances."

I decide to leave out the fact that I also grabbed a miniature Venus de Milo. They still have enough interruptions that a good ten minutes pass before I've got everyone up to speed on how Andrea King came to be sitting by the pool this afternoon.

I collapse onto the couch across from theirs as soon as I'm done, groaning as I drag

my hands down my face.

“I can’t believe she saw my pickle pajamas.”

Shal chuckles until Priya smacks her arm.

“It’s not that bad,” Priya says in a soothing tone. She gets up and comes over to sit down beside me, slinging an arm around my shoulders. “Anyone would have felt awkward after meeting somebody for the first time under those...very specific circumstances, and I’m sure she’s not actually mad you mentioned her to her dad. How were you supposed to know it was a secret?”

I shake my head and slump against her. “Maybe I was supposed to know. I’m pretty bad at subtlety sometimes. Maybe it was obvious. She hasn’t talked to me since, so she must be mad.”

Priya strokes my hair with her free hand, but Shal goes for a more blunt approach.

“She hasn’t talked to you because you’ve been hiding from her all day. You literally just ran past the kitchen door so she wouldn’t see you.”

She might have a point.

“Okay, yeah, I haven’t been in the same room as her since she came down for breakfast, but that doesn’t prove she’s not mad.”

Shal shakes her head and then gets to her feet. “I’m gonna give you two a few minutes to do your whole introvert thing while I put the snacks away.”

As soon as she’s gone, Priya removes her arm from my shoulders to clasp both my hands in hers instead, giving them a squeeze.

“You okay?”

She doesn't make a big deal out of it when I can't meet her gaze. Even with someone I trust as much as Priya, sometimes eye contact feels way too overwhelming, especially when my anxiety is already bad enough I'm fighting to breathe.

“What do I do?” I ask, my voice wheezy. “Am I supposed to just share the house with her now? Does she want me in the house? Do I leave? Is she the house sitter now? Is that supposed to be obvious to me?”

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“Hey, listen.” She gives my hands another squeeze. “Everything is fine. She said she’s only staying for a few days, right? You definitely still have a house sitting job. She’ll be out of here soon, and then you can go back to having a nice, quiet mansion to yourself. Well, except for when Shal and I come bug you.”

I let out a half-hearted laugh and then suck in a long, shaky breath. I concentrate on the texture of the couch cushion underneath my bare legs, imagining I can feel each thread pressing into my skin as I ground down into the sensation.

It gets a little easier to breathe.

“It’s bad again, huh?” Priya asks, her voice heavy with concern.

I know what it means: it is my anxiety, and she’s right. It’s getting worse. Ever since graduation, it’s like my body has turned into a box full of firecrackers and life is just one big box of matches ready to set them off and turn me into a shell-shocked mess.

“It’s just a...weird time in life,” I answer. “It’s like we’re in limbo this summer, you know?”

She nods and slips her hands out of mine to cross her arms over her chest. “I get that. It’s kind of like we’re stuck between who we were and who we’re going to be, like there’s this whole new Priya I have to wait around until September to meet, when really I just want to be her now.”

A fresh round of firecrackers goes off in my stomach, and I clench my jaw to keep from telling her that’s not what I meant at all. What I meant is that my whole life is

going to change in September, and I don't feel ready to change at all. I'm not even sure I want to change, and the fact that our friendship was supposed to be the one steady thing we could count on to get us through all the upheaval feels a lot less comforting when she's talking about how much she can't wait to be someone new.

"Priya, do you—"

We're interrupted by the sound of Shal swearing in the kitchen before she comes stomping back into the living room, her phone clutched in one of her hands.

"He cancelled."

She rolls her eyes when neither of us knows what she's talking about.

"The guy who was supposed to buy the joints for us. He can't make it."

When we still don't react, she narrows her eyes and squints at us.

"Am I interrupting some kind of dramatic conversation here?"

I can feel the tension between me and Priya still hanging in the air, like the acrid threat of lightning you can sniff on the breeze just before a summer storm rolls in.

"Um, no," Priya answers. "We're just introverting, like you put it."

Shal props her hand on her hip. "Well, do you introverts know anyone else who could buy us weed?"

Smoking a joint for the first time in my life now sounds way beyond my capacity for stepping outside my comfort zone today. I'm about to admit that when the squeak of the kitchen door sliding open makes us all go quiet. My breath freezes in my lungs as

I listen to the sound of bare feet padding across the kitchen, getting closer to the living room with each step.

Shal turns to greet Andrea as she strides into the room. She's got a towel wrapped around herself like a dress, and her hair is hanging loose, so long the strands almost reach the middle of her back.

The kitchen was too dark for me to notice last night, but in the daylight, the slight purple tinge to her chocolate brown hair is hard to miss. Other than the dye, everything about her looks the same as her graduation photo: eyes so deep brown they're almost black, sharp features softened by the thick spray of freckles over her nose, and a mouth that always looks like it's on the verge of twisting into a smirk that could set a whole city on fire.

Everything about Andrea King screams danger, like a blinking, ten-foot sign blocking off a crazy cliffside highway you know you shouldn't drive down if you value your life but can't help steering your car towards anyway.

"Uh, hey," she says, coming to a halt beside Shal.

Shal lifts her hand in a wave. "Hey! I'm Shal."

If I ever needed proof Shal is straight, I just got it. There's no way anyone—even anyone as confident as Shal—could be attracted to women and not have some kind of stun gun reaction to seeing Andrea up close for the first time.

"Andrea," she answers with a nod before looking over at me.

My throat starts closing up, like just a half second of eye contact with her has sent me into anaphylactic shock.

I think Priya introduces herself, but I don't hear her speak. The stun gun effect is wearing off now, and my brain has started to whirl with reasons why Andrea probably hates me or at least doesn't want me in the house.

"Sandy said I could have friends over," I blurt, the words all jumbled together in a heap of a sentence. I clear my throat and add, "Just, like, a couple people. Just so you know. She said it's fine."

Andrea blinks and then nods. "Uh, yeah, cool. Honestly, I'm not gonna rat you out for whatever you want to do in their house. I wasn't even supposed to be here myself."

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She huffs a laugh, and sweat breaks out on the back of my neck as I wonder if that was meant to be a sarcastic jab at me telling her dad she's here. Before I can stammer an apology, she heads off in the direction of the nearest staircase.

"So get up to any mischief you want," she calls over her shoulder, "as long as you invite me."

Despite my major social malfunctioning, something about that sentence and her borderline flirty tone still makes goose bumps rise on my thighs.

She's that powerful.

"Wait a minute," Shal says into the silence of the room once Andrea's gone. I watch as her expression shifts from pensive to diabolical.

"Shal..." Priya warns.

Shal dashes after Andrea before either of us can tell her to stop.

"Hey, wait!" I hear her calling. "Andrea!"

There's a pause, and then Andrea's voice calls back, "Yeah?"

"Two questions: how old are you, and do you smoke weed?"

## CHAPTER 6



Andrea

“Wow,” Priya says in a low whisper from up in the passenger seat. “I’m touching marijuana.”

She’s holding the plastic bag featuring the dispensary’s logo with just the tips of her fingers, like it’s an ancient relic from an Indiana Jones movie—awe-inspiring, but possibly about to shoot out poison darts at anyone who tries to touch it.

I press my lips together to keep from laughing and look over at Naomi in the seat beside me. Her shoulders are shaking like she’s trying not to laugh too. I lean forward, trying to catch her eye, and when she notices me, I grin and tilt my chin toward Priya.

The corners of her mouth twitch up into the hint of a smile, but then her gaze drops to the floor of the minivan. I notice her fingers are clamped around the edge of her seat, squeezing hard.

Like I make her nervous.

I can’t tell if I want to reassure her enough to make her grip loosen, or if I want to lean in even closer and see exactly what happens when Naomi Waters runs out of places to hide.

Something clenches low in my stomach, and I turn to look out the window instead. Whatever I want to do probably shouldn’t happen in the backseat of a van with her two best friends sitting up front.

Whatever I want to do probably shouldn’t happen at all. I shouldn’t even be in this van. I should be working on sorting my life out, but it’s hard to say no when the universe delivers an infinitely more fun opportunity.

I rest my temple against the cool glass of the window and watch the tourist-packed streets of downtown Ottawa go by. We're close enough to the ByWard Market that every sidewalk is lined with tour buses and frazzled staff with clipboards running around to organize their groups. The sight brings back a few fragmented memories of a first grade field trip when they took us downtown to see the Parliament buildings. That was way back before the divorce, when Mom and I still lived in Ottawa with Dad.

I push the memories away before they can start to sting, and then I tune into what Priya and Shal are saying up front.

"It's easy to get way too high on edibles," Shal tells her sister. "Trust me. I've seen it happen. It's better that we actually smoke."

She steers the van onto the winding parkway that runs along the Ottawa River and over to Dad's mansion-laden neighborhood, dark sunglasses covering her eyes. She speaks like someone who's seen it all, but I've spotted a few cracks in her confidence during the couple hours I've known her. She almost reminds me of my mom.

Everything about Shal is calculated, carved from hours of effort to look like it takes no effort at all. She sucks in her surroundings and spits them back out as whatever the people she's looking to impress expect.

Experience with my mom tells me that on the rare occasion she can't meet those expectations, she crumbles, all the versions of herself she's worked so hard to construct crashing down around her in a heap.

"I can't believe we're doing this," Priya says, still grasping the bag I handed her like she's considering chucking it out the window. "This is so illegal. This is the most illegal thing I've ever done."

This time, I can't help laughing out loud.

Shal's head tilts up to look at me in the rearview mirror. "What's the most illegal thing you've ever done, Andrea?"

There's a hint of a challenge in her voice. I feel a smirk taking over my face before I can stop it.

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“It was probably the time I spent my birthday participating in an ecstasy-fuelled orgy inside a government building me and my friends broke into as part of a political protest,” I answer, tacking on a wistful sigh at the end. “What a way to ring in my sweet sixteen.”

Naomi makes a sound like she might have just choked on air. I glance over and find her eyes are bulging out of her head.

“Sixteen?” Priya squeaks, the bag sliding off her fingertips to land with a plop on the floor of the van.

Even Shal has gone silent, her mouth opening and closing like she’s trying to talk herself into calling my bluff.

I can only keep a straight face for another couple seconds before I burst out laughing. “Oh my god, you guys, I’m kidding.”

I wait for them all to let out nervous laughs of their own before I add, “Or am I?”

I manage to catch Naomi’s eye again, and I can’t resist the urge to wag my eyebrows at her. She’s still laughing, reaching up to cover her mouth as her cheeks flush pink.

“What made you all want to try weed anyway?” I ask, settling farther into my seat and stretching my legs out.

They all get quiet, darting looks between each other as we turn off the parkway and onto a residential street.

“Well...” Priya begins. “We have this, um, list that—”

“Priya.” Naomi grinds her friend’s name out through clenched teeth. I look over to see her shooting a pleading look at her friend, but Priya is still staring out the windshield.

“Is it a...secret list?” I ask, directing the question at Naomi.

She looks like she’d rather jump out of the van than answer, but after a moment, she sighs.

“It’s not a secret,” she says. “It’s just our...summer bucket list...thing.”

Her face is shifting from a glowing, timid pink to a blazing, embarrassed red, and I can’t tell which colour is cuter on her.

“Well...” I can’t stop myself from leaning a little closer to her. “If item number one is smoking a joint, it sounds like you’re in for a pretty fun summer.”

“Actually, it’s item number three,” Shal says. “We’re not really going in order.”

“So what are one and two?” I ask. “And how long is this list? Now you’ve got me curious.”

“It’s, uh, just ten things,” Naomi answers.

“And those things are...?”

She twines her fingers together in her lap and stares down at them as she speaks.

“Well, number one is, uh...” She stops and coughs. “I think number one is skinny

dipping.”

I feel that tightening low in my stomach again, the sensation sharper this time.

I can’t stop staring at her as I answer, “This is sounding like a very fun list.”

We turn onto my dad’s street, and the process of getting through the gate and out of the car keeps me from asking anything else until we’re in the house.

“Do you have this summer list written down somewhere?” I ask once we’re gathered around the kitchen island, the dispensary bag resting in the middle of the marble slab like an autopsy subject.

Once again, they all share a few glances, like they’re having a silent debate about whether or not they should be embarrassed.

“Oh, come on,” I urge. “I bought you weed. The least you can do is let me know exactly what I’ve enabled.”

Nobody moves.

“Or not,” I add, lifting my hands in surrender. “If it’s some kind of secret BFF pact, I—”

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“Okay, we might as well show her,” Shal says with a huff. “We’re not cringey enough to have a secret pact. It’s just a list of things we want to make sure we’ve all done before we go off to school in the fall.”

School in the fall.

The words feel like a chilly breeze sweeping into the kitchen, sucking up the summer before it’s even had time to begin. That cold wind carries my mom’s voice from this morning back to my ears.

Just because you decided you needed this whole gap year thing does not mean you get to opt out of being a grown-up.

To her, it didn’t matter that I’d been working a full-time job and paying my share of the rent every month. It didn’t matter that I did my groceries, my laundry, and even my taxes. If I wasn’t working for the company, I was giving up.

On her.

On myself.

If I had any idea of what else I’d do with my life besides take the internship, maybe her disappointment wouldn’t matter so much. Maybe I’d feel like I could be enough to make her proud even if I didn’t take the job.

Only I don’t know what else I’d do. I don’t know what I’m good at besides bantering with customers while I wait tables and keeping people entertained at parties by

playing stupid little songs on my guitar. I spent a whole year trying to build a life that let me finally breathe the way I never could in Toronto, but all I did was postpone the suffocation.

My shoulders tense, and I have to fight to keep all the muscles in my face from clenching.

If I'm going to get on a train straight back to where I started, the least I can do is make the most of the time I have left.

"Let's see this list then, ladies" I announce, my voice loud enough to echo through the kitchen, "and then let's get high."

"I don't think I'm feeling it."

Naomi's voice is sluggish and dreamy. She keeps running her hands over the planks of the deck, where she's lying flat on her back. I'm sitting on one of the rattan couches with a blanket wrapped around my shoulders and a bowl of popcorn in my lap.

"Like, my brain is all fuzzy, but I don't think I'm high."

I laugh, and a piece of popcorn flies out of my mouth. I'm buzzed enough that I think it's funny instead of embarrassing. "Yeah, hate to break it to you, but that's kind of the definition of being high."

"Oh." She screws her face up like she's thinking really hard. "Ohhhh. Okay. Yeah, yeah maybe I'm high."

I laugh again and pull the thin blanket a little tighter around me, mostly to ward off the couple mosquitoes that have started to buzz around the deck. The air outside is



still hot enough to feel heavy against my skin, but the sun has almost sunk below the horizon in the pink-streaked sky, and I know the temperature will be dropping fast.

The girls took so long to work up their nerve that we ended up eating dinner together before anyone even took the pre-rolled joints out of the bag. We each took a few puffs while sitting out here on the deck.

Priya somehow got way higher than all of us despite smoking the least. We spent a good half hour trying to keep her calm and assure her that her heart wasn't beating loud enough to burst her eardrums. At some point, she went from paranoid to extremely sleepy and passed out on one of the lounge chairs, where she's still snoring loud enough to make Naomi and I jump at the noise every few minutes.

Once Priya was out of commission, Shal decided she wanted to experience music while under the influence and has been sitting cross-legged on one of the pool chairs while staring up at the sky with her headphones on for long enough to put a meditation master to shame.

Turns out I'm the only one who's got the munchies.

"You doing okay?" I ask Naomi when she pauses her stroking of the deck and frowns.

"Yeahhh." She drags the words out and bobs her head in a couple slow nods. "I'm just not really sure what to do about my existence, you know?"

"Huh." I pop another handful of popcorn in my mouth and chew for a moment. "That's a really stoned thought, and I don't think I'm quite on your level, but somehow, I think I know what you mean."

She wrinkles her nose, and even my high brain can't ignore how cute she looks doing

it.

“You do?” she asks.

I nod. “Uh-huh. I was taking a gap year in Montreal before I start this internship at my mom’s company in Toronto, but honestly, I was hoping a year would be enough time to figure out what else I could do with my life. I thought a new city and a new guy would help me find the answer, but I just...didn’t. Sometimes it felt so close it was like...like a little butterfly flitting around my head, but every time I turned to look at it, it was just gone.”

I swirl my one of my fingers through what’s left of the popcorn and realize I might be higher than I thought.

“Sometimes I feel like there’s this...this thing other people have that I don’t,” I continue, “or at least, I haven’t found it yet, but everybody expects me to have it, so I look for it, but I never find it. Sometimes I get so close, but it always slips away. Always. So I fill myself up with other things instead, but they...they just make me feel even more empty. Sometimes everything in the world makes me feel so goddamn empty, and I don’t know why.”

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I stare hard into the popcorn bowl, like the fluffy white lumps are going to arrange themselves into a message from the universe, some buttery epiphany that will give me the answers I'm dying to hear, but all I see is popcorn.

I scoop up another handful and keep eating.

"That sounds lonely," Naomi murmurs.

Something about her voice makes my chest ache.

"Yeah," I say, lowering my voice to match hers. "I guess it is."

"I'm lonely a lot too."

I go so still I even stop chewing, something in my brain deciding that even the sound of popcorn squeaking between my teeth might scare Naomi off.

Hearing her speak almost feels like taming a deer, like I'm luring her in with a handful of clover, stretching out my hand in some wildflower-strewn meadow to show her I'm safe.

Only I lured her with marijuana, and I don't know if I am safe for her.

I know I probably only keep trying to flirt because we're both here and queer. She doesn't seem like she's down for a hook-up, and even though making her blush is becoming my new favourite hobby, part of me knows I'm not either.

I've never had sex with a girl, and it's not that I'm waiting for some magical moment of being deeply in love, but I'd probably rather it didn't happen with a girl I'll never see again in a couple days at a time in my life when I'm living out of garbage bags.

"I feel like I'm missing something as well, something everybody else has, just like you said," she tells me, staring up at where a few inky streaks of indigo have started to bleed into the pink sky. "There are things that just seem so easy for everyone else, so natural, but they take so much work for me. Every second I'm around almost every other person in the world feels like work. It's exhausting, and it makes me so anxious I literally throw up for no good reason sometimes. Isn't that crazy? I'm crazy, right?"

The dreamy tone fades from her voice, revealing an aching self-loathing so raw it makes me want to jump off the couch and squeeze her so tight she never has to feel lonely again.

"You're not crazy. Don't say that, Naomi."

"How do you know?" she murmurs. "You've known me for two days, and I've barely said anything to you. I literally hid in my bedroom because I was so afraid to talk to you, and if I weren't too stoned to even consider getting off this deck, I'd still be terrified to talk to you now. You must think I'm a little crazy."

"Hey." I give in to the urge to be closer to her and lower myself down to sit cross-legged on the deck beside her. "Hey, hey, hey."

She snorts. "Hay is for horses."

That makes me giggle, and in a matter of seconds, we're both laughing so hard we end up wheezing and clutching our stomachs.

"Wow, we really are stoned," I say once we've managed to calm down. "But look,

what I came down here to say is that none of that makes you crazy. Everyone is their own flavor of weird, and I think yours is...pretty damn cool. You're pretty intriguing, you know that?"

She lets out an unconvinced huff.

"I mean it," I urge. "I mean, come on, we have the same favourite movie. That means you're at least somewhat cool."

I watch the corners of her mouth lift, and for a second, I feel like I've managed to pull the sun back up over the horizon.

"And now that you've managed to talk to me, you can't go back to hiding in your room, okay? We've reached a new level of familiarity we can't go back from."

She keeps grinning. "Um, I don't know if that's how weed works, so I guess I'll just have to take your word for it."

I nod. "Yes, you will. Besides, I've already seen your pickle pajamas. You can't get much more familiar than that."

She groans and clamps her hands over her face.

"Oh my god," she moans from beneath her palms. "I still can't believe you saw those."

"I thought they were pretty cute."

The words slip out before I can stop them. Naomi stiffens before she slowly peels a hand from off her face and turns to blink one of her eyes at me.

She really is very pretty, even when she's so stoned she seems to have forgotten to put her other hand down. The half of her face I can see catches the last of the light in the sky, reflecting it in the depths of those swimming pool eyes of hers.

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She has eyes like summer: filled with long, lazy hours sparking with the potential to turn into something unforgettable.

Only I'll be gone before those sparks turn into fireworks. I'm leaving, and they must be meant for someone who isn't me.

Someone who has whatever it is I don't.

"Andrea..." she says.

Something about my name on her lips feels like magic, like she's taken the sound that's followed me around my entire life and turned it into an incantation I've never heard before.

My name is a spell, and it's pulling me closer.

We're way too close. Her eyes are the size of two moons, big enough to turn all my tides.

I must have gotten absolutely stoned out of my mind without realizing it because I can't stop moving closer, and I can't stop thinking crazy things about moons and sparks and her saying my name again and again and again.

"I HAVE REACHED ENLIGHTENMENT!"

Shal's shout is so loud even Priya sits up on the couch, glancing around with bleary eyes and a bit of drool on her chin. Naomi and I scramble away from each other like

we've been zapped by a mosquito rod, and I realize I'd been leaning over her while she'd been rising up to meet me. Our faces were only a few inches apart.

I do an awkward backwards shuffle until my back thumps against the side of the nearest couch. I sit there with my heart pounding in my ears as Shal stumbles across the lawn towards us with her arms held up like some kind of messiah.

"Enlightenment!" she repeats. "I have found it!"

Priya rubs her eyes and mutters something under her breath. Shal reaches the edge of the deck and clutches the banister while she climbs the short set of steps up to meet us.

"That's...cool?" Naomi says.

Her voice is a little breathless, and the sound makes my heart beat even faster.

"I don't really remember what it is," Shal says, facing us with her hands on her hips, "but I found it halfway through Taylor Swift's discography, and no one can take that away from me."

I give her a short round of applause, since focusing on anything that will distract me from Naomi seems like a good idea. "Amen to that."

Priya gives a disoriented shake of her head and stares at my hands. "Your hands sound weird. Am I still high?"

"I'm going to go with yes," I tell her.

Shal navigates a path around us towards the house, moving like she's trudging through piles of sand.



“Come!” she shouts. “I need snacks, and I don’t know how to work the fridge.”

I’m sober enough to know you don’t need to work a fridge, and the fact that Shal isn’t means she’s definitely going to need help in the kitchen. I push myself up to my feet, and even though the backyard looks a little hazy, it’s not nearly enough to justify how dazed I felt with my face so close to Naomi’s.

A shiver runs through me as I turn and head for the sliding door, ignoring every instinct in my body that’s screaming at me to look back at her.

I can’t look back. I have to leave this house. I don’t know what I’m missing in my life, but I know I’m not going to find it getting high at my dad’s house and using the nearest shiny, exciting thing I find to fill me up before I start feeling empty again.

I reach for the door handle while Shal stands waiting for someone with functional motor skills to pull it open, and I tell myself I’ll book the train to Toronto in the morning.

## CHAPTER 7

Naomi

The first thing I realize when I look at the clock next to my bed is that I’m late for the cats’ breakfast.

The second thing I realize is that the cats aren’t in bed with me.

They’ve slept with me every night since I arrived, and they usually wake me up by kneading my stomach and meowing long before they’re due for their first meal of the day.

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“Bijoux!” I call, my voice groggy. “Aurora Rose!”

I pat my hands along the comforter, searching for the shape of the cats tucked among the blanket’s folds, but I can’t feel them. My heart pounds, banishing the last of the sleep fog from my brain as I swing my legs out of bed.

“Here, kitties!” I call as I drop to my knees to peer under the bed. “Where are you?”

All I find are some dust bunnies and stray hairs. I get up and take off running down the hall, my bare feet slapping against the hardwood as images of last night flit through my mind like a slideshow on speed.

Or, more accurately, weed.

I remember Priya passing out on the living room couch after we all went inside. I think I left her there with a blanket and put Shal in one of the spare bedrooms.

The last thing I remember before going up to my own room is devouring a bag of Cheetos in the kitchen with Andrea and laughing at how weird it felt to lick cheese dust off my fingers.

The wave of embarrassment that builds when I imagine what I must have looked like shoving my fingers in my mouth and giggling like a maniac gets pushed aside when I make it down to the empty kitchen and don’t find the cats waiting by their food bowls. I pivot and make a break for the igloo, sprinting past a still-sleeping Priya where she’s lying with her entire body huddled under a fluffy pink blanket like it’s a shroud.

When I find the insulated cat bed empty, my pulse reaches a dangerous pace and my vision swims. Mid-morning sunlight is streaming through the windows at full blast. I don't know how I'm going to tell Sandy I let her award-winning cats escape and get burned to a crisp while I was high out of my mind and trying to ignore how much I wanted to make out with her step-daughter.

I push through the vertigo and race back to the kitchen. I'm just about to shove the sliding door open when a voice from behind me asks what's wrong.

I turn and find Andrea with her hair piled in a messy bun and some very tiny sleep shorts just visible under the hem of the oversized t-shirt she's wearing.

I'm suddenly very aware that she's once again caught me in my pickle pajamas.

"The cats," I say, glad I can blame the breathiness of my voice on panic instead of what those little shorts are doing to my respiratory system. "I can't find them."

She swears and comes over to join me as I push the door open and step onto the deck.

"You've checked the whole house?"

I shake my head, raking my gaze over the wide backyard for any sight of exposed cat flesh. "Just their usual spots, but they would have heard me calling if they were inside. They've slept with me every night except last night. They must have gotten out."

I cup my hands around my mouth and shout their names loud enough to make Andrea flinch. I keep calling as I cross the deck and step down onto the lawn, my pitch rising when neither of their bald heads pokes out from behind a flower pot or under a pool chair.

I glance over my shoulder and see Andrea stalking along the bushes that line the property's fence. She's found a big stick to pry branches out of the way as she hollers summoning chants that would have Sandy fainting away onto the deck boards if she were here.

"Come on, you greasy little skin sacks! I have more important stuff to do today! Here, kitties!"

I'd laugh if I didn't feel close to tears.

They might have been greasy and sack-like, but they were also the cuddliest cats I'd ever met. We had a bond. Now they're probably some neighborhood dog's chew toy, and I'm going to get my dad fired because of some stupid plan to make my last real summer as a teenager 'matter.'

A heaving gasp forces its way out of me. Andrea freezes in the middle of lifting the bottom of a shrub with her stick and turns at the sound.

"What is it?" she asks, already bounding over to me. "Did you find them? That did not sound good."

I shake my head, blinking against the burning sensation in my eyes. I should have known things like joints and tattoos and summer flings aren't for people like me.

"Hey. Hey, it's okay."

Andrea comes to a stop a foot away from me and lifts her hands like she's about to hug me before she drops her arms back to her sides. She shifts her weight from foot to foot as I cough to cover a sob.

"I lost them," I wheeze. "I lost the freaking cats. I had one job, and I lost them. They

can't be in the sun. Those poor things. Poor Sandy. What am I supposed to do?"

Andrea lifts one of her hands again and reaches for my shoulder, her fingertips brushing the pickle-patterned fabric of my t-shirt like she's asking permission. When I don't pull away, she wraps a firm grip around my shoulder and guides us back to the house.

"We don't even know if they're lost yet," she says as we step back into the cool air of the kitchen. "They have a whole mansion to be hiding in. We're gonna find those weird little naked felines, okay? I promise."

I can still feel the ghost of her fingers wrapped around my shoulder when she lets go of me and turns to lead the way to the second floor.

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“We’ll work our way down,” she says, glancing over her shoulder as I jog up the stairs behind her. “Room by room. They’ve got to be here somewhere.”

She offers to cover the third floor on her own since there’s nothing up there besides the home gym and a small washroom. I start by retracing my steps to my room and double-check the bed before tearing through the closet. I keep cooing and calling the cats’ names the whole time.

I don’t know how Priya and Shal aren’t awake now. I’d be worried they’re having some sort of prolonged negative reaction to the weed if there were space left in my brain to worry about anything but the cats.

I leave my bedroom looking like it got ransacked and sprint across the hall to check the guest bathroom. My anxiety is churning up gory images of the cats drowning in the bathtub. I know I didn’t even take a shower last night, but my brain tries to tell me I must have been so high I don’t remember going for a soak and deciding to plop the cats in for a rinse.

“It could happen,” I tell myself even as I’m peering into the empty tub.

I yank open all the bathroom cupboards for good measure and check behind the thick, dark green drapes framing the window, but there are no cats to be found.

When I dash out of the bathroom, I find Andrea careening towards me.

“I did my room and this bathroom,” I tell her.

She nods and comes skidding to a stop before pulling open the door of a walk-in storage closet and disappearing inside. We race through the rest of the second floor, tag-teaming each door and shouting confirmation when we've cleared a room.

I even crack open the door of the bedroom Shal is sleeping in and find her sprawled on top of the blankets fully dressed, with an arm slung over her eyes to block out the sunlight streaming through the open curtains. I whisper-shout the cats' names and pad inside to do a quick sweep of the closet. Shal mumbles something as I'm retreating back to the hall before letting out a loud snore and shifting to nuzzle her face against her pillow.

By the time we make it back down to the ground floor, my breath is coming in short bursts that leave me so dizzy I have to stand gripping the staircase banister as I sway on my feet for a second. Andrea is already bounding off through the house, leaving me to take over the kitchen and foyer. Once the room has stopped spinning, I get started on examining every possible nook and cranny a hairless cat could have wriggled its way into.

I can't stop picturing what Sandy's face will look like when I tell her the cats are gone. My dad's boss is forever going to see him as 'that guy whose daughter lost my wife's beloved pets and crushed her spirit beyond repair.' I'm pretty sure smashing every sculpture in this mansion would have been a better mistake than losing the cats.

I can't even look after two tiny animals for the summer. How the hell am I supposed to manage starting university and living life as an actual adult?

I slam the door of the cupboard under the kitchen sink shut so hard it rebounds and smashes into my shin. I yelp and bend down to rub my leg, sniffing to hold back tears that have nothing to do with the pain.

My therapist is going to tell me losing the cats has nothing to do with me starting

university, but right now, I don't care about all the mantras and mental health exercises I've spent the past five years stuffing my head with.

When it comes down to it, I'm just not ready for life the way everyone else seems to be. It's like other people slid into existence with a set of instructions already encoded into their brains that I've spent the past eighteen years trying to learn through trial and an overwhelming amount of error.

I can't even have basic conversations without getting everything wrong and ending up exhausted by the end. It all just takes so much effort, like I'm stuck in analogue mode and everyone else has gone high-speed digital.

I think it's possible you might be neurodivergent.

My therapist's voice rings out above all the swirling thoughts in my head, the words making my already shallow breath freeze in my lungs.

It's been over a year since she first said that to me, and the statement still hits like a bucket of ice water pouring down my back. She always asks if I want to talk about what that means or how it might be affecting me, but I tell her 'maybe next time' every single time.

Therapy was supposed to help me feel normal. I don't want another label like 'anxiety disorder' slapped on my forehead so it can glare at me every time I look in the mirror.

I don't want another word for how different I am, for how freaking hard it is to get something—anything—right.

I turn to grip the edge of the sink, the porcelain cool under my fingers as I curl them around the lip of the basin. My shoulders are shaking, and I taste bile in the back of



my throat.

“I’m gonna be sick,” I mutter, bracing for the first heave.

“Naomi!”

I look up and find Andrea skidding into the kitchen, her socked feet sliding on the tiled floor. Her eyes are wide, and most of her hair has escaped from her bun to hang in wild, burgundy-tinged tendrils down her back.

“Come here!”

She beckons with a finger before careening back out of the kitchen. I push the nausea down enough to follow her, not daring to trust the excitement in her voice, not when I’ve already resigned myself to the tragic demise of both cats.

I find Andrea standing at the foot of the couch where Priya is still lying with a pink blanket covering her body from head to toe. The soft rise and fall of the fabric assures me I don’t have to worry about killing my best friend too, even though she sure is sleeping like the dead today.

“What is it?” I whisper to Andrea, who’s now grinning at me like I should be jumping for joy.

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“Listen,” she whispers back, leaning forward over the couch and cupping a hand to her ear.

I step up beside her and mirror her pose. At first, I can’t hear anything except the hum of the air conditioning and Andrea’s breathing beside me. I scooch in a little closer and squint at the blanket while I strain my ears to pick up on whatever has Andrea so excited.

I’m about to straighten up and ask if she indulged in another joint this morning when I hear it.

Purring.

Something under the blanket is purring, and I’m pretty sure it’s not Priya.

My jaw drops, and I must look even more shocked than I feel; Andrea clamps a hand over her mouth to muffle her laughter as she watches me.

A wave of relief floods my body with so much force I almost drop to my knees. I force my feet to carry me to the couch, where I hunch over and lift up a corner of the blanket. A couple seconds pass, and then a pale pink nose pokes out to sniff the fresh air.

Now I really do crumple to my knees, trembling with relief as both Bijoux and Aurora Rose blink at me with bleary eyes before curling back up against Priya.

I let the blanket drop and tumble backwards to land flat on my butt. For the first time

since I woke up, I feel like I can breathe.

Andrea is shaking with the force of her silent laughter, one hand braced against the arm of the couch while the other stays clamped over her mouth. A snort pushes past her fingers, and she turns and flees. I'm too stunned to do anything except sit and listen as she sprints for the door to the back deck and then explodes into loud guffaws before she even has a chance to slide the door shut.

Once I've recovered enough to walk, I find her sprawled on one of the rattan couches, wiping tears of laughter away with one hand while she works the elastic out of her hair with the other.

I join her on the deck, my movements jerky and robotic as I plop onto the nearest chair and sit staring out at the backyard without really seeing anything.

I've just experienced a week's worth of emotions within an hour of waking up, and my body seems to be going through a system reboot.

"Those little assholes," Andrea says, still giggling a little as she sits up enough to redo her bun. "They were right there the whole time, and they didn't even bother meowing."

"Uh-huh," I say.

She must be too focused on her hair to notice my zombie state.

"Well, that's today's disaster all dealt with," she continues. "Thank god I didn't take the train to Toronto today instead of tomorrow morning. Who knows how long it would have taken you to go through the whole house on your own?"

I bob my head a few times before the meaning of her words dawns on me.

Toronto.

Train.

“Wait. Are you leaving?” I can’t stop myself from staring at her so hard I forget to blink. “Like, tomorrow?”

She presses her lips together for a moment. “I mean...yeah. My mom wants me to go back and sort my life out, and I mean...I’m literally living out of garbage bags. I don’t really know what else to do.”

“Oh.”

I knew she was only staying for a few days, but somehow, I figured I’d get some warning.

I drop my gaze when I realize how stupid I’m being. I’ve known her for three days. She doesn’t owe me a warning. She doesn’t owe me anything.

My chest goes hollow at the thought.

“So you’re doing that internship?” I ask, turning my attention to the yard again. Most of the dew has evaporated off the grass now. I can smell chlorine wafting off the pool.

“I...” She trails off and slumps back down on the couch cushions again. “I don’t really want to think about it. I start my internship at the end of August, and I guess I’ll just...figure something out for the rest of the summer.”

“Do you think you’ll get back together with your boyfriend?” I blurt.

I want to pull the question back into my mouth as soon as I say it. My cheeks burn as I stare so hard at a tree across the yard I almost expect one of its branches to snap off.

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I see her shaking her head out of the corner of my eye. “No. That’s done for good. I don’t even... God, it’s just so crazy, because it’s only been a few days, and I already don’t even know why I was with him in the first place. I was looking for something that mattered to me, and for a minute there, I think I really fooled myself into believing it was him.”

I stay quiet and wait to see if she’ll elaborate. She shakes her head a few more times, and for a moment, she looks even lonelier than she did last night.

“God, I wish I could just stay here all summer,” she says instead of telling me more. “Right here on this couch. I’ll give it to my dad and Sandy; they sure know how to pick a house.”

I dig my fingernails into the tops of my thighs to keep from asking her the question I spend way too much of my life asking myself: what if?

What if she stayed?

