



Love Letters to Christmas

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Category: Romance

Description: Hes the best mail lead around, and Im just his childhood friend turned roommate

Ive spent my life battling to manage my parents impossible expectations and trying to catch the eye of Brian Single, a man whose head only turns for mail. Bemoaning my humanity shouldnt really be at the top of my priorities after Ive just moved out of my parents house and in with the mailman himself, but—haha—it is.

When Brian launches a Christmas in July event where we both now work together, Im thrilled to finally be a part of the morale-boosting fun. What I dont expect is for the entire thing to be an excuse to get closer to me.

With love letters, mistletoe, and mischief abounding, its really starting to look a lot like Christmas.

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Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:28 am

Nothing beats a mail-loving roomie.

Brian

“Amelia. Amelia Christmas,” Mars—an old buddy from school back in my hometown of Bandera—says through the phone. My eyes widen as I stop spinning in my office chair.

“Amelia Christmas,” I echo, recalling the little girl, the teenager, the young woman from my past. She was always so...

pristine. So perfect. So passionate. So sweet.

No matter how old she was, I can’t remember her with anything but a darling little smile and rosy cheeks.

She was like a porcelain doll. Looking at her made me think she required a box and bubble wrap to keep her safe.

But—as I learned in my youth when I tried to ship my twin sister, Brianna, to Timbuktu—people aren’t supposed to be packaged.

It’s against regulation and was banned in 1920.

That Amelia Christmas needs a job and a place to stay? My Amelia Christmas...?

Here at Whirlwind Branding, I’m head of the mailroom and self-appointed head of

morale.

Unfortunately, due to a severe lack of both mail lovers and morale boosters, my job often becomes a solo operation, like right now, where I am the only one working down here in the belly of the building's heart and soul—our beloved basement mailroom.

In addition to making sure the mail is processed, sorted, and delivered in a timely manner, I have recently taken up side projects. Passion projects, if you will. Splayed on the monitor before me are plans for my next greatest morale-boost.

A Countdown to Easter celebration.

After the massive success of my Countdown to Valentine's endeavor, it has become ever more obvious that the good people of Whirlwind Branding HQ want— nay! —desperately need more holiday cheer in their lives.

And I'm just the mailroom guy for the job.

Amelia would fit right in here, help me with my passion projects, and give the mail the proper attention it deserves. In other words, she's perfect .

Snapping out of my thoughts, I grin. “Of course Amelia's welcome anytime. I'll personally ensure she has a job here in the company and a place to stay.”

“Really? You don't need to talk to your boss?” Mars asks, tone peculiar in that scheming sort of way I remember. Jeepers. Wonder what he's up to this time, and why in the world he needs Amelia out of the picture back home for his plans to work.

Anyway, that's none of my business. What is my business is making sure dear, sweet Amelia's well taken care of.

“If it’s Amelia, I don’t need to visit Liam.

She can work with me in the mailroom.” It’s hard to find adequate help these days, and my team’s turnover rate is...

abysmal. No one loves mail enough, and I cannot abide members who could not care less about the service we provide.

Mail, after all, is passionate work. We are the lifeblood of our company, and we should act like it.

If someone I hire doesn’t find this possible, I send them off to a metaphorical Smeerensburg, a la the movie Klaus when Jesper did not love mail enough.

Otherwise known as: I let them go. “I love Amelia. When can she start? I’ll set up my guest room for her. ”

Moments pass while Mars confers with someone on the other end of the line.

Muted voices trickle through, so I take the moment to add a few more Easter egg graphics to the presentation I’m putting together in order to pitch my idea to my boss, Liam—whose name, it should be noted, is mail spelled backwards.

Making a point of changing the egg colors so they’re seamless with the rest of the presentation’s branding, I beam at my work.

Liam’s gonna love this. It’s cute . It’s branded .

It’s full of opportunities for mail . He’ll be handing me a company credit card and making participation mandatory in no time.