What if she really did spend all summer here?

With me?

I jerk as a shiver rolls through me.

She tilts her head. “You cold?”

“Oh, no,” I mumble. “Just...relieved.”

She chuckles. “Yeah, I’m sure the house will be much more peaceful for you without me here.”

I blink a few times before I realize she thinks I’m relieved about her leaving.

“No. No, that’s not what I meant,” I stammer. “I’m relieved about the cats, not you. I don’t want you to leave. I—”

I cut myself off with a gasp.

We both go still, the gurgle of the pool filter filling the silence.

“I just...I just mean you can stay if you want,” I rasp, my voice so quiet I’m not even sure she can hear me. “Not that you need permission. I just... If you want to stay, you don’t have to worry about me.”

If it weren’t totally crazy, I might actually believe there’s a hint of flirting in her voice when she asks, “You sure about that?”

I nod, still not meeting her eyes, and force myself to swallow so my answer doesn’t come out as a wheeze. “I don’t mind.”

“Hmm.” She sits up and folds her legs into a lotus position. “I wouldn’t want to get in the way of your summer bucket list thing. You three seem to have your hands full with that.”

A bark of laughter bursts out of me. “Ha. I think it’s safe to say we’re done with the list.”

I glance over and see her watching me with her head tilted to the side. “What do you mean? You just got started.”

“We smoked one joint, and I nearly got the cats killed and apparently incapacitated my two best friends so much they’re knocked out cold. No way am I doing anything else on that list.”

She lets out a sound I can only describe as a guffaw and then waves a hand toward me when I gawk at her. “I’m sorry. It’s just...you didn’t nearly get the cats killed. They were fine the whole time, and your friends have only got a bit of a weed hangover. I don’t think you have anything to worry about.”

I bite my tongue to keep from telling her I always have something to worry about.

“I’m just...I don’t think I’m cut out for normal teenager stuff,” I say.

Or normal human being stuff in general.

Andrea flexes her hands out in front of her to crack her knuckles and then drops them to rest on her knees.

“Normal is boring,” she tells me. “You’re not boring, Naomi.”

I glance at her face again, and this time, I can’t look away. Nobody has ever stared at me like that, like they’re trying to sear through my body to get at the very core of who I am.

For a second, I want to give her everything she’s looking for. I want to split myself open and offer myself up. I want her to know me. All of me.



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Then I remember all the parts of me that would probably make her turn and run.

I drop my gaze to the deck boards.

“You’re not boring,” she repeats, “and I don’t think you should give up on that list. You were right; you’ll never get another summer like this, and who cares if all the regular teenage milestones seem stupid and cliché? This is your chance to make them your own, and I think you should take it.”

I curl my hands into fists in my lap and ask, “Why?”

She’s quiet for so long I start to think I’m not getting an answer, but just as I’m about to clear my throat and say I should go inside before I get a sunburn, she speaks up.

“Because I think the world needs more of you, Naomi Waters.”

My breath catches, and something in my chests spurts wings that stretch out wide to catch the morning air.

“And because I believe in the sanctity of a bucket list,” she adds as she uncrosses her legs and gets to her feet, “I’ve decided I’m going to stick around until you finish it. I think you three could use an accountability buddy.”

She walks over until she’s standing just a few feet in front of me and plants her hands on her hips. I try not to gulp as I look up at her.

“You’re staying?”

She nods, her eyes sparking like wildfire as she grins. “Toronto can wait. I think destiny called me here to help you get this list completed.”

I still feel like the smarter move here would be crumpling the list up and tossing it in the trash, but I don’t have any other reason to tell her to stay.

At least not any reasons I can say out loud.

“Well, you’ve got your work cut out for you with that.”

“I’d say I’m off to a promising start. Here.”

She grins again and shoves her hand out towards me, holding it in the air between us. I look between her face and her fingertips for so long she chuckles and makes a show out of rolling her eyes.

“Summer list item number five,” she says, reaching forward to tug my hand out of my lap and clasp it with hers. “Make a new friend. Nice to meet you, Naomi. I’m your new friend Andrea King.”

## CHAPTER 8

Andrea

The city bus drops me off a few streets over from my dad’s place. I can feel the back of my shirt clinging to my skin by the time I’m punching the code into the house’s gate. I wipe the sweat beading on my forehead away with the back of one hand, the other clutching a small bag from the drugstore.

Nothing like a box of hair dye to celebrate a questionable life decision. It’s been three days since I told Naomi I’m sticking around, and I figured if I really am postponing

my trip back to Toronto—and risking the wrath of my mother—I might as well seal the deal with a fresh coat of purple.

The air conditioning hits me like a chilly winter wind as I step inside. I kick my sandals off in the entryway and find Naomi sitting on one of the high stools lining the kitchen island, her laptop open in front of her and a wine glass filled with something fizzy resting on a coaster next to her elbow.

“Wow, is it happy hour already?” I joke, nodding at the glass. “Pretty sure last time I checked, it wasn’t even noon.”

Her cheeks flush pink.

“Oh, um, no, it’s not—I mean, I wouldn’t be drinking at eleven in the morning. I wouldn’t even be drinking at eleven at night. I mean, not unless Shal raided the wine cellar again, and not that she, like, actually raided it. Sandy and your dad said there were a few bottles we could try, and...well, yeah. It’s not alcohol.”

She drops her gaze back to her laptop screen before I have a chance to tell her it’s okay. Part of me wants to claim the stool beside her, sling an arm around her shoulders, and just give her a chance to breathe.

Kind of like I wish someone would do for me sometimes. I might not struggle to talk to people the way Naomi seems to, but I know what it’s like to have the pressure of how you’re supposed to act wrapped so tight around your chest it’s like your lungs are caving in.

Hence me continuing to squat in my dad’s house and dye my hair purple instead of facing that sense of suffocation during every second I spend with my mom.

“It’s, uh, sparkling grape juice,” Naomi says in a squeaky voice. “My mom always

told me and my brother that juice tastes better in a fancy glass.”

I smile when her eyes flick up to look at me again, and her lips lift into a sheepish grin.

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“I love that,” I say. “Juice deserves to be an occasion, especially if it’s sparkling juice. You’re really embracing the upper class lifestyle, huh?”

“I’ve always loved sparkling grape juice!” she shoots back, some of her reserve slipping away to reveal the spark of her personality underneath.

“Just like you’ve always loved pickles?” I joke, propping a hand on my hip. “Do I need to brace myself for some grape pajamas too?”

“What’s wrong with my pickle pajamas?” she asks, slapping a palm down against the marble island. “Pickles are one of my favourite snacks, and the pajamas are cute, okay?”

I shrug and can’t keep myself from smirking. “I never said they weren’t cute.”

She blinks a couple times before murmuring, “Oh.”

Even though the kitchen is chilly enough she’s got a cardigan on over her tank top, I still feel the back of my neck start to get hot, like I’m back outside with the midmorning sun beating down on me again.

Only this time it’s her making me sweat.

She starts typing so fast I suspect she’s probably just spelling out nonsense to fill the silence. I shake my head in a failed attempt to clear whatever haze just clouded the air around us and step forward to drop my purse and hair dye onto the counter. I grab a glass from one of the cupboards and fill it up at the fancy water and ice dispenser

built into the double-door fridge.

I can't help thinking back to the night we met, when the topic of her pickle pajamas led to her blurting out she's a lesbian.

I raise the glass to my lips, still facing the fridge, and chug half the icy water down before filling the glass again.

I wonder if she's ever kissed a girl before.

I wonder what it felt like for her.

I kissed a few girls at parties before I met Nick, but always after I'd had a few drinks first. It wasn't that I needed the liquid courage; it was because the 'wow, we're so drunk' excuse seemed like a prerequisite for getting my mouth anywhere near another girl's mouth, like if we didn't have the alcohol burning in our blood to blame for the way we reached for each other, that need would be too real.

It would mean something.

Something we couldn't take back.

So I'd down a few shots of whatever bottle was closest, just so I had an alibi in case whichever girl I kissed laughed and said, 'I can't believe we were so trashed we made out!' the next time I saw her.

Turns out I needed that alibi every single time.

I wonder what it would feel like to kiss a girl who knew I wanted her, really wanted her, so bad I'd feel drunk and dizzy without needing to taste anything but her lips.

“Do you want some?”

I realize I’ve filled my glass so high the water is sloshing over the rim and into the overflow tray. I jerk my finger off the dispenser and whip around to face Naomi so fast I send an arc of droplets flying across the kitchen.

“Huh?”

She tilts her head and stares at me. I don’t blame her; I’m acting like I’m coming down with heat stroke or something.

“Juice,” she says, pointing a finger at her own glass. “Grape juice. Do you want some?”

I focus on not staring at her mouth.

“Sure,” I say, my voice stilted. “Yeah, that sounds great.”

“It’s in the green bottle in the fridge.”

I nod. “Right.”

I turn and gulp down my water like my throat is on fire, which it sort of feels like it is. My whole body is burning up, and I have no idea why.

I set my empty glass down on the counter with enough force to make the clinking sound echo through the kitchen. I yank the fridge open, drawing in a deep breath of relief as the blast of cool air hits my skin.

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As I reach for the bottle Naomi described, I tell myself I'm just excited to meet an out lesbian and that I'm still in the rebound zone after Nick.

I'm not developing some middle school style crush on Naomi after only a week of knowing her.

By the time I've poured the juice and walked over to prop one of my elbows on the island, I've got a grip on reality again. I roll my shoulders back a few times to shrug off the last of the thoughts about her mouth and ask what she's working on.

She pauses her typing and leans back in her chair. "It's my summer job. It's just this basic data entry position, but it pays pretty well, and I don't have to go into an office or anything."

I nod. "The dream. So is that what you're studying next year? Data...stuff?"

She huffs a laugh. "No, not at all. I'm not bad at math, but I didn't want to do a whole degree in it. I'm majoring in English."

I nod again and take a sip of my drink, the tiny bubbles in the juice fizzing on my tongue.

"That makes sense," I say. "You do seem to like reading."

Every time I've seen her around the house, she's either been on her laptop or had her nose buried in a book.



“So where will you be going to school?” I ask. “I don’t think I’ve even asked you that yet.”

“Carleton,” she answers. “It’s here in Ottawa. Actually, wait, I’m sure you know it’s in Ottawa. Sorry. I probably didn’t need to specify.”

I press my lips together to keep from grinning. I don’t want her to think I’m laughing at her, but those little stream of consciousness tangents she goes on are quickly becoming one of my favourite things about her. I could stand here and listen to her thoughts until dinnertime.

“It never hurts to be specific,” I say. “So, sticking around Ottawa, huh?”

An image of her walking around some generic college quad with a backpack on and an armload of English classics and poetry books pops into my head. I bet she’d have a pickle-shaped keychain dangling off the bag.

I wonder who she’d eat lunch with. I wonder if there’s some alternate universe out there where I’d live in an apartment in Ottawa and take the bus over to meet her at one of the picnic tables sometimes.

For a second, I see our futures hanging in front of me like two strings dangling just out of my reach, twisting around one another before they uncurl and drift away in opposite directions.

I shake my head. Maybe I really have come down with heat stroke.

“Yeah,” Naomi answers. “Priya and Shal are going to Ottawa U, so they’ll still be here too, but Shal almost picked the University of Toronto. Are you from Toronto originally?”

I shake my head again. “No, but my mom is. I was actually born here in Ottawa. We lived here until my parents split up when I was seven. My mom moved us to Toronto once they got the whole custody thing sorted out. My dad stayed here.”

Naomi slides her laptop a few inches away. I feel a twinge of guilt over distracting her from work, but besides the night she was so high she couldn’t get off the deck, she hasn’t ever said this much to me.

“That must have been hard,” she says, her voice soft, “at that age. Especially with a big move on top of the divorce.”

I shrug and start tracing the veins of the marble with my fingertip. “I guess so.”

The move wasn’t the hardest part.

The hardest part was realizing my dad didn’t really care what I did with my life while my mom cared way too much. It was like growing up in some hellish version of Goldilocks, where everything was either too hot or too cold and never just right.

“Not that I’d know. My parents are still together.”

She sucks in a breath, and I look up to find her wincing.

“That sounded really insensitive, didn’t it?” she asks. “I’m so sorry. I just didn’t want you to think I was pretending to understand something I can’t really understand because I’ve never been through it...and now I just keep sounding like I’m bragging.”

Her shoulders curl in with embarrassment. I chuckle and lift mine in another shrug.

“Don’t worry. I get it. It’s no big deal. It’s not like I’m the first kid to have their

family ripped apart by divorce, and all things considered, it could have been way worse.”

She nods and then gulps down a few sips of her drink before she asks, “So you’re not doing the whole university thing?”

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I tense up for a second and then let out a long breath before draining the rest of my juice. Just the thought of my post-secondary situation makes me wish the drink was spiked with something stronger.

“It’s...a whole thing,” I say once I’ve set my glass down hard enough to rattle the half-melted ice cubes left at the bottom. “The plan was always for me to go straight from high school to an internship with my mom’s company, but then as the company grew and got more complex, we decided I should still do the internship to get a feel for things and then go get a business degree so I can help my mom run things someday.”

I wrap my fingers around the edge of the island and squeeze hard, waiting for her to ask me a thousand questions I don’t have the answers to.

Nick and his friends never asked anything about my long-term goals. They didn’t care about degrees and internships, but somewhere along the way, I realized most of them didn’t care about anything else either. That townhouse we lived in was like a revolving door of people looking for a good time. In and out and in again. All of us just seeking a distraction. All of us replaceable and easy to forget.

I was back in that Goldilocks story again: running from someone who wanted too much into the arms of people who wanted too little.

She might be shy on the surface, but something tells me Naomi is the kind of girl who wants a lot—who deserves a lot from the people around her. She’s smart as hell, responsible enough to be the poster girl for teenage safety, and so dedicated to everything she does that even losing Sandy’s cats for all of twenty minutes had her

ready to dissolve into a puddle of shame.

On top of all that, the way she looks at me when I'm speaking makes me feel like she hears me—really hears me—in a way I've been craving for so much longer than I realized. Plus, she's hilarious in this quiet and watchful way I've never seen in anyone else before.

In short, she seems like the kind of girl you'd better be ready to work your ass off to be worthy of.

"Oh. So is that...still what you want to do?"

"That's the plan," I answer, my voice coming out terser than I meant.

She winces. "Sorry. I didn't mean to bother you."

I shake my head, plastering on a smile so she knows my mood has nothing to do with her. "No, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap. It's just...stressful to even think about it, you know?"

She slumps back in her chair and lets out a chuckle that's got a slightly manic tinge to it. "Oh, that I know. I can barely even think about September without feeling like I'm going to puke."

Now I'm laughing too. "Sounds about right."

"I should probably be embarrassed to tell you that," she adds, "but yeah, stressed out is a complete understatement for how I feel about starting university in less than two months."

I make a show out of cringing. "Don't even remind me of the timeline. We should

just vow to not speak of it at all.”

She sighs. “I don’t know if that would help, but anything is worth a try at this point.”

I lean over the island, all the joking fading from my tone. “So let’s do it then. For the rest of my time here, we will not utter the names of Carleton University or Valerie Madden Pilates Studios. There will be this summer and this summer only. Our prime directive in life will be completing your bucket list and nothing else.”

She taps the edge of the island and frowns. “But I still have so much to prepare, and—”

I hold up a finger and wag it at her.

“Ah ah ah. We do not speak of it. Do what you must in your own time, but when it’s you and me, we are in the summer zone only.”

She blinks at me, her lips parting as the weight of what I’ve just said settles over us both.

You and me.

Just three words, but in an order that links us together in a way that almost makes me believe I could grab those two strings representing our futures and tie them in a knot.

I realize I’m holding my breath and let it out in a sharp burst.

“And Priya and Shal,” I add. “Of course.”

Her shoulders jerk like I’ve shocked her before she drops her gaze to the slab of marble between us and bobs her head in a few nods. “Of course.”

My heart is racing, and I know I need a distraction before I do or say anything else too stupid to take back. I whirl around and spot the drugstore bag sitting on the counter.

“So, uh, in the spirit of all things summery and reckless,” I say as I walk over to grab the bag before turning to face her with it swinging from my wrist, “do you want to help me dye my hair purple?”

## CHAPTER 9

Naomi

I'm touching Andrea's hair.

I'm wearing plastic gloves that are three sizes too big and sliding globs of slimy purple goop between my fingers, but still, I'm touching her hair, and I think the contact might have me on the verge of cardiac arrest.

That might also be due to the view I have of her bare lower back as she sits facing away from me on the edge of the tub. I almost hit the floor tiles when she called me in here and I found her wearing nothing but a pair of baggy old sweatpants and a dark red towel draped over her shoulders and chest. She has a couple hairclips securing the fabric in place, but it still feels like every inch of my body is hyperaware that there's nothing but a swath of terrycloth covering her boobs.

The thought makes me cringe at myself even as an ache starts to build somewhere low in my stomach. I'm supposed to be dyeing her hair, not imagining what she'd look like if one of the hairclips popped open and the edges of the towel slipped down a few inches.

She trusted me enough to ask for my help, and in return, I'm acting like a total creep.

For about the millionth time in my life, I marvel at how simple it must be to be a straight guy, to have your attraction to women considered normal even when it shows up at an inconvenient or inappropriate time. If I was a straight guy, people would take it as a given that I'd be fighting not to drop my gaze to the soft skin of Andrea's lower back, but as it stands, I have to worry about being the predatory lesbian turning



an innocent moment of ‘girl time’ into something gross simply because I’m thinking about how pretty she is.

And how hot she is.

And how much I wish I was touching more than her hair.

I shriek as purple flecks splatter the towel and the front of my shirt. It takes me a second to realize I squeezed the clump of her hair I’m gripping too hard and sprayed us both.

She glances over her shoulder and gasps before covering her mouth to stifle a laugh.

“Oh no,” she says between giggles. “It’s on your face. Go wipe it off before it turns your skin purple.”

I rush to the mirror above the sink and see I’ve sprouted a violet-coloured goatee. I lift a hand to wipe the goop away, forgetting I’m still wearing the gloves coated in dye. I end up with a huge smear streaking my chin.

Andrea doesn’t bother holding back her laughter now. She cackles as I rip the gloves off and lunge for the toilet paper. I pull off a long strip and dampen a wad in the sink before scrubbing at my face.

“Is it really going to dye my face purple?” I demand, my eyes bugging out when I see the faint mauve stain on my chin. I scrub harder.

“Not forever,” she assures me. “Try some soap. You got it fast enough that I don’t think it’ll stain, and if it does, it won’t last long.”

I grab the bar of soap from its little gold dish beside the tap and start rubbing it in

circles along my chin and jaw. My skin looks clear after I've rinsed off, but I still go in for another round with the soap to be safe.

"Make sure you leave some skin on there," Andrea says with a snort.

Before I can stop and ask myself if it's way too nerdy to make a Shakespeare reference, I raise my fist in my best Lady Macbeth impression and recite, "Out! Out, damned spot! Out, I say!"

My cheeks burn with regret an instant later.

Andrea keeps laughing from her perch by the tub. "Wow. Tell me you're going to be an English major without telling me you're going to be an English major."

I risk a peek at her and see she's swung her legs around so she can face me.

"You know Macbeth?" I ask.

She makes a show out of rolling her eyes. "I did take four years of high school English. I have a general awareness of Shakespeare. I even performed in A Midsummer Night's Dream in grade nine."

I straighten up from where I've been hunched over the sink and turn to face her. "Oh my god, really? Who did you play?"

She chews on her lip for a second before she answers. "Puck."

Now it's my turn to laugh. Somehow, I can picture it perfectly: Andrea leaping around the stage in some kind of leafy ensemble with a pair of little horns on her head.

“Did you lose a bet or something?” I ask.

I doubt she was a drama club kid in high school.

“Um, excuse me, but I specifically auditioned for the role of Puck.”

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She places a hand on her chest, and I can't tell if the offense in her tone is fake or not. There's something sincere about the disappointment in her eyes as she squints them at me.

Or maybe I'm just bad at reading faces and think everyone is mad at me all the time. Either way, I apologize.

"Sorry. I just didn't think you'd have been into nerdy stuff like that in high school. You seem like you were probably way cooler than me in grade nine."

Her posture softens a little, and she lets out a quiet chuckle. "To be fair, I mostly only auditioned because I thought it would be hilarious. We'd just done *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in English class, I was like, why the hell not? It turned out to be one of the most fun things I ever did in high school, even though my friends never let me live it down."

My breath catches when she pauses to turn that deadly smirk on me for a second.

"Plus, I was a really sexy Puck."

Goosebumps break out on my arms, and I have to swallow down a very unsexy squawk when she swings her legs back into the tub to give me another look at her back.

"There's an extra pair of gloves in the box," she says.

I fish around for the gloves before returning to my hair duties. Due to Andrea's heads

up about dye mishaps, I'm wearing one of the only black shirts I own: a faded t-shirt from a spelling bee they held at my junior high in the seventh grade.

By some miracle, I managed to make it all the way to my elimination without bolting to the bathroom to puke. That spelling bee was one of the last school events I participated in before my anxiety got bad enough to make me give up on all my hobbies besides reading.

Not that I ever had many hobbies besides reading, but stuff like spelling bees and poetry club were out of the question once we all started turning into judgmental teenagers and every day made me more and more aware of just how far from normal I was.

"So were you a high school thespian?" Andrea asks as I massage a clump of dye into a spot I missed near her ear.

"Oh, definitely not," I answer. "I'm not really the get up on stage type."

I tense up, bracing for her to drawl the classic refrain of, Oh, so you're shyyyy?

I don't know why people say that. As fellow shy girls, Priya and I are always asking ourselves what kind of answer anyone expects. That question always comes out sounding like a jeer or a taunt, like whoever's asking wants me to either take the bait and reveal I am in fact concealing my true nature as an extrovert or just sit there and mumble an answer that makes them feel justified in cooing at me like I'm a toddler.

Andrea doesn't say anything like that. She doesn't even ask why I don't want to be in a play or how I know I wouldn't like it if I've never tried.

She just nods and says, "Fair enough."

For a moment, I'm so stunned I freeze in the middle of running my fingers down a lock of her hair.

"Is something wrong?" she asks, turning to glance at me over her shoulder and nearly pulling the hair out of my hands. "Do I have a massive split end or something? I probably should have gotten a trim before we did this."

I shake my head. "Oh, no. No, nothing's wrong."

She squints at me for a moment before turning back around. "You good, Waters?"

She even makes the simple act of calling me by my last name sound sexy. The more time I spend around her, the more convinced I become that Andrea King could make literally any word in the English language sound sexy if she put her mind to it.

"Just, uh, finishing up," I say.

I spend the next few minutes double-checking to make sure each layer of her hair has been fully saturated and then step back so she can stand up.

"I believe we're finished," I say, "but you should check it yourself to be sure."

She moves past me to the mirror and grins as she tilts her head back and forth.

"You did great. I mean, I'm trusting you on the back. You could be totally screwing me over there, but I'm choosing to believe you're not."

I hold up my hands, still sheathed in the goop-covered gloves. "So I can officially take these off now?"

She shrugs. "Unless you want to go purple too."

I must make some kind of hilariously alarmed face at that; she doubles over laughing before she straightens up and wheezes, “Or not.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:45 pm*

“I’ve already signed myself up for either a piercing or a tattoo,” I say as I step over to the garbage can and drop the gloves inside. “I’ve got to keep myself in check or even my family won’t recognize me by the time I go off to university.”

The sentence slips out before I can stop it, and it’s like my whole brain glitches for a second when I realize I haven’t thought about school even once in the past half hour. Then my heart races like it’s trying to make up for lost time.

Andrea raises one of her fingers and wags it at me. “Hey now. What did we promise each other?”

I swallow and nod. “Right. No school talk. Just summer.”

“Just summer,” she echoes before turning to lead the way out of the bathroom. “I have to leave this stuff in for thirty minutes before we wash it out, so let’s have some lunch.”

I follow her down to the kitchen, and we settle on cold cut sandwiches with some pickles on the side as our meal. Andrea adds the last part after making fun of the several bottles of pickles I’ve stocked the fridge with.

“Two of those were already here!” I protest as she makes a show out of placing each and every bottle on the island in front of me.

“You can be honest with me about your addiction, Naomi,” she says as she lays a hand on my arm. “This is a safe space.”



I try to glare at her, but instead, I let out a tittering laugh as all my senses zone in on the brush of her fingers against my forearm.

We set up a sandwich assembly line on the island and work side by side, me still in my dye-stained shirt and her still wearing nothing but her sweatpants and the towel. She's not even touching me now, but I'm still aware of every movement of her elbow where it rests a couple inches from mine.

I've got to get this under control.

Even her freaking elbow is driving me crazy, and if I'm not careful, I really am going to end up accidentally doing something creepy enough to have her packing her bags.

"I'm eating outside," I announce once I've finished my sandwich. I do a scan of the kitchen for any sign of the cats as I head over to the sliding door with my plate in my hands.

I'm already sitting down on one of the deck couches when I realize a normal person would have asked if she wants to eat outside too, but she doesn't seem put off; she pokes her head out the door and asks if she can join me a moment later.

"You forgot your side dish," she says, holding up one of the pickle jars. "I didn't have a wagon to haul the whole selection out, so you'll have to make due."

I let out a chuckle that only sounds slightly strangled, and we spend the next few minutes sitting in silence as we eat. I wonder if I should be talking, but Andrea looks content with the quiet as she sits cross-legged on the couch beside me.

"Do you think they ever actually use that barbeque station?" she asks.

I follow her gaze to the expansive set-up that looks worthy of a Grill Masters episode.

“I mean, probably? It looks like it cost a lot, at least.”

I’m still not sure what you should and shouldn’t say about people this wealthy, and I’m about to apologize in case I was rude, but Andrea nods and grunts in agreement before I get a chance.

“He probably does, like, boys nights with Sandy’s sons out there. Steaks and football and the stock market and stuff.”

I only just manage to hold in a laugh at the caricature of manliness. Judging by the way the house is decorated, I was thinking the barbeque pit was more of a conversation hub for Peter and his fellow art collectors to chat about their pieces while eating shish kebabs and drinking wine.

“Ugh, sorry,” Andrea says before groaning as she slumps against the back of the couch. “I sound so angsty. It’s just like...they have to have something I don’t, right?”

I stop staring at the barbeque station and turn to look at her instead. Her eyes have gone out of focus, and her face is pinched with a pain I’ve never seen in her before. For the first time, my urge to touch her has nothing to do with how pretty she is.

I want to cup her chin in my hand and smooth out every single line in her skin. I want to use my fingertips as erasers to wipe out every trace of the hurt inside her.

“Sorry,” she repeats as she flashes me a quick smile that doesn’t reach her eyes. “I’m just rambling. I didn’t even mean to say that out loud.”

She lunges for her sandwich and shoves a huge bite in her mouth before she starts chewing way too fast.

“You think he likes them better than you?”

The idea is so absurd I have to check if that's really what she means. There's no way Peter could spend nineteen years as her dad and not realize how amazing she is. I've known her for less than two weeks, and I'm already letting her take me along on some crazy adventure to complete a bucket list my anxiety thinks I should throw in the trash.

She's unstoppable.

She keeps chewing for so long I start to think I'm not getting an answer. I've popped the last bite of sandwich crust into my mouth when she finally speaks.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:45 pm*

“I wish I knew what he likes.” Her voice sounds like it’s coming from far away even though she’s sitting right beside me, like it’s echoing from some deep part of her she usually keeps locked up. “My mom makes it clear when I don’t live up to her standards, but my dad... It’s like there’s some code I’m supposed to know how to crack. I don’t think he dislikes me. We just feels so...distant, like there’s this gap between us I don’t know how to close.”

She looks so lost, like the couch cushion she’s sitting on has drifted out to sea with nothing but miles and miles of empty water surrounding her.

Something she said while I was lying on this deck the night we got way too high drifts into my mind.

She said she was lonely. She looks like the kind of person who’d never need to spend a single moment alone unless she wanted to, but I’ve spent enough time feeling isolated in crowded rooms to know that’s not really how loneliness works. You can listen to a hundred voices speaking around you and still feel like no one can hear yours.

I want to reach for her hand. I want to thread my fingers through hers and pull her back, just to let her know I float away sometimes too.

Just to let her know she’s not all on her own.

Only I’m not sure I’m brave enough to do that. I’m not sure if I can find the words. People in books and poems always make it seem so easy to know what to say.

That's part of why I love reading so much; it makes everything seem easy, but in reality, words rarely show up when I need them, so instead, I blurt the first thing that comes to mind when I glance away from her and find myself staring at the barbeque station again.

"My dad tried to teach me and my brother to use the barbeque once."

I see her shift to squint at me out of the corner of my eye.

"I blew up my brother's eyebrows. He was fine. He just had no eyebrows for like three months."

A moment of silence passes before Andrea starts laughing so hard she doubles over and clutches her stomach.

"Wow, Naomi," she says once she can talk again. "How did you know that's exactly what I needed to hear?"

## CHAPTER 10

Andrea

I wake up to find four voice mail messages from my mom waiting for me on my phone, which makes this the perfect day to continue distracting myself from my own future and go get a piercing instead.

My mom has been demanding an explanation ever since I cancelled my return to Toronto last week, and my vague texts about making arrangements and figuring things out have only made her double-down on her efforts. I swipe the notifications away before heading down to the kitchen, where I find Naomi washing some dishes at the sink.

“You look like you need coffee,” she says when she looks up and sees me.

She must have just finished giving the cats their disgusting slop for breakfast; they’re shoving their entire heads into their food bowls and chewing loud enough for me to hear halfway across the room.

“Wow, do I really look that bad?” I ask, combing a finger through my sleep-disheveled hair as I yawn.

Naomi’s face pales, and the dish she was washing clatters to the bottom of the sink.

“I didn’t mean it like that. I just meant you look sleepy. It’s nice. You look nice.”

She drops her gaze to the sink basin and starts scrubbing so hard I half-expect the dish brush to snap in half.

“I wouldn’t be offended if I didn’t look nice,” I say with a grin, “and I do need coffee.”

I head for the fancy machine that’s got its own special built-in section below the microwave and pop a coffee pod into the slot. While I wait for the coffee to pour, I turn around to lean against the counter and watch Naomi start drying off the dishes, which turn out to be some spare cat food bowls shaped like porcelain mice.

“You ready for today?” I ask her.

Priya and Shal are supposed to arrive in a couple hours to drive us all to a tattoo and piercing shop that does walk-ins. The last I heard, only Shal is up for a tattoo, and the rest of us are going with piercings.

“Not at all,” she answers, “but I guess I’m doing it anyway. Did you decide what

piercing you're getting?"

I've already got three in each earlobe and my helix done. I thought about getting something else on my ear, but if I'm going to be putting off Toronto for a few weeks to participate in this whole bucket list thing, I might as well go all out.

"My nipple."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:45 pm*

She's got her back to me, and I see the way her shoulders tense. She stands stock-still for a couple seconds before she sets the food bowl down on the counter.

"Oh," she says, the sound so high-pitched it's almost past the range of human hearing.

Part of me wants to laugh, and the rest of me is burning with the need to find out what would happen if she turned around.

She's probably just shocked I said the word 'nipple' in front of her, or maybe freaked out by me admitting I want to get a piece of metal stabbed through mine, but I can't help wondering if maybe there's another reason she froze like I'd whipped my shirt off right here in the kitchen.

Or if freezing is all she'd do if I really did strip my shirt off while she watched.

A loud gurgle from the coffee machine makes me flinch, and I look over to see my mug is now full. I wrap one of my hands around the cup and lift it to my mouth for a sip even though it's still way too hot. The liquid tastes bitter and earthy.

"I'm gonna get dressed," I tell Naomi as I head for the staircase.

She still hasn't looked at me, and she mumbles something too quiet for me to catch as I leave the room. I decide not to ask her what she said. The back of my neck feels hot, like the right words from her could have me breaking out in a sweat.

The wrong words, I correct myself as I pad up the stairs slow enough not to spill my



coffee. Definitely the wrong words.

There would be nothing right about acting on whatever this whole pseudo-flirty vibe between us is. I don't even know if she's actually into me, and either way, I'm supposed to leave as soon as we're done with the list.

I can't get caught up thinking some random summer fling is going to give me all the answers I need. Not again.

I pause on the landing and take another couple scalding sips of coffee, willing the caffeine to sort out all the jumbled thoughts in my head. Once I've gotten dressed and downed the rest of the mug, I flop down on my bed and spend the rest of the time until Shal and Priya's arrival trying to play through a Fleetwood Mac song on my guitar. I keep zoning out and needing to restart. The better part of an hour passes, and I only manage to get through the chorus once.

There was a time when I thought maybe music was the thing I was looking for, the direction I could steer my whole life towards, but even though music has been there for me during times when no one else was, singing and guitar have only ever been hobbies to me. I've never loved playing enough to want to shape my whole life around it.

I've never loved anything like that.

The sound of a car horn out in the driveway makes me jump. I scramble to put my guitar away and then slide a stack of bracelets and a few rings on to complete my jean shorts and tank top outfit before jogging back down to the kitchen.

I find Naomi pulling her shoes on in the entryway. She's traded the leggings and plain t-shirt she was wearing this morning for tan high-waisted shorts, a wide belt, and a little blue striped blouse partially tucked in.

It's the first time I've seen her dressed up, and I have to pretend to be engrossed in finding my shoes to keep from staring.

"So we've been summoned?" I ask when the car horn honks again.

"Shal just texted to say Priya won't get out of the car since she's scared she'll lose her nerve if she does, and Shal doesn't want to come in and leave her alone because she's scared Priya will bolt and hide in a shrub or something."

I press my lips together to hide my smile as I slip my sandals on. It's moments like these that make it clear why Priya and Naomi are best friends. I can totally see her using the 'hide in a shrub' method too.

"I didn't answer her yet, so she probably thinks we haven't heard the car," Naomi explains as the horn blasts again, long enough to make us both wince.

"We better go before the neighborhood watch rolls in," I say as I lead the way out.

I press the lock button on the front door's fancy keypad once we're out on the steps. We head for the driveway, and Naomi hauls open the side door of the minivan. We each take one of the bucket seats in the back while Shal greets us from up front. Bollywood music is blasting so loud on the stereo she has to crank the volume knob down before we can hear her.

"I'm trying to pump her up with the Yeh Jawaani Hai Deewani soundtrack," she says, gesturing at where Priya is sitting in the passenger seat with her forehead pressed to the window and her arms wrapped tight around her stomach, "which usually she can't resist, but not even 'Badtameez Dil' is working."

"Why did I let you talk me into this?" Priya moans. "Ma is going to kill me."

Shal shifts the car into gear and swings the van around to head for the gate while she makes shushing noises at her sister.

“I told you, Ma never needs to know.”

Priya flops forward so her head is braced against the dashboard. “And I told you I’m not getting any private areas pierced, which means I’m going to have to face her wrath, not you.”

Shal shrugs as she slows the van to a stop and waits for the gate to swing open. “You still have a chance to get a tattoo instead, like me.”

“Do you know what you’re getting?” Naomi asks over the sound of another groan from Priya.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:45 pm*

The gate swings shut to lock behind us once we've reached the end of the driveway, and Shal starts following the directions on her phone screen where it's stashed in one of the console cup holders.

"I think I'm going to look at their flash designs and see if anything speaks to me," she answers, "and Priya wants to get some kind of additional ear piercing. I really don't see why our mom would have any right to be mad about that. She's okay with nose piercings, and she got our earlobes pierced when we were babies. Seems only fair we pierce whatever we want now that we're legal adults."

Priya scoffs and sits up straight. "Have you met our mother?"

Shal stays quiet for a couple seconds before she shrugs again. "Well, I still think it's only fair."

"Because you're not the one she's going to murder," Priya shoots back.

"I'm usually the one she wants to murder." Shal lifts a hand off the wheel to flick her hair over her shoulder. "Anyway, this conversation is bringing my mood down. Let's stop worrying and get pumped up. It's the summer, bitches!"