Mars interrupts my perfectly rational thoughts. “She’ll tie up some loose ends and start next month. Can you text me your address and anything else she might need to know?”

“Absolute-a-tootly.” I lean back and fiddle with one of my colorful plotting pens.

Let’s see. It’s the first of March...so... Ah.

“April 1st is a holiday,” I say. Per my first morale-building prompt of my Countdown to Easter April Fool’s Jokes event, that’ll be a prime time for people to utilize the post in their pranks.

“Terrific time for mail, I’m sure you know.

I’ll be too busy to welcome a new roomie properly.

When Amelia gets here, I’d like to be present and make sure she can settle in comfortably, so I’ll expect her on the second. ”

“Great. Thanks.” Mars has hung up before I can ask him how he’s doing, or why he’s been texting me weird questions lately.

Figures.

Mars has always been a touch off-kilter. But that is what I’ve always liked about him. That and the fact he’d let me deliver his ransom notes in high school. The man was nothing short of an artist with magazine letter cutouts.

With all the texting and calling he’s been doing lately, I do wonder if he’s still using his gift. Somehow a texted ransom note just doesn’t feel like it’d hit the same, so probably he is. I have faith in him.

Setting my phone down, I lean back in my chair and stare at the large monitor in front of me.

Happy, cute bunnies dance across my presentation, promising team-building, a better work experience, and improved morale.

Adding Amelia to the countdown starting day two improves all these projections by roughly five thousand percent.

“Amelia Christmas,” I whisper into the quiet of the mailroom on this late Friday afternoon. “A- mail -ia Christmas.” Heh. Haven’t said that for a while.

A slow smile stretches over my lips, and I lock in to finish up what has the potential to be the best holiday event Whirlwind Branding has ever seen.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:28 am

Love-letter blue.

Amelia

Blue.

Blue, like the sky on a summer day.

Blue, like the ocean at a distance.

Blue, like the wax seal on a love letter...

“I hope you don’t mind,” Brian says as he sets down a box of my meager belongings and turns to face me where I stand, starstruck, beneath the doorjamb of my new bedroom.

“I took the liberty of freshening up your room a bit. If there’s anything you don’t like, we can change it.

” Smiling warmly, he sets his hands on his hips and takes in the elegant queen-size bed garbed in blue and white lace, the matching dresser and desk set with ornate silver handles, the lovely fluttering envelope wall stickers scattered around the room, as though a fresh breeze has taken it upon itself to deliver them personally.

“It was a little too bland and white before I knew you were coming.”

My heart trips. “You...painted it for me?”

Brian's green eyes hit me, and my body tenses to keep from collapsing. I am not yet used to the full force of his attention. After so many years apart, I've lost all my immunity.

Adorably, his head tilts. "I painted it, got new furniture, and put up the stickers myself. I couldn't have you living in a bland bedroom, devoid of color and joy. Why, it would be inhumane!" His nostrils flare as he crosses his arms, shakes his head, tuts. "What a silly thing to suggest."

He...painted this bedroom. For me.

He painted my bedroom love-letter blue just for me .

"If it's not your color, no worries," he says. "We can fix it. Painting is a remarkably enjoyable task."

"No," I say, perhaps too swiftly. Swallowing my eager enthusiasm, I present a practiced smile and trained calm. "No, it's perfect. I love it."

Softness ripples in Brian's eyes as he meets me at the door to take the box I'm holding from my grasp.

"I thought you might." Spinning on his heel before I'm emotionally ready to forego the closeness, he sets my box atop the other one.

"Once we get your things in, I'll show you around and we can go over house rules. "

Right. Yes, of course. House rules. I'll write them down, study them faithfully, and commit them to memory.

The last thing I want to do is be a burden on my childhood crush.

He's already doing so much just by letting me stay here, not to mention the job he's lined up for me, too.

I can hardly believe that anyone possesses such explicit kindness.

As it stands, we haven't spoken for years and we were never even friends . We went to the same school, but we've had precious few conversations, most of which I stammered and stumbled my way through. It's a wonder that he remembers me when every girl I knew growing up was also in love with him.