She cranks the music so loud Naomi claps her hands over her ears and shouts for her to have mercy. Shal turns it down a smidge before cackling and revving the engine—or at least, as close to revving an engine as you can get in a minivan.

"Now that is a statement I can get behind!" I shout over the music.

I roll my window down and pull my hair out of its half-ponytail so the deep purple strands can fly free in the breeze. When I glance over at Naomi, I see she's still got her hands pressed to her ears, but she's grinning as she watches the tips of my hair whip at my face and tangle themselves into knots I'd probably end up regretting if I didn't know they were the price I paid to make her smile.

Another wave of apprehension rises inside me, and I do my best to push it back down where it came from.

It's the summer, I'm riding in a car full of girls ready to go do something crazy, and I like seeing Naomi smile. There doesn't have to be anything more to it than that.

The tattoo parlor is in a random strip mall with a florist on one side and a leather goods repair store on the other. The sign above the front window is a little faded, but the place had good reviews and has been open for almost fifteen years, so I figure it's at least safe to say we're not going to die of some fatal skin infection.

Shal claims a spot out front for the van. She and I hop out as soon as she's cut the engine, but we end up sitting on the curb for a solid five minutes while Naomi leads Priya in what looks to be some kind of breathing exercise inside the car.

"I told Priya she doesn't have to do it," Shal says as she kicks some pebbles around with the tips of her flats. "I wouldn't force her. She does want to. She's just nervous."

I nod. "Yeah, that makes sense."

I glance at her and see she's watching the two of them in the car, an expression I can't read carving a couple lines between her eyebrows.

There's a lot about Shal I can't read. On the outside, she seems like the girl who has everything: the good grades and extracurricular achievements, plus all the popularity

and social influence an eighteen year-old could dream of. I don't have to have gone to school with her to know what place she held in the social food chain. There's something about the way she carries herself that makes it clear she gets what she wants, and that what she wants is victory.

My mom would be thrilled with a daughter like her.

Only the longer you look at Shal, the more you realize there are cracks in the surface, like a bird's egg slowly being squeezed in a merciless fist.

Maybe I'm just projecting. Maybe that's just what I feel like when I think about the life waiting for me in Toronto. Maybe other girls can handle the pressure just fine.

The sound of the car doors slamming shut snaps my attention away from Shal. I look up to see Naomi and Priya standing in front of us with their arms linked and their faces grim but determined.

"Let's do this," Priya says, her voice a little shaky.

Shal and I both whoop our agreement before getting to our feet. As soon as we step inside the shop, the sharp smell of antiseptic makes my nose wrinkle. The faint buzzing sound of tattoos in progress brings up a surge of adrenaline in my chest. I still haven't gotten any ink myself, but I've lounged around several studios while friends got them. I've even asked for the price of a few flash designs, but in the end, looking at tattoos options kind of felt like skimming through brochures at the university fair they held at our high school every year.

I never found anything that felt like me, not in some deep-seated, cosmically-aligned way that made me feel like my very soul was lighting up inside me, which I know is probably not necessary for some tiny ink drawing of a flower on your ankle, but it does seem like how you should feel about your major life decisions.

“Hey! Welcome to the shop, you guys.” A guy in a beanie with full sleeve tattoos and a septum piercing strolls over to stand behind the counter and smile at us. “What can I help you with today?”

I’m about to step to the front of the group and answer him when Priya clears her throat and points one of her fingers at her ear.

“I would like to get this pierced,” she says in a voice loud enough to make a few heads around the shop turn our way. Her tone is a mix of defiance and nerves, like she’s expecting the guy to throw us out of the building. I see his mouth twitch like he’s trying not to laugh.

“For sure,” he says after he’s found his cool again. “We can definitely do that.”

“I’d like a piercing too, please,” Naomi murmurs, shifting her arm where it’s still linked with Priya’s. “Also on my ear.”

“I want one too,” I add, “but my nipple, not my ear.”

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*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:45 pm*

To the guy's credit, he doesn't bat an eye as he nods, but I do see him pressing his lips together like he's holding in a laugh when Priya whirls around and hisses, "Your nipple?"

Even Shal does a double-take.

"You only live once, right?" I say with a shrug.

Priya looks like she's going to need to sit down any second now, but we're saved from a fainting spell when the guy at the counter distracts us by opening up a laptop and humming while he types a few things.

"Looks like you're in luck. Leila should have time for you all in about twenty minutes." He glances up from the screen to turn an expectant look on Shal. "Anything for you, or are you just the moral support today?"

Her voice comes out shakier than I expected. "Actually I, um, was wondering if you had a spot for a walk-in tattoo today?"

He clicks around for a few seconds and then tells her there's room for a small piece in about two hours. He points out the artist across the room where he's hunched over a woman getting a big piece done on her thigh.

"Did you have something in mind already?" he asks. "I can also give you Joel's flash so you can see if you're into his style. He's just added some really nice new stuff, and he's usually open to changes if you want to make them a little more custom."



I notice Shal rocking back and forth on the balls of her feet. “Um, sure, yeah. I’ll take a look at it.”

He shuffles some things around behind the desk and then hands her a folder.

“Let me know what you decide, and I can get you booked in. Feel free to have a seat over on the couches. In the meantime, let’s get some piercing forms filled out. Do you all have ID on you?”

We pull out our wallets and then get started on filling out the forms and reading over the aftercare information. Priya decides to go for a daith piercing in the hopes that it will be a subtle enough to attract minimal rage from her mother, and Naomi asks for a hoop through the outer cartilage of her ear.

“I still can’t believe you’re getting your nipple done,” Priya says to me once we’re finally ready to join Shal on the black leather couches by the front window.

I’m about to reply when I notice Shal has the flash folder sitting closed on her lap. Her hands are gripping the edges of the cardstock so tight her knuckles have turned pale, and her face is blank as she stares down at the tiled floor.

“Shal, what’s wrong?” Priya asks, sliding over to sling her arm around her sister as soon as she notices her expression.

“I...” She opens and closes her mouth a few times, her gaze still pinned to the floor. “I don’t think I want to do it anymore.”

Naomi moves to fit herself in on Shal’s other side.

“It’s okay,” she soothes. “You don’t have to.”

“I just...” Shal shudders before she continues. “I thought I wanted it for me, but I don’t. I just...I want to be smart, and I want to be successful, and I want to be a daughter my parents are proud of, but I also want to be cool and badass, like a...boss queen slaying my way through life, or whatever the hell it is we’re all supposed to want to be.”

She lets out a watery chuckle and then sniffs. Priya leans her head on her shoulder and squeezes her tighter.

“And I think maybe I just wanted this one thing to be about me,” she continues, “but I don’t think I’m going to feel any better if I get some random white dude named Joel who’s probably never tattooed brown skin in his life to draw, like, a heart or a bird on my rib cage. I mean, what the hell is that going to do for me?”

She laughs again, the sound edged with desperation, before she leans her head over to rest on top of Priya’s.

“I’m proud of you,” Priya says. “I should tell you that more often.”

Shal sniffs again, and I start to wonder if I should get up and give them a minute. I feel like a stranger who’s stumbled into a scene I’m not supposed to be watching.

I’m about to jump to my feet and pretend I’m looking for the bathroom when Shal lets out a heavy sigh and sits up straight.

“Okay, that’s decided. Maybe someday I’ll find the right tattoo, but it is not here in Joel’s flash book.” She looks between the two girls at her sides and then over at me. “You all have to carry the torch of the summer bucket list for me, okay?”

Before anyone else can speak, Priya stands up to loom over her sister.

“Oh, hell no,” she says with her hands on her hips. “Just because you don’t want a tattoo doesn’t mean you’re getting out of here without a body modification. If I’m finishing that list, so are you. No queen woman boss left behind. Slay, besties!”

She does a combination head toss, hip thrust, bicep flex that has us all laughing so hard we might actually get kicked out of this place.

“Did you really say queen woman boss?” Naomi demands. “Is that even a thing?”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:45 pm*

“It might as well be,” Shal says as she wipes her eyes. “God, it all sounds so ridiculous when you actually stop and think about it.”

Priya shakes her head and plants her hands on her hips again, spreading her feet apart into a wide power stance. “Speak for yourself. I am a queen woman boss. You should see me in a damn crown, bitches.”

We all freeze at the sound of someone clearing their throat. I look past Priya to see a woman with long black hair and at least six piercings in her face standing with a clipboard in her hands. From the way her shoulders are shaking with suppressed laughter, I’d guess she’s been there for at least the past thirty seconds.

“Sorry to interrupt,” she says, “but, um, Miss Queen Woman Boss, would you like to get pierced first?”

## CHAPTER 11

Naomi

My ear is throbbing so bad I can feel every beat of my heart reverberating through the skin around my piercing, but I can’t stop smiling. Even when my cheeks start to ache from the strain, I keep beaming as Shal finishes paying at the counter.

She ended up getting the same piercing as Priya, in a rare instance of them doing anything remotely the same to their appearances after being forced to dress identically for the first eight years of their lives.

The irony makes me want to tip my head back and laugh, but then again, pretty much everything seems worth laughing at right now. I feel like I'm high again. I don't think my body has ever produced as much adrenaline as it did in the moment Leila the piercer said, "I'm going to go on three." The relief now that it's done has me feeling like my feet are floating a couple inches above the floor.

"You good?" Andrea asks from beside me.

I realize I've been swaying and will myself to be still, but I'm grinning like a stoner when I turn to look at her.

"So good! I can't believe I did it."

She bumps my shoulder with hers. "It suits you."

I'm so loopy I don't even find that hard to believe. In fact, I totally agree with her.

When Leila told me to go check myself out in the piercing room's full-length mirror, I couldn't help squealing as soon as I caught sight of the little metal hoop around the outer edge of my ear.

I got a piercing—a really freaking cool piercing that looks amazing on me—and I didn't faint or throw up or cry at any point in the process. I let some woman I don't even know shove a giant needle in my ear, and now I'm smiling about it.

I start swaying again.

Andrea chuckles at me as Shal tucks her wallet into her purse and leads us out of the shop. The afternoon sun feels so good on my face it's a miracle I don't burst into song. I take a deep breath of air in through my nose, and even though the parking lot smells like dust with a hint of car exhaust, I still close my eyes like I'm savoring the

balmy scent of a tropical breeze.

I'm going to have to tell my therapist I've discovered a new cure for anxiety. Forget beta blockers; the post-piercing rush is all you need to feel like you could blast any unexpected social interactions life throws at you into smithereens.

I open my eyes and find myself staring at the collection of businesses across the street from the strip mall, which just so happens to feature a used bookstore I didn't notice before.

"You guys!" I say, stopping dead in my tracks to point towards the store's faded orange sign. "Look! Books! We have to go."

Shal and Priya groan in unison.

"Every time this girl gets within a five kilometer radius of a bookstore, we have to go spend like two hours inside," Shal says to Andrea.

"I'll be fast!" I insist. "Come on. They usually have really pretty old editions at places like this. Maybe there's some—"

Priya turns from where she's already reached the van and puts her hands on her hips. "Please do not say William Butler Yeats. The hold that old dude has on you."

I gasp to show my offence at one of my favourite poets ever being referred to as 'that old dude' and then march over to loop my arm through hers. She gives in after a few seconds of me tugging on her, and once Shal realizes resistance is futile, she and Andrea join us in a procession across the street.

A bell above the door tinkles once we reach the bookstore and step inside. The familiar scent of musty pages fills my nose, and the smile I haven't been able to wipe

off my face gets even bigger. A silver-haired woman behind the counter greets us before she goes back to putting price stickers on a pile of new arrivals.

We fan out to browse on our own. I trail my fingertip along the edges of the shelves I pass, tilting my head so I can read the titles on the books' spines. I find the poetry section at the very back of the store. They do have a couple volumes of Yeats, but nothing that stands out enough to add to my already extensive collection.

I move onto the next section and squat down to get a better look at the lowest shelf when I notice a book with the title spelt out in rainbow letters. I look closer and realize there's a whole—albeit tiny—section filled with queer-themed books, ranging from the history of Pride to something called Sizzling Sapphics with little flame designs edging the words.

“What did you find all the way down there?”

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My heart leaps into my throat. Before I have a chance to stand up and face her, Andrea squats down beside me and grins. She's so close I can see the spray of freckles dotting her nose and cheeks. They remind me of a sprinkle of cinnamon dusting the smooth surface of a latte.

"Anything good?" she asks, turning to scan the shelf in front of us.

"I'm, um, still looking," I say, the sudden dryness in my throat making my voice crack like a pubescent boy's.

"This seems cool."

She taps the Pride history book before pulling it off the shelf, and my brain fires up with a dozen questions as I watch her read the description on the back.

Do straight people think the history of Pride is cool?

Is this a queer-coded signal?

Is she trying to tell me she's queer, or is she just trying to indicate she's an ally and that it's okay for me to talk about gay things with her?

Am I supposed to say something back?

"We should learn about this stuff in school," she says, her eyes still scanning the back cover. "I bet a lot of people would feel okay to come out way sooner if we did."



I can't stop my eyes from flaring wide as my tongue itches to ask, 'People like you?'

I rip my gaze away from her to stare at the shelf instead. I watch with my peripheral vision as she slides the book back onto the shelf and then lets out a soft laugh.

"Wow. Sizzling Sapphics?"

She reaches for the flame-adorned book, and I get a glimpse of the cover: a drawing of two naked women with their arms wrapped around each other, long tendrils of hair shielding their faces and conveniently obscuring their nipples and butts. They're framed by a giant red and orange flame shooting yellow sparks up towards the title.

Andrea flips the book over and starts reading from the description.

"A fiery tale of passion and forbidden lust, this gorgeously detailed graphic novel tells the story of a young woman descended from Sappho herself who will stop at nothing to free her long-lost lover from the mysterious evil forces that split them apart."

Her dramatic reading voice cracks, and she pauses to let out a snort.

"Wow," I say, my nerves easing just a bit as I laugh along with her. "That is...really something."

"Truly," she agrees as she opens the book up. "Let's see what it—oh. Oh. Oh wow. That is detailed."

Her eyes go wide, flitting over the page before she snaps the book shut. I watch her throat bob as she swallows, and I notice there's a soft flush creeping up her neck and into her cheeks—which is nothing compared to the way my whole face feels like it's on fire.

She slides the book back into place without a word, but her fingertip lingers on the spine. We're hunched so close together I can hear her breathing as she keeps her gaze pinned to the shelf.

"If I wasn't already sure I was bisexual, that would have done it."

Her body goes rigid as soon as the words leave her mouth.

Her hand drops to her side.

She's not breathing anymore, and I realize neither am I.

Andrea is bisexual.

Andrea likes girls.

The whole universe feels like it's rearranging itself around me. The earth's tectonic plates crash and crumple into brand new continents. The stars shift and swirl to create new constellations in the sky, and above it all, a choir of angels draped in rainbow-coloured robes sing an operatic chorus of, "She likes girls! She likes girls! She likes girls!"

"Wow, I can't believe I just said that."

I come careening back down to reality and find Andrea still crouched beside me with her arms wrapped around her knees as she rocks back and forth on her heels, her gaze boring a hole into the bookshelf.

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“I mean, not that it’s a secret,” she says, her voice quaking a little more with each word, “and not that I haven’t known for a while. I’m making it sound like this is my big coming out moment. It’s not. I’ve told other people. I—I mean, I haven’t told a lot of people, but I don’t want you to think you’re, like, the first person ever, and I...I don’t know why I’m making this so weird.”

She forces a shaky laugh and glances at me before looking away and pressing her lips into a thin line.

“It’s not weird.”

Despite the jubilant refrain of the queer angels on high still echoing in my head, my voice comes out steady and reassuring.

“And trust me,” I add, “you’re talking to the queen of making things weird.”

She huffs another laugh, this one sounding a little less fake than the first, and her posture loosens a bit.

“Thanks.”

A moment of silence passes before she shrugs.

“So, uh, now you know,” she says.

I nod, my heart pounding like a jackhammer in my chest. “Yeah, um, now I know.”

## CHAPTER 12

Naomi

I stand in front of the full-length mirror in my bedroom, holding my hair aside with one hand so I can squint at my piercing and assure myself it's really there.

Yesterday really happened.

The me who graduated high school a few weeks ago would never have gotten a piercing. She wouldn't have touched even a speck of marijuana. She wouldn't have been able to put enough sentences together to make a new friend, and that new friend certainly wouldn't be one of the coolest and hottest girls in the world.

That new friend wouldn't be someone she just spent a whole night thinking about kissing while her heart thundered with something dangerously close to hope.

When we made our summer bucket list while giggling and tipsy on wine, I imagined a version of me who could really do all the things we wrote down. I imagined what it would be like to rip through every page I've ever read until I was the girl doing things, not the girl burying herself in books to spend every day reading about the people who make things happen.

I thought that's all I'd do: imagine her.

I thought that's where it would end—the same place every possibility of a different life or a different me always ends: in my head.

My hands shake even more, and I realize it's because I'm breathing so heavy, pulling in sharp bursts of air through my nose until my head starts to feel all fuzzy.

What's happening to me?

The rap of someone's knuckles on my door splits the silence of the bedroom.

"Hey, you in there?" Andrea's voice asks, muffled by the door.

I let my hair fall back into place as my heart leaps into my throat. I try to come up with the words to answer, but all I can think about is her crouched beside me in the bookstore yesterday, so close I could count every one of her freckles while she read the description of *Sizzling Sapphics* and then admitted she's attracted to girls.

I couldn't look at her the whole ride home. Today I woke up at a quarter past seven to be sure she'd still be sleeping while I fed the cats. I've spent the rest of the morning locked in my room because I know there's a very good chance that the second we're face to face again, she'll see everything.

She'll see every first kiss scenario I spent last night playing out in my head like a dozen movies starring the two of us. She'll see the way my hands shake at just the thought of holding hers. She'll see all the excuses I've tried to batter into my brain only to have each and every one wiped out by a truth I can't ignore anymore, not after what she told me yesterday.

I like her.

I don't just think she's hot and cool and impressive.

I like her, and I want her to like me back.

"Oh, um, yeah," I answer, my attempt to sound natural just making my voice slide from way too high-pitched to way too low in the span of a couple words.

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If she notices how weird I sound, she doesn't comment on it. "I was just wondering if you need anything at the grocery store. I'm taking the bus over to pick up a few things."

I take a few steps back from the mirror and end up bumping against the end of my bed. I collapse into a seat on the edge of the mattress.

"Naomi?"

I curl my hands into fists in my lap and suck in a shuddering breath, but I still can't pull myself together enough to answer.

"You could, um, come with me." Her voice gets a little clearer, like she's leaned up against the door. "If you don't know exactly what you want. We could go together."

I do know exactly what I want.

I want to fling the door open and tell her to kiss me. I want to tell her I've been thinking about kissing her since I found her raiding the fridge in the middle of the night while I threatened her with a table lamp and a tiny Venus de Milo.

I want to tell her I like her and that I'm not even totally sure what I mean by that but that whatever it is, I haven't been able to snuff it out and bury it beneath a bunch of books like I do with everything else I'm too scared to do or feel or be.

"Are you okay?" she asks, her voice edged with alarm. "Naomi?"

I dig my nails into my palms so hard it hurts. “I’m okay. I...I...”

My voice trails off into a rasp. I swallow and start to try again, but she speaks first.

“Hey, um, I’m sorry if I made things weird yesterday. I guess you didn’t ask for that information, so if this is about me...me being bi, then yeah, I’m sorry.”

The door jiggles like she’s shifted against it.

“I don’t...I don’t really know a lot of people, um, in the community?” she says, pausing to let out a self-deprecatory laugh. “See, I don’t even know if that’s a thing people say. Anyway, I don’t know if there’s some, like, etiquette about it, or whatever. I just... I guess I just wanted you to know, and I’m sorry if that was weird.”

My heart feels like it’s swelling up too big to fit in my body.

She wanted me to know. She didn’t just blurt it out by mistake. She said she hasn’t told many people, and she wanted one of those people to be me.

A wave of guilt hits me so hard I raise one of my hands to cover my mouth so she won’t hear me gasp.

She trusted me to be there for her, and now I can’t even look at her because of a stupid crush.

“Okay, well, that’s all I have to say.” Her tone has gone flat now. “I’ll see you later, I guess.”

Panic squeezes my chest. I push up off the bed and take a shaky step towards the door.

“Wait.”

She doesn't say anything, but I don't hear her leaving either.

“I...”

I squeeze my eyes shut and force myself to go on.

“I'm the one who's sorry. You...you didn't do anything wrong. There's no, um, etiquette. If you want to tell someone, you should tell them, and if they care about you, it's their job to be there for you. At least that's how I see it. So...yeah. I'm sorry. I'm just...a very socially awkward person. Sometimes I just don't know how to, uh, be a person like other people do, but I really am so glad you wanted to tell me, even though I'm super weird.”

She's quiet for so long I start to wonder if maybe she did leave, but then she speaks again.

“Thank you. That means a lot. Also, I don't think you're weird. I think you're...you, and you don't try to be anything else the way other people do. That's way weirder, if you ask me. I think you're pretty damn cool, even when you're refusing to have a conversation without a door between us.”

She laughs again, and I force myself to join in, but my pulse is racing with alarm again. I want to be there for her, but I don't think I'm ready to do that while staring at her gorgeous face.

“Seriously,” she says, “come to the grocery store with me. It'll be fun. We can buy more pickles, although I think you already own every kind they have.”

I wrack my brain for an excuse that won't make her think I'm avoiding her and end



up blurting the first thing to pop into my head.

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“I have diarrhea.”

I haven’t even finished my sentence before I’m praying the floorboards will split apart and reveal a black hole ready to suck me down into oblivion.

“Ohhhh,” Andrea says after what feels like an eternity. “I see. Yeah, to be honest, that McDonald’s we stopped at on the way home yesterday seemed a little sketchy.”

I can hear her straining to hold back a laugh, and I wonder if I could hold my breath long enough to literally die.

“Well, in that case, you’ll probably appreciate me leaving as fast as possible,” she continues. “Good luck, soldier.”

She hovers at the door for a moment, and I force myself to let out a strained, “Thanks.”

I wait until her footsteps reach the end of the hall before I collapse face first onto my bed and smother a groan in my pillow.

“Diarrhea?” I demand to the universe. “Seriously? Diarrhea?”

I might as well spend the rest of the summer in this exact position. There’s no way I can recover from telling Andrea King I’m suffering from an explosive poop episode.

The longer I lay sprawled on the mattress, the more I realize it’s going to be impossible to pull myself out of the depths of my shame alone. I lift my head enough

to spot my phone on the nightstand and then flail my arm out towards it, nearly knocking over the miniature Venus de Milo I put back after my would-be attack on Andrea. I fumble through the process of dialing Priya's number and then hold the phone to my ear. She answers after a couple rings.

"Oh, hey! Great timing. I was actually just going to text you. Shal and I were wondering if—"

"I have a crush on Andrea, and I told her I have diarrhea."

The line goes silent for a moment before she clears her throat.

"Right. Okay, yeah, maybe you should go first."

I roll onto my back and let out an incoherent moan before demanding she tells me what's wrong with me.

"I mean, it sounds like what's wrong with you is...diarrhea? Was it the McDonald's?"

"Oh my god, no! I don't actually have diarrhea!" I wail. "I just told her I did. Why the hell did I say that, Priya?"

I drape one of my arms over my face for dramatic effect even though she can't see me.

"I think I need some more information here."

I shift my arm up enough to give her a brief synopsis of this morning while avoiding any mention of Andrea coming out to me yesterday, since that's not my news to share. I'm hoping the adrenaline and endorphin cocktail of getting a piercing is

enough to justify coming to the conclusion that I have a crush.

“Wow,” Priya says when I’m done. “So after all that, you really went with diarrhea?”

“Priya!” I shriek. “You’re supposed to be making me feel better.”

“Sorry, sorry. I couldn’t help it. Look, we’ve all done embarrassing things in front of our crushes. Remember that time Jake Tran caught me putting an anonymous Valentine in his locker and then I for some reason told him I only did it because Cupid’s evil twin cast a spell on me and took control of my body?”

I scoot up a little on my pillows and readjust the phone’s position against my cheek, holding back a laugh at that particular memory.

“Um, yeah, in the sixth grade,” I tell her. “I don’t think you’ve done anything like that since then.”

“Well, I gave up trying to even talk to any of my crushes after that. You’re literally living with yours. Embarrassing stuff is bound to come up. Let’s focus on what’s really important here: you like her.”

There’s a finality to hearing the words out loud that makes us both pause.

“Do you want to, like, date her?” Priya asks, her voice low enough to almost sound cautious.

“I mean, she’s only here for the summer,” I answer. “Her mom wants her to start an internship at her company in Toronto in the fall. I don’t think Andrea actually wants to do it, but that’s her plan so far.”

“And if her plan changed?” Priya asks. “Then would you want to date her?”

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I shake my head as soon as I realize my thoughts are veering into ‘what if’ territory.

What if she stayed in Ottawa?

What about long distance?

What if we didn’t have to say goodbye at the end of the summer?

“It doesn’t matter,” I say, more for myself than for Priya. “Have you seen her? I’m crazy for even thinking about it. I just don’t know how we’re supposed to keep sharing a house. I couldn’t even look at her today.”

I roll onto my side and cradle the phone between my shoulder and my cheek so I can curl up into a fetal position.

“Look, I know it’s scary, but maybe this is all a good thing. This is what the summer bucket list is all about, right? Facing our fears, meeting new people, not staying chained to each other all the time anymore.”

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

“Chained?”

The word tastes bitter. I knew she wanted us to make new friends, but she never said she felt chained to me.

“I mean, not, like chained,” she says in a voice that’s a little too high-pitched. “I

didn't mean it like that."

"How did you mean it?"

She sighs. "I just meant... I just meant our lives are going to be really different in university, and it's good to try things that scare us. That's all."

I don't answer. For what feels like a couple minutes, the only sound is the rattle of static as she breathes into the receiver.

For the first time in my life, I wonder if maybe I shouldn't have called her.

"Oh, come on, Naomi," she says after we've been quiet for so long my phone screen starts to stick to my cheek. "We're always going to spend time together. Seriously, I was just about to text you and say Shal and I want us all to do a road trip to that big water park on Saturday. You know, the one we went on a field trip to in grade eight?"

I release my knees from where I've been hugging them to my chest. "Oh?"

"Yeah, since a road trip is on the list but you can't leave the cats overnight, we thought that could count. We could sleep over at the mansion on Friday and then leave early Saturday morning."

I pull the phone off my face and hold it above my ear so my cheek will stop sweating. "I guess we do need to get the road trip done soon. We're not even halfway through the list."

"That's exactly what I said. It will be so fun! You've been telling me we should go back there for years."

Some of the tension leaves my body as I listen to the excitement in her voice.

“That is true. Okay, let’s do it.”

She whoops and then tells me Andrea should come too.

“You’re right. It would be awkward if we didn’t invite her,” I say with a sigh. “I’ll just have to somehow figure out how to exist around her between now and then.”

“Maybe you two will have a romantic water slide ride together, and you’ll find out she likes you too!”

“Ha,” I deadpan.

We spend the next few minutes hashing out details about the trip. It’s only a two hour drive, but we come up with an extensive snack list and some mandatory songs to include on the road trip playlist.

“Maybe we’ll get really crazy and film our dance challenge at the water park,” I say. “A bucket list two-for-one.”

Priya stays silent for a little too long.

“Oh, um, I guess you didn’t see my post.”

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I sit up straight on the bed. “What post?”

“I, uh, did the dance challenge thing already with someone I know from my music classes.”

I know I’m being ridiculous, but that doesn’t stop the blood from rushing in my ears as I answer, “Oh. I see.”

“It’s just, we said we didn’t have to do everything on the list together, and I figured a dance challenge is a good way to solidify a new friendship. It’s just like you said: a bucket list two-for-one. Right?”

I wrap an arm around my stomach. “Right.”

When she speaks again, there’s a forced brightness in her voice. “But you, Shal, and Andrea should do it with whoever you want. I’m sure yours will be great! I can’t wait to see it.”

I sound like a robot when I answer, “Right. Yeah. That sounds good.”

Another moment of silence passes before she tells me she has to go to a clarinet lesson. We say our goodbyes, and I lower my phone to stare down at the blank screen in my lap.

She has a new friend—a friend I haven’t heard anything about even though she’s clearly already close enough with them to be doing dance challenges.



I try to do what my therapist would suggest and put a name to the feeling that's making the back of my neck break out in a sweat, but my self-awareness isn't cooperating. Instead, I unlock my phone and pull up Priya's profile, where I find the post she was talking about.

It was uploaded three days ago. I've been freaking out about Andrea too much to pay much attention to social media the past couple days, but it's still weird Priya didn't say anything about completing a new list item.

The bottom of my stomach drops when the video loads and I see Priya and her new friend doing some kind of Macarena-esque routine to the latest pop hit in what looks like an empty music room.

Her new friend is a guy.

I might be a lesbian, but even I can tell he's obnoxiously cute for a man, and I know my best friend well enough to realize she's into him after just a few seconds of watching them laugh together on the tiny screen.

At least, I thought I knew her that well, but as I click the video off, I realize I called her less than twenty-four hours after figuring out I have feelings for Andrea, and she hasn't said a word about this guy to me.

I decide if I had to name the feeling that's perched on my chest like a boulder, I wouldn't call it jealousy, or betrayal, or even anger.

I'm not angry.

I'm afraid.

CHAPTER 13

Andrea

I can still remember sitting in awkward silence for hours while my parents traded death glares with each other in the years before their divorce, but I don't think I've ever sensed as much friction in a room as I do watching Naomi and Priya avoid each other's eyes tonight.

You'd need way more than a knife to cut through the tension hanging in the air. Whatever is going on between them feels like it might need more of a sledgehammer situation to smash it apart. The two of them barely spoke at all over dinner, leaving Shal and I to carry the conversation as we all ate way too much of the food their mom sent over with them.

At least, I ate way too much. It wouldn't surprise me if this best friend feud kept Priya and Naomi from eating more than a few bites.

"Should we watch a movie or something?" I ask from where I'm sitting cross-legged in an armchair in the living room.

Priya and Naomi are sharing a couch, but they're both huddled up against the arms at either end.

"Uh, yeah, I guess," Naomi says, darting a glance at Priya when she grunts in agreement before dropping her gaze back to the floor.

I hung back in the kitchen after our meal to ask Shal if she knows what the hell is up with them, but she said my guess is as good as hers before disappearing to the basement to call some guy who seems to be her half-hearted attempt at a summer fling.

I get up and hunt around for the remote and then turn on the huge flat screen hanging

above the fireplace. I scroll through the top picks on a few different streaming services—my dad and Sandy seem to be subscribed to all of them—but I just get a few nods and vague mumbles in response to the titles I read out.

“Speak now, or I will seriously press play on the fourth Shrek movie, which seems to be trending for some godforsaken reason.”

I slash the remote through the air to indicate how serious I am, but Naomi just lets out a soft, distracted chuckle while Priya shrugs and says, “I won’t stop you.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:45 pm*

I fight to keep from rolling my eyes as I hover my finger over the play button.

Naomi is sitting with her legs pulled up to her chest and her chin resting on her kneecaps, her dark blonde hair falling forward to shield the sides of her face. Her lips are pressed tight together, and two little creases have formed between her eyebrows.

“All right. You two asked for it.”

I hit the button, and the very unnecessary fourth addition to the Shrek saga starts to play on the screen.

We get through enough of the movie that I wonder if Shal has ditched us to go have phone sex. I’ve even become invested enough in the story that I don’t notice she’s back until she’s standing next to my chair and demanding to know why we’re watching Shrek.

“Actually,” I say, craning my neck over my shoulder to look at her, “it’s Shrek Four, AKA Shrek Forever After. You have to give them credit for the title. They really outdid themselves with that one.”

She grimaces. “I repeat: why are you watching this?”

I sweep my arm out towards the couch. “Because these two zombies just sat there after I threatened to make us all watch it if they didn’t stop me.”

“Huh.” Shal puts her hands on her hips and takes a couple steps closer to the couch. “Are you two ready to stop being weird and tell us what the hell is going on?”

They both shift around on the couch like little kids being interrogated by their mom.

“Nothing is going on,” Priya says with a shrug. “Maybe you’re the one being weird. Why were you on the phone for so long?”

Shal scoffs. “Ha. Nice try, sister. I’m not letting you avoid my question.”

Priya groans and drops her head against the back of the couch. “I answered your question. There’s nothing going on. I don’t have to be in a chatty mood all the time, which is maybe not something you would understand, sister.”

I try to catch Naomi’s eye to share an amused look about the twin fight that is clearly about to go down, but she’s still staring at the carpet.

“Well, excuuuuse me.” Shal holds her hands up in mock surrender and makes a show out of backing away from the couch. “Whatever you say, I guess. If things are so totally normal between you and Naomi, I guess you won’t have a problem with my brilliant idea to knock another item off the list tonight.”

She tosses her hair over her shoulder before looking at me for back-up.

“Right, Andrea?”

I have no idea what she’s talking about, but I still nod. Shal is the kind of girl you just go along with.

“Right. Exactly.”

She nods. “Good. Now turn off Shrek, and let’s all get naked.”

I don’t know how Shal does it, but twenty minutes later, she’s got us all standing at

the edge of the pool wrapped in towels with nothing underneath, ready to complete bucket list item number one: skinny dipping.

I shiver as I watch the water lap at the blue tiles glinting in the glow of the underwater lights. My nose is filled with the scent of chlorine and a hint of rain in the air. They're calling for a storm tonight.

The gathering clouds have taken care of most of the remaining daylight. The property has been designed for maximum privacy, but I'm sure we're all glad for the darkness as we stand clutching our towels around our chests. I don't know if it's the threat of lightning in the air or the look at Naomi's bare shoulders I got while we filed out of the house, but the hair on my arms is standing on end and my heart is beating so fast I'm scared she'll be able to hear it where she's standing less a foot away on my right.

"Are we doing a countdown or something?" Priya asks from Naomi's other side.

The two of them still haven't said much to each other, but the fact that we're all naked in the backyard seems to have eased some of the tension between them.

Being naked next to Naomi has the opposite effect on me. My ears strain to catch the sound of her breath as she shivers next to me. My arms are coated in goose bumps. Being this close to her feels like getting zapped by a hundred tiny static shocks shooting off her skin.

I shift my towel a little higher up my chest and suck in a breath, ordering myself to pull it together.

I'm not supposed to be into this girl. I'm supposed to be spending a few weeks at this house to clear my head before getting serious about my new life in Toronto. I already gave myself a year to find some other plan, and I came up with nothing but a few fleeting glimpses of an alternate future that always slipped away so fast I'm starting

to think they were never real at all.

My stomach twists at the thought, hard enough to make me wince and ball my hands into fists around the edge of my towel. I see Naomi turn to give me a look out of the corner of my eye, but I step forward instead of looking at her and curl my toes around the edge of the pool.

“On three?” I ask.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:45 pm*

I'm about to start counting when I realize I can't jump in the pool with a fresh piercing the aftercare sheet emphasized it would not be safe to swim with for at least a couple weeks.

"Wait," I say as the other girls shift up to join me. "We totally forgot about our piercings."

"Oh my god, you're right," Priya says, reaching up to cup her ear. "How did I not even think of that?"

She starts to back away from the pool, but Shal latches onto her arm to hold her in place.

"We'll just keep our heads above the water," she says. "It'll be fine. The piercings won't even touch the pool."

I gesture down at my chest. "That's going to be a little more difficult with this situation."

"You could just stay in the shallow—"

Shal cuts herself off as we all turn to stare at Naomi, who's darted over to the pool shed. She disappears inside for a couple seconds before returning with a bright pink inner tube slung over one of her arms.

"You can swim with this on," she says, panting a little by the time she gets back to us.



She grins at me and holds the tube out. A fresh patch of goose bumps flares on my skin when my fingers brush hers before she lets go of the plastic.