Despite the options, he picked none of them.

Because never once was anyone more important to him than mail.

And, last I checked, I'm not mail.

“—A-mail-ia?” Brian's voice calls me from my move-in daze, and I squeak, facing him, as I heavily set the last hanging bag of clothes on my new bed.

Frantic, I search his face for a clue as to what we're talking about. Not even his eyebrows deliver a hint.

Humor softens his lips into a smile. “I asked if this was everything, A-mail-ia.”

“Oh. Yes. It is.” I glance at the mess now strewn about my new room: a few spare boxes, a couple hanging bags of clothes. This is everything I own. Everything my parents would let me keep when I left.

I must look pitiful.

But at least Brian isn't the type to pity me.

Clapping his hands, he grins. “Great! Tour time.” He exits my room, getting a step beyond the door before declaring, “Across the hall you’ll find your bathroom. To your left, at the end of the hall, you’ll find the master bedroom.”

My heart thuds . Our bedrooms are right next to each other ?

It suddenly becomes impossible to swallow.

“Moving on—” He strides forward, practically falling into each of his steps. “—you’ll see a perfectly modest living room, decked out with the best films money can buy.”

A widescreen TV sits within an oak entertainment center, only two DVDs— You’ve Got Mail and Klaus —on display near it. My eyes linger on them, my favorite movies, my favorite movies which we seem to share .

Oblivious of my racing heart, Brian sweeps his arm across from the living room of the open floor plan to present the kitchen and dining space.

“Our full-service kitchen boasts twenty-four hour access and immediate, on-demand ordering...within five business days.” Approaching the fridge, Brian pokes a letter-themed notepad stuck to the door.

“Write anything that you need or anything that we run out of on here, and I’ll pick it up next time I’m at the store. ”

My heart beats in my throat as I nod.

Bringing his hands back together in a loud clap that makes me jump involuntarily, Brian states, “Thus concludes our tour, unless you want to see the third guest room acting as my decoration storage facility.”

I would kill to see more of Brian's home.

It is already more perfect than anything I could have ever imagined.

He keeps it so tidy. It's nothing like I would have expected a bachelor pad to be, but that's the Brian difference for you.

He's a step above all others. "Th-that's okay," I say. "I don't need to pry."

I want to.

I don't need to.

"It's not prying." One of his brows takes on a dramatic arch. "This is your home now. I want you to feel comfortable going anywhere in it. I'm an open book, so feel free to poke around and familiarize yourself with anything."

Poke...around? Anywhere? Even...

I force myself not to glance down the hall with our bedrooms, toward his bedroom.

I force myself to swallow my rampant heartbeat and reply, "That's very kind.

I... I really appreciate this, Brian. I can't express how much you're helping me.

"Get on my feet. Get away from a less-than-great living situation.

Get myself together. At the ripe old age of twenty-five, I'm finally getting the chance to grow up, and cut the umbilical cord, and discover myself.

Without the looming threat of my parents' disappointment, negativity, or

expectations.

Brian isn't just giving me a place to live and a job while I figure out what it means to be physically independent. He's giving me freedom to decide who I am and what I want. He is letting me figure out what it means to be Amelia Christmas.

And he's waving a hand, as though it's no big deal at all. "Don't mention it, A-mail-ia. I'm happy to have you. Here and at the mailroom. I've missed having you around. You always were a bright spot in my life. It's a delight to welcome you back into it."

I could die happy right now. Assuming I'm not already dying. As far as I know, I got in an accident on my way here and this is all a drug-induced hallucination.

Brian just told me that he likes having me around. Wow. Wow . Is this what happiness feels like? I'm... I'm not sure. But probably.

The next thing I know, Brian's hand waves in front of my face. "A-mail-ia?"

I snap out of my daydream, which may or may not have contained wedding bells and dresses made of letters with blue wax seals. "Yes! Sorry. I'm fine. W-what were you saying?"

Brian tucks his hands in his khaki pants pockets. "Do you have any questions for me or is there anything else I can do to help you settle in?"

Anything else he can do?

He has already done far more than enough. Far more than anyone has ever done for me.

I flush. "U-um, well...just...what's rent and when's it due?"

His brows rise.

“And is there a chore list for me? So I can make sure I’m pulling my weight?”

Brian blinks.

I bite my lip, hoping I haven’t said something stupid.

Did he already send me information about rent and chores?

I check my email religiously, even spam, but maybe he sent it while I was on the road?

“Sorry,” I whisper, fumbling to get my phone out of my purse, which I apparently still have slung across my body.

“Did you already email me about this stuff? Maybe I missed it. It’s been...

a...” Emotion, sudden and unbidden, chokes me, forcing me to croak the words, “...a really rough day.”

Arms envelope me before I know what’s happening. A broad chest garbed in a cardigan presses to my cheek. Breath leaves me only to return with the full, fresh scent of ink and sandalwood. Strength abandons my limbs, and quiet tears escape down my cheeks.

“It’s going to be okay,” Brian says, voice soothing, deep, warm. “There’s no rent, and all I ask is that you clean up after yourself. For the foreseeable future, this is your home. You don’t need to worry about anything else.”

Home is right here...in his arms?

My eyelids fall closed.

“Treat it like home,” he says. “That’s the only rule. Okay?”

Throat constricted, I whisper, “Okay,” and he squeezes me tight enough to keep my breaking pieces from falling apart.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:28 am

Work is a fabulous distraction from feelings...usually.

Amelia

“If you’ll just fill out some quick paperwork, I’ll get you input as a new employee of the illustrious Whirlwind Branding,” Brian says, looking hopelessly attractive in his sweater vest. “Incoming mail arrives around two. Between now and then, we maintain internal correspondence and provide team spirit on our building rounds. But, anyway, I’ll give you more training once you’re finished giving me your social security number.”

He laughs while I settle myself down into a chair at a desk in the main sorting room, which is immaculate at a level I would not assume possible given that we seem to be the only two people here.

Subtly taking in the sorting boxes, processing equipment, and filing systems all around, I keep my attention squarely off Brian and his adorable sweater vest as he hums in tune with the jangling keys on his belt loop the whole way over to a corner office with glass walls.

Just riding in Brian’s passenger seat on the way here this morning I felt out of my depth. As the suburbs where Brian lives turned into city skylines packed with towering buildings, my stomach twisted in a way I’m still trying to unravel.

My country blood was ill prepared to walk into a building with a crisp receptionist station, smile amicably at the woman manning it, and keep heading toward the elevator without stopping to exchange any gossip. Or ask about the giant shark

painting behind her.

I really wanted to ask about the giant shark painting behind her, but Brian marched past with little more than a friendly wave, and I wasn't going to lose track of him on my first day of work.

After getting here last Tuesday, Brian gave me nearly a full week to get settled in and unpack at home. I spent most of my time trying to open boxes without crying oceans, cleaning, having dinner ready when he got back from work, and forbidding myself from going into his bedroom.

One day, Thursday I think, I spent about an hour staring at the sliver offered me by his cracked door.

Needless to say, I'm very grateful it is Monday and I am starting a job that will distract me from the emotions associated both with leaving my parents and with living in Brian Single's home.

A good taste of whatever my new "normal" is going to be with work added to my schedule should keep me from having too many breakdowns going forward.

Or, at least, that is my hope.

Turning to the next page of my intake paperwork, I locate a quiz, headed by the question: Do you love mail?

Do I love mail? Of course I love mail. Don't tell me... Is this the reason Brian and I are the only people here on a crisp Monday morning when work started fifteen minutes ago? If we had coworkers, they should be here already, sitting with me and awaiting our fearless leader's instruction.

I chose the desk I'm sitting at because it seemed the most unbothered when I came in. Upon closer inspection, however, all four of the desks in this main sorting room appear unbothered. Devoid of personal touches. Clean and awaiting residents.