“Get your boob protector on, and then lets get in,” Shal barks, hopping from foot to foot to stay warm.

I turn my back to the pool and shimmy my towel down to my waist before sliding the inner tube over my head and arms to settle around my chest. My piercing twinges a little during the process but stops protesting once my boobs are resting against the curve of the tube.

Thankfully, the tube is on the tighter side and sitting so high up my chest my boobs are pretty much hidden from view, with just my head peeking out like some weird new breed of hermit crab.

I turn around, and everyone bursts out laughing.

“It’s called fashion,” I say, jutting my chin up as I march back to the edge of the pool. “Are we getting in or what?”

I count down from three. When I get to one, we fling our towels aside. A surge of adrenaline floods my body as the cold air hits my bare skin.

I squeeze my eyes shut and shout, “Go!”

We all scream as we leap into the water. My tube hits the surface with a splat that sends rippling waves surging out away from me. The pool is heated, and my skin sings with relief as the water warms me.

Priya is shrieking about her piercing while Shal laughs and splashes her. Naomi giggles while she treads water and watches them from a few feet away.

The water is too choppy for her body to be anything but a shimmering outline beneath the waves, but my heart still thuds at the flashes of bare skin I see reflecting in the underwater lights.

I force myself to look away and pretend I'm focused on Shal and Priya's battle as I do an awkward doggy paddle towards her. The sound of the tube squeaking makes her turn and laugh at me instead.

"I know, I know," I say. "I look ridiculous."

"I think the pink suits you," she says with a chuckle.

I let myself float in place once I'm a couple feet away from her. "Well, thank you for selecting it."

We stare at each other for a few seconds, Shal and Priya's shouts filling the silence between us. Water has beaded into glimmering droplets on Naomi's hair, like she's a mermaid all decked out in shiny pearls.

I haven't been this close to her since that day at the bookstore. We've barely talked since then. She's been working more hours than usual at her data entry job, so I've been keeping busy with my guitar and some reading.

"Hey, you two! We're playing catch."

I jerk my head around just in time to see a beach ball flying towards my face. I raise my hand on instinct and slap it away, sending the ball arcing over to Priya.

For the next ten minutes, all my thoughts get pushed aside as the four of us toss the ball around, laughing and making fun of each other the whole time. The tube restricts my movement enough that I'm the worst player by far, and my arms have gone limp

from the strain of reaching for the ball by the time someone knocks it so far out of the pool we decide we're done.

The storm clouds have gotten even thicker, turning the edges of the backyard beyond the reach of the house lights pitch black. Priya announces she wants to go in the hot tub before it rains, and the rest of us follow after her.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:45 pm*

I stare down at the water dripping off my legs to keep from watching Naomi as she lowers herself into the hot tub ahead of me. Shal laughs as I climb in next with the inner tube still slung around my chest.

“I think you could probably take it off now,” she tells me.

All three of them are submerged up to their necks, the bubbling jets concealing their chests.

“I don’t want to be the only one sitting around with my tits out.”

Shal and Priya both snort, but Naomi keeps her head down as she searches for the best spot against the jets.

Once we’re all settled, we end up lapsing into a conversation about our road trip plans for tomorrow. I’ve never been to the water park we’re visiting, but the rest of them know it well enough to strategize about what rides we should prioritize waiting in line for and which of them will pose the most risk for our piercings.

I take the opportunity to tip my head back and close my eyes while the jets massage my back muscles. I have to hand it to my dad and Sandy; whatever they paid for this hulking, state of the art hot tub was probably worth it.

I flinch as a cold drop of water lands right in the middle of my forehead, followed by another on my cheek.

“Is it raining?” Priya asks.

I lift my head and look around the yard to see splatters of rain are now dotting the concrete and pinging against the surface of the pool. In a matter of seconds, the rain starts falling fast and hard enough I can feel my hair getting soaked.

“Guess that’s our cue to go inside,” Priya says.

She and Shal start scrambling out of the hot tub and then dart over to wrap themselves in their towels. I stay where I am even after Priya comes over to hand some now very damp towels to me and Naomi.

“I think I’m gonna stay out for a bit,” I say. “The rain is kind of nice.”

With the rest of my body nearly boiling in the hot tub, the cool water on my face is a refreshing relief.

“Me too,” Naomi says, her voice so soft I almost don’t catch it over the rumble of the jets. “I want to warm up a little more.”

Priya shrugs and stashes our towels under one of the pool chairs. “See you inside, then.”

A little of the frostiness has come back to her tone. I nod towards the house once she and Shal have disappeared inside and ask, “So do I get to know what’s going on there?”

Talking about Priya seems a lot safer than sitting in silence until I can’t help asking why she stayed out here alone with me.

She looks past me to stare across the yard as she shrugs. “Just...some stuff about school.”

I shift a few inches closer so I can hear her better.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

She shrugs again. “I thought we had a rule to not talk about what happens in the fall.”

I see the corner of her mouth lift into the hint of a teasing smile, and I chuckle.

“Yeah, well, it would be far from the first rule I’ve ever broken.”

She laughs. “I don’t have any trouble believing that.”

I know she’s just trying to tease me, but the words hit me like a punch to the chest. I wonder if that’s all she sees me as: some crazy rule-breaker who just rolls through life wasting her time and dragging her belongings around in garbage bags.

I haven’t given her a reason to see me as anything else. I haven’t given anyone a reason to see me as more than that.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” She leans a little closer to me, her head tilted to the side and her face pinched with concern.

“Oh, uh, I think the jet just hit a knot in my back. It’s all good now.”

She leans back and nods. “Yeah, they’re pretty strong, aren’t they? I’d turn them down, but there are like five thousand buttons, and I don’t really want to run into the house to look for the instructions your dad gave me.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:45 pm*

I force a laugh. “It’s fine. I’ll live.”

We stay quiet for a few moments. I start to think I’m not getting any more information about Priya, but then Naomi sighs and starts talking again.

“Maybe if I broke some more rules, things would be better with Priya. I think maybe...I think maybe she’s tired of me, like I’m just...too much, you know? I mean, it takes so much work for me to figure out what the rules in life even are, so once I get something right, I don’t want to mess with it.”

Her eyes have gone unfocused, like she’s in one of those states where she doesn’t realize how much she’s saying. I can tell she’s kept this so bottled up it’s ready to burst out of her whether she wants to share it or not, so I stay quiet and focus on just being here for her.

“Like making a friend, for example. I had no idea how to do that, even as a little kid, and it seemed to just happen for everyone else. Then with Priya, it just...worked, somehow, so I was like, ‘Cool, I did it. It’s done. I don’t need to worry about doing it again.’ I always thought it was the same for her, but...it’s not. Turns out I did get it wrong, and I’ve been, like, suffocating her with the burden of our friendship for basically our entire lives.”

She clamps her jaw shut so tight I can practically hear her teeth grinding. Her eyes stay hazy for a few seconds before she blinks and seems to realize I’m still here. She cringes, but I shift as close as the inner tube will allow. I raise my voice so every word rings out loud and clear over the gurgle of the water.

“Nobody who is lucky enough to be your friend would ever call that a burden, Naomi.”

Her bottom lip drops open with shock, but she doesn’t look away.

“You are not too much, and whatever is going on with you and Priya is going to get sorted out. I can see how much she cares about you. You have something really special with her. Trust me, as someone who’s pretty much only had friendships of convenience my whole life, I know the real deal when I see it. You have that with her.”

By the time I’m done, Naomi’s eyes have gone so wide they’re almost perfect circles. Her bottom lip starts to shake, and I wonder if I got way too intense on her.

Then she lets out a squawk of laughter before clamping her hand over her mouth.

“Sorry,” she says from behind her fingers. “Thank you. That was so nice. Really. It’s just, you look so funny being all serious like that in a pink inner tube.”

She laughs again, and this time I join in as I consider just how weird I look wearing an inflatable tube around my boobs in a hot tub.

“Seriously,” she says once we’ve calmed down. “Thank you. That means a lot. I’m sorry I dumped all that on you.”

I hold a finger up. “Hey. No apologies. What are evening skinny dips in the hot tub for, if not dramatic life chats?”

I haven’t even finished my question before the air seems to crackle with the threat of lightning—not from the sky, but from the electric zing of the reminder that we’re currently naked, alone, and just a couple feet away from each other.



I wait for her to look away. I wait for myself to say something that will cut the tension, but all we do is stare. I watch a raindrop slide down her cheek, and I notice how much darker her hair looks when it's wet. There's a lock of it plastered to the side of her neck. I want to sweep it back into place. I want to feel the soft skin of her throat under my fingertips.

I want to know if she's ever thought about kissing me.

I want to know if she's thinking about kissing me now.

"Naomi..."

Her name tastes like rain, fresh and sweet but laced with the potential to surge and swell into something destructive.

I don't know if I moved closer or if she did, but she's near enough that I could count every one of her eyelashes if I wanted to.

"Naomi," I say again, like the word is a spell I'm casting on us both.

She's so close. I'm braced for her bare legs to bump against mine any second now. I lift my arm to smooth her hair off her neck.

The shift in my weight makes the inner tube let out a squelching noise that sounds just like a loud and drawn-out fart.

We both freeze, and then Naomi pushes away from me so hard her back slams against the wall of the hot tub.

My heart is racing so fast I'm sure it must be a health hazard, but I still force a chuckle and say, "Hey, it was the tube, not me."

I expect her to laugh, or at least smile, but she has this horrified expression on her face that makes my skin crawl.

“Naomi? I—”

“I’m sorry,” she blurts. “I...I’m so sorry.”

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She turns away from me and wades over to the far side of the hot tub. She hovers under the water with her hands gripping the edge for a moment before she clears her throat.

“I’m, um, getting out now.”

I realize she doesn’t want me looking at her.

My eyes sting, but I turn my back to her and stammer, “Right. Uh, yeah. Not looking.”

I squeeze my eyes shut. My throat burns as I listen to the slap of her wet feet on the concrete as she heads for her towel.

“Naomi,” I say, spinning around to face her once she’s got her towel on.

She’s already halfway to the kitchen door. I watch her yank it open. I can’t tell if she didn’t hear me or if she’s ignoring me, but either way, she slips inside without looking back.

## CHAPTER 14

Naomi

We’re only halfway to the water park, and I’m already considering jumping out of a moving car.

One of Shal's Bollywood playlists has been filling the silence for the better part of an hour. Shal herself is the only person in the car who's said more than a couple sentences the whole trip.

Priya declared she slept badly and sandwiched a pillow up against the passenger side window as soon as we pulled out of the driveway. I don't know how anyone could sleep through the blasting music, but she's done a good job at pretending for most of the ride.

She also did a good job at pretending to sleep when I knocked on the door of her guest bedroom last night to make yet another attempt at talking through the mess between us.

I made that mess infinitely worse when I texted her a couple days ago to ask why she hadn't told me about the guy from her music class and if she plans on telling me when they start dating or if that's going to be a secret too.

She said my reaction is exactly why she didn't tell me in the first place.

I asked what she meant.

She said that should be obvious.

We've had pretty much the exact same conversation a half dozen times since then, and each one has made me more and more sure I've gotten things catastrophically wrong in the one friendship that's made me feel like I can do things right.

If the tension radiating from Priya in the passenger seat weren't enough to have me ready to eject myself out of this car, there's also the heavy silence from the seat behind me adding to the experience.

Andrea claimed the back bench instead of taking the bucket seat next to mine like she has every other time we've been in the van together. I don't know when she ate breakfast, but she was locked up in her room until Shal called her downstairs once the rest of us were ready to leave.

I watch the endless miles of Canadian forest lining the highway fly by outside the window, but I can't stop seeing Andrea's face in the hot tub last night, so close to mine I could almost feel her breath on my lips.

So close I almost kissed her.

She didn't ask me to kiss her, and as much as I felt like she was leaning in too, what's happened with Priya has shown me I can't trust myself to understand what people want.

If I'm too much for Priya, I'm sure as hell too much for Andrea. We barely know each other, and I was already blabbing about myself so much last night I almost slipped and told her my therapist thinks I'm not neurotypical.

I haven't told anyone about that, and Andrea certainly didn't ask for a confession. Sure, she said we're friends, but that was just to check off a stupid bucket list item. I'm the one taking things too far, and soon I'll be making her feel trapped just like I've done to Priya.

"Oooh does anybody want Slushies?" Shal asks as she reaches to turn the music down. "There's a rest stop coming up, and I bet they have them."

"I'm not really hungry," I say when nobody else answers, "but if you want one, we should stop."

"You don't have to be hungry to get a Slushie," she says. "It's a summer road trip

staple. Hey, Pri, wake up! We're getting Slushies."

She gives her sister's arm a nudge, and Priya's answering groan is groggy enough for me to believe she really did fall asleep.

"Maybe Slushies will cheer you grumpy little babies up enough to make this trip actually fun. Me and the trusty Dabangg soundtrack can only do so much on our own," she says with a nod at the stereo.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:45 pm*

We reach the turn-off for the exit in a couple minutes. We're winding down the wide curve when a bang loud enough to make us all scream explodes underneath the van.

"What the hell was that?" Priya screeches, her hands clutching the edge of her seat.

Shal jabs at the stereo to turn the music off. "I don't know. There's no light on in the dashboard. Do you hear anything?"

For a moment, I can't hear anything except our rapid breathing as Shal continues to steer the van down the exit ramp.

Then a heavy thunk-thunk from under the front end of the car starts to sound out again and again, the noise grating enough to make my jaw clench.

"That's a flat tire," Andrea says from behind me. "A very flat tire."

Shal swears. "Ma is going to kill me."

"Pull over," Priya orders, tugging on Shal's arm until she swats her away.

"I can't pull over in the middle of a ramp. I have to get to the road at the bottom."

The thunking sound gets louder and crunchier as we go. We're all wincing by the time we get to the end of the ramp. Shal pulls off to the side of a road lined with corn fields full of stalks almost as tall as the van.

She shuts the engine off and twists in her seat. "So, who knows how to change a

tire?”

We all glance at each other.

“I mean, in theory I do,” Andrea says, “but I’ve never done it all by myself, and I don’t really remember all the details.”

“Do you think we could manage it with a YouTube video?” Priya asks.

She’s already pulling her phone out, but after a couple seconds, her face falls.

“Oh no. Do any of you have service out here?”

My stomach drops as I hunt around for my purse on the floor. By the time I’ve gotten my phone out, everyone else has confirmed they’re out of service range too.

“We could walk to the rest stop?” I say. “I’m sure there’s someone there who could help, or at least enough service to call somebody.”

Shal glances at our very rural surroundings. “We might have to, but the sign said it’s five kilometers away from the exit. That’s...a very long walk in the sun. Somebody else is bound to come down this exit, right?”

She undoes her seat belt and says she’s going to check on the tire. As soon as she shuts the door behind her, the tension in the car seems to get a thousand times thicker. My throat feels like it’s being crushed by the weight of all the words I wish I could say to Priya and Andrea.

Priya turns back around and lets out a heavy breath before opening her door and stepping outside. I hear the muffled sounds of her and Shal arguing, but I don’t focus on their voices. All my senses are tuned into Andrea.



I listen to her breathing. I listen to the creak of the seat as she shifts her weight. I listen to her seatbelt buckle click.

“Naomi, about last night—”

“I’m sorry.”

My whole body has tensed up. Even the muscles in my face are so tight my cheeks are twitching.

She shifts forward, leaning her head out between the seats. I think she’s trying to catch my eye, but I stare down at my sandals instead.

“You don’t have to be sorry,” she says.

I try to swallow, but I can’t.

I don’t want to hear this. I don’t want her to let me down easy. I don’t want her to pity me.

“I...I’m gonna go see if they need help.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:45 pm*

I fling my seatbelt off and yank the door open. I don't even bother closing it behind me. I just trudge around to the back of the van so I can squat down to wrap my arms around my knees and pull myself together in private for a moment.

The morning sun beats down on my head as I press my forehead to my kneecaps and focus on breathing in and out. I tune into my senses: the sound of rustling corn leaves, the scent of hot asphalt and dirt, the sight of the clear blue sky when I lift my head and look up.

My chest feels a fraction less tight now, but my skin is still hot and itchy with nerves. It all feels like way too much to fit inside my head: the fight with Priya, the awkwardness with Andrea, and now the stress of being stuck on the side of some random country road with no phone service.

I don't know what I'm supposed to do. I don't know what the rules are. I don't know who I'm supposed to be anymore. I haven't even gotten to university yet, and the whole world has already shifted into shapes I don't recognize.

I drop my head back down to listen to the rustle of the leaves again, like maybe they'll whisper some answers, but instead, I end up tuning into Shal and Priya's conversation from up at the front of the car.

"I get it, okay? It's stressful, but you're being straight up rude, and you have been all day," Shal says. "What's the matter with you, anyway? Why won't you tell me what's going on?"

"Oh, so it's okay for you to have your own life, but as soon as I don't want to tell you

every single detail about mine, I'm being rude?"

Shal scoffs, and even though I can't see her, I'm certain she just put her hands on her hips.

"Where is this even coming from?" she asks. "If you've got some problem with Naomi, fine, but don't start projecting it on me too."

Priya grumbles her reply just loud enough for me to catch the words. "Maybe I have a problem with both of you."

I know I should do something to let them know I can hear them, but I'm frozen in place, straining my ears to make sure I don't miss anything as my skin turns slick with sweat.

"Oh yeah?" Shal asks, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "Care to enlighten me?"

"Yeah, actually, I do care," Priya says. "I care that I'm just the sidekick in everyone else's story. I care that I'm just the boring twin you only spend time with when you need a break from everyone else. I care that I'm the dependable rock everyone can lean on, but as soon as I want my own life, it's too much for everybody else. I care that you're off doing your dating and partying thing like usual, and Naomi's off crushing on Andrea and being all obsessed with her, but as soon as I want some space to spend time with someone other than the two of you, you both freak out and get mad at me for wanting just one thing that doesn't involve you. It's honestly pathetic."

She's shouting by the time she finishes, which makes the silence that follows extra eerie. I've gone from overheating to clammy and shaky as my sweat-soaked t-shirt clings to my skin.

Priya is right.

I have always seen her as my rock, and maybe that's not something she ever wanted to be. Maybe all I've done is hold her down.

"Priya..." Shal rasps.

I hear a scuffle of footsteps before Priya says, "Don't, Shal. Just...don't."

More footsteps sound out, and by the time I realize they're headed for the back of the van, it's too late for me to go anywhere. The steps stop, and whichever twin is now standing a couple feet away from me gasps.

"Naomi."

It's Priya.

I know I should stand up. I should fix this. I should apologize. I should do something, but my brain feels like it's on overdrive, whirring through a thousand social calculations without finding any definitive results. My systems are crashing.

"You...you heard that," she says, her voice low. "Naomi, I—oh. Hi."

"Hey."

I hear Andrea's voice on the other side of me, and realization slams into me so hard I almost end up sprawled on my side in the middle of the road.

If I heard everything Priya said, then Andrea must have heard it too.

Including the part about me having a crush on her and 'being all obsessed.'

"Naomi, look, I..." Priya trails off and then sighs before she steps up beside me.

I hear her crouch down to get on my level, but all the sounds around me have gone distant and hazy, like I've been pulled into an anxiety whirlpool where I can't tell up from down.

I can tell I'm about to have a panic attack, and it only gets worse when Andrea kneels down beside me too.

I don't want them to see this.

I don't want anyone to see this.

I have to get out of here.

I don't realize I've bolted until corn leaves are already whipping my face and arms. One of my sandals snags the base of a stalk. I almost end up sprawled on my face before catching my balance, but I don't slow down.

My lungs burn, and above the pounding of my heart, I can hear someone calling my name, but still, I don't stop. I don't know which way the road is anymore. I don't know where I'm going. I just know that if I slow down for even a second, reality is going to catch up with me, and I'm going to crumble under its weight.

I tear my way through another few rows of corn before I trip again, but this time, I don't manage to steady myself. I land hard on my knees and palms, a shriek ripping its way out of me when I feel the sharp edge of a rock dig into my kneecap.

I roll to a seat and inspect the damage while I continue to gasp for air. My knee is caked with dirt and oozing blood where the rock jabbed me. My hands are streaked with dirt too, and my bare arms are criss-crossed with shallow scrapes from the corn.

“NAOMI!”

I look up as the sound of shaking leaves and pounding footsteps gets closer and closer, followed by more shouts of my name. I'm too stunned from the fall to do

anything but stare as Andrea bursts through the last few rows of corn separating us and then gasps when she spots me on the ground.

“Naomi! Are you hurt?”

She’s kneeling beside me before I have a chance to answer, one of her hands coming to rest on my shin as she inspects my bleeding knee with wide eyes. Her purple-tinged hair is hanging wild around her face, sweat is coating her neck, and her arms are streaked with the same scrapes as mine.

“You’re here,” I mumble.

She huffs a laugh laced with relief as her eyes meet mine. “Of course I am. I...I wasn’t about to let you disappear into a corn field forever without telling you I have a crush on you too.”

Everything stops.

My heart, my breath, the breeze rattling the tops of the corn stalks, the shift of the sun in the sky—it all goes still.

“You...what?”

“You heard me,” she murmurs, one corner of her mouth quirking up into that smirk that’s been undoing me since the day I met her.

She only manages to keep it up for half a second before her eyebrows draw together and uncertainty slides over her face like a cloud drifting across a clear sky.

“Look, I know we haven’t known each other for very long, and I know I’m just some random girl squatting in her dad’s house, but...but if what Priya said is true...if you

do have a crush on me, then I figured maybe you should know I have a crush on you too. So yeah. That's...that."

When a few seconds pass without me saying anything, the furrows between her eyebrows deepen. She pulls her hand off my shin to ball it into a fist at her side.

"Maybe this wasn't a good time to say that," she says. "Maybe I shouldn't have said it at all. I... God, this is such a cliché, but I've never really had this kind of a conversation with a girl, and I just thought... Honestly, I don't know what I thought. I just did it."

She lets out a quiet laugh that's so bitter it makes my chest ache. She starts to push up to her feet, but I shoot my hand out to grab her arm and pull her back down.

Her eyes widen again, and I'm sure I look just as shocked, but I don't let go.

She has a crush on me.

She likes me.

This unstoppable force of a girl likes me, and the rest of my life might feel like it's spinning out of my control, but this moment right here is one I can hold onto.

This moment right here doesn't have to crumple under the weight of all my doubts.

This moment can crush those doubts to dust if I let it.

"You really...like me?"

Andrea nods and closes her hand over the spot where my fingers are still gripping her arm. "I like you, Naomi. I was trying not to admit it to myself, but...I think I've liked



you since you tried to murder me with the Venus de Milo.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:45 pm*

We're silent for a couple seconds. Then she squeezes my hand, and it's like something deep inside my chest cracks open to let liquid gold pour through my veins.

I tip my head back and laugh up at the bright blue sky while Andrea does the same. My body sings with relief. The ground itself seems to be thrumming to the tune of our joy when once we've caught our breath, both our faces split into cartoonish grins.

She likes me. She likes me. She likes me.

I know it's the dorkiest thing ever, but the chant keeps repeating in my head as we get to our feet. I release her arm so we can get up, but she grabs my hand to twine her fingers through mine as soon as we're standing.

A fresh surge of gold shoots through my bloodstream, and every colour in the corn field flares a little bit brighter.

"I don't really know what this is," she says, nodding down at our joined hands. "and I know I'm kind of a hot mess right now, but I just knew as soon as you sprinted off into this field that I had to tell you how I feel. I've never met anyone like you, Naomi. I...I haven't been able to stop thinking about you."

The corners of my eyes sting, and my heart feels like it's about to beat its way out of my chest.

"That's...that's exactly how I feel about you," I tell her. "I was ready to throw that whole summer list in the trash, but then you showed up, and you kind of just...swept me into this crazy adventure I didn't know somebody like me could go on."

She chuckles. “It has been pretty crazy, hasn’t it?”

“Yeah. We’re, like, literally having this conversation in the middle of a random corn field, miles away from any trace of society.” I sweep my free hand out in front of me to indicate our surroundings. “Plus, you’re...not the only one who’s been feeling like a hot mess. You heard what Priya said. I don’t even know if I have a best friend anymore, and it’s true that a lot of what I’ve been struggling with lately has been pretty pathetic. I—”

“You’re not pathetic.”

Andrea’s voice is sharp enough to make me jerk with surprise. She squeezes my hand again and softens her tone.

“I know you two have got a lot to sort out, and I know I’m just some random outsider looking in on the situation, but whatever you have going on, I know she doesn’t actually think you’re pathetic. No one could think you’re pathetic, Naomi, and I know once we go back out there, Priya is going to tell you that herself.”

Once we go back out there.

The words hang in the air, so heavy I can almost hear them hit the ground with a thud as reality seeps back into the field like an acrid gas.

“What is it?” Andrea asks.

I realize I’ve reached my free hand up to cover my mouth and let it fall back down to my side.

“Nothing. This is just...surreal. Like, you’re holding my hand and telling me you have a crush on me, but for some reason, I feel like this all going to be some kind of

dream we leave behind as soon as we leave this field.”

She stares at me for a few seconds before she steps closer until we’re just a couple inches shy of chest to chest.

“How about this?” she says, her gaze as soft as the stroke of her thumb along the back of my hand. “You have to have a summer fling to finish the bucket list, right? So...let’s try it. Let’s go on a date.”

I blink. “A...a date?”

She nods and grins at me. “Yeah. A date. You and me. Does that help you believe you’re not dreaming?”

I grip her hand extra hard to keep from falling over as I squeak, “Um, not really?”

She shrugs and lets out a fake sigh, her eyes flashing with amusement. “Well, if you don’t want to...”

“I didn’t say that!”

She chuckles at the urgency in my voice. “So, it’s a date, then?”

I nod so many times I feel my cheeks heat up at how not cool I’m being, but I’m past the point of speaking.

Andrea King just asked me on a date.

## CHAPTER 15

Andrea

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:45 pm*

I'm still holding Naomi's hand when we make it back out to the road. I use my other hand to push the last few stalks of corn out of our way, and as soon as my feet touch the strip of dried-out dirt that runs between the edge of the field and the side of the road, I squeeze my palm extra tight around hers to remind us both this isn't some heatstroke-induced dream.

This is real.

I really told her I like her. I really asked her out on a date, and maybe getting tangled up in whatever's happening between us is the exact opposite of what I'm supposed to be doing this summer, but it's just like I told her: the second she took off running, I knew I had to run after her.

I knew I needed her to know I was as close to kissing her last night as she was to kissing me.

Sparks shoot up and down my arm, radiating from our joined hands, and I fight the urge to stop and just kiss her here and now. It's stupid and cheesy, but I can't help thinking Naomi Waters is the kind of person you kiss at sunset or midnight or in the pouring rain, when the world looks as magic as being with her feels.

Then again, I was full prepared to kiss her while floating around in an inner tube in a hot tub, but still, it was raining.

"Is that...another car?"

Naomi comes to a halt so fast I get jerked back beside her. We popped out of the field

a few meters down from the van. I look over and see the hint of another car parked in front of the van.

We jog the rest of the way up to the vehicles and find Shal and Priya talking to an old woman with frizzy grey hair who's wearing a sundress and passing around a bag of what looks like trail mix. They all turn at the sound of our approach, and I notice Shal and Priya's eyes widen when they spot my hand clutching Naomi's. I give Naomi a quick glance and squeeze her palm one last time before I let go.

"We were wondering when you'd make it back," Shal says, her voice laced with a suggestive note. "Meet our new friends, Mary and Bobby."

The woman with the trail mix waves, and a balding guy I didn't even realize was here pokes his head up above the hood of the van to say hello.

"They have a tire changing kit," Shal says. "They passed by on their way to the rest stop and offered to help."

"We're saved!" I say, leading the way over to the others. "That's amazing. Thank you so much."

"No problem, sweetie," Mary answers. "Want some trail mix?"

We spend the next fifteen minutes eating trail mix and pretending the lingering tension between Priya and Naomi isn't thick enough to choke on. Our rescuers refuse any offers of buying them lunch at the rest stop, and once they've driven off, we're left standing in silence.

I'm about to offer to take a walk or sit in the van to give them some privacy when Naomi clears her throat and looks straight at Priya.

“You’re right,” she says.

Priya shakes her head, her expression pinched. “Naomi, I shouldn’t have—”

“No, I get it,” Naomi cuts in. “I get why you didn’t tell me about the guy at music school. I get why you wanted something that was just for you. I...I’ve been so scared, and I’ve taken things way too personally when really I should have just been excited for you. You shouldn’t have to be the rock all the time. Not to me. Not to anyone.”

Priya’s eyes get all shiny before she rasps the words, “Thank you.”

I’ve never had a conversation like this with a friend. I’ve never had a friend like this at all. I filled up my life in Montreal with so many people, but I’ve barely thought about any of them since I left. I never got to know them well enough to feel like we could depend on each other—or let each other down.

They were just people to pass the time with, people to laugh with or go on drives with or peer pressure into singing along with me while I played guitar. I didn’t have to worry about disappointing them because that’s all they saw me as too: some fun and nothing more.

“I don’t want you to have to feel like that anymore, Priya,” Naomi says. “You’re not a sidekick. You deserve people in your life who can celebrate your wins, and I want to be one of them. I promise I’ll do better. I promise I’ll be there for you too, even when it’s scary or hard for me, because you being happy is one of the best things in the world, even when it’s some random saxophonist dude with bad dance moves making you smile.”

Priya lets out a watery laugh as a few of her tears manage to escape and slide down her cheeks.

“He plays trumpet,” she says in a choked voice, “and his moves were not that bad.”

She lifts her arms in a tentative invitation, and Naomi hesitates for a second before rushing into the hug. My chest aches as I watch them squeeze each other and sway back and forth.

For some reason, I can’t stop thinking about all the times I’ve apologized to my mom for one thing or another and how I always waited for that moment when she’d tell me everything was okay, when she’d lift her arms just like Priya did and wait for me to run into them.

Only she never did. Hugs were for when I got things right, not when I got them wrong.

I hear Priya snifle before she pulls back enough to look at Naomi.

“I didn’t mean t-to call you p-pathetic. I’m so sorry. I don’t think that at all. I was just hurt, and I shouldn’t have said it.”



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Naomi shakes her head and makes a shushing sound. “It’s okay.”

“You’re my best friend, and I never want that to change. Me wanting other friends, or even a...a boyfriend doesn’t mean you mean anything less to me.”

“I know.” Naomi shifts her hands up to grip Priya’s shoulders. “Sometimes it’s hard for me to stop worrying about stuff like that, but I know now, and I want you to have everything you want.”

I hear another snuffle and look over to see Shal is trying to blink back tears too.

“Thank you,” Priya says again. “That’s everything I needed to hear. I’m...I’m so sorry I told everyone about your...that you...”

She glances over at me and then back at Naomi. My heart pounds as I wait for Naomi’s reaction. A couple seconds pass, and then she turns her head to beam at me.

My breath catches. Even in her adorable pickle pajamas, I don’t think she’s ever looked cuter than she does right now.

“Well, I’m glad you did,” she answers Priya without taking her eyes off me.

I’m about to say screw it all and run over to yank her off Priya so I can kiss her in the middle of this road, but Shal breaks the spell of the moment by marching over to the driver’s side door and yanking it open.

“Do you want to get freaking married in this corn field, or can I finally get my damn

Slushie?”

The shrill screams of people shooting down dozens of massive water slides ring out above the pop song blaring through the park’s sound system. Water drips off my bikini to darken the concrete under my feet. I shiver as a wisp of cloud drifts across the sun to cast us in shadow where we’re standing in line for one of the most popular rides in the park.

Naomi notices and turns from where she’s been caught in a debate with Shal and Priya about when we should go get lunch at the food court.

“Cold?” she asks.

I rub my hands up and down my arms. “Just a little.”

‘A little’ is an understatement. We’ve been waiting in line in our soaked bathing suits for so long my teeth are chattering.

“Oh no,” Naomi says, her forehead creasing when I fail to clench my jaw hard enough to keep her from hearing the rattle of my teeth. “Here, let me help.”

She steps closer and grips my arms so she can start rubbing me too. My body floods with warmth in a split second—not from the friction, but from how close she’s standing in nothing but a cute little two piece while her palms slide over my skin.

I’d call her out for pulling a smooth move on me, but when I see her eyes flare as they lock on mine, I realize she’s just as shocked by the intensity of the heat building between us. She blinks, and I watch the flutter of her pale eyelashes.

“Okay, we get it. You’re a thing now. No need for the excessive PDA.”

I look over Naomi's shoulder and see Shal making a show out of rolling her eyes, but she can't stop herself from smiling. Priya is biting back a grin too as she shifts her gaze around the park like she's trying not to stare at us.

Naomi coughs and drops her hands to her sides. There's already a flush creeping up her neck as she steps away from me and tucks her hair behind her ears.

"Andrea was just cold." Her defensive tone makes her sound way guiltier than she is.

The fact that she can't meet anyone's eyes right now doesn't help her case.

Shal looks up at the cloud still draped across the sun. "Honestly, I'm getting cold too, and this line has not moved for at least five minutes, which is why I think we should just try again after lunch."

"We did make it all the way from there to here," I say, pointing over my shoulder at the distant end of the line, "and the line might be even longer after we eat."

Priya wraps her arms around her stomach. "I am really hungry. I almost grabbed that kid's fries when he walked by."

Shal laughs. "I would pay to see you actually try that. Looks like Naomi is the deciding vote here, though."

We all turn to Naomi. She scans the length of the line all the way up to the slide while hemming and hawing like she's trying to get out of making a decision.

"I mean, we are a lot closer now..." she says, "but then again, it has been a long time..."

Shal snorts. "Very helpful. Look, how about this? Pri and I go eat since we're the

hungriest, and if you're still in line when we're done, we'll rejoin you."

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We all decide that seems like a good idea. I watch Shal sling an arm around Priya's shoulders as they head off towards the food court and then look back to see Naomi staring at them all misty-eyed.

"It's probably good for them to get some time alone," she says, wiping the wistful look off her face once she notices me watching her. "I know they said they talked before those people with the tire kit showed up, but they can't have had very long together."

I nod. "If you want time with Priya too, no worries. I know today has been pretty...intense for you two."

She chuckles as we finally shuffle another couple feet up the line.

"Yeah, that's one way to put it. I'm sure we'll talk more soon, but it feels good to be okay for now." She takes a deep breath and lets her shoulders slump with relief. "I really thought I was going to lose her, you know? I'm not really good at the whole knowing what to say thing, which is ironic considering all I do is read books, and people always know what to say in books. You'd think it would have helped me, and...and now I'm rambling. I..."

I step closer to her, and she trails off into silence. A fresh wave of heat crests over my skin.

"You know, I think you underestimate yourself, Naomi." I pause for a moment, savoring the thrill I get from saying her name.

It hits me then that I never thought twice about the hundreds of times I called Nick by name, but every time Naomi's name is on my tongue, it tastes like magic.

I shake my head to clear it before I can start considering what that might mean and how it's definitely not the way you're supposed to feel about a temporary summer fling.

"You might not think you're good at knowing what to say, but you did smooth talk your way into saving a friendship and scoring a date in less than half an hour. Even I can't say I've ever managed a feat like that."

I've moved even closer now, close enough to notice the way her breathing quickens.

"I don't think anyone would call me a smooth talker," she murmurs, "but if I'd known running blindly into a corn field would result in you asking me out, I would have done it a lot sooner."

I raise my eyebrows and bump my shoulder against hers. "You see? That's the smooth talking I'm talking about. I think you're secretly a sly fox, Naomi."

She lets out a full-on donkey snort and then clamps her hand over her mouth. It's maybe the cutest thing I've ever heard, and I'm about to tell her that when a scuffle of movement up ahead interrupts me.

A group of about twenty kids and adult chaperones from what I assume is a summer camp have all stepped out of line. The kids moan complaints about having to take a lunch break as the adults march them past us. The rest of the line rushes to fill the empty space, and Naomi and I get bumped all the way up to the base of the staircase leading to the top of the slide.