Brian must screen all potential employees based on this quiz. And not many must pass.

That's sad. No one appreciates mail like they should these days.

I write With my entire heart and soul in the space below the question.

Question number two asks, What do you love about mail?

The entire rest of the page is filled with lines for my answer, as it should be.

I start with the obvious things I love about mail—it is cute and pretty—and move into the deeper things—mail is a collection of emotions and effort, little I love you's from friends and family.

I wax poetic concerning how mail is a memory, gifted to us, a moment in time immortalized.

I explain the dopamine that results upon receiving a package.

I discuss the trust involved in sharing a page full of words with someone else, knowing that you won't get to keep what you give away.

Mail is a blessing.

An honor.

And it really is so cute and pretty. So romantic.

So adorable. Especially when it has wax seals.

I love, love, love wax seals. I get extravagant with mine and use them whenever possible.

I even put them on bills. My car insurance people normally receive red seals to indicate formal correspondence, but when I was especially poor at one point, I sent a check in with a black seal.

A little wink wink, nudge nudge that if they kept these insane rates up, they would be invited to my funeral.

My collection of wax and stamps is outrageous and among the few things my parents let me keep when I packed up April 2nd because I bought every last color and melting spoon with my own money. My wax sets are truly mine .

Ah, but, anyway.

To conclude my essay, mail equals the best .

Once finished with the question, I've filled in all the lines provided on the front and back of the page, so I start decorating the rows of text and margins with tiny envelopes and heart- shaped seals—then I scream.

Taken aback, Brian—who just said my name behind me—blinks. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

I clutch my pen and exhale, “No. No, I’m sorry. I’m...jumpy.”

“I noticed.” He chuckles and offers a hand. “I was wondering if I could start processing your application while you finish up the quiz.”

“Oh, I’m done. Sorry.” Gathering the pages, before I can proofread whatever nonsense I no doubt rambled, I pass along my application and watch in stark horror as Brian skips to the last questions right in front of me.

He skims the lines, then sniffs and wipes a tear from his eye. “Welcome aboard, A-mail-ia. May you stay with us here in the mailroom at Whirlwind Branding indefinitely.”

“Indefinitely?”

He turns on his heel, raising my application while he strides back to his office. “Also known as forever.”

Forever .

My gaze skates across the pristine sorting boxes and tall filing cabinets before returning to the desk I’ve claimed. “Forever,” I whisper down at the cherrywood as Brian enters the glass box that is his office. Peace overwhelms me at the idea of belonging somewhere—anywhere— forever .

So I smile.

Mail comes in. We process the mail. We sort the mail. We put the mail in our little bag or on our little cart. We deliver the mail. We pick up the mail. We process the mail again. We sort the mail some more. We deliver it.

And then also, amid all that, we spread joy.

Everywhere Brian goes, he sparks laughter and smiles. It's just like high school, minus the part where all the women are in love with him. Which is, shall I say, a refreshing relief.

I wasn't quite sure what I'd do if I had to live through another round of watching other women more confident and bold than I am hand him love letters while I keep all of mine in a box under my bed. Signed, sealed...subdued.

These elegant and mature business women have husbands and lives in this sparkling city. Their affections do not swirl around my Brian. Some of them barely seem to tolerate him, which I can't understand, but maybe some things in life are meant to be mysteries.

A grunt responds to Brian's chipper chorus of knocks on a corner office door in the graphics department, so he pushes inside, pink envelope lifted high. "Letter for you, Frank, from your doting husband."

A woman with her head on her desk groans and cocks a frown at us, petite nose scrunching on her round face beneath Wayfarer glasses. Then she mutters, "Curse you, Brian."

Brian flashes his teeth in a bright smile. "I'm sure I have no idea why you'd say such a mean thing."

Snuffing, Frank snatches the envelope from Brian's fingers and slouches, jutting a lip as she opens it.