It's one of the slides you ride an inflatable raft down, and a guy in a staff t-shirt who

looks about our age is handing them out from a pile at the bottom of the steps.

“You ladies want a two-seater?” he asks.

I glance at Naomi for confirmation and then nod. The guy hauls down a black raft with two hollows for seats and two sets of plastics handles lining the sides.

“Have fun!” he says once I’ve grabbed one of the handles and shifted the raft up onto the stairs.

I watch Naomi as she cranes her neck to stare up at the top of the slide. The ride is a long, black and orange tube with more loops and bends than I can count. It’s not the steepest slide in the park, but the sign at the foot of the staircase says it’s officially the longest.

“You ready for the ride of your life?” I joke as a flare of adrenaline shoots through me when a particularly loud scream echoes from high above our heads.

Naomi shivers. “Let’s hope so.”

It takes another fifteen minutes for us to get all the way to the top of the stairs. There’s another staff guy getting people prepared at the entrance to the slide. He guides the pair of kids in front of us into their two-seater raft and grips the backrest to hold the raft in place as he watches the pool of water way down at the very bottom of the slide. Once the previous raft comes shooting out, he tells the kids it’s time to go and shoves their raft through the mouth of the tube.

They shriek so loud I wince. I turn to see Naomi’s eyes tracing the twists and turns of the slide as she grimaces.

“Come on,” I say. “We’ve got this.”

Excitement is shooting through my veins and making me jitter and bounce on the balls of my feet. I haul our raft over to lay it down in the flat section at the start of the ride. The staff guy holds it in place while I ask Naomi if she wants the front or the back.

“Definitely the back,” she answers, her steps a little wobbly as she comes over to join me.

We get ourselves settled in the seat hollows, and my heart pounds even harder when I realize how close we are. Her legs are basically slung over my shoulders. If I sat up a little straighter, she could probably wrap them around my chest.

I look behind me and see she’s gone from looking grim to queasy. Her face is pale, and she’s gripping the handles so hard her knuckles are turning bright white.

I release one of my handles to squeeze her leg.



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“Don’t worry. I’ve got y—”

I don’t have time to finish my sentence before the guy is shouting instructions to keep our hands and feet inside the raft at all times. I barely have a chance to grip the handle before he yells it’s time to go and shoves us into the dark tube.

My scream turns into an exhilarated laugh as we fly through the first few turns, the raft sloshing up the sides of the tube and jerking us around so hard my stomach drops. The orange sections of the slide let some daylight through, but the black ones turn everything so dark I can’t even see my toes stretched out in front of me.

The slide coils through a series of tight loops that have Naomi screaming about us flipping and dying while I just shriek with more laughter.

Before today, I hadn’t been down a water slide since I was in the sixth grade, and now I already want to come back every weekend. I forgot how something as simple as careening down a giant slide at top speed can make your whole body burn with the incendiary joy of just how damn good it feels to be alive.

The track evens out for a bit, forcing our raft to slow down a fraction. I hear Naomi sucking in deep breaths over the sound of the rushing water.

“You good?” I shout, turning my head so the words don’t get lost in the tunnel.

“THIS IS CRAZY!” she screams back.

I laugh again. We’re about to hit another bend and head into a pitch-black section of

the slide, but thinking about the last time I was at a water park—specifically, on a school field trip with a bunch of other daredevil twelve year-olds—gives me an idea.

“Watch this!” I yell before I lift my feet up in a wide straddle and brace them against the sides of the slide.

The water shooting past us tries to keep tugging the raft forward, but I press the soles of my feet harder against the slippery sides of the slide until I finally force the raft to a complete stop.

“Andrea! What the hell are you doing?” Naomi shrieks from behind me.

“What?” I demand. “You never tried this as a kid?”

I crane my neck around to face her with my feet still up in the air and see she’s leaned forward in her seat, her face just inches from mine. Her eyes are bugging out of her head, and she’s still got a death grip on the handles.

“Of course not! We’re supposed to keep our hands and feet inside! They’re going to freak out when we don’t come out of the slide soon!”

I want to tease her about following the rules, but she’s so close I forget everything I was about to say. Her damp hair has been whipped into a tangled mess, and her face is still pale with terror, but none of that makes her any less pretty.

She’s just so damn pretty.

The thrill-seeking chemicals flooding my brain can’t think about anything else, not with her mouth so close to mine. It doesn’t matter that I’m twisting my neck around at what I’m sure is a very unattractive angle. It doesn’t even matter that I’m fully spread-eagled to hold us in place in the slide.

I want to kiss her.

I've wanted to kiss her for weeks, and sure, the middle of a giant water slide is not exactly a prime location, but my heart is pounding so loud I can't hear the roar of the water anymore, and every beat makes me more sure of one thing than I've ever been of anything else in my life: I can't go another second without knowing what it feels like to have her lips pressed to mine.

I watch as the terror starts to leave her eyes. Her pupils darken, her bottom lip dropping open as her gaze flicks to my mouth and then back up to meet my stare.

"Naomi," I say, the blood rushing in my ears so loud now I can barely hear my own voice. "I want you to kiss me."

If I shift back any further, I'm going to lose my grip on the sides of the slide.

She's the one who will have to make the first move here.

She jerks back with surprise, but after blinking at me a couple times, a look of determination so cute it would make me laugh if it weren't also somehow incredibly sexy takes over her face.

She leans back in towards me, hunching forward until her mouth is hovering just a breath away from mine.

I can feel the warmth of her lips already. My eyes drift shut on instinct. I squeeze the raft handles so hard my fingers ache.

She still doesn't close the gap between us. I'm about to squint at her through my lashes to see if everything is okay when she takes a sharp breath and then presses her mouth to mine.

The whole water slide disappears. Everything fades out of existence like we've shot into one of pitch-black sections of the tube.

There's nothing but the pillowy softness of her lips as they brush mine. I don't think I've ever kissed a mouth even half as soft as hers. Somewhere deep in my chest, a rich, resonant note rings out, like Naomi is a tuning fork and I'm singing her own sound back to her in perfect harmony.

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Only it's not just her sound. It's mine too. It bubbles up from some boxed up part of me I buried long before I met her.

I'm kissing a girl. I'm kissing a girl who knows this moment is more than a joke or some booze-fuelled misadventure we'll laugh off and try to forget.

I'm kissing a girl who isn't afraid to show me she wants to kiss me back.

She wants me.

This girl is one of the kindest, smartest, most amazing people I've ever met, and she wants to be kissing me.

My whole body goes weak at the thought.

Which, of course, makes my feet slip.

We both yelp and pull away from each other as the raft inches forward. I dig my heels in as hard as I can, but the water has regained too much of a hold on us now.

"Hold on!" I yell just before I drop my legs.

We scream as we shoot forwards and get plunged into complete darkness, but we're laughing hysterically within a few seconds.

Even when we're whipping along so fast the air gets sucked out of my lungs and my face gets dashed with water splashing up from the sides of the raft, I can still feel the

ghost of Naomi's lips on mine. I have to fight not to let go of the handle and risk dumping myself out of the tube just to brush my fingertips over my mouth.

My body is still vibrating with that pitch-perfect note. I don't know what it means. I don't know what's happening here, and I sure as hell don't know how to stop it, but for now, I just do what I told Naomi to do.

I hold on.

## CHAPTER 16

Naomi

I'm going on a date.

A real, live date.

With a real, live girl.

A girl with whom I have already shared a real, live kiss.

With all the literary descriptions of kisses I've read, I should be able to come up with a better description of what happened in the water slide yesterday than 'real' and 'live', but I'm learning that when it comes to Andrea King, words often fail me.

I stand in front of the full-length mirror propped in a corner of my guest bedroom and triple-check my outfit for tonight: a pale blue sundress with spaghetti straps and a swishy skirt that flares out from my waist, paired with a pair of brown sandals. The only other time I've worn this dress was to high school graduation. It's not exactly formal, but it's fancy enough that I don't know why I brought it with me to the mansion.

It's not like I expected to be going on the first date of my life when I showed up at this house.

I consider swapping my sandals for some shiny black ballet flats, the only somewhat fancy pair of shoes I have here, but I still don't even know if this is a fancy date. Andrea came down while I was feeding the cats this morning and said she was taking me out tonight but refused to give any details on the location.

I didn't really mind the secrecy when it was paired with the thrill that zinged through me when she said the words, 'I'm taking you out.'

Bijoux hops down off my bed where he's been cuddled up with Aurora Rose and struts over to twine himself around my legs while he mews for scratches. I bend over to rub behind his ears and ask if he thinks Andrea will like my dress.

He just head-butts my hand and meows even louder.

"Yeah, I don't know why I expected you to have an opinion on that," I tell him. "Your taste probably aligns more with Sandy's than with Andrea's."

Thinking about Sandy gets me thinking about how I'm officially having a summer fling with my dad's boss's daughter—if you can even call a summer fling official. Whatever I'm doing with Andrea has made me realize dating has even more unspoken social nuances to it than I realized.

I straighten up despite the protests from Bijoux and smooth the dress down before tucking my hair behind my ears. I drop my arms to my sides and stare at my reflection for a few long moments.

I'm not sure who the girl staring back at me is.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:45 pm*

This whole summer has felt like one long, twisty ride down the world's craziest water slide. It's knocked me down and flipped me around more times than I can count. I haven't even reached the bottom yet, and I already know I'm too shaken up to be the same person I was at the top.

The version of me who walked into this house would not have swum naked in the pool, but I did it. I got a piercing. I got way too high smoking a joint. I jumped into a van with my friends and went on a road trip that resulted in what I'd consider the first real kiss of my life—and most definitely the best one.

Maybe those things don't mean much on their own, but somewhere along the way, they started stacking up like bricks for me to stand on and tower over all the jeering doubts in my mind that tell me I'll never be brave or cool or normal.

Tonight, I'm doing something even better than normal.

I'm doing something spectacular.

I'm going out with Andrea King, and I'm not letting any of my doubts stop me.

“Naomi! Our chariot awaits!”

I jump to attention like Andrea has burst into the room instead of just knocking on my door.

“Chariot?” I say as my heart leaps into my throat.



I do a few manic laps around the room to search for my purse before I realize it's already slung over my shoulder. I smooth my dress down for probably the tenth time tonight before I step over to open the door.

"I ordered us a ride since I figured the OC Transpo would kind of cramp our style tonight," Andrea is saying on the other side. "Not that this dude's Toyota Corolla is going to be much of a chariot, but—"

She cuts herself off with a gasp when I fling the door open.

Then she swears.

Loudly.

Several times.

The bottom of my stomach drops as I glance down at my dress, certain I must have missed some sort of hideous stain on the front.

Or maybe it's my makeup. I thought I cleaned up all the rogue mascara from my first failed attempt, but maybe I have horrifying raccoon eyes I somehow didn't notice in the mirror.

"What is it?" I demand. "Should I change? I—"

"Naomi."

She clamps her hands down on my shoulders and squeezes hard until I stop babbling and look at her.

Instead of disgust, her eyes are filled with a blazing heat that makes my knees shake.

“You. Look. Incredible,” she hisses, punctuating each word with a shoulder squeeze. “This dress is...wow. Wow. You’re just...stunning. I am literally stunned.”

My neck and cheeks start to do their usual embarrassing blushing routine, and the only answer I can come up with is, “Oh.”

She grins and shakes her head. “God, you’re cute.”

She huffs a laugh that almost sounds nervous and drops her gaze from mine.

“You look stunning too,” I tell her.

She’s wearing a black, silky romper with a keyhole cutout in the front that reveals a hint of cleavage I can’t look at without my mouth going dry. There are more cutouts showing off a couple glimpses of the smooth skin of her sides.

She’s got some low, strappy black heels on, and her eye makeup is darker than I’ve ever seen it before. Combined with some burgundy lipstick and a twisty up-do that somehow comes off sophisticated and effortless at the same time, she looks downright dangerous tonight.

“Are you trying to give me a heart attack?” I blurt before cringing at how very not smooth that was.

She smiles again and then does a little twirl.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:45 pm*

“I’d like to keep you alive long enough to get you downtown. Speaking of, we really do have to go before this car drives off without us.”

We rush downstairs and out of the house to where the driver is waiting just outside the gate. We pile into the backseat of the car, and I squint at the driver’s phone screen for any hint of where we’re going, but I don’t recognize the address listed as our destination.

“Are you sure I’m dressed up enough?” I murmur to Andrea.

She nods. “More than enough. It’s really not that fancy, or at least not as far as I can tell.”

“You’ve never been there before?”

She shakes her head. “I was looking for places to take you tonight and saw they had an...interesting menu item we really cannot miss out on.”

I give her a curious look, but she just smirks at me and then pretends to be engrossed in staring out the window.

I do the same and watch as the sprawling properties of Mansionland morph into the packed streets of downtown. We drive all the way to the heart of the ByWard Market. The sun has only just started streaking the sky with orange and pink, but the streets are already filled with tourists and locals heading out for dinner and drinks.

“This good?” the driver asks as he pulls up to an empty strip of curb.

Andrea scans the collection of restaurants and bars lining the street before nodding. “Yeah, thanks. It’s right up there.”

She slides out on the side closest to the road, and I pause in the middle of climbing out of my seat when she reappears to hold my door open and offer me one of her arms.

“I feel bad,” I say as she helps me to my feet on the sidewalk and then swings the door shut so the driver can take off. “You’re the one wearing heels, so shouldn’t I be the one helping you out of the car?”

She shrugs. “I have no idea. You probably understand sapphic dating etiquette more than me. This is, uh...well, this is my first date with a girl.”

She slides her arm out from under mine and presses her lips together while she shifts her weight from foot to foot like she’s nervous.

Like I make her nervous.

The idea of me making someone like her nervous is so wild I almost laugh, but instead I reach to grab hold of her arm again and tuck it back in place.

“Well, this is my first date ever,” I tell her, “so I think we’re just going to have to fumble our way through it together.”

“So it would appear.” She drops her voice low, and I’m suddenly very aware of every single place where her skin is touching mine. “Somehow, I think we’ll manage.”

I can’t stop myself from glancing at her lips, those lips that felt like flower petals and velvet ribbons and silky-soft feathers when they moved against mine in the water slide.

She leads us down the sidewalk, and as we weave around groups of people wearing everything from formalwear to 'I love Canada' t-shirts and hats shaped like maple leaves, my head spins with a combination of hope and anticipation that's more intoxicating than any of the liquors Shal has ever persuaded me to take a sip of.

I'm walking around with my arm linked through Andrea's for the whole city to see, and not even a dozen shots of gross tequila could make me feel braver than I do in this moment.

"You sure didn't waste time getting this date set up," I tease.

She brings us to a halt in front of a restaurant door and swings me around so I'm facing her, her eyes sparking with that same heat from back in the house.

"I sure didn't," she answers, her tone matching mine as she arches an eyebrow. "This might be a summer fling, but I wanted to at least take you out for a meal before I kissed you again, and do you really think I could have made it longer than tonight without doing that?"

She leans in so close my eyes start to flutter closed as the rest of me braces for her to kiss me again, but all she does is hover over my lips before pulling back and grabbing the door's handle.

"Dinner first," she says with another smirk.

I'm seconds away from passing out in the middle of the sidewalk, but she tugs on my arm to guide me in after her. I didn't get a look at the restaurant's name outside, but the interior has me turning to ask her if she's sure this is the right place.

The restaurant looks like an old European spinster's cottage. The walls are bare stone with eerie black and white family portraits hung alongside some shelves housing a

collection of creepy dolls in what I think is traditional Bavarian clothing. Old-timey brass band music plays softly overhead, and the few occupied tables are filled with a middle-aged couple drinking from huge beer steins and a family with a toddler munching on a giant pretzel.

“So...Google said it was a German restaurant,” Andrea says as I took a second look at the dolls. “It actually has great reviews! Plus, I really only picked it for this one appetizer they have, so we can just get that and then go somewhere else if you want.”

Despite the concerning decor, I’m still flying high enough on the thrill of walking down the street with her that I work up the nerve to bump her shoulder with mine and joke, “Wow, Andrea, you sure know how to treat a girl.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:45 pm*

She bumps me back and is about to say something when a grey-haired woman in black pants and a black t-shirt with an apron tied around her waist comes over and asks if we'd like a table for two. I was expecting all the servers to be in full-on dirndls, but the menus she places in front of us after getting us a seat make up for the lack of German attire. The laminated pages have illustrations of little cartoon mice in lederhosen adorning the corners.

"They really went all out, didn't they?" I ask once our waitress has headed off to another table. I tap on one of the mice as I hold the menu up for Andrea to see.

"Okay, so maybe Google also described it as a 'quirky, no frills hole in the wall,' but did you see the appetizers?"

She taps on her own menu, and I place mine back on the table to scan through the options. I get halfway through the appetizers section before I burst out laughing at the same time my heart swells to twice its size in my chest.

"Oh my god, no way," I choke out. "A pickle platter?"

"Featuring a dozen different flavors of the finest quality gherkins!" Andrea singsongs as she reads off the menu before looking up to beam at me. "Pretty impressive, right?"

"Wow, yeah. I didn't even know pickles came in a dozen different flavors."

She taps her chin. "Yeah, we'll see about that. That's a pretty bold claim. You're the expert, so you'll have to let me know what your official assessment is once we're

done.”

I chuckle before dropping my gaze back down to the menu. It’s definitely not very cool of me, but the corners of my eyes prick with heat as the impact of her doing this for me sinks in.

Sure, it’s not some huge romantic gesture. It’s just a silly little joke about my weird affinity for pickles, but she saw that weird piece of me and ran with it. She saw me and decided I was worth getting to know.

“Hey, um...” I say as I reach up to tuck my hair back behind my ears. “Thanks. This was...this was really nice of you, thinking of me like this. I know it’s just, um, pickles, but you remembered that about me, and that’s...really nice.”

My face heats up, but I still force myself to look up from the menu. Andrea’s eyes have gone all soft as she stares at me. Her mouth curves into a slight smile as she slides her foot over to nudge mine under the table.

“I don’t think there’s much about you I could forget, Naomi.”

My breath catches, and before I realize what’s happening, we’re both leaning over the table. Her makeup looks even more smokey and seductive in the dim light of the restaurant, and all I want is to watch her burgundy painted lips say my name again before she kisses me.

“Are we ready to order, dears?”

We spring apart as our waitress walks back up to our table. My back slams into my chair so hard it’s a miracle I don’t tip over.

“Um, yes, I think so,” Andrea says, her voice a little higher-pitched than usual.



“Any appetizers?” the waitress asks.

Andrea clears her throat. “Yes, we will have the, um, the pickle platter, please.”

I can’t help it. The phrase ‘pickle platter’ is just too good. I try to hold back the laugh building inside me, but it bursts out as a snort.

Of course, that makes Andrea start laughing too, which makes the waitress look at us like we’re crazy, but for once, I don’t care about anyone in the room thinking I’m weird.

I’m soaring above all my worries now, waving down at them like I’m watching the tiny specks of a bustling city from the window of a plane way, way up in the air.

I don’t want to land in that city tonight, with its blaring sirens and choking fumes.

Tonight, I just want to fly through an orange-streaked sky with Andrea King.

We end up getting a full meal at the German restaurant, after I’ve decided there were about five distinct pickle flavors on the platter and the rest just seemed to be a variety of cuts and shapes.

We decide to wander through the ByWard Market to grab something for dessert. The sky has shifted to an inky purple now, and most of the stalls selling crafts and maple-flavored treats in the main market square have been packed up for the night. People swarm the sidewalks and pile into the pubs and bars lining the streets to fight for good patio spots where they can enjoy the summer night.

Andrea grabbed my hand as soon as we left the restaurant, and the warmth of her palm against mine feels like it’s shooting straight to my brain to turn all my thoughts hazy and slow. My feet glide over the pavement. Even if all we did was stroll around

the city like this for the next couple hours, I'd still call this one of the best nights of my life.

“Do you want to get ice cream?”

Andrea lifts her free hand to point at a stall painted in bright pinks and blues, where a small line of people peruse the list of ice cream flavors written on a sign above the counter.

“That sounds perfect,” I say, which is probably what I would have said to anything she suggested, but I can't deny there's a particular perfection to eating an ice cream cone on a hot summer night.

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The line moves quickly, and it's only a few minutes before we've found a bench in the square to sit down on while we do our best to get through the ice cream before it drips onto our hands.

We both got double scoop cones. I went with coconut, and Andrea got chocolate raspberry. I'm concentrating so hard on not staring at her mouth while she licks the ice cream streaked with pink swirls that I don't realize she's asked me something until she gives me a light jab with her elbow.

"Well?" she says.

I make the mistake of looking at her in the middle of dragging my tongue up the side of my ice cream and then freezing mid-lick when our eyes lock.

She raises an eyebrow.

I blink.

Then the whole top scoop of my ice cream slides to the pavement with a plop.

"Oh no!" Andrea shrieks before she starts cackling. "Your poor ice cream."

I clutch what's left of my dessert in one hand and use the stack of napkins the girl behind the counter gave us to wipe an ice cream splatter off my shin—and to use the excuse of bending over to hide my flaming cheeks from Andrea.

"I asked if this was living up to your first date expectations," she says, "but now that

I've made you drop your ice cream, I'm scared to hear your answer."

I straighten up and use another napkin to wipe a bit of melted ice cream off my hand.

"Even after losing half my ice cream, it's definitely exceeding expectations," I tell her. "It's...perfect."

I wince as I wonder if that was too much, but I don't take it back, either. For once, I don't give in to the urge second-guess myself. I push up even higher above the doubts telling me I'm reading things wrong.

Even if it's only for one night, I want to believe I can just be myself with her. I want to trust that's enough.

She slides closer until the side of her leg is pressed to mine, and my body hums like a generator coming to life.

"Good," she says. "I don't think I could forgive myself if I messed up your first first date."

I dab at my hand with the napkin again as another trickle of ice cream drips down the side of the cone.

"Well, there's not much pressure on you since I have nothing to compare it to," I tell her. "I'm the one who should be worried. You're probably a first date pro compared to me."

Her shoulder nudges mine as she shrugs. "Actually, I didn't go on any real dates in high school either."

I jerk upright on the bench and turn to gawk at her. "You're joking."

She lets out a nervous laugh. “I’m not. I messed around with guys at parties and stuff, but I never actually dated. My ex was my first and only boyfriend. I always told everyone I thought all the high school guys were too boring to date, but...”

She shrugs again and focuses back on her ice cream cone. We sit there eating in silence for a few moments. I can tell she wants to say more, but I don’t push her. I’ve almost gotten to the bottom of my cone when she speaks again.

“I think maybe I was worried I wasn’t good enough for them.” Her voice is low enough that I have to lean my head closer to hear over the din of passing cars and shouting pedestrians. “I didn’t go to private school or anything, but my high school had this whole reputation for academic excellence or whatever. Everybody had a ten year life plan figured out by the start of ninth grade. I thought I did too. but as I got older, everything my mom and I had planned for my life started to feel so...heavy, like I wasn’t good enough to hold it anymore.”

For a moment, it’s like I can see past all the sultry makeup and purple hair dye to stare straight at a younger version of her, a smaller version of her—a version of her who felt like she was being shoved into a box she’d never fit.

“I know what it’s like to feel like you’re not good enough,” I say. “I know what it’s like to think you just keep getting things wrong.”

My free hand twitches with the urge to touch her, and I don’t give myself a chance to hesitate. I reach over to lay my palm on the top of her thigh. After a second, she places her hand flat on top of mine.

“Thanks,” she murmurs.

We stay quiet for so long the final few bites of my ice cream melt into a sugary soup, but I don’t care. The last purple traces of twilight are fading from the sky when I

decide to speak again.

“Your ex...” I say, trailing off as I try to figure out how to word the question. “Were things different with him?”

She barks a laugh. “You could say that. I thought I...I mean, I guess at some point I thought I loved him, but I think really I just wanted a break from it all. He didn’t want much from me. He didn’t need the ten year plan or the achievements.”

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She stares into space before she shakes her head and continues.

“I think maybe I swung too far the other way, because in the end, I was the one who got frustrated and bored. That’s what makes it so confusing. Like, there has to be something in the middle of all that, right? Something like...well, honestly, something like you and your friends have.”

I gawk at her. “Huh?”

She chuckles. “Yeah, you heard me. You, Shal, and Priya are the first people I’ve met who have all these goals and things you’re serious about, but you’re also fun and awesome and weird in the best way possible. You’re pretty amazing, you know that?”

She sounds so serious it makes me squirm on the bench.

“Oh. Thanks. Yeah, I mean, Shal and Priya are great. I...”

I trail off when she leans her head in closer to mine, all the words whooshing out of my head.

“They are,” she says, her eyes boring into mine, “but I specifically meant that you, Naomi, are amazing, and maybe this is a lot to say, but I’m really glad I met you.”

I can count every one of her freckles now. She presses my hand even harder against her thigh, and this time neither of us even blinks when what’s left of my ice cream cone slips out of my hand to splatter on the ground.

In fact, Andrea drops her cone too, or at least I think she must, because one second she's staring at me, and the next she's cupping my face with both her hands as her mouth hovers over mine.

"Can I kiss you?" she whispers.

All I can do is nod, and then my whole world explodes with the sweet taste of raspberries, chocolate, and her.

She tilts my head back, kissing me way harder than she did in the water slide, and my hand slides up from her leg to her waist. My fingers curl around the silky fabric of her romper. When my pinkie brushes a strip of her bare skin revealed by the side cutouts, she makes a soft sound in the back of her throat that reverberates through my whole body.

She pulls her head back to break the kiss but her hands stay cupping my jaw. We're both panting. My heart is slamming against my ribs, and my skin feels like it's on fire.

"Wow," I breathe, not caring how dorky I sound.

"Wow," she echoes.

I'm about to ask her to do it again when the strum of a guitar makes us both turn to look over at the center of the square, where a busker must have set himself up sometimes in the past few minutes.

He's only a few meters away from us, which should probably have me feeling embarrassed about him potentially seeing us kiss, but I'm too exhilarated to do anything but squeeze Andrea's hand and grin at the gathering crowd.



The busker looks like he's in his thirties. He's wearing jeans and a t-shirt with the name of a band I don't recognize printed on the front. He spends a couple minutes tuning the guitar. A handful of people have gathered to wait for the show to start, and he gives them a wave once he's ready.

"Hey there, folks. We're gonna start things off with an oldie but a goodie. Anyone heard of Neutral Milk Hotel?"

There's some shrugging and mumbling from the group in front of him. I glance at Andrea to see if she knows the band, but she shrugs too.

"Tough crowd, tough crowd," the busker says with a laugh. "Well, allow me to introduce you. This is their song, 'In the Aeroplane Over the Sea.'"

He strums the guitar, and Andrea's grip on my hand tightens. After a few bars, he begins singing. He's got a clear and earnest voice, the kind that makes you believe every word he says is pouring straight out of his heart even if someone else wrote the song.

Combined with the chords of the guitar, the lyrics paint a picture of hope mixed with melancholy, kind of like those last few moments before the sunset slips out of view, or the final days before summer shifts into fall.

I shiver against Andrea like a gust of September wind just blew through the square even though we're not even halfway through August.

She lets go of my hand, and I see her eyes light up with the spark of an idea before she jumps off the bench and tells me to stay where I am. I watch as she scoops up the remains of our ice cream cones and then jogs over to dump them in the nearest garbage bin. When she gets back, she stands in front of me and pulls her phone out of her purse before grabbing my arm and hauling me up to my feet.

“Are we taking a selfie?” I ask as she bends over to set the phone on the bench with the camera facing us.

She straightens up and shakes her head. “No, we’re knocking another item off the bucket list.”

She holds one of her hands out towards me.

“Naomi Waters,” she says, already swaying to the rhythm of the song, “I challenge you to dance with me.”

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A few strands of purple hair slip out of her elegant up-do to fall in reckless curls around her face. She lifts an eyebrow while she waits for me. Her grin starts to falter as she mistakes my pause for hesitation.

I'm not hesitating.

I'm just soaking up the sight of this perfect girl on this perfect night, ready to sweep me up into yet another perfect moment.

At the start of this summer, I would have turned away. I would have sat this one out. I would have laughed and told her she's crazy for thinking I'd ever dance in front of a whole crowd of people in one of the busiest spots in Ottawa. I might have even admitted I have no idea how to dance.

Instead, I step forward and take her hand in mine.

## CHAPTER 17

Andrea

Sandy's cats come flying at us the second we step in the door, nearly sending one of the sculptures in the entryway toppling off its stand. Naomi stoops down to oblige them with scratches while I pull my heels off.

"These things are killer," I say in a hushed voice as I wriggle my cramped toes against the cool stone of the entryway floor.

“I don’t know how you managed to dance in those,” Naomi says, keeping her voice quiet too.

We’re the only ones here, but something about coming home at night all dressed up to a mostly dark house still has that illicit, sneaking-home-after-a-party feel to it. Once Naomi gets her sandals off, we pad through the house on our tiptoes like we’re scared to make the floor creak.

“So…” I say, daring to be a bit louder once I’ve led us into the living room—or at least, one of the several living rooms—and flopped down on the couch. “What do you want to do now?”

It’s just past ten. We ended up dancing in the market for three whole songs before I persuaded Naomi to let me buy her a replacement ice cream cone for the one she dropped when I kissed her.

The whole crowd smiled and clapped for us when we stopped twirling around. In fact, one guy smiled a little too much and then stepped over to tell me I have a very pretty girlfriend as we were heading back to the ice cream stand.

Girlfriend.

The word is still bouncing around in my head, despite the fact that it was some random creepy dude who said it.

Girlfriend.

I played it on repeat the whole ride home, like that single word made up an entire song I could strum on my guitar, only I’m not sure I know the right chords.

I can play the Summer Fling song. I even managed the Boyfriend of Convenience

tune for a while, but Naomi—

Naomi deserves a whole symphony, and I don't know if I could give her that.

“Well...” she says as she sits down next to me. “We could...kiss again?”

She looks down at where the hem of that gorgeous blue dress is brushing her knees. I watch her curl her fingers around the edge of the fabric, and I decide all my thoughts can wait.

I shift closer to her. “I'd say that sounds like a pretty solid option.”

She huffs a laugh, still toying with the edge of her dress. “Okay, but first I have to tell you something.”

There's a nervousness in her voice that tells me to lay off on the flirting for a moment. Instead, I shift so I'm facing her with my legs crossed in front of me.

“Of course. I'm all ears.”

She turns to mirror my pose so we're face to face. “I don't think I'm ready to have sex.”

I blink.

Whatever I was expecting her to say, it wasn't that.

Before I can come up with a response, she squeezes her eyes shut and starts speaking so fast I can barely keep up.

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“I know not being ready for sex at eighteen is kind of weird, and I mean, who knows? Maybe I’ll feel different soon, but the truth is...well, the truth is that before yesterday, I hadn’t even kissed anybody since the sixth grade, and that only happened because of a game of truth or dare. I don’t know how this whole summer fling thing works, or what you want, or what you expect. I’m not very good at knowing what people expect in general, and I just...I wanted to tell you I’m not ready yet. Just so you know.”

She takes a big gulp of air and then sits perfectly still with her eyes still scrunched shut.

The last thing I want to do is laugh, but she just looks so freaking cute I have to let a couple seconds tick by in silence while I fight the chuckle trying to climb up my throat.

“Naomi,” I say once I’ve got myself under control, “thank you for telling me. That means a lot. I really don’t have any expectations at all when it comes to sex. I guess you don’t know this, but I’ve never had sex with a girl. I’m not sure if I’m ready for that either.”

She opens one eye just enough to peek at me. “You...oh.”

Now I do let myself laugh. “Yeah. Oh.”

She opens both her eyes and tucks her hair behind her ears.

“And just so you know,” I tell her, “I don’t think there’s any official rule about

needing to have sex with someone for them to be your summer fling, so we're still meeting the bucket list requirements."

An expression I can't read flits across her face for a second before it disappears.

"Right," she says. "The list."

The list.

The whole reason we're doing this. The whole reason I even bothered to stay more than a few days at this house.

At least, that's what I've been telling myself.

"Come here."

I crook my finger to beckon her closer. I need the distraction. I need the excuse to shut my thoughts off and forget everything except how good it feels to wrap my arms around her and press my lips to hers.

I've watched the video of me and Naomi dancing in the ByWard Market so many times over the past week I've probably sat through the equivalent of an entire movie's worth of footage. That doesn't stop me from pressing play again as I sit out on the deck with my guitar resting by my side while I give my fingers a break.

On the screen, I watch as Naomi places her hand in mine. I pull her to me fast enough to make the skirt of her dress flare before we spend a couple awkward seconds figuring out what to do with our arms.

A bird nestled in the bushes across the backyard tweets loud enough to make me lift my head and realize I've been smiling at my phone like an idiot. A couple more birds

start trilling high-pitched notes to signal the start of the sunset.

The mosquitoes will be descending any second now, but I can probably get a little more practice in before I'm forced back inside.

Naomi is at her parents' place for dinner, and I've been out on the deck since she left a couple hours ago. Something about being alone in the giant house was making my skin crawl. I hadn't realized how much I'd stopped noticing all the photos of Sandy's sons on the walls.

With Naomi and her friends filling the rooms and hallways, I felt like I could get swept up in the house sitting fantasy too. Using some huge estate as a summer playground with nobody to keep tabs on us and nothing but some hairless cats to worry about has some serious escapist appeal.

Only it's not a random rich couple's house. It's my father's house, and everything in it is a reminder of the life he's built without me and my mom. Everything is a reminder of the code I just can't crack, the one that keeps him behind glass and out of reach, always distant, always leaving me with a 'just ask your mother instead' no matter how hard I try to get a different answer.

The thought of my mom has me swiping through my phone to get to our text conversation before I can stop myself. As usual, she's been trying to get me to phone her for days, but I don't know what new information she could so desperately need to give me after the last time I worked up the nerve to call her back.

That was just before we went on the road trip to the water park. I got the usual speech about how 'baffled' and 'exasperated' she is by my life choices, as well as a reminder that my 'real life' is waiting for me in Toronto.

I know the texts will just keep coming if I don't do something, so I groan loud



enough to make the birds go silent and then lift the phone to my ear. She picks up midway through the second ring.

“Andrea, it’s been days,” she says, skipping right past the part where a normal person would say hello. “I cannot keep chasing after you like this. You are going to be part of a professional team soon. People are going to depend on you, and you need to learn how to handle that. It might be my company, but not everyone there will be as forgiving as me.”

If I’d been in the middle of drinking something, that comment would have had me doing a full-on spit take.

“Forgiving. Right.”

“You can drop the sarcasm right now,” she shoots back. “Now, onto the reason I’ve been trying to get you on the phone all week. I want to make sure this gets through to you loud and clear. I have a meeting in Ottawa next Friday, and I’ll be picking you up from your father’s house that Saturday so we can fly back to Toronto together. I’ve already bought you a ticket.”

My spine stiffens like someone has crept up behind me and poured a bucket of ice water down the back of my shirt.

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“But the internship doesn’t start for another two weeks. Why do I need to—”

She cuts me off with a sigh. “Andrea, it’s time to stop playing games. We agreed on a gap year, and that year is up. You need to come home and get prepared to start this position, if it’s still something you want.”

Most people would miss it, but I hear the slight falter in her voice before she tacks that last part on. There’s an echoing tremor somewhere deep in my chest as I listen to her breathing fill the silence.

If I give up on this internship, I’ll be giving up on her. I’ll be giving up on everything she’s built for us, just like my dad did when he refused to fight for our family.

“Mom...”

My voice cracks, and I have to stop and clear my throat. The birds are singing again, and as I listen to the music filling the air, I consider telling her everything: how this city makes me feel like I can breathe after years of suffocating in Toronto, how sick to my stomach I feel when I imagine walking through the doors at the company headquarters, how I still have no idea what I want my life to look like but can’t shake the feeling that it involves Naomi Waters twirling around in a blue summer dress.

I grip the phone extra tight as the lump in my throat threatens to choke me.

I can’t tell her any of that, even though the words are swarming inside me like a flock of birds desperate to escape my body and sing their song for the sun. I can’t tell her because I know it wouldn’t be good enough. I wouldn’t be good enough.

I don't have some wildly ambitious dream or shiny business plan to present her with. I don't have the goals and checklists she already had on lock at my age. I just have this split-second flash in the corner of my vision every once in a while, like a frantic wave from the universe as it begs me to turn my head and look at the mysterious something it's holding out to me.

Even I know how crazy that sounds. She doesn't need to tell me that's not a good enough reason to turn down the career she's offering on a silver platter.

"Look, Andrea, I know it's scary."

The sudden tenderness in her voice almost makes me drop my phone.

"You're probably feeling exactly how I felt when I opened my first studio. I was so afraid I almost wanted to shut the whole thing down before the first class."

Something cracks deep in my chest as I mumble, "You were scared?"

"Terrified," she answers, "but deep down, I knew what I wanted, and no amount of fear could take that away. I know you're scared now, but ever since you were a little girl, you've been telling me taking this business on someday has been your dream too. You have no idea how proud that makes me, and I know if you just come back home to Toronto, you're going to remember who you are and what you want."

My knees knock together where I've pulled them up to my chest, and I realize I'm trembling.

She's never told me she was scared. Some naïve part of me really believed she'd never been scared in her entire life.

I shut my eyes and picture it again, the same scene I've been playing in my head like

a movie for years: me in a pantsuit just like the ones she wears, the two of us walking side by side up the steps to Valerie Madden Studios HQ while clutching matching water bottles.

I wait for that moment she described to hit me, the one where the fear melts away and the sense of being exactly where you're supposed to be takes over.

I'm still waiting when she says, "Just be ready for the flight, okay?"

The vulnerability in her voice is gone, and she's back to sounding like the no-nonsense business woman who raised me. She says goodbye and hangs up a moment later, but I'm still waiting for that moment when everything will make sense.

I stay out on the deck for so long the birds stop singing and my arms and legs get puckered with mosquito bites, but I just sit there waiting.

And waiting.

And waiting.

Just when I'm about to give up, the kitchen door slides open, and Naomi steps out onto the deck.

## CHAPTER 18

Naomi

I head straight for the sliding door as soon as I spot Andrea out on the deck, but instead of pulling on the handle, I pause for a few seconds to watch her. She's got her back to me, thick layers of purple-tinged hair spilling down the back of her loose white tank top and nearly brushing the waist of her denim shorts. Her guitar is sitting

on the deck beside her, the glossy wood reflecting the last streaks of pink left in the twilight sky.

She's sitting still enough to deserve her own pedestal among the other sculptures dotting the lawn. As the seconds tick by and all she does is keep staring across the yard, I realize how much smaller she looks when she's not moving.

She's pretty much always moving. She swept me up like a tidal wave the moment I met her, and she's been crashing through my life ever since. She's as breathtaking as a stormy sea doing battle with the shore, but that's not what has me falling for her.

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That's not what made me turn to my mom on the car ride back here tonight and blurt the age-old words: so, there's this girl...

I've started falling for her in the moments like this, when her silence gets so much louder than her sound, when the truth of her bubbles up to break her swirling surface and whisper in my ear to tell me somehow, somehow, there is a part of me and this girl that are the same.

I pull the door open and step out onto the deck.

"Hey."

She turns her head, and even though I should be used to it by now, the glimpse of her stunning profile makes my breath catch.

"Oh, hey. You're back."

She slides her guitar away and shifts over a couple inches. I sit down beside her, close enough that the couple centimeters between her arm and mine feel like they're buzzing with an electric current.

The whole house has felt like it's lined with live wires ever since the night of our date. We've kissed at least once every day since then. We've cuddled and watched Jennifer's Body. We've played around in the pool together and stood side by side in the kitchen while making dinner and taking turns picking songs to listen to while we cook.

There's a small, scared voice inside me that whispers I must be reading things wrong, that those moments can't possibly have meant as much to her as they have to me, but that's all the voice is: a whisper.

I'm done letting it shout. I'm done letting it scream the words, 'What if?'

I'm choosing to listen to Andrea instead when she tells me I'm amazing and special and one of the best people she's ever met. For once, I'm choosing to see what it feels like to tell myself the same thing.

"Ouch." I slap my arm as a mosquito pricks my skin. "Aren't you getting attacked out here?"

Andrea swats at her legs as more bugs descend on us. "Yeah, they're getting bad. I just...didn't want to be inside."

She shudders, and I inch a little closer to her.

"I get that. It's kind of creepy to be in a house that big all by yourself. That's how I felt the few days I was alone here before you showed up."

She grins and leans over to bump her shoulder against mine. "I definitely prefer the house with you in it."

We stay pressed together as she goes back to staring across the yard. I glance at her and see the grin has slipped off her face.

"You okay?" I ask.

She blinks and shakes her head like I startled her. "Oh. Yeah. Just, um, thinking about how early it gets dark now. August always goes by so fast, doesn't it?"

I nod, my chest tightening. She's right. There are still a few weeks of summer left, but the slow, sticky pace of July has morphed into August's sprint towards September.

September.

When both our lives change. When she goes back to Toronto. When our summer fling ends.

Unless it doesn't.

"Yeah," I say, as my thoughts drift back to the talk I had with my mom in the car tonight, "it does go fast."

I told my mom something I haven't even told Priya yet, something I wasn't totally sure of until it slipped out and I heard my own voice say it: I don't want the end of summer to mean the end of me and Andrea.

I don't want to tear up everything between us when we tear off the next page of the calendar. I know we never planned on more than a chapter, but I don't want to write 'the end' on this story yet.

"Andrea..."

The rest of my sentence gets lodged in my throat when she turns to look at me, her brown eyes almost black in the growing dark. The 'what if' questions get louder, crashing against everything I want to say until the words are a jumbled mess in my head.

What if she doesn't want that?



What if I got it wrong?

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*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:45 pm*

What if I lose whatever it is we do have because I was stupid enough to ask for more?

“Hey.” She leans closer, her forehead creasing as she rests her hand on my knee. “You okay?”

My mom said I should just tell her. She said I have nothing to lose, and I agreed at the time, but staring into Andrea’s eyes now, I’m not so sure.

“Yeah, I, um...”

Her eyes are as huge as two new moons in the summer sky.

My mouth drops open, ready to tell her everything.

Slap.

I gasp and jerk back when her fingertips smack against my cheek.

“Sorry!” she shrieks before pressing her hand to her mouth. “There was a mosquito on your face! I’m so sorry. It was reflex. Are you okay?”

It was more of a pat than a slap. My cheek doesn’t even sting, and as I watch her continue gawking at me in horror, I can’t help it.

I burst out laughing.

“You maniac,” I tease as she starts to chuckle too.

“It was a huge one!” she protests. “Trust me, you did not want that thing biting your face.”

We laugh together for a few moments, but when we’ve calmed down and she asks what I was going to say, I know I’m not going to tell her tonight.

I want to tell her without any lingering doubts swarming me like a hoard of mosquitoes, and I don’t know how to make that happen yet.

“Oh, right. I have news from Priya,” I say instead, the deck creaking underneath me as I pull my knees up to my chest. “She found an open mic night happening on Saturday.”

“Oh, cool.”

There’s a questioning note in Andrea’s voice, like she can tell that’s not what I wanted to say, but she lets it go and gets to her feet before picking her guitar up by the neck.

“That’s soon,” she says while I scramble to stand up too. “I better get practicing.”

“You’ll play guitar?” I ask as we head for the house.

She nods. “Mhmm. And what delightful talent will you be entertaining the crowd with?”

I double-check the cats aren’t prowling around the kitchen before I pull the door open for us.

“Oh, um, I was thinking I’d pick one of my favourite poems to read,” I say once we’re both inside. “I don’t know if that’s a talent per se, but as you can probably

guess, I'm not really the public speaking type, so it's going to be a pretty big deal...for me, at least."

She tilts her head and smiles, and I'm surer than ever that I don't want to wave goodbye forever to that smile at the end of the month.

"I can't wait to hear it," she says. "Which poem?"

I huff a laugh. "That's the question. I have a lot of favourite poems."

She steps closer until we're almost chest to chest. My heart thunders in my ears.

"Has anyone ever told you how cute you are?"

She doesn't wait for an answer before she kisses me. The brush of her lips on mine is soft at first, but when I gasp against her, they press harder. My knees shake, and I'm about to reach for her waist when she pulls back.

"Damn, Naomi, you almost made me drop my guitar."

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I tell her I'm not sorry, and we both laugh again. I'd like to spend the whole night kissing her, but the sight of my laptop on the kitchen island reminds me I still have a couple hours of data entry to finish before bed. Andrea groans when I tell her but says she'll respect the sanctity of my work by not staying in the kitchen to distract me.

I sit down on one of the chairs at the island, but I only get a couple minutes of work done before the temptation to search for a poem becomes too strong to ignore.

I open up a blank document on my screen to type out a list of options. I should probably go with something modern, the kind of Instagram poet thing I imagine people read at open mics full of art school students, but after listing a few of those off the top of my head, I know they're not right.

Priya's never going to let me hear the end of it, but if I'm going to read something in front of a crowd for the first time in my life, it's going to be by Yeats.

I spend the next couple hours alternating between data entry and browsing through lists of his poems online, but it's only once I'm tucked into bed with my worn out copy of *Selected Works* by W.B. Yeats that I find it.

I should probably pick something longer, but as soon as I trace my fingers over the smooth page with the musty scent of old paper filling my nose, I know it's what I need to read.

I also know what I need to say to Andrea.

Naomi

I whoop and clap for longer than anyone else in the room when Priya climbs down off the stage with her clarinet in hand. She beams as she wades through the crowd to rejoin us.

A rumble of chatter takes over the bar as the applause fades. We're half an hour into the open mic night, and the crowd is way bigger than I expected. Despite the air conditioning, the room is warm enough to have my t-shirt sticking to my back and condensation forming rings around our drinks on the table. The air smells like beer tinged with the lingering scent of coffee from when this place is a café during the day.

I'm still counting it as my first time at a real bar. Andrea is the only one of us without a bright orange 'under nineteen' wristband on, but she ordered a ginger ale in solidarity.

Priya squints, probably still blinded by the lights pointed at the tiny raised platform serving as a stage. The guy she met at music school steps forward to flag her down.

I've since learned his name is Bill. If I had any worries left about things between me and Priya, they disappeared when neither of us managed to keep a straight face after she told me the cute guy she's 'kinda, sorta dating' is named Bill.

"You were amazing!" I say once Priya has reclaimed her chair at our table.

"Everyone loved it," Andrea adds from beside me.

"It was beautiful," Bill says as he slides his arm around the back of Priya's chair. He turns to her with a look on his face that almost makes me feel like we should give them a moment.

I glance at Andrea to see if she agrees, but she's not even looking at them. Her gaze is pinned to the mostly empty glass of ginger ale on the table in front of her.

She's been quiet all night, so quiet my stomach started tying itself in knots as I hypothesized about a hundred different things that might be wrong, all of them involving me. I did my therapist proud, though, and fought those thoughts off with a healthy dose of reality when I pulled her aside to ask if she was okay.

She told me she's just nervous about performing, and I chose to believe her. I'm nervous enough myself that the copy of the poem I brought feels as heavy as a brick in my pocket.

"Wait, where's Shal?" Priya asks. "Did she miss my song?"

She starts craning her neck around to look for her sister as disappointment wipes the smile off her face.

"She said she'd watch from the back," I answer. "She didn't want anyone to see whatever outfit she changed into yet. I think—"

The boom of the MC's voice cuts me off. We all turn to watch the beanie-clad guy scan the clipboard in his hands up on stage.

"I think that's the first time we've ever had a clarinet on this stage," he says into the microphone as another smattering of applause breaks out. "Great stuff. Now, please welcome Shal!"

He leaves the stage, and a few seconds of strained silence pass before the murmurs start. Our whole table is looking around for any sign of Shal. She refused to tell anybody what she's performing and disappeared halfway through the act right before Priya's so she could change into a mysterious outfit she brought in a duffel bag.

What feels like a full minute goes by. Priya starts to pull her phone out of her purse with a worried look on her face, but then a jingling sound followed by a few murmured 'ooh's and 'ahh's turns everyone's attention to the very back of the bar.

My jaw drops so fast I'm surprised it doesn't bash into the table. Shal sweeps into the room in a cobalt blue sari paired with piles of gold jewelry that flash like a treasure chest. Combined with the dramatic makeup she already had on earlier tonight, she looks like powerful enough to split the ocean in half instead of just clearing a path through the bar.

Her gaze is pinned to the stage, and even though she's walking with the poise and grace of a seasoned movie star, I can see the way her chest is heaving with nervous breaths. When she's only a few feet away from the glow of the spotlights, I manage to pry my eyes off her and look at Priya.

Her mouth is hanging open as wide as mine. She keeps gawking as Shal steps onto the stage and grabs the microphone.



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“This performance is dedicated to my sister.”

Priya lets out a squeak and then clamps her hand over her mouth.

“Who you just saw rock the hell out of the clarinet,” Shal continues. “My sister Priya is the coolest person I know, and this summer, she’s reminded me of what it actually means to be cool. This is cheesy as hell, but it’s true, people: being cool means being yourself.”

There are some shouts of agreement from the crowd. Shal grins, her voice getting more confident with every word.

“Sometimes it’s hard for me to be myself. Sometimes it doesn’t feel safe. Sometimes it’s just easier to be what other people want, but when I’m riding in the car with my sister singing at the top of our lungs or doing bad reenactments of Bollywood movies in our basement like we have since we were kids, I forget about all that. I’m just me. That’s what I want you to know, Pri. I’m always the most me when I’m with you.”

A chorus of ‘awwww’ fills the bar, and my eyes prick with heat when I look over and see tears are already streaking down Priya’s cheeks.

“So in honor of my sister and the true definition of being cool,” Shal says, “I am going to risk my dignity by doing a very special dance for you all tonight.”

“Oh my god,” Priya mumbles from behind her hand. “She’s going to do Badtameez Dil.”

The crowd whoops as Shal holds her sari with one hand and uses the other to set the microphone stand down off the edge of the stage.

“There are a lot of white people who have probably never seen a Bollywood movie here tonight,” Shal says, loud enough for her voice to carry without the mic, “so allow me to educate you. This is a hit song from the two thousand and thirteen blockbuster Yeh Jawaani Hai Deewani, titled ‘Badtameez Dil.’”

More whooping follows as Shal steps to the very back of the stage and turns her back to the crowd before striking a dramatic pose. A second later, the song starts thumping through the speakers, and Shal starts busting out moves that have my jaw dropping all over again.

She swivels and pops her hips in ways I didn’t know the human body was capable of, her arms flying through a series of complex movements that make the bracelets stacked on her wrists jingle and clack. The whole crowd has started clapping to the beat of the song as they shout their approval.

“Oh my god!” I yell over the noise, leaning across the table towards Priya. “I had no idea she was this good!”

Priya’s eyes are bugging out of her head, and she doesn’t look away from Shal for even a second as she answers. “Me neither! I’ve never seen her do that. Holy shit!”

That’s all I can think too as Shal whirls through the rest of her routine and winds up earning a thunderous standing ovation. Her face glistens with sweat as she beams at the crowd before taking a bow, her chest heaving with exhaustion.

The applause doesn’t let up as she makes her way over to our table. The four of us are still on our feet, clapping and stomping as we yell her name. She fights for her breath and then slams back half a glass of water as the audience starts to calm down and

wait for the next act.

The raw joy now bouncing around the room makes me heart feel like it's swelling in my chest. My body thrums with so much energy it's hard to sit back down, but just as Shal and Priya are breaking apart from a tender hug that has my eyes stinging all over again, the MC announces Andrea's turn.

I forgot she was the next in line.

Which means I'm the next next in line.

Adrenaline shoots through my veins, but I'm so high on watching my friends perform I forget to be terrified. We settle ourselves as Andrea pulls her guitar out of its case.

"Good luck," I say as she steps past my chair.

She catches my eye, her expression blazing with an emotion I can't quite read.

The copy of the poem in my pocket feels even heavier now—the copy I scribbled my own words beneath just before we left the house tonight.

Words I won't be able to take back once I speak them up on that stage.

Andrea steps up to the stage and grabs a stool sitting off to the sidelines. The microphone stand has been returned to its place, and she sets the stool behind it before perching on the seat with her guitar resting across her lap.

She's wearing jeans and a cropped black t-shirt, with thick black eyeliner and that same burgundy lipstick from our date. A few rings glint on her fingers, and as I watch her adjust the microphone to the right height, all I can think is that I want more of her.

More date nights in cute dresses. More late night chats in the hot tub. More cuddles under the same blanket while we listen to each other's hearts race and forget all about the movie we're supposed to be watching. More tossing our ice cream cones aside because we can't wait a second longer to kiss each other.

More moments. More stories. More us.

"Hey, everybody."

I feel her voice reverberate through my bones when she speaks into the microphone, even though the sound system isn't nearly loud enough for that.

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“I don’t know how I’m supposed to follow up that masterpiece we all just witnessed,” she says with a grin. “I really hope we’re at the point of officially being friends, Shal, because I’m about to brag to this whole bar and tell them you’re my friend.”

A laugh rolls through the crowd. I glance around and see she’s already got the whole room falling under her spell. She was so nervous she couldn’t even drink her ginger ale a few minutes ago, but up on stage, there’s an ease to her you can’t help but sink into yourself.

“Of course we’re friends, bitch,” Shal yells with her hands cupped around her mouth.

The laughter gets even louder. Andrea chuckles into the mic.

“Spoken like the truest of friends.” She shifts her guitar on her lap and gets her fingers set up on the fret board before looking out at the crowd again. “I have a dedication to make too. This song is...for a girl.”

Someone wolf whistles at the same time my heart jumps into my throat.

“It’s for a girl I’m...” She trails off and clears her throat. “A girl I’m really gonna miss. So yeah, this is a song by Neutral Milk Hotel called ‘In the Aeroplane Over the Sea.’”

My hands fly up to cover my mouth as Andrea strums the familiar chords of the song. I might have only heard it for the first time less than a week ago, but I’ve replayed the original version enough since then to have every word memorized.

Andrea's fingers move up and down the fret board without hesitation, and my chest tightens when I remember she hadn't heard the song before our date either. She could have played any song she wanted tonight, but she must have spent the past few days learning the one we danced to.

She learned this song so she could play it for me.

I drop one of my hands from my mouth to press my palm to my chest instead, right over the desperate thump of my heart under my shirt. My heart feels like it's trying to beat its way out of me so it can get to her. My feet twitch with the urge to jump up and run to her, to stop this whole performance and tell her she doesn't have to miss me because this doesn't have to end.

Not if we don't want it to.

She gets to the end of the song's intro, and the only thing that stops me from actually going off the rails and careening through the bar towards her is the sound of her voice.

I didn't know she sang.

The first lyric about finding a beautiful face in a beautiful place reverberates through the bar like a magic spell that keeps every eye locked on her. Her singing voice is higher than I would have expected. If I had to guess, I'd have said she'd have one of those rich and raspy rock goddess voices tinged with smoke and flames, but instead, the sound is clear and fresh like sweet rain water trickling down a windowpane.

It's a voice that comes from those slow and still parts of her I've caught glimpses of from time to time, like when I found her out on the deck a few nights ago. It's a voice that tells the world who she really is.

She gets to the chorus and falters for a moment, her eyes squeezing shut, and I realize that voice can't hide the fear she's always running from. The loneliness. The heartache. The dark things lurking over her shoulder that tell her she's not good enough.

I've spent most of my life letting my own shadows do exactly the same thing to me. I've let doubt, shame, and fear keep me in the dark for way too long.

When I met Andrea, I saw a girl who shone like a summer sunrise, so bright it almost hurt to look at her. I tried to hide from that light, to watch it from the shadows like I always do, but she turned the sun on me full blast and decided what she found was not too small or scared or weird or pathetic for someone like her.

She helped me start to believe that maybe I'm not too small for anyone. Maybe I never have been.

And maybe what she needs is for someone to finally reflect her own light back at her and let her see the same thing about herself.

So when she finishes her song to resounding applause and comes back to our table, I ignore the lurch in my stomach when the MC calls my name.

I ignore the way my skin gets hot and itchy as the whole crowd watches me walk to the stage.

I ignore the way my vision swims and my throat goes dry when I'm finally facing a crowd full of people all waiting for me to do the one thing that's scared me the most my entire life: speak.

I ignore every 'what if' that tells me I can't do this and replace them with, 'What if I can?'

## CHAPTER 20

Andrea

By the time I sit back down at the table, I'm shaking so much I can barely get my guitar case zipped up while we wait for Naomi to replace me on stage. I couldn't look at her after I'd finished my song, not when every chord I played and every word I sang was steeped with the one thing I haven't been able to bring myself to say to her yet: goodbye.

My year is up, and maybe my mom is cutting it a couple weeks short with the flight, but it's not like it matters at this point. If I was going to have some grand revelation about what I'm actually good for in life, it would have happened by now. I would have come up with more than 'fun at parties' and 'can get anyone to sing along to the guitar.' I'd have something worthwhile enough to justify turning my back on everything my mom has built for me.

I'd have something a girl like Naomi could be proud of, not just entertained by for a summer.



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The spotlights catch on the pale strands of Naomi's hair as she adjusts the microphone. She's wearing a flowy blue shirt that reminds me of the dress she wore on our date—the dress that's etched into my memory like a tattoo. She pulls a folded sheet of paper out of her pocket and lifts it to her face with one hand while her other hand tucks her hair behind her ear.

That sight of that now familiar gesture makes me feel like someone just smashed a glass over our table and shoved one of the shards into my side. I curl my arms around my stomach and lean forward, watching as Naomi stands in front of the crowd and faces her fears.

She once told me I'm unstoppable, but really, it's her that can't be stopped.

When I met her, she could barely get a sentence out around me. She held a joint for the first time like she was scared it was going to bite her hand off. She almost fainted while waiting to get a piercing.

She still went through with all those things.

As I run through every item of the summer list we've ticked off, it hits me that it was never about the things themselves.

I'd already tried almost everything on that list before I showed up at my dad's house, and they didn't turn me into the kind of girl I now see standing on the stage.

What mattered is that Naomi didn't think she could, but she did it anyway, the same way Priya didn't think she could find her independence and Shal didn't think she

could show the truest parts of herself to the world.

They still did it all. They still managed to find the parts of themselves that refused to be strangled by what anyone else might have to say.

I've spent a whole year searching, and I haven't found that. I haven't found the part of me worth fighting for. I've just found distractions to keep me from admitting maybe that part doesn't exist at all.

"I'm going to read a poem tonight. It's by one of my favourite poets, William Butler Yeats."

Priya groans and mutters, "Of course," but I can still hear the excitement in her voice.

Naomi stares at her paper for a few seconds before she looks into the crowd. If I didn't know from being up there myself that the spotlights make it too bright to see anyone, I'd swear she was staring straight at me.

"First, I want to say something, though."

The breath whooshes out of my lungs.

"I don't know why the poem itself is one of my favourites," she continues, glancing down at her paper every now and then, like she's reading from some notes. "To be honest, it's always been a tough one for me to read. It...it kind of hurts to read it sometimes. It's about this guy telling this woman to take down a book of his poetry when she's old and grey so she can read this poem about how much he loved her, the real her, not just the shiny, idealized version of her a million other guys fell in love with too."

I can tell everyone else at our table is looking back and forth from me to Naomi, but I

can't stop staring at her like she might disappear if I even blink.

“Only it must not have worked out for some reason, because she's old and alone and reading this book by her fireplace without him. I've always thought it didn't work out because he was too scared to tell her how he felt. He was so scared he could only do it in a poem that he'd only let her read when it was too late, and I...well, I've missed out on a lot of things because I was too scared until it was too late, but...but then I met this girl who's sort of helped me get out of the habit.”

Priya squeals, but all I feel is hollow, like the hole in my side has drained all my emotions onto the floor.

Naomi must not know more than that shiny, idealized version of me. If she did, she'd know I'd only ever be able to disappoint her.

“So,” she says, “this one is for her. It's called ‘When You Are Old.’”

The crowd gets extra quiet as she reads, the room so still you can almost hear the thump of her heartbeat in the microphone. She starts off a little too fast, but once she's past the first couple lines, she seems to sink into the poem like it's a well-worn chair she's curled up in a thousand times. Her voice lilts from quiet to loud, strong to soft, tracing its way through the flickers of aching nostalgia, bitter regret, and solemn acceptance in the words.

By the time she's done and her murmured, “Thank you,” gets swallowed up by applause, I'm convinced she's got it wrong.

The man in the poem wasn't too late.

He just fell in love with a woman who wasn't good enough to love him back.

All of a sudden, it's like every last drop of air has been sucked out of the bar. The room is too hot, too loud, too full of people.

"Andrea?" Priya says, turning from where she's been waving Naomi back over to our table. "Are you okay?"

Somehow, I manage to choke out the word, "Bathroom."

I shove my chair away from the table and stagger towards the back of the bar. The room doesn't feel as stifling once I'm tucked into the narrow hallway lined with a few single stall washrooms, but there's still not enough air back here. All the washrooms are occupied, so I lean against the wall and tap my foot against the floorboards, my rhythm getting more and more frantic the longer I wait.

My breaths are so shallow I'm getting dizzy. I try to suck in more air, but my lungs won't let me.

I have to get out of here.

The thought repeats a few more times in my head, and when none of the washrooms show any sign of opening, I push off the wall with a grunt and speed-walk down to the other end of the hall, the one blocked off by a chain with a 'staff only' sign hanging in the middle.

I ignore the words and duck underneath the chain. I hear some clanging over to my right, where I'm pretty sure the kitchen is, but all my focus is pinned on the door I spot with an exit sign above the frame.

I heave myself against the push bar and stumble out into a dark and narrow parking lot with a giant dumpster sitting up against the wall of the building. The door shuts with a click behind me, and I gulp down a huge breath of cool night air as soon as I'm cut off from the din of the bar. The only noise I hear now is the hum of some distant traffic and the echoing bark of a dog.

I lean against the hard brick wall behind me and focus on slowing my breath. I've just managed to get my heartbeat back to a somewhat normal pace when the door swings open and sends my pulse skyrocketing again.

"Andrea!" Naomi steps over to me with her eyes flared wide. "Priya said she thought you were sick. Are you okay?"

She tilts her head to the side and looks me over. The concern in her face makes my chest ache harder than it has all night.

“I, um...” My voice sounds wheezy, and I stop to cough. “I just got kind of warm.”

She nods, the tension in her posture easing. “Oh, for sure. It’s packed in there. It’s actually really nice to be out here, even though it’s a little cold tonight.”

She claims a spot against the wall beside me, close enough that our arms are almost touching, and I squeeze my eyes shut for a second as I fight the urge to turn and kiss her so hard this all goes away, if only for a moment.

That’s the problem. It would only ever be for a moment—one perfect, shining moment before the rest of our lives rush in to push us apart.

“You did, um, hear the poem, right?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see her staring down at her shoes as she nudges a few stray pebbles on the pavement. The question is tinged with a mix of hope and nerves that makes me go weak.

“Of course I did. I wouldn’t miss it. You were incredible.”

At least I can tell her that.

“Thanks. You were too. I can’t believe you learned that song. To be honest, I wasn’t sure I was going to have the guts to say what I did tonight, but then you played that song and—”

“I’m leaving.”

I clench my hands into fists as the words leave my mouth, my jaw locked so tight I almost can’t force them out.

She goes silent, her body tensing up beside me.

“My mom, she...she said I can’t wait any longer if I want the internship, so she’s flying me home next week.”

“Oh.”

Her answer is so flat I have no idea what she’s feeling, and I know if I look at her face to check, I’m going to lose it, so I keep staring across the dark parking lot.

“And you...you do want the internship?” she murmurs.

“I...”

I don’t know what I want.

That’s the only answer I have, and she deserves so much more.

“I thought maybe there was something else out there for me,” I say instead, “something I could be good at, something that would light me up instead of just being a dumb way to pass the time, but...I don’t have that ambition or passion or whatever it is everyone else seems to have found. If I had that, maybe...maybe it’d be worth telling my mom I’m not sure I want this internship anymore, but this might be my very last chance to not disappoint her, and I can’t throw that away for doing nothing here just like I did a whole year of nothing in Montreal.”

“Nothing?” she repeats, with a chill in her voice that raises goose bumps on my arms. She pushes off the wall and squares off in front of me. “You really think you’ve found nothing here? That this whole summer was about a dumb way to pass the time?”

I shake my head fast enough to give me whiplash.

“No, Naomi, that’s not what I meant. It’s not about you. You’re...you’re the farthest thing from nothing.”



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Her eyes soften a little, but she stays planted in front of me with her hands on her hips.

“That’s the problem,” I tell her. “You’re this...this incredible person who does what she wants and is who she is no matter how scary that gets sometimes, and I...I have no clue who I am, despite spending an entire year trying to figure that out. I think maybe I’m just...I’m just a fundamentally disappointing person.”

I don’t know what kind of a reaction I expected, but it wasn’t for her to bark a laugh. I blink with shock as she drops her hands from her hips.

“Andrea, do you have any idea how ridiculous that sounds? Look at you!” She waves her hand towards me. “You had that whole bar eating out of the palm of your hand, and when you sang, you...you’re just magic, okay? You’re just goddamn magic, and who cares if you don’t know exactly what your passion or your dream is yet? Who cares if you need another year or five years or ten years to figure it out? I wouldn’t think any less of you if that were the case, and I don’t think anyone else should either, including your mom.”

I shake my head as my vision clouds and my throat gets too clogged to speak.

“Look.” She steps closer and lowers her voice. “Move back to Toronto if you have to. Take the internship if you have to. Just...just don’t tell me this was nothing. Don’t tell me it was just about a list. Don’t tell me it’s something you can leave behind when you get on that plane.”

I feel the streak of salty heat as the first tear slides down my face.

“I’m not always very good at reading people,” she says, almost whispering now, “and sometimes I feel like I’m getting everything wrong. It all makes so much more sense when it’s just words on a page, but...but I know I got this right. I know I got us right, and I know that whatever you choose, I want to be part of it.”

A sob lodges in my throat. It gets harder and harder to breathe as she stands there with her eyes boring into mine, but I can’t look away.

“When you met me this summer, you didn’t just see some shy and awkward girl with anxiety,” she says, “and when I met you, I didn’t just see some wild party girl with purple hair who’s really good at making people follow through on a dare. We both saw way past all that. You helped me be more me this summer, Andrea, and maybe that’s not the big revelation or sense of purpose you were looking for, but to me it’s...everything.”

Her bottom lip trembles, but she pauses long enough to draw in a shaky breath and then speaks more firmly than she has all night, maybe even more firmly than I’ve ever heard her speak before.

“I don’t want to say goodbye. This isn’t just a summer fling to me. I want it to be more, and I really think it can be, wherever you decide to go next. My brain is already trying to come up with a million reasons this won’t work, but I’m done missing out on things just because I’m scared of them. So...so I’m just going to say it.”

She stops to take another breath, and I know I should interrupt her. I know I should tell her the truth: that I’m not the magic girl she thinks I am. I’m a book with a cool cover that has way too many blank pages inside to keep someone like her entertained for longer than a summer.

“I think I might be falling in love with you, Andrea King.”

I stop breathing. I think even my blood goes still in my veins.

“So yeah, that’s...that,” she says, “and I need you to know that because I really need you to say you’ll see where this goes with me. This is the first time I’ve ever let myself have my own story, and I want it to be ours.”

For a second, I can see it. I can see all those blank pages inside me filled with words and pictures and cheesy stick figure drawings in the margins that are all about us. I can see myself in this city, taking her on dates every weekend, sitting in cafes with her while she pores over a pile of textbooks, and spending night after night huddled up under a blanket while we tell each other absolutely everything that’s ever happened to us.

I can see myself breathing here, in a way I’ve never been able to do in Toronto. I can practically taste life filling up my lungs with the air I’ve been gasping for, but just when I think I’m finally going to get that inhale I need, something sucks the wind right out of me, and I’m left gasping as hard as ever.

“Andrea...”

She takes a step closer to me. I shake my head, and she freezes, hurt flashing across her face.

“I don’t...I don’t know how,” I choke out. “I don’t know how to be the person you need me to be.”

I don’t know how to do that for my parents. I don’t know how to do that for anyone.

How the hell am I supposed to do it for her?

“You already are,” she says as her hands ball into fists at her sides. “That’s what I’m

trying to tell you.”

My lungs burn, but I force myself to keep speaking.

“And I’m trying to tell you I’m not. I’m just not, and if you knew me, you’d see that. I can’t...I can’t do this.”

Her face crumples.

“Andrea. Please.”

I sag against the wall and shake my head as more tears streak down my face.

“Do you really mean that?” she whispers.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:45 pm*

I'm crying too hard to answer now. The tears are so thick I can't even see her properly. When she steps forward and reaches for my arm, I jerk away.

If I let her hold me, I won't be able to tell her to stop.

I hear her hiss of pain, and another piece of my heart cracks. She hovers in front of me for a couple seconds, and then she steps over to pull the door open. The second it swings shut behind her, my knees give out, and I slide down to crouch on the cold, hard pavement.

### CHAPTER 21

Andrea

She's gone.

It's the first thing I think when I open my eyes to squint at the strip of daylight pouring in through the gap between the curtains.

It's the same first thought I've had every time I've woken up this week.

Naomi went to Shal and Priya's place instead of my dad's house back on the night of the open mic. The next day, she texted to say it would be best if she stayed at her parents' house until I left for Toronto. I tried to tell her I'd find my own place so she wouldn't have to leave because of me, but she'd already gotten in touch with Sandy to say she had a family issue and needed to be home for a few days while I took care of the cats for her.

A thump on the mattress makes me sit bolt upright in bed. Bijoux blinks at me from the end of the comforter and then prowls his way up to my lap before head-butting my hand. I scratch his saggy skin as I lift my other hand to press against the sharp twinge in my temple that grows into a throbbing ache in a matter of seconds.

My stomach churns, and the rest of the symptoms of a raging hangover set in as my body wakes up: clammy skin, dry mouth, and a desperate craving for water.

I remember I raided the wine cellar last night at the exact same moment I remember why I raided the wine cellar: today is my last day in Ottawa.

Tomorrow morning, I'll get on a plane to Toronto. I'll move back into my mom's house. I'll never see Naomi again.

I sprint to the bathroom and drop to my knees on the cold tiles in front of the toilet as the image of her walking back into the bar without me that night clouds my vision.

I could have told her to stop. I could have told her to wait. I could have told her I might be falling in love with her too and that the rest doesn't matter, but I'd be lying.

I can't move to Ottawa just because I might love her. I can't build a whole life around being with her. She needs someone who has their own life too, and I'm not any closer to that than I was a year ago.

I dry heave a few times, sweat coating my skin even as the cold floor makes me shiver, but I don't end up puking. I push myself to my feet a few minutes later and then shove my head under the sink faucet to gulp down some water.

The hydration helps, although my reflection in the mirror is so horrifying I almost feel like I need to get drunk all over again just to erase the sight from my mind. My hair is a mass of tangles wild enough to be housing a few woodland animals. My face

is puffy, and there are deep purple half moons under both my eyes.

“Ugh,” I say to my reflection before grabbing my toothbrush.

Both the cats turn up at the bathroom door to start meowing and twining themselves around my legs. I realize I have no idea what time it is, but judging by how bright the sun is shining outside, the cats’ breakfast is long overdue.

I stumble my way back to my bedroom and throw a hoodie on over my pajama shorts and tank top before heading down to the kitchen. Fractured memories of what happened after I uncorked the first wine bottle start to take shape as I hold my breath through the whole disgusting process of putting the cats’ slop in their bowls.

I think I watched TV for a while. I remember shouting insults at some classic romcom, but I can’t picture which movie it was. The dishes in the kitchen sink prove my suspicion that I heated up some frozen chicken wings, although my memory gets so hazy at that point I’m surprised I didn’t wake up to the sound of the smoke alarm or any oven burns on my arms.