"Dinner tonight is Chicken Francese with roast potatoes and a Caesar salad. I miss you dearly, and my life is empty without your shining light. Come home soon because if you work late, I will drown myself in my own tears of agony and loneliness." Dry, she smacks the poor letter against her desk and tosses it onto an all-

in-one drawing table beside her monitor set up.

“That could have been a text.” Her eyes narrow.

“I could be texting my dear Normie right now while I suffer beneath the weight of ungodly deadlines. Instead, he’s opting for communication that takes two business days to get here. ”

“You wound me. Of course I let Norman drop his letters off with me personally and deliver them day-of.” Brian sets a hand to his heart, and I mimic the motion, also wounded, in solidarity.

“Tonight I’m telling my husband that—actually—he doesn’t need to send letters to appease you anymore since you’ve developed something like a normal human relationship with mail.”

Brian’s lip juts. “Norman is smarter than to ever believe such a horrible, horrible lie.”

Frank rolls her eyes skyward and pushes her square eyeglass frames up so she can rub her eyes. “Fine, then I’m telling him if he doesn’t stop this nonsense, I’m counting it as cheating on me with you and will have no choice but to divorce him.”

Brian scoffs, tossing a flippant hand in the air. Plainly, like a teenage girl from a tween movie, he says, “As if.”

Frank stares at Brian, and Brian stares at Frank.

After a while, Frank dissolves back onto her desk.

“Fine. I would never say such a thing to my dear sweet Normie.” Frank’s lips pucker as she mumbles, “I just want to go home. Receiving letters makes me feel like a

soldier at war. I'm in the trenches.

Life is suffering." Her head tilts, and she seems to see me for the first time. "Who's the newbie?"

Brian flourishes. "Amelia, meet Frank. Frank, meet Amelia Christmas."

"Charmed," Frank drawls. "Run while you still can. Brian's nuts. He sings to the mail."

I know. I know he does. He always has. It's beautiful . Like an angel has blessed my eardrums with the purest of sounds.

Brian rolls his eyes toward me, and a glint of delight lights in them as he says, "We can sing together."

Duets...with...Brian.

Heat erupts in my cheeks.

"Oh," Frank curses, "no. There's two of them..."

Smug, Brian grips his mail bag strap and sticks his nose in the air. "Anyway, glad we cleared that up. Come now, A-mail-ia. Let's go see Will; he appreciates me."

I straighten when Brian passes me, then I twist toward Frank, who is plucking her letter up off her drawing table, opening a drawer in her desk, and setting it lovingly inside atop others speckled in hearts. Warmth fills me as I say, "It was very nice to meet you, Frank."

"A-mail-ia!" Brian calls. "Don't get too far behind fraternizing with those who have

yet to appreciate the power of mail. The elevator takes several business days to operate.”

“Sorry! Coming!” I dart out of the graphics office, up the hall, and into the forced proximity of the elevator for an unforeseeable length of time. Fiddling with the frilled hem of my dress skirt, I say, “Sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize.”

“She was saving her letter.”

Brian breathes a laugh. “I know. She saves all of them. She’s just a bit overstimulated today.

She loves her husband and his casual love letters.

He comes by the office sometimes just to bring her coffee and a snack.

Once, he did it in a flour-covered apron, and she nearly killed him.

It was very cute. She said no one was allowed to see him like that but her.

He was beet red before he left, but he was smiling deeply. ”

I love them, your honor. “They sound precious.”

“Yep.” Brian sifts through his mail bag, assessing the next floor’s deliveries.

“She can grumble all she wants about how texting is more convenient and less stationed in the trenches of the working world , but nothing embodies the love they have like a letter. Someday, they’ll be able to sort through those memories.

Infinite text scroll can't capture what mail can. ”

“That’s beautiful.”

Brian smiles at me. “Love always is.”

When the elevator doors open, someone somewhere down the hall shrieks, “ Will! ”
and Brian laughs.

“Speaking of lovebirds...” he says, “...let’s meet another pair.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:28 am

I think I'm gonna like it here.

Amelia

A man who seems as severe as the sorts of guys my best friend, Ceres, reads about in her dark romances glares at me beyond his cherrywood desk.

Eyes dark and fingers threaded before his lips, he scans me, head to toe, as though his petite and perfect, curly-headed, Barbie blonde wife isn't sitting on the arm of his chair.

"Bambi," he says.

"No," she replies, sharply, in a tone that doesn't really match how she looks any more than the gothic dress contrasting her pale skin.

Fidgeting, I look to Brian for help.

He translates effortlessly, "Liam wants Amber to get a dress like yours. He loves how cute it is. She refuses."

I look down at my dress, and—admittedly—I got it because it was adorable, but... I look back up at the big boss of Whirlwind Branding, William Warrick... Are we sure that's what he's thinking?

"Tiny flowers," he mutters.

There are tiny flowers scattered all over the sheer material making up my sleeves and my outer skirt's lining.

However, no matter how petite and blonde Mr. Warrick's wife happens to be, she does not seem the type to dress in tiny flowers unless they are black or blood red and wilting. Instead of tiny flowers in her skirt's lining, she has tattered black lace against ink-dark satin.

"Sweet & Salty still has cupcakes with tiny flowers on them right now," Brian offers, as a balm. "They were for Easter. Because they love Easter."

Liam's gaze drags off my clothes and holds to Brian. "Easter was last week. You're still upset?"

"Upset?" Brian gasps. "Who?" He looks behind himself, at no one, then faces forward—aghast—finger pointed at his face. " Me? " He sniffs. "No, of course not. Why would betrayal upset me?"

Amber crosses her arms. "We already told you. Your Countdown to Valentine event resulted in dozens of complaints. We need to let the office cool down before we try something else like that again. We are on your side. The night after rejecting your Easter plans, Liam lay face-down in our bed for two hours, depressed."

Brian sags. "All those complaints were Ruby, because she was sad she couldn't participate in all the activities to the fullest due to her disability.

If I were unable to behold the beauty of holiday decorations, I'd complain, too.

I said in my Easter presentation that I'd make a point to have even more tactile decor and commission Easter songs to be written to help better involve our blind staff. "

“She specifically, actually, on multiple accounts asked that she be involved less,” Amber says.

“And Frank also complained that her workload couldn’t support the mandatory participation.

” Liam scowls. “It’s unfortunate, but some jobs can’t be outsourced in order for everyone to have fun.

For Whirlwind Branding to function,” he grumbles, seeming deeply put out by his words, “it requires that my employees actually work.”

Amber pats Liam’s head, running her fingers through his dark waves.

“What an unprecedented and depressing thing to have learned.” Merciless, she turns her focus on Brian.

“If there’s nothing else, it was a pleasure to meet your new mailroom assistant.

You may get back to work...and keep the cute outfits somewhere far away from my silly little husband’s puppy dog eyes... like in the basement.”

I gulp.

Planting his palm on my lower back, Brian wheels me toward the door. “Understood loud and clear. My next plan will work around work schedules—and be extra cute in a way that won’t end up in your closet or on any hangers beneath any sad eyes.”

I don’t think that’s entirely what they were saying, but as Brian escorts me from the penthouse office, I look back to find Amber smiling down at Liam, whose head has found a home against her side.

Eyes closed, he soaks in something gentle that she offers, and I relax by the time Brian and I are back in the elevator, heading down, down, down into the basement mailroom.

“What do you think of the place?” Brian asks as he falls against the back wall railing and tucks his hands in his khaki pants pockets.

“It’s very...” Nice. Characterized. Full. Like a small town operating in a single, bustling building. Stories live and breathe here, interwoven together, connected by the mailroom.

This is a beating heart with us as the veins.

“Very?” he prompts.

“Kind.” Even when Ruby, the single blind employee in the building, was screaming at her husband, there was a certain calm in the space that I can’t explain.

Like everyone could see the blush in her cheeks, even if she ignored it fully up until the moment Will tapped a kiss to her lips, then walked away, whistling.

I like it here, already.

Bracing myself to meet the full beauty of Brian’s eyes, I say, “Thank you.” My breath shivers as I fight the emotion threatening to rise.

“So much. I...I don’t know what else to say.

I’ll do my very best and work very hard, a-and try to make sure I continue to not be trouble at home.

I just... Thank you for this chance to start over. ”

Reaching into his bag, Brian procures one last envelope and taps my forehead with it.

Smile unleashed, he says, “Don’t mention it, A-mail-ia.

” He lets go once I grasp the paper, and the elevator doors slide open to reveal his kingdom of sorting systems and shelves.

Walking out, he says, “And, for the record, people who greet other people with homemade dinners when they come home are never trouble.” With a wave, he heads toward his office.

“But, even without all that, I think you in particular would find it very, very hard to trouble me.”

Me... in particular ?

Stifling a squeak when the elevator doors try to close on me, I drag my attention off Brian long enough to make it to the desk I’ve claimed as my own and the training manual Brian gave me before we went on our building-wide escapade.

Taking a deep breath, I tell my heart to settle and look at the formal letter in my hands.

I’m sure he didn’t mean anything by that comment.

Why would he?

I open the letter, and my heart nearly stops when I locate the check within.

A sign-on bonus. I have never seen this much money all in one place before.

Never once. Now that I think about it, I...

don't actually know how much money I'm making here.

The moment I learned that there was an opportunity to get away from where I was working—Walmart—and move in with Brian , everything else shut down.

I'd work for a gum wrapper and three pennies a week if it meant staying somewhere as bright and warm as Brian's home.

This...is not three pennies.

Gulping, I locate a note tucked in with the check and read:

A-mail-ia,

It's an honor and a joy to be working with you. You never realize how much you miss someone until they're not around anymore, but I think, out of everyone in Bandera, I missed you the most.

To our beautiful future,

Brian

He missed me? Out of a million others, he missed a random girl who hung around him sometimes?

Surely, he doesn't mean anything by this.

This is just him being polite and kind and welcoming—all the Brian traits that always had people flocking to his princely veneer.

He was passionate and mature and sooo not like the other boys.

He never bullied anyone. Never made crude jokes.

Never acted like a toddler. Never broke the rules.

He just had his mail. And worked at his family's post office.

He was the pristine, good guy with a work ethic and clean clothes and a plan.

Even as kids, we saw the future husband traits in him, gleaming like a beacon.

It killed me when I learned that his plan was to leave town after high school.

But he didn't even say goodbye to me...so it makes no sense for him to have missed me the most . Not a single bit.

He's just being nice.

And I'm just fabricating an idea that I could have all this and more.

Which is not very grateful of me at all. I should be grateful, and stop wanting more.

Setting my sign-on bonus and the letter aside, I open up my training manual and start where I left off before we went on our rounds, which was around page fifteen of the why you should love mail opening.

Brian said I could skip it, since I already embody the heart and soul of a mailroom

worker, but in my heart and soul I knew there was no way I'd miss out on reading a single word Brian has written, much less when what he's written is a love letter to mail.

Allowing the peace of my new life to consume me, I sink into Brian's words for the rest of the day.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:28 am

Cutie patootie.

Brian

Flag Day.

A Flag Day wedding.

Which I am, specifically, staring at a non-invitation for.

Mars has officially un-invited me to his wedding.

He says I am not allowed to come. He has put glitter in an envelope and told me to stay far, far away from his fiancée until she's stuck with him, and then—maybe—he'll let me meet her.

But not before he convinces her to get a ring tattooed on her finger.

I am uncertain how to take this.

The invitation is beautiful, handwritten in script, decorated with stickers I'm certain he stole from his brother, Jove. He put time into this, just to tell me—and I quote—to flag off .

What a way to begin the weekend.

Peeking behind me at the kitchen, I locate my sweet roomie, who is humming

“Dandelions” by Ruth B.

as she dances through the kitchen