I walk over to the island after setting the food bowls down and fold over until my cheek is resting against the cool marble. The temperature helps keep a wave of cat food-induced nausea at bay.

I squeeze my eyes shut as shame adds itself to the list of things making me feel like I’m going to puke. I’m supposed to start the rest of my life tomorrow, and I decided the best way to handle that was getting stupidly drunk.

This isn’t me.

I straighten up like the smoke alarm really has started blaring as those words echo so loud inside my head I could swear someone else yelled them into the kitchen.

I glance around like a stranger really is going to jump out from one of the cupboards, but the only sounds I hear are the hum of the air conditioning and the munching noises of the cats eating their breakfast.

“This isn’t me,” I murmur, like I’m giving the phrase a test drive.

I wait to feel some kind of shift inside me, but nothing changes. No flame is lit. No sparks go off. No divine messenger appears in the kitchen.

I smack my hands against the island and groan loud enough to make the cats look over.



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:45 pm*

“So who is me?” I ask them, my voice loud enough to bounce off the tiled walls.

They blink a couple times and then go back to eating.

I groan again and hunch forward, propping my elbows on the island so I can rest my chin in my hands and glare out at the backyard. The sun is glinting on the glassy surface of the pool. I glance at the clock on the microwave for the first time, and a fresh jolt of shame hits when I see it’s past one in the afternoon. I must have stayed up way later than I thought.

The back of my neck tingles when I realize there’s a good chunk of last night I can’t account for at all.

“I need to see my phone,” I announce to the cats before I sprint back to my bedroom as fast as my headache will allow.

If I was drunk enough to be yelling at the TV, I might have been drunk enough to do something truly stupid.

Like call Naomi.

My phone isn’t where I usually keep it on the bedside table. I check under the bed and then strip all the blankets off to be sure.

There’s no sign of it.

I swear and do a scan of the whole bedroom before racing down to the basement

where I was watching TV last night. My stomach churns in protest of all the physical activity, and I have to pause at the foot of the stairs to catch my breath.

I cringe as I look over at the wine bottles, chip bags, and plate of chicken bones littering the table I pulled up in front of the huge couch. The TV is still on, playing some hospital drama loud enough to make my head throb even harder.

I find the remote sitting on one of the couch cushions and shut the screen off. I notice one wine bottle is completely empty, while the other is missing about a glass. I thank Smart Andrea for stopping me at some point, but that's still way too much wine for one person.

This isn't me.

The phrase rings out again, loud enough that I drop into a seat on the couch and press both my hands to my forehead.

"That's not an answer," I say to whatever part of me has decided that phrase is supposed to be helpful. "I don't need to know who I'm not. I need to know who I am."

That sounds like way too much of a riddle for someone who drank over a bottle of wine last night. I flop onto my side, waiting for my head to stop spinning.

Being on the couch brings another memory to the surface.

I remember lying like this at some point last night while holding my phone in front of my face. I was trying to call Naomi, but the letters on the screen were too tiny to focus on. I decided calling her was a bad idea, and I decided to hide my phone to help my resolve.

I remember thinking I had the perfect place. I just have no idea where that is.

“Damn it,” I mutter as I close my eyes and try to sink into Drunk Andrea’s thought process.

I’ve only come up with a few ideas before Hungover Andrea’s thoughts take over.

Hungover Andrea is still very tired. Hungover Andrea doesn’t want to deal with any of this, and Hungover Andrea thinks the couch is very soft.

I wake up to the sound of a phone ringing. My first drowsy thought is that it’s my missing cell phone, but then I remember I always keep my phone on silent.

The unfamiliar ringtone blares again and again, and I realize the sound is coming from the house phone. I get to my feet, and even though my parched throat is begging for several glasses of water, the nap has at least turned my headache from a throbbing nightmare to a dull ache.

There’s no house phone downstairs, so I follow the sound all the way to the closest source, which is up in one of the sitting rooms, or whatever they call the additional rooms full of couches and chairs that aren’t the main living room. There’s a small desk set up in front of the window with a landline phone on top. The screen on the receiver shows my dad’s name.

I pick up the phone. “Hi, Dad.”

“Oh. Andrea. Hello.”

A few seconds of silence follow, and I can’t even blame the hangover for the awkwardness.

I never know what to say to him. I never know what he wants to hear.

“Are you all right? Sandy couldn’t get you on your cell, and then you didn’t answer my texts.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:46 pm*

He already sounds disappointed, and my grip on the phone tightens when I realize he has every reason to be.

I missed his texts because I've been sleeping off a hangover all day after raiding his wine cellar in the house I snuck into without his permission.

That voice from earlier pings in my head again.

This isn't me.

"Oh, sorry. My phone is, um, dead. I need to charge it."

My voice is so hoarse and groggy it would give the lie away even if it weren't an extremely low effort excuse.

"I see. What time is it there, anyway?"

I drop into the upholstered armchair in front of the desk and rest my head on one of my hands.

"It's, um..." I glance at the screen on the phone dock and wince. "Almost five."

"I see," he says again. "Well, Sandy just wanted to check that you're doing all right with the cats. She misses her little updates from Naomi."

My shoulders tense at the sound of her name, and my chest feels like it's caving in as I imagine her typing cute little messages about the cats' lives for Sandy to keep up

with.

“Oh, for sure,” I answer. “Yeah, the cats are good. They’re, um, eating, and stuff.”

“That’s good.”

The line goes silent.

He clears his throat.

More silence.

“Well, I should probably get going. Sandy is—”

“Dad.”

I don’t know what makes me say it. I don’t know what makes me keep him on the line when I thought I came to terms with him hanging up on my whole life years ago.

The window I’m sitting in front of looks out onto the back deck, right over the barbeque station where I’ve imagined him cooking with Sandy’s sons. I look past it to the spot on the deck where Naomi and I sat while she told me about accidentally burning her brother’s eyebrows off, and somehow, that gives me the courage to ask the question I’ve wanted to ask him my whole life.

“What did you want me to be?”

At first, the only answer I get is the rattling echo of my own breath, and then he asks, “What do you mean?”

“I mean when I was little,” I say. “Actually, even before I was little. Even before I

was born. Even before I existed at all. What did you want your kid to be like?”

He makes a sound like he’s about to say something, but then he stops.

A few more seconds go by before he asks, “Where is this coming from, Andrea?”

I straighten up in the chair, and I can’t keep a bit of irritation out of my tone. “You know where it’s coming from. You know I’ve never been...quite what you wanted. You or Mom. At least with her, I know what she wants me to be. I can keep trying, even if it never seems to be good enough, but with you... You just gave up.”

My voice is shaking, and I’m speaking way too loud. He tries to cut in, but I keep going. I can’t stop. It’s like somewhere inside me, a lock has sprung open, and there’s a whole army of pent up emotions storming out with guns blazing.

“You didn’t even fight for more than a few weekends a year with me,” I hurl at him. “You didn’t even fight to fix things with mom. It’s like we just stopped being worth it to you, or maybe we were never what you wanted in the first place, and I have spent my whole life trying to figure out what it is you do want so I can be it. I’ve tried so hard I have no idea who I am. I’m so scared I’ll end up being someone you and Mom don’t want that it’s literally impossible for me to even think about who I might actually be.”

The phone almost slips out of my hand as it hits me.

That’s the reason those fleeting glimpses of my future never last.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:46 pm*

That's the reason I spent a whole year trying to find myself and came up with nothing.

I didn't want to find myself. I didn't want to dig up a truth I couldn't bury back inside me if it wasn't what they wanted to see.

Those hints of who I am and what I want didn't get snatched away from me. I pushed them away. I shut my eyes and blocked my ears. I ran and ran and ran.

The answers I've been looking for haven't been hiding from me. They've been fighting to catch up.

"I wanted a daughter."

My dad's voice in my ear makes me jump. For a moment, I forgot I was on a call.

"I would have been happy with whoever you were, but I always wanted a daughter."

I've never heard him sound like this before, gruff and tender all at once, like he's trying not to choke up. A lump swells in my throat as I listen to him.

"When you were born, it was the best day of my life. You were everything I wanted and more. I knew you were special even when you were a little baby. You could not be stopped. You were just like your mother in that way."

His voice cracks, and I almost choke on a sob.



I've never heard him talk about me this way.

"I wasn't a match for her, Andrea. I wasn't enough. I held her back. That's why it never worked between us."

"She thought you were enough," I whisper. "She just needed you to believe it."

He's quiet for so long I start to worry I went too far, but then he sighs.

"I don't know if it would have worked out like that, Andrea, but I do know I should have tried harder to be enough for you."

I pull the phone away from my ear to stare at it for a moment before I speak.

"Huh? Dad, I've been trying to be enough for you, and it's like no matter what I do, you're just...there, all silent and distant. You're not like that with Sandy's kids. You—"

"I'm not their father."

The rest of my sentence peters out.

"I love those boys," he says after a moment, "but they have a dad, and that's why...that's why I never worried with them the way I have with you. I never wanted us to be distant, Andrea, but I also never wanted to say the wrong thing. I never wanted to make a mistake. I never wanted to let you down like...like I did with..."

He doesn't finish the sentence, but he doesn't have to.

My entire world is already flipping on its head.

I keep staring out the window, but my eyes aren't focused on the deck anymore. I can't tell if I want to laugh or cry or scream. I can't tell if I wish I could hug him or if I want to swear at him and push him away.

All those silent, awkward moments. All those times I'd try and get nothing in return.

He let the fear of not showing up perfectly keep him from showing up for me at all.

"Andrea, I'm sorry. I didn't—"

"I have to go."

My hands are shaking, and my feet are jittering against the floor. I need to move. I need work all this frantic energy out of my system so I can figure out what the hell any of this even means.

"Andrea..."

His voice breaks again. I screw my face up as I press the phone tighter against my ear.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:46 pm*

“I know, Dad. I know you’re sorry. I just...I just need to think.”

I end the call before I talk myself out of it, and in the next second, I’m bolting for the front door. I shove my feet into a pair of sneakers and lock the door behind me before I take off sprinting down the driveway.

I manage to run a few blocks before I have to slow my pace. My lungs burn and the muscles in my legs ache, but I make myself continue at a jog.

This is what I need.

I need oxygen. I need quiet. I need space. I need the thud of my feet on the ground to be the only sound around me as I listen for that voice again, the one that said, ‘This isn’t me.’

I know it has more to tell me, and for the first time in my life, I think I might actually be ready to listen.

I jog past giant house after giant house until my empty stomach demands I slow down to a walk. Still, I keep moving, not caring what I look like traipsing through the fanciest neighborhood in Ottawa in a pair of pajama shorts and a hoodie with my hair an absolute mess.

After another couple blocks, I reach one of the private schools in the area. The wide green lawn out front is dotted with maple trees and a few benches. I turn off the sidewalk to head for the closest bench, but I end up sprawling out on the soft grass under one of the trees instead.

I close my eyes with my face turned up to the evening sun, and a hundred memories wash over me.

My dad turning his back in the window of our old house in Ottawa when my mom and I drove away for the last time.

The strain in his voice whenever he said ‘I love you too’ on our phone calls, and all the moments of hesitation when I wondered if he’d say it at all.

The first time I had dinner with him, Sandy, and her sons and realized it was the first time I’d heard my dad laugh—really laugh—in as long as I could remember.

I play every single moment like a movie in my head, rewinding and re-watching and rewinding again, looking for proof that what he said on the phone today is true.

I don’t know how long I lay there. By the time I sit up, the grass has pressed imprints into the backs of my legs, and the sky has started to turn orange as the sun sinks lower and lower.

I wonder if Naomi is watching the sunset too.

I wonder if I’ve made her feel the exact same way my dad has.

She didn’t want me to be perfect. All she wanted was for me to try. All she wanted was for me to believe I was enough, but I wouldn’t do it.

I was an absolute idiot. As I push myself up to my feet and shake the pins and needles out of my legs, I realize I can’t leave this city without telling her that.

I don’t even care if it’s too late. I just can’t do the same thing my dad did.

I can't spend my whole life being afraid.

Not anymore.

I ignore the protests from my stomach and run back to the house as fast as my legs will carry me. When I turn onto my dad's street, I see there are way more cars parked along the sidewalk than when I left. I can hear the thumping bass of music blasting outside one of the houses.

Another car pulls up and swerves into an empty spot as I jog down the street. A few seconds later, a guy with a purple Mohawk and a girl in an oversized, ripped up t-shirt serving as a bikini cover-up get out and start walking up the sidewalk.

I can't stop myself from staring. I might be one to talk considering my own outfit, but these people don't exactly seem like the type to be attending whatever garden party is going down.

They turn down a driveway, and it takes me a couple second to realize it's my dad's driveway.

"What the hell?" I mutter before I run after them.

I get close enough to see the gate is open and the whole driveway is filled with more cars. People in bathing suits swarm past the vehicles, most of them lugging crates of beer and liquor bottles. The purple Mohawk is one of the tamer hairstyles I spot. Everyone here looks like they could have walked out of the crowd at a punk rock concert.

And then it hits me.

I know where my phone is.

I also know I did something way stupider than call Naomi last night.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:46 pm*

I fly up the driveway, weaving through the chaos to get to the front door. Everyone else is heading for the backyard, and the slightest bit of relief dulls the panic taking over my body when I remember the whole house is locked—or at least it should be, unless I also screwed that up while I was drunk.

I punch in the code for the keypad on the front door and zoom into the kitchen without bothering to take my shoes off. The backyard is already packed with people filling up the deck and the pool. The blaring heavy metal music is so loud I can hear every lyric even inside the house.

I run straight for the fridge and fling the double doors open, praying to whoever's listening that my phone still works after a night of being shoved behind Naomi's pickle jars. I have no idea why I decided on that as a hiding place.

“Oh, thank god!” I gasp when the screen turns on after a couple tries.

I swipe through my texts to make sure I'm remembering things right, and all my fears are confirmed.

Brayden, Nick's sketchy friend who drove me to Ottawa at the start of the summer, texted me to ask if I knew anyone in my dad's neighborhood who wanted to host a pool party for one of the heavy metal event things he's always organizing.

Drunk Andrea decided a truly momentous way to end a truly disastrous summer would be to volunteer my dad's backyard for the cause. I even texted Brayden the code for the gate.

I flinch when I hear a glass break out in the backyard, followed by a chorus of cheering, but I can't look away from my phone.

A text from my mom just came in.

I open up our conversation and see things are even worse than I thought. I have no memory of messaging her last night, but the record shows she decided to pick me up tonight instead of tomorrow because our flight is so early and it would be easier for me to sleep at the hotel.

Her most recent text says she's fifteen minutes away.

Sweat coats the back of my neck as my nausea comes back full force. I drop my phone onto the counter and glance at the backyard just in time to see somebody stumble into one of my dad's sculptures and send it sliding off its pedestal to shatter against the pool deck.

I drop my head over the sink and start puking.

## CHAPTER 22

Naomi

The tips of my sandals dig two trenches into the sand as Priya and I dangle in the swings in the small park two blocks over from my house. The creaky old chains groan as we sway back and forth, both of us slurping down giant Slushies we got at the corner store. A few birds are serenading the first stains of orange streaking the sky as the sun begins setting.

It's the same way we've spent a hundred summer evenings before. Back when we were so small our feet barely brushed the ground, my mom would come to the park



and push us for so long I'm sure we wore her arms out. Once we got old enough to come to the park alone, we'd sit in the swings talking about all the things we'd do once we finally finished high school for so long our butts went numb.

The tops of the swing chains are rusting, and the red paint on the support poles has almost completely flaked off, but in all the years I've lived here, they've never changed anything about the park. Even the corner store we always get our Slushies from still offers the same selection of flavors they did when we were little.

"Isn't it crazy that we were on this swing set when I got accepted to Ottawa U?" Priya asks. "It's really hitting me. Everything we always talked about is finally here, and there's no going back. We're about to start the rest of our lives, and there's nothing we can do to stop it."

I look up from where I've been swirling the slush around in my cup. My swing has ground to a halt, but I don't bother pushing off from the sand again. I let myself hover in place as I watch Priya pick up more and more speed.

"Would you want to stop it?" I ask. "If you could?"

She presses her lips together, her expression caught somewhere between fear and determination.

"No," she says after a moment. "I think if this summer has taught me anything, it's that I'm ready. I mean, unless Shal gets us drunk again and we come up with a university bucket list too. I don't think I'll be ready for another bucket list for a while."

I hadn't thought about Andrea for the whole fifteen or so minutes we've spent on the swings. At the mention of the bucket list, it's like the cork gets pulled out of whatever bottle I've shoved all my feelings into. They come pouring out so fast I gasp for air,

like I'm drowning in the memories and fighting to keep my head up high enough to breathe.

“Oh, Naomi!”

Priya hops off her swing and runs around to the back of mine so she can lean over and wrap her arms around me. She almost knocks my Slushie out of my hands, but I don't care. I lean back into her and snuffle as the corners of my eyes start to burn.

“It's gonna be okay,” she coos.

The park blurs as tears threaten to spill down my cheeks. I blink them back, staring at the golden light filtering through the leaves of the maple tree at the edge of the park. The whole sky is a soft orange edged with pink.

I can't help wondering if Andrea is watching the sunset too.

It'll be her last one in Ottawa.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:46 pm*

“She’s leaving tomorrow,” I say to Priya, my voice thick. “Like, she’s really leaving. I know it’s stupid, but I just kept thinking maybe she’d call, maybe she’d change her mind, maybe she’d do something, but she’ll be gone tomorrow. If it was going to happen, it would have happened by now.”

Priya hugs me even tighter. “I’m so sorry.”

She holds me as I take a few shuddering breaths. I manage to get the tears under control before I end up terrorizing the family playing over by the monkey bars by bawling my eyes out in the middle of the park.

“Do you think maybe we’re too old to be here?” I say with a watery laugh as I nod over at the parents helping their two little kids across the bars. “I hope they don’t think we’re creepy.”

Priya scoffs. “This is our park. We own this hood.”

I laugh again, the sound more convincing this time, and Priya takes it as a sign she can return to her swing. We’ve only just started sipping our drinks again when the sight of someone waving their arms above their head down at the end of the block catches my eye.

“Is that...Shal?”

She’s supposed to be at a party with the guy she’s been counting as her summer fling despite seeming thoroughly uninterested every time she talks about him, but sure enough, she comes jogging up the sidewalk and then runs across the park’s grassy

lawn to meet us.

“Naomi’s mom told me you were here,” she says before we can ask any questions. She’s panting, and she bends to brace her hands on the tops of her thighs. “I told Liam I’m done with him, and then I remembered you two were hanging out tonight, so I came over.”

She straightens up and grins at us before she starts to sway on her feet and then totters backwards a few steps.

Priya leans forward in her swing to squint at her. “Are you drunk?”

Shal giggles and keeps swaying. “I’m just a little tipsy.”

“You didn’t drive, did you?” Priya asks.

Shal scowls. “Of course not. I walked. The party was pretty close to here, not that you could call it much of a party.”

She sighs and then lowers herself down to sit on the grass in front of us. She’s wearing a silky halter top and some black shorts, and her hair is gathered into a ponytail that’s sitting a little lopsided on her head. There’s a bit of mascara smeared under one of her eyes.

“Shal, are you...okay?” I ask.

She sighs again. “I’m fine. I’m just feeling...disillusioned.”

Priya and I share a look.

“The party was just a bunch of the same people I usually see at parties,” Shal

continues, “and Liam was being his usual blah self, and I realized I was only drinking so I could be mellowed out enough to actually stand being around him, and...it just hit me. I don’t have to do that anymore. I don’t need those people’s approval. I’m not even going to see those people anymore after everyone starts university. Like, why do I still care? And then I realized...I don’t.”

She digs her fingers into the grass and then tips her head back to stare up at the orange sky. She ends up tilting her head so much she loses her balance and lands flat on her back with an, “Oomph!”

Priya and I glance at each other again before getting up off the swings.

“Okay, sister,” Priya says as we each crouch down on either side of Shal, “let’s go back to Naomi’s house. I think you need some water.”

She waves us off. “I’m fine. I’m just a little tipsy.”

I glance behind me and see the parents at the monkey bars are loading their kids into a wagon. I hope they haven’t reported us for disorderly conduct. Shal shows no signs of getting up, and I don’t think dragging her all the way home is an option, so Priya and I end up reclaiming our spots on the swings while she stays sprawled in the grass.

“You know, I really did want to fall in love this summer,” she says, “and not just to finish the list. I really wanted to find someone special, you know? Like you two did.”

My chest twinges, and I tighten my grip on the swing chains.

“I don’t think I’m in love with Bill,” Priya says.

Shal lifts her head enough to gawk at her. “You’re crazy about him. I’ve never seen you like this about a guy.”

Priya shrugs. “I do really, really like him, but...it’s not quite love. It’s more like...loving the possibility of love. The potential for it. Loving the space you’ve made for it to grow if it wants to.”

Shal scoffs and lets her head drop back to the ground. “Now you sound tipsy.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:46 pm*

Priya stares down at her lap like she's embarrassed, but I lean forward in my swing and say, "I like that. That's beautiful."

She gives me a grin. "Thanks."

"It kind of reminds me of this one poem by Yates..." I trail off when she grimaces. "I'm kidding."

She chuckles. "Sure you are. But seriously, I've been thinking about that a lot, actually. I think that's kind of been the theme of my whole summer: falling in love with my own potential, with my own future, even if it's different from everything I've been so far."

Two months ago, it would have terrified me to hear her say that.

I wanted to be sure of the future. I wanted to know it wouldn't look too different from the past. I wanted to know our friendship would stay as constant as this old swing set, even if that meant we got covered in rust.

Now I know we can change without losing ourselves.

"Oh. My. God!"

Whatever cheesy thing I was about to say to Priya gets interrupted by Shal's shout. She's holding her phone a few inches from her face while she stares at the screen with her mouth hanging open.

“What is it?” Priya asks.

Watching Shal try to scramble to her feet and bring the phone over is a bit painful. She’s definitely way past ‘tipsy.’

“This is the mansion, right?”

She thrusts her phone into my face. I have to push her hand back a few inches before I can focus on the video playing on the screen. It’s a clip posted just a few seconds ago by someone whose account I don’t recognize.

The video contains all the key elements of a raging pool party, or at least what I think the key elements are, considering I’ve never been to one. The audio is crackly, but I can hear some kind of heavy metal song blasting over the noise of the crowd. People clutching beer bottles and Solo cups are swarming around a huge swimming pool dotted with people canon-balling into the water and floating around in inner tubes.

My breath catches.

I know that pool.

“Oh my god,” Priya says from behind me. “Is she seriously having a pool party? Who even posted this?”

Shal shrugs, the phone jiggling in her grip. “Some random girl I follow. She used to go to our school.”

Priya squints at the screen. “I can’t believe Andrea is throwing a party. What the hell?”

“What the hell is right,” Shal barks, snatching the phone away to plant her hands on



her hips. “A pool party was on our list. Does she really think she can finish our list without us?”

I slide off the swing and take a few steps away from them, turning my back before they can see my face twist with pain. The Slushie cup falls out of my hand. I wrap both my arms around my stomach and wait for the ache in my chest to ease, but the gnawing sensation only gets worse.

I don't care about the list anymore. I care that I was just crying on a swing set wondering if Andrea was missing me, and it turns out she's spending her last night in her dad's house throwing a rager.

Like she's over me already.

Like I really was just a fling to her.

That night at the open mic, she told me I meant everything, that she didn't think she was good enough to be with me, but what if she was just trying not to hurt my feelings?

What if she felt sorry for me? What if she turned me down because she realized how pathetic I am after all?

“Naomi.”

Priya steps closer but doesn't try to touch me. I don't turn around.

The voices I thought I'd managed to drown out are now ringing loud and clear in my head, all the doubts I thought I'd buried springing to the surface again.

I thought Andrea saw me. I thought she helped me see myself, but maybe I got the

whole thing wrong.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:46 pm*

“It’s just a stupid party,” Priya says from behind me, her voice soft. “We don’t have to talk about it. We don’t even have to think about it. We can just go home and watch Jennifer’s Body and eat pickles and stay up all night. I’ll even buy you another Slushie if you want.”

A flood of warmth fills the hole in my chest, and I whirl around to face her. As I stand there staring at the best friend I’ve ever had in the park where we grew from kids to teenagers to people taking their very first steps into adulthood, I realize it doesn’t matter what this summer meant to Andrea.

It doesn’t matter if I was more than a fling.

It doesn’t matter if she really did see me or not, because I saw me, and no matter who helped me get there, nobody will ever be able to take that away.

I’m the one who stood on that stage and read that poem. I’m the one who followed her into the parking lot and laid my whole heart on the line. I’m the one who decided I was enough for her, even if she couldn’t do the same for me.

The voices in my head might be trying to tear me down and tell me differently, but the loudest part of me knows I will always be enough for myself.

“You know what?” I say to Priya. “That sounds like the perfect summer night.”

Her face splits into a grin to mirror my own. She links her arm through mine, and the two of us turn to head over and collect Shal.

Only Shal isn't where we left her.

"Shal?" Priya shouts, just as I whip my head around and spot Shal reaching for the door of a silver car that's pulled up to the edge of the sidewalk.

"Come on!" Shal shouts, waving us over.

"Who is that?" Priya demands, releasing my arm so the two of us can sprint over to the car.

"Our driver," Shal answers with an eye-roll. "For the ride I ordered. Duh."

"The ride to where?" Priya demands.

"To the party." Shal rolls her eyes again, like the answer should be obvious. "Do you really want Andrea to finish the bucket list without us? We have to go to this pool party."

She tugs on the door handle, but Priya grabs her arm.

"Listen, Shal," she says over the sound of her sister's affronted gasp. "We are not going to the party. You are drunk, and that is a terrible idea."

Shal yanks her arm out of Priya's grasp and then shrugs. "Speak for yourself, but I am finishing that bucket list. I'm going to go to that party and make a new friend and also fall passionately in love, okay? We can't let Andrea beat us at our own list!"

Before either of us can move to stop her again, she hauls the door open and dives into the backseat.

Priya groans. "We're not getting her out of this car, are we?"

Considering that Shal has now buckled herself in and is humming along to the radio, I shake my head.

The driver looks back over his shoulder and asks, “Are we getting in or not, ladies?”

Priya groans again and then looks at me with a grimace. “I’m sorry, Naomi. I can’t let her go alone. I’m sure by the time we get there, I’ll be able to convince her to come back. You can stay, and—”

“I’m coming with you.”

Her eyes widen. “You don’t have to. I’ll deal with it. You shouldn’t have to see—”

“If Andrea can spend her last night in the city throwing a pool party, I can show up there. Shal is right. We have to finish the list. Maybe it’s stupid, but we made it this far, and...and I think maybe I need this.”

I was ready to forget about the list altogether, but now that the chance to finish it for good has literally pulled up to the curb in front of us, I can’t help thinking ‘That Summer We Almost Completed a Crazy Bucket List’ is not what I want this chapter of my life’s story to be called.

I’ve read so many stories about other people. Now that mine has finally begun, I’m not going to cut it short.

So I get in the car.

CHAPTER 23

Andrea

“Why would you take several clearly drunk texts I sent at one in the morning as confirmation you could actually throw a party here?”

I whirl around to face Brayden after locking the front door. He’s wearing board shorts and a t-shirt for a band who seem to be really into Viking aesthetics.

“It just seemed really hardcore of you,” he says, holding his hands up to feign innocence.

He is not innocent. Once I dealt with the whole puking into the sink situation, the first thing I did was run outside—through the front door, rather than the deck door, since the last thing I want is for anyone to get into the house—and start shrieking Brayden’s name while I waded through the crowd to find him.

He was in the middle of setting up a keg, and I could tell after a few seconds of screaming at him that he was already a couple beers in. The music was so loud I had to drag him all the way around the house and pull him inside to stand a chance of getting my message across. My message is that he needs to shut this party down and get everyone out of here in the next ten minutes.

“Well, I’m not interested in being hardcore today,” I tell him. “Are you going to stop this party or not?”

Instead of marching out there to shut the music off, he leans against the wall and tilts his head to the side. “You seem really stressed out. Do you want me to grab you a

beer?”

I let out a scream. “Brayden, this party cannot be happening, and I have a feeling those people are not going to listen to me if I try to get them out of here myself. You need to shut this down.”

“Okay, Okay.” He pushes off the wall and lifts his hands again. “I’ll do my best. You sure you don’t want a beer, though? Seems like you have a lot going on, and sometimes a beer and a bit of headbanging is all you need to fix that, you know?”

I stare at him for a couple seconds, and once it sinks in that he’s being completely serious, I can’t help it.

I burst out laughing.

I double over and laugh so hard my ribs ache. I stagger across the entryway end up slumped against the wall, still howling as I slide all the way down to a seat on the cold tiled floor.

“Uh...” Brayden says.

The quick glance I take at his freaked out expression just makes me laugh even more. It’s not even funny. None of this is funny, but my body doesn’t seem to be getting the message.

“I’m sorry,” I wheeze once I can finally speak again. “Uh, yeah, you could say I have a lot going on.”

Another bark of laughter bursts out of me before I go on.

“This is my dad’s house. I’m supposed to be taking care of it, and now my mom is

going to show up here any minute and see I'm actually destroying it, which is not going to surprise her because she's used to me being disappointing."

I ball my fists up in the sleeves of my hoodie and stare straight at my knees as the words pour out of me. I'm sure Brayden's probably plotting an escape from the girl having a complete mental breakdown on the floor, but I can't stop.

"I'm supposed to fly back to Toronto tomorrow and commit myself to finally being the perfect daughter, but I'm not the perfect daughter, and I think for the first time in my life I'm actually...okay with that? Except it's still terrifying, and also on top of all of that, I think I'm in love with this girl I really messed things up with. I have to go find her and tell her that before it's too late, but there's a raging heavy metal party out there destroying my dad's backyard, and my mom is probably pulling into the driveway as we speak."

The thump of the bass outside and the muffled shouts from the party fill the silence that falls once I'm done.

"Oh," Brayden says after a couple seconds tick by.

"Yeah," I say. I look up and grimace at him, all the laughter now drained from my body. "That about sums it up."

He steps closer and crouches down in front of me until we're eye to eye.

"Andrea," he says, "that is very hardcore. I'm going to go stop this party so you can go find that girl."

He straightens up and heads to the kitchen. I hear the sliding door screech open before the volume from outside increases by what feels like fifteen decibels. I get to my feet to run over and lock the door behind him, but it seems like nobody even



noticed him slip outside. He's disappeared into the crowd. I stand with my nose pressed against the glass, my foot tapping out a deranged rhythm as I wait to see what happens.

There's no way we'll clear them all out before my mom gets here, but things might go marginally better if she shows up and finds a crazy party ending instead of one in full-swing.

I'm considering cracking the door open to see what's taking him so long when the boom of the music shuts off. There's a split-second of silence out on the deck, and then I hear the rumble of murmuring voices and some shouted complaints.

The whole party turns to look as Brayden's head and shoulders pop up above the crowd on the deck. He must have jumped up on one of the tables. I can't make out everything he's saying through the glass, but it doesn't take long for his announcement about the party ending to get drowned out by a chorus of 'Boo!' from all sides of the yard.

Brayden tries to wave down the protests, but he's interrupted by a scuffle of movement in the crowd, and the next second, he disappears from view. A few people start cheering, and then a wide enough path is cleared for me to see why: two ridiculously buff dudes have grabbed Brayden by his arms and legs and are carrying him to the side of the pool.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:46 pm*

Somebody figures out how to get the music going again, and the whole party claps and stomps along as Brayden's captors swing him back and forth over the edge of the water. I wince at the splash as they finally let go and dump him into the pool, right alongside my last hope for stopping this party in time.

I back away from the door, my mind scrambling to come up with some way to make it look like I'm not getting my father's house destroyed. I still have no idea what I'm going to tell my mom today. I know whatever I say is not going to go well, but it's going to go extra bad against the backdrop of the MTV Spring Break scene playing out in front of me.

I jog back to the entryway after I decide the only chance I have at improving the situation is meeting my mom out on the street before she can get to the house and see just how bad things are. I bend down to pull my sneakers on and then freeze at the sound of knuckles rapping against the front door.

I don't even have to look up to know I'm too late.

She's here.

Inch by inch, I lift my gaze from the floor to face my mother's glare on the other side of the glass. She's wearing black cigarette pants and a flowy white top, her dyed blonde hair pulled into the signature high ponytail she's still known for from all her old Pilates DVDs. Her posture is as perfect as a prima ballerina's, but her face looks like a volcano on the verge of eruption.

She knocks again, harder this time.

My knees shake as I get to my feet. I reach for the door handle, and she doesn't even wait for me to pull it all the way open before she storms past me into the house.

“Andrea, what the hell is going on here?”

She doesn't bother stopping or giving me a second look as she glides through the entryway and then turns the corner into the kitchen. I take a step forward, reaching a hand out like I can pull her back through sheer force of will alone, but my mumbled plea for her to wait goes unnoticed.

“What are all those cars—”

Her question gets cut off by a gasp so loud I almost expect to hear her drop unconscious on the kitchen floor.

I follow her into the kitchen, dragging my feet like I'm walking up to a firing squad, and find her standing facing the deck with her mouth hanging open and her face getting redder by the second. She turns at the sound of my footsteps. Her jaw opens and closes a few times but no sound comes out. Her eyes look like they're about to pop out of her head.

The only other time I've seen her look even close to this mad was when I told her I was moving to Montreal whether she liked it or not.

Just like that day, the sight of her makes my hands tremble so hard I have to squeeze them into fists to keep the tremors from travelling all the way up my arms. My skin breaks out in a cold sweat, and the floor seems to tilt and sway under my feet.

She hurls one word at me.

“Why?”

I drop my gaze to the floor.

“It was a mistake. I didn’t mean to—”

She cuts me off with a scoff. “You didn’t mean to invite a bunch of drunk strangers over to destroy your father’s property the day before I’m supposed to take you back to Toronto? Do you know how ridiculous that sounds? Do you really expect me to buy that?”

My shoulders curl inwards, and my chin drops closer to my chest.

I thought I could talk to her. I wasn’t expecting a miracle, but I thought we could at least get somewhere, like I did with my dad.

Now I see that even without a giant party emphasizing just how disappointing I am with every thump of the bass, I wouldn’t have been able to stand up to her. When we’re face to face like this, I choke. I always choke on everything she wants me to be until I’m too suffocated to be who I am.

“I just don’t get it,” she says. “When you started doing things like this in high school, I figured it was just a phase. I expected more from you, but still, I thought it would pass. When you decided to waste a whole year of your life partying in Montreal, I thought that would pass too. I made excuses for you. I told myself you just needed to get it out of your system, and then you’d be ready to become the person I know you can be, but this...”

My head is so heavy I can’t lift it even an inch, but I still see the whirl of movement as she sweeps her hand out towards the deck.

“I just don’t get it,” she continues. “Your whole life, you’ve been telling me how much the company means to you, how you can’t wait to get started there, and I’ve

done everything I can to make sure you're ready for that. I've always thought of it as our company, ever since you were a little girl and you told me that's what you wanted. I've been building this for us, so we have something no one can ever take away. I wanted you to have something in your life you could always count on, but that means you need to step up and commit to it, and this...this is not commitment."

I hear a loud splash outside, and she makes a disgusted sound as she watches whatever is happening in the pool.

"Can you at least tell me why?" she asks after a moment. "I've tried so hard to understand it, Andrea, and I just can't imagine why you keep doing this. I've given you everything you need to succeed, and you keep throwing it all in my face."

I'm still staring down at the floor. The lump in my throat is getting even bigger. Soon I won't be able to breathe at all.

"Are you going to say something?"

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:46 pm*

My head is spinning. I can't get enough oxygen. This is exactly how I used to feel in Toronto, right before I'd sneak out of the house to go do something stupid with my friends just so I could feel the pressure lift from my lungs for a couple hours.

"Are you going to answer me, Andrea?"

Her voice is louder now but still edged with icy control despite the rage I can feel rolling off her.

"Are you even going to look at me?"

I clench my fists so hard my hands ache, but I still can't make myself look up. I can't face knowing what she sees when she looks at me.

She sighs like she didn't expect any different and then starts digging through her purse.

"I'm calling the cops to come deal with this disaster. If doesn't take all evening to get the yard in order, I'll see if my assistant can switch our flight to tonight. We'll talk more about this at home."

I can't leave tonight.

I can't leave without seeing Naomi, without telling her the truth, even if it's too late for the truth to change anything.

Even if the truth isn't enough.

For a moment, she's all I can see: the flash of that bright blue dress, a hint of a smile on her face as tucks her hair behind her ears.

I have to see her again, even if it's only just once.

My mom is already punching in a phone number when I find enough willpower to lift my chin and say, "No."

She freezes. "Excuse me?"

"I can't leave tonight."

Her gaze flicks over my face, her forehead creasing into an expression I can't read before she smoothes it out and sighs again.

"Andrea, you can't let just one more night turn into just one more year again. I know this isn't who you are, and if you just come back to Toronto, you'll—"

"So who am I?"

My voice is clearer now, and even though my hands are still shaking, I can meet her eyes.

"What's that supposed to mean?" she asks as she lowers her phone.

"You said this isn't who I am, and I just...I just want to know who it is you think I am, because I'm starting to see that maybe...maybe that's not me. Maybe that's never been me."

She flinches and takes a step back. I clench my jaw to hold back the urge to apologize, to tell her I'm wrong, to promise I'll try harder next time.

Trying harder never made anything better for either of us.

“Andrea.” There’s the slightest tremor to her voice as she says my name, but she hardens her tone right after. “I don’t know what made you lose sight of yourself as a teenager, but I never lost sight of you. When you were little, it was always your dream to—”

“Exactly,” I cut in. “I was little.”

Her eyes flare at the interruption, but I widen my stance and refuse to back down.

I can breathe easier now. More air rushes into the room with every word I say, giving me the fuel I need to go on.

“And maybe what happened to me when I became a teenager was growing up. I’m not a little kid anymore, Mom. I have my own ideas and experiences. I’m my own person, and I tried so hard to squish that person into a box you built for me when I was small that I didn’t have any room to grow into myself.”

I see the hurt flooding her eyes, but I don’t stop. If I stop now, I might never start again.

“I was suffocating, and all those times I acted out during high school were because I didn’t know how else to breathe. I didn’t run away to Montreal to party and waste my life. I went there because I needed to get out of that box and just be me for a minute.”



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:46 pm*

She shakes her head and tries to say something when I pause for a breath, but still, I go on.

“Only it didn’t work because it turns out I was so terrified finding myself would mean finding something you don’t like that I gave up on finding myself at all. So yeah, I did kind of waste a year of my life messing around, until...until I showed up here, and I met this girl, and...”

I trail off as another image of Naomi flashes across my mind in such bright Technicolor it almost hurts to look at her. I picture her staring into my eyes while we danced in the market until it felt like the whole crowd disappeared. There was just us and the music, and that was more than enough.

That was everything.

“And she saw me,” I say. “All of me. She knew I didn’t have it all figured out, and she didn’t care. She just wanted me to be me, whatever that looked like, and I didn’t know how to handle it because I’d never felt anything like that before.”

My mom presses a hand to her chest. Her purse has slipped down her arm, but she doesn’t move to fix it. She just stares at me as pain starts to take over her face, warping her features in a way I haven’t seen since the divorce.

“I don’t want to disappoint you, Mom.” My voice cracks, but I make myself continue. “I don’t want to hurt you either. I don’t want you to think I’m giving up on you, but...I also can’t hurt myself.”

She moves her hand from her chest to cover her mouth, her head shaking slowly from side to side. When she speaks from behind her fingers, her voice is hoarse.

“You...you don’t want the internship, do you?”

The instincts that have ruled me for so long are screaming at me to tell her I do want it, to tell her I’m sorry and hope she’ll give me another chance, or to at least say something that will soften the blow of the truth.

There’s no getting around the truth, though.

“It’s just not who I am anymore, Mom.”

She takes a stumbling step backwards. I want to scream from how much it hurts to see her hurting like this, but I can’t lie to her anymore. I can’t lie to myself.

“I’m still figuring out what I want,” I tell her, “but I know deep down, it’s not in Toronto, and that’s not because I don’t love you or want to make you happy. I just want to make me happy too.”

She drops both her arms to her sides. Her purse slides off and hits the floor, but she doesn’t seem to notice. She spreads her hands like she’s trying to pull her next words out of the air itself.

“Andrea, I...I’ve always wanted you to be happy. I just...I-I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything yet,” I say. “I know it’s a lot to take in. I get that. I just...I can’t get on that plane, Mom.”

She takes a shaky breath and then bends to grab her purse. Once she’s straightened

back up and slipped the strap over her shoulder, some of her usual stony composure seems to have returned.

“I know you think that,” she says, “but have you considered maybe you’re...you’re doing all this for that girl? Because people leave, Andrea. People let you down. People give up, and—”

For the first time since she walked in here, my skin starts to heat with anger.

I’m not going to let her bring Naomi into this. This is between me and her.

“I’m the one who gave up,” I cut in. “I’m the one who let her down. I might have messed things up forever, but I’m still not moving back to Toronto, because that really isn’t about her. It’s about me. For once, it’s about me. I’d say the same thing even if I knew she’d never speak to me again.”

I have to squeeze my eyes shut as the possibility sinks in.

Naomi was right that night at the open mic; our story was just getting started, but I slammed the book shut in the middle of the first chapter, and now I might not ever be able to pry it open again.

“I just don’t want you making a mistake and ending up hurt,” my mom says. “I’ve always tried to keep you safe from that.”

“But you can’t,” I tell her, shaking my head. “You can’t keep me safe from that, and...I don’t want you to. I am hurt. It hurts every single time I think of her, but even if I feel like that for the rest of my life, I’d never give back what I got to have.”

A soft sound from over by the entryway makes us both freeze. The noise of the party makes it hard to tell, but I could have sworn I heard somebody gasp.

“Hello?” my mom calls. “Is someone there?”

The only answer we get is the continued pounding of the music outside. I share a glance with my mom and then backtrack a few steps so I can peer into the entryway.

All the air gets knocked out of my lungs.

“Naomi?” I wheeze.

She’s pressed against the wall right around the corner, her eyes wide and her face going paler by the second.

“I’m sorry!” she yelps. “We heard about the party, and then Shal got in a car and we couldn’t let her come alone because she’s drunk, and then I let myself in to look for you, and I heard...”

Her voice peters out and her eyes somehow get even rounder as her gaze darts between me and the kitchen, where my mom is still hovering out of sight

“I’ll just go now,” she squeaks, already backing away. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to listen in. I—”

I step closer.

“Naomi, wait.”

She goes still as I walk over until there are only a couple feet of space left between us. I don’t close the distance. I don’t know where we stand. All I know is that I can’t stop staring at her, that I never want to stop staring at her, that I’m drinking the sight of her in like she’s a thundering waterfall and I haven’t had even a drop to drink in days.

I watch her throat bob as she swallows, and then she speaks in a low voice.

“You did let me down.”

I wince, pain radiating through my ribcage as I brace for her to turn and leave.

“But I think maybe I needed that,” she adds. “I needed to know I could count on myself.”

I open my mouth to answer, but before I get a chance, I hear footsteps behind me and see her eyes go wide again as she stares over my shoulder at my mom. I glance behind me too and see her watching me and Naomi with an expression that almost looks tender before she catches me staring and wipes it off her face.

“I’m going back to the hotel,” she announces. “I...I need to think about all this.”

We step aside as she crosses the entryway. She turns to walk back over to us just before she reaches the door and then thrusts her hand out towards Naomi.

“I’m Valerie. I apologize for us needing to meet like this.”

Naomi accepts the handshake, her eyes now so wide I’d laugh if I felt like it were possible to find anything about this moment funny.

“I-I’m Naomi, and, um, no problem.”

My mom shifts her purse back into place and then heads for the door. She looks back at me once she’s pulled it open, and I see it again, for just another second: that tenderness, that softness I’ve always been looking for but never found.

“Andrea...I do want you to be happy. I always have.”

She leaves before I have a chance to answer. I stand there staring after her for so long

Naomi asks if I'm okay.

I nod even though I wouldn't say 'okay' is the best word for how I'm feeling. Then I ask, "How much of that did you hear?"

"I think all of it. I'm pretty sure I showed up just after she did."

I wince as I start replaying the whole conversation, trying to gauge what Naomi's reaction must have been.

Then I realize it doesn't matter. She heard the truth, and the truth is all I can give her.

She heard the truth, and she's still here.

"Andrea, I—"

She takes a step closer, but I interrupt before she can say more.

"I know I messed up. I'm so sorry. I hurt you. I should have stepped up for you. I'm just so sorry, Naomi."

She tilts her head, two faint lines appearing between her eyebrows as she considers me for a moment.

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“I get it now,” she says. “After hearing that, it all makes sense. I didn’t know just how bad it was for you with your family. I forgive you.”

“You do?”

For the first time today, she smiles, and my whole body blooms with warmth.

“Yeah, of course. I know it wasn’t about me at all, and I’m just happy you don’t have to feel like that about yourself anymore.”

She closes the space between us, but I don’t reach for her yet, not before I know this isn’t too good to be true.

“Look, I know I’m a giant mess right now,” I tell her, “but I won’t be forever. I don’t expect you to say yes to this, but I just have to know if maybe...maybe someday we could give this another shot?”

She leans her head closer to mine, and my heartbeat booms louder than the music outside.

“Someday?” she asks.

“Yeah, someday. I don’t need to know when. I just—”

“How about today?”

Then she tilts her head and presses her mouth to mine. My eyes close, and in the next



second, we're pressed tight together, our arms weaving around each other until it feels like we're closer than we've ever been. A million tiny explosions flare across the backs of my eyelids when she parts her lips and gasps against me as my fingertips press hard against her back.

We kiss for so long my knees go weak and I'm in danger of pulling us both down right here on the entryway floor, but she tips her head back just in time and grins at me with hazy eyes.

"Yeah," I say between panting breaths, "today sounds good."

She laughs, and the sound is like hearing a song I've spent years searching for.

My attempt to lean in for another kiss is interrupted by yet another splash followed by a round of cheering in the backyard.

"So, um, are you going to explain why there are a bunch of metalheads having a party out there?" Naomi asks.

"That is...a long and embarrassing story." I sigh and loosen my grip on her. "I really need to do something about that situation before they destroy anything else, but to be honest, I kind of just want to kiss you more."

She lets out the cutest little hum of agreement and starts to lean back in towards me.

Then somebody knocks on the kitchen door.

"Thank god I locked that," I mutter as the knocking continues, getting louder and faster by the second.

"Wow, they really want in," Naomi says.

The knocking doesn't let up, and after a few more seconds, a voice I'm pretty sure I recognize starts chanting loud enough for us to hear through the glass.

“OPEN UP! OPEN UP! OPEN UP!”

“Does that sound like Shal to you?” I ask.

Naomi squints as she listens to the chanting for another second before she nods.

“Yeah, it does. Priya is here too. We saw someone's post about the party and decided to, uh, make a dramatic appearance.”

I hadn't even gotten to wondering why they were here yet, but as soon as I do, I gasp and let go of her so I can cover my mouth with my hands.

“Oh my god, you must have thought I was throwing a party without you guys,” I say as my blood runs cold, “and that I wasn't even sad about leaving. I'm so sorry. I—”

“It's okay. You can give me the long and embarrassing story later. I think—”

She cuts herself off as the knocking gets so loud I fear for the door. We take off into the kitchen, and sure enough, Shal is standing in front of the glass clutching a Solo cup in one hand and the ridiculously giant bicep of a huge bearded dude with the other.

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He's got about six different facial piercings and is wearing a Metallica t-shirt over a bathing suit. He looks as confused as I am about why Shal is holding his arm.

I lift up the lock and then crack the door open enough for Shal to speak to us.

"You guysssss!" she shrieks, swaying a little on her feet. "I'm gonna finish the bucket list! This is my new best friend, um..."

She turns her head and blinks at him. He looks back and forth between me, her, and Naomi like he's hoping someone will tell him what's going on.

"Uh, my name is Bones," he rumbles in a deep voice.

"Yeah, Bones!" Shal shouts. "He's hilarious. Like, his name is Bones. That's so funny. So yeah, I decided he's my new friend. Checking that off the list! Also, I decided if Priya is allowed to count falling in love with the potential of love or whatever the hell she was talking about, then I am allowed to count being in love with myself."

She beams at us like she's just announced she's found the cure to cancer.

"Oh! That's, um, really nice, Shal," Naomi says after a moment.

"Isn't it? So yeah, checking that off!" Shal draws a giant check mark in the air with her Solo cup, beer sloshing over the rim to land on the deck boards.

"Well, thank you for telling us that," I add. "Maybe you should come inside and let

Bones go back to—”

She ignores me and presses her face into the gap between the sliding door and the edge of the doorframe to shout, “We need to jump in the pool!”

Naomi and I glance at each other again.

“We do?”

“Yes! Priya, me, you two, and Bones! We need to have a big end of summer moment!”

“Um...” I say before turning to Naomi for some backup.

Instead of trying to lure Shal inside with me, she stands tapping her chin for a second before she shrugs.

“Okay. Why not?”

I gawk at her, but she just grins.

“I think we should do it.”

We shouldn’t. What we should be doing is shutting this party down before someone really does call the cops or another several thousand dollar statue gets smashed, if that hasn’t happened already, but then she reaches for my hand and whines, “Pleeeeeease?”

I can’t help thinking back to my first few days here, when she’d literally tuck and roll just to avoid having to speak to me in the house.

We've come a long way since then.

"Okay," I say, mirroring her grin now, "but we have to go around the other way so I can keep this door locked."

Shal frowns and starts shouting protests when we try to explain the plan to her, but we get her to stop trying to shove her head inside long enough to lock the door. We both shriek with laughter as we sprint out the front door and race each other to the backyard. By the time we get to the pool, Shal is standing at the edge with a baffled Bones on one side of her and a reluctant Priya hovering a few feet back from the water on the other.

"Oh no," Priya groans once we've fought through the crowd to claim a spot beside her. "Has she tried to rope you into this too?"

Naomi laughs and grabs Priya's hand before taking hold of mine too.

"She's succeeded. Come on." She pulls us both up to the very edge of the pool. "Shal has a point. This is a pretty great end of summer moment."

Priya gives a pointed look at the heavy metal fans all headbanging to whatever hardcore anthem just started booming through the speakers, and Naomi laughs again.

"Okay, yeah, it's weird," she says, "but what about this summer hasn't been?"

Priya can't argue with that, and neither can I. Shal waves her arms around to get the crowd's attention as she begins to count down from ten. By the time she's reached the last few seconds, the entire party is shouting along with her.

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“THREE! TWO! ONE! GO!”

I leap off the edge, Naomi’s hand still clutching mine as we soar through the air before crashing through the surface of the water.

Everything turns muffled and slow. Bubbles swarm past my ears as I let myself sink down to the very bottom of the pool.

The world is quiet down here. With nothing but the echoes from the roiling surface and the thump of my heartbeat to fill my ears, I can imagine there’s no party to deal with at all. There’s no mom or dad to deal with either. There are no questions to ask or plans for the future to figure out.

For a moment, it all hovers above me, a weight I know will crash down on me as soon as I come up for air.

But I need to breathe, and Naomi’s hand is tugging me up to join her.

I kick off the floor of the pool and shoot up to breach the surface, sucking in a deep breath the second I do. I blink my eyes open to find Naomi’s face just inches away from mine.

I stare at the water droplets clinging to her eyelashes, at the strands of blonde hair plastered to the sides of her face, at the blue of her eyes reflecting the shimmering ripples and waves in the pool, and I decide ‘weird’ was an understatement.

This has been the most unexpected and utterly chaotic summer of my life, but I

wouldn't change a single second of it because somehow, this summer led me to her.

## CHAPTER 24

Andrea

She's wearing the blue dress again.

She told me there were no guarantees when I asked if she would, but she steps out of the house in the dress I'll probably be picturing her wearing until the day I die. She's paired it with white sneakers and a cute little white headband this time. The colour scheme makes her cheeks look extra pink when she catches me staring at her from where I've been sitting out on the front steps.

"What?" she asks as she pats her hair down.

"You know what," I tell her, giving myself a few more seconds to stare before I get to my feet.

She gives my outfit a once-over and nods her approval once her eyes reach my face.

"You look so pretty," she says, stepping close enough to run a finger under the simple gold pendant I'm wearing to go with my purple skater skirt and white crop top.

"Is this good enough for our mystery venue?" I ask to distract myself from how good it feels to have her fingertip brushing my collarbones.

She lets go of my necklace and takes a step back before nodding. "It's perfect."

She insisted on taking care of all the planning after we decided the best way to celebrate my official decision to move to Ottawa was to go on our second date. It's

been a few days since what we're now referring to as the Hardcore Pool Party Incident, and we've settled into the final stretch of our stay at the house together.

I lead the way down the path to the driveway. My heart skips a beat when Naomi reaches for my hand.

"Can you believe this?" I say once we're standing out on the curb waiting for our ride, her fingers still twined with mine. "We went from you thinking I was a burglar breaking into the house to murder you to holding hands while we go on our second date."

She laughs and shakes her head. "Yeah, even if I'd had a thousand tries to guess how this summer would end, I wouldn't have guessed this."

I watch the fading yellow rays of the sunset catch in her hair and make her skin glow gold. She smells like flowery shampoo and long afternoons spent lying in the grass, the scent of her mixing with the baked asphalt and sweet clover of another hot August day fading into night.

There's a breeze in the air that hints at the start of September. My dad and Sandy will be back from Italy next week. Naomi will go back to her parents' place, and I'll stay with my dad until I find some roommates to move in with.

"Good thing that data entry job pays so well," Naomi says, sliding her hand out of my grip so she can check our driver's progress on her phone. "We have to savor this ride, because I'm really going to need to ration my savings once I start school."

I trail my fingertips down her arm to let her know I want to hold her hand again, and she lets out an adorable giggle before wrapping her palm around mine.

I brush my thumb over her knuckles and ask, "How are you feeling about school, by



the way?”

She sighs and stares down the wide, tree-lined street. “I’m not going to lie. It still terrifies me. So much is going to change in ways I can’t even anticipate, but...well, it’s not like I could have anticipated this.”

She bumps our joined hands against my leg, which makes it very hard not to pull her to my chest and kiss her in the middle of the sidewalk.

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“And I like to think this is turning out pretty good,” she adds, “so I’m doing my best to trust there’s a chance the rest of my life will go well too. It’s a new feeling.”

I nod. “I get that. Trusting myself is a novelty for me too.”

She looks back at me and lifts her mouth into a slight smile while she shakes her head.

“What?” I ask, already smiling back at her even though I have no idea what’s got her so amused.

“It’s just I never would have guessed that about you when I first met you. You seemed like someone who had never even heard of the idea of caring what other people think.”

I chuckle and shrug. “Yeah, sorry to disappoint you.”

Her eyes narrow, and she squares her shoulders off with mine as her voice turns serious.

“That’s not the version of you I fell for,” she says. “I mean, yeah, I was pretty star struck by that Andrea, and I know she’s part of you too, but when I really fell for you was in all the quiet moments, when you let me see you’re just as scared as the rest of us. You’re scared, but you still show up, and...and that’s what I want to do too.”

My heart swells in my chest. For a moment, all I can do is squeeze her hand again while I search for the right words.

The way she makes me feel is bigger than words. It's as big as a blue summer sky, as a thousand leafy streets lined with a thousand towering mansions, as a glittering city flickering to life.

I'm still trying to figure out how to tell her that when our ride pulls up to the curb. We slide onto the backseat to sit side by side. I stare out the window and watch the quiet streets of my dad's neighborhood turn into the crowded buildings of downtown.

These streets are becoming familiar now. Soon I'll have my own place in this city—probably just a cramped little bedroom in some dingy townhouse with way too many roommates, but still, it will be mine. I'll be able to invite Naomi over. We'll be able to take this thing growing between us and give it all the time and care it needs to bloom.

I'll be able to do the same thing with whatever's growing in me. Those flimsy glimpses of my future I used to see out of the corner of my eye have finally caught up with me and taken hold, like seeds drifting on the wind before settling down to sprout roots.

"We're here!" Naomi says just as the driver swerves to pull up to the sidewalk.

She's bouncing in her seat, and she flings the door open the second the car shifts into park. She calls out a thank you to the driver as she bursts onto the sidewalk and waits for me to catch up.

"Oh my god," I say when I look over at the shop she keeps glancing at. "That's where we're going?"

The storefront is done up to look like an old-fashioned ice cream parlor, with a pink and white awning paired with brass accents and a logo printed in swirling Victorian script on the windows.

“That’s where we’re going first,” Naomi says as she leads us over to the door. “I did pick somewhere for dinner, but I just figured since I ruined our ice cream cones last time, I should get us another round, and I was too excited about finding this place to wait until after dinner.”

I raise my eyebrows when she looks back to find me standing with my hands on my hips after she’s grabbed the brass door handle.

“I’m the one who ruined our ice cream cones,” I say. “I wasn’t exactly subtle about wanting to kiss you. Worth it, though. That was one of the best kisses of my life.”

It only takes a second for a flush to start creeping up her neck.

“Really?”

I nod and step closer. “You blow everyone else out of the goddamn water, Naomi.”

Her eyes widen. “Oh. Well, good.”

I tip my head back to laugh and then place my hand on her lower back to guide her inside.

The shop smells like waffle cones and sugar. The chilly air inside makes goose bumps break out on my arms and legs, and once we’ve got our cones, we decide to sit on the bench outside to enjoy the warmth of the evening instead of taking one of the plush red vinyl booths lining the wall.

Naomi got strawberry cheesecake, and I went with double fudge. She hums her approval of the flavor after taking her first bite, her eyelids fluttering. I give her a light jab with my elbow.

“You’re going to make me drop this one too if you keep that up.”

She blushes even deeper than earlier, which just makes me want to abandon my ice cream even more.

We do our best to focus on dessert for the next few minutes. Even though it’s a weeknight, the street is still rumbling with the hum of car engines and the chatter of pedestrians as they pass in front of our bench every now and then.

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“So, is it safe to say we can break our rule now?” Naomi asks after using one of the napkins she grabbed to wipe a stray cheesecake glob off her hand.

I lower my cone and shift so I’m facing her. “And which rule would that be?”

“The one where we’re not allowed to talk about anything past the end of the summer.”

I’m about to tell her we’ve already broken that rule countless times since the Hardcore Pool Party Incident. I’ve filled her in on my conversations with my dad, which have been promising, as well my conversations with my mom, which have been less promising but still have the faintest trace of hope to them.

My dad wasn’t even mad about the smashed sculpture, which was miraculously the only permanent damage we found amidst the sea of bottles and Solo cups. I told my dad I’d pay for the sculpture—which I would have done, even though it might have taken a couple years of monthly deposits—but he said the only thing he wanted to make up for it was some time with me.

I’m still not quite sure what to make of that, but I’m not absolutely dreading his and Sandy’s return next week, which is saying something.

My mom keeps saying she needs time to process and doesn’t know how she feels, but she also offered to ship some of the stuff I still have in my bedroom in Toronto. It’s mostly just a few books and some clothes I didn’t bother taking with me after high school, but she never offered to do that when I moved to Montreal.

I open my mouth to remind Naomi I've already told her all of that, but something about the nervous look in her eye and the way she's fidgeting with the edge of her dress makes me pause.

I realize we've talked about me staying in Ottawa, and we've talked about her starting school, but we haven't really talked about what's going to happen with us.

"I'm ready to forget about that rule," I say, "if you are."

She nods and smooths her dress over the tops of her thighs.

"So, I'm still not sure exactly where my life is going," I begin. "I think I've got some catching up to do with the whole figuring out what I want to be when I grow up thing, but I'm ready for it. I'm not running away from what feels right anymore. I've actually, um, put in a request to join a public speaking course."

Her eyes light up as she gasps. "You didn't tell me that! That's so cool."

I nod and drop my gaze down to my ice cream cone as my face heats up.

"Thanks. I figure I can do some little courses like that to help me decide what I'm passionate about, as much as I can when I'm not working whatever job I get for now. I always loved when my mom let me make little speeches to her class when she brought me to the studio on special occasions, and doing the open mic night made me remember how much I miss stuff like that. I love music, but only as a hobby. I've never wanted to make it a career, but the being up in front of a crowd part of it, getting them all to feel something...maybe there's something there for me. It's not much, but it's something."

She stops fussing with her dress and lays her hand on my arm instead. "It's more than something. It's awesome. I'm...I'm really proud of you."

Those words make me glow so bright I'm in danger of melting my ice cream.

"Thanks," I mumble. "I don't want you to think I don't have any goals, or that I'm just hanging around town to be lazy, or—"

"Hey." She squeezes my arm to cut me off. "I've never thought that. You're allowed to need time to figure it out."

I pause and let those words sink in. Part of me wants to argue and tell her there's no way she's not rethinking being on a date with someone whose life is as messy as mine, but I stay still and quiet until that part of me quiets down too.

If we're going to do this for real, I have to believe her. I have to believe in myself.

"I just really want you to know that I'm serious about things," I say. "I'm serious about living here. I'm serious about finding my passion, and I'm serious about...us."

"Us?" she murmurs.

I suck in a deep breath and squeeze my eyes shut as I urge myself to keep going.

"Yeah, us. I want to...I want to date you, Naomi. I want you to be a part of my life, whatever it ends up looking like. I'm not sure of much, but I'm sure of that. I've been sure of that for way longer than I've been ready to admit it, and...I'm ready now. I'm ready to tell you I think I might be falling in love with you too."

I still have my eyes shut, but I can feel Naomi watching me. She's silent for so long a trickle of melted ice cream starts sliding down my fingers. I squeeze the cone so tight I'm sure I'm going to crush it, but I don't open my eyes until I feel her shift close enough to press the side of her leg against mine.



When I see her staring at me with a look that says she's full of that same feeling as me, the one that's far too big for words, I know there's no hope for our ice cream.

Both cones splat against the sidewalk as we lunge for each other. Her hands end up locked behind my neck while mine frame her face. Her lips are sweet and sticky against mine, and she shivers when I swipe my tongue over them before pulling her even closer.

She tastes like a summer that never, ever ends.

## CHAPTER 25

Naomi

“Oh my god, no! We are not watching Jennifer’s Body for the seven millionth time.”

Shal crosses her arms to make an X shape and bangs them together a few times to indicate just how against watching my favourite movie she is.

“Sorry, Naomi, but I’m with Shal,” Priya says as she adjusts the pillows on the rattan chaise lounge she’s sitting on. “We literally just watched it not even two months ago. Also, I still don’t get why you like it so much. It’s pretty gross.”

We’re all out on the deck at the mansion, gathered around the fancy fire pit table thing it took the four of us a good fifteen minutes to figure out how to work. I’m hoping we got it right and that the gas-powered flames aren’t about to explode and set the house on fire, but so far, they’re just warding off the slight chill in the night air and keeping the bugs at bay.

Andrea is sitting next to me on one of the deck couches, the side of her leg pressed against mine. Tonight is my last night in the house before Peter and Sandy come home tomorrow, and even though Andrea and I already have a date planned for the day after that, I’ve still spent the whole evening feeling like she’s going to slip away for good the second I let her leave my side.

What I’ve decided to announce to all three of them tonight isn’t helping my worries.

“It’s a modern classic!” Andrea urges. “Plus, it’s like the most fun horror movie ever, because every time you think something scary is about to pop up, it’s actually just—”

“Megan Fox!” I say at the same time as her.

She turns to grin at me and then slides her arm around my shoulders. “Exactly. You get it.”

Shal groans from over on the other side of the table, where she’s sprawled on a couch. “Are you two already finishing each other’s sentences? Disgusting.”

I can tell she’s holding back a smile.

“I’m pretty sure that movie is the reason I realized I’m bisexual,” Andrea adds. “My older cousin let me watch it when I was way too young for an R rated movie, and instead of being traumatized, I just wanted to watch Jennifer and Needy kiss over and over again.”

“Maybe I should thank your cousin,” I blurt.

My face heats up when I realize how cringey that was, but Andrea just chuckles and bumps my arm with hers before telling me she’ll get us in touch. I tilt my head to rest my cheek on her shoulder as she tightens her grip around me.

Priya coughs.

“Do you two want some alone time?” Shal asks with a wag of her eyebrows. “We don’t have to watch a movie tonight. Priya and I can head out and let you watch your gross and yet apparently erotic zombie cheerleader movie together.”

“Demon cheerleader,” Andrea and I say in unison.

This time we earn ourselves a groan from both Priya and Shal.

“Okay, okay, we’re out of here, Pri,” Shal says as she rolls onto her side and then pushes herself up to a seat on the couch cushions.

“Wait,” I interrupt before they can get to their feet. “I, um, I need to tell you guys something.”

Everyone turns to stare at me. I glance at Andrea and murmur, “You too.”

She cups her hand around my shoulder and squeezes. I lean into her touch, closing my eyes for a second as I ground into the sensation. The fire dances across the backs of my eyelids, and when I open my eyes again, I watch the red and orange glow reflect on Shal, Priya, and Andrea’s faces.

Just before my therapist signed off on our regular call this afternoon, I told her that next time, I want to talk about the whole neurodivergent thing—as in I really want to talk about it, not just keep saying I do and then putting it off every time.

If it’s a part of me, I want to get to know that part. I want to love that part if I can, and I want to trust the people I love enough to share it with them.

If this summer has taught me anything, it’s that I don’t ever have to worry about being too weird for the three girls sitting with me tonight.

“So, you know how I’ve been dealing with the whole social anxiety thing for a few years now?” I ask.

I’m back to staring at the fire. The orange tendrils curl and twist around each other, forming ever-shifting shapes and patterns.

“Well, my therapist thinks maybe there’s more to it than that,” I continue, “and I’ve been avoiding the possibility for a while because I didn’t want there to be yet another

thing wrong with me, but I'm trying really hard not to see it as something wrong. If it is true, then it's just...me, and...and I want you guys to know me, so..."

Andrea keeps her arm wrapped tight around my shoulders and uses her other hand to reach for mine. Even now, a few sparks still shoot up my arm when I feel her palm slide against mine.

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“She thinks I might be some type of neurodivergent,” I say, “and honestly, I’m not totally sure what that’s going to mean. I haven’t looked into it or asked her any questions yet because I’ve been too scared to even think about it, but it’s true I’ve always felt...different, like I’m on the outside of this box everyone else is in, but...but somehow that’s never mattered with the three of you, at least, so I guess what I want to say is thank you for letting me just be me.”

I let out a shaky breath, and I realize I’m waiting for Andrea to let go of my hand. I’m waiting for Shal to get up and head for the van without a word. I’m waiting for Priya to tell me she needs a normal friend.

None of that happens.

Andrea pulls me in closer and kisses the top of my head. Shal runs around the fire and folds herself over the back of our couch so she can scoop us both into a bear hug. Priya swipes at her eyes and tells me she’s proud to be my friend in a voice thick with tears before she gets up and joins the cuddle pile too.

For a few moments, I just let myself be held. I let their arms wrap me up in the assurance that right here, right now, I am safe, and I don’t have to be anything other than me to deserve that.

We’re all sniffing by the time Shal and Priya get up to return to their seats. Andrea stays wrapped around me, and Shal repeats her offer to give us some time to ourselves.

“No, don’t go, you guys!” I urge, even as I snuggle in closer to Andrea. “It’s our last

night here. We have to make the most of it.”

Priya leans forward to stretch her hands out towards the fire.

“Just as long as making the most of it doesn’t involve any last minute additions to the bucket list,” she says with a fake shudder.

“Well, actually...” Shal jokes before a glare from her sister shuts her down.

“Where is the list anyway?” Andrea asks. “Are you guys going to frame it or something?”

Shal claps her hands. “Oooh, I like that idea! Yeah, where did the list even go? It would be really anticlimactic if we lost it after all this.”

“I think it’s in my room,” I answer.

I’m pretty sure I tucked it into one of my journals. Shal urges me to go get it, and even though the last thing I want to do is leave Andrea’s arms, I can’t deny how poetic of a moment rereading the list around a fire on our last night at the house will be, so I get up with a dramatic groan.

I stop complaining when Andrea jumps to her feet and says she’ll come with me.

The cats were asleep in their igloo the last time I checked, but I still do a quick scan of the kitchen before I pull the door open; losing Sandy’s cats the night before she comes home would not be the poetic moment I’m looking for.

Once we’ve reached the top of the stairs on the second floor, I stop and tell Andrea to wait.

My heart is hammering in my chest. Now that we're alone, it's a little easier for my doubts to creep in and tell me maybe Shal and Priya can accept me as a friend, but Andrea can't possibly want to date a weirdo with a messed up brain.

She spins around to face me and then comes close enough to take both my hands.

"Yeah?" she murmurs.

I drop my gaze to our entwined fingers.

"Are you sure what I said out there didn't change anything for you? Because I know it's a lot, and maybe it's not what you were looking for, and—"

"You're what I'm looking for."

She squeezes my hands, and all the doubts peter out.

"You were what I was looking for before I even realized it, and whatever you learn about yourself isn't going to change that. It's just going to give me a chance to get to know you even better, and...getting to know you better might be my new favourite thing."

My cheeks heat up, and I can't stop myself from smiling down at our hands.

"That's how I feel about you."

"Good," she says. "Then we've got nothing to worry about. Now, shall we go find that list?"

The bucket list is just where I thought it was, the sheet of paper covered in Shal's handwriting tucked under the cover of my journal. We head back out to the deck, and



then all four of us huddle around one of the couches while we read by the flickering light of the fire.

## SUMMER BUCKET LIST

## Page 100

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:46 pm*

1. Skinny dip in the mansion's pool.
2. Have a summer fling.
3. Smoke a joint.
4. Perform at an open mic.
5. Make a new friend.
6. Attend an insane pool party.
7. Go on a road trip.
8. Post a dance challenge.
9. Get a tattoo or other body modification.
10. Fall in love (whatever that means).

We laugh at some of them, groan at others, and marvel at the fact that we actually did all this.

“Okay, we have to frame this,” Priya says once we reach the end. “I’m going to stop believing this summer actually happened if we don’t, and I don’t want to go back to being boring Priya.”

I look up from where I've been holding the paper out in front of me and stare straight into the white hot center of the fire instead.

"You were never boring," I tell her, "and also...I don't think we could go back to who we were even if we tried."

I get to my feet, my gaze still pinned to the flames. I step close enough to feel their heat radiating against my skin.

Then I thrust my arm out to dangle the list over the fire.

All three of them gasp, and Priya starts to shout a protest, but when I glance behind me with the edge of the paper still pinched between my fingers, she goes silent.

"I think we should burn it," I say.

I wait for someone to disagree, but after a few moments, they all nod.

I turn back to face the table and will myself to let the list go.

At first, my fingers won't listen. They cling to the paper as I wonder if Priya is right, if I'll watch this reminder of our summer go up in flames and stop believing I'm the kind of person who can do the things I want to do, even when they terrify me.

The heat on my legs is getting uncomfortable now. I take a little step back and up bumping against Andrea's knees. She puts a hand on my hip to steady me, but she doesn't haul me back or push me forwards.

She just lets me know she's there for me while I figure things out.

I take a deep breath, and then I step back up to the table.

I let the summer list go.

The paper zig-zags down, down, down until the hungry flames reach up and flare bright enough to sting my eyes as they lick the edge of the page.

I sit back down beside Andrea, and we watch as the sheet curls inward, the flames illuminating the words that changed all our lives before they're burnt down to a few flakes of ash.

I tilt my head onto Andrea's shoulder and wait for whatever comes next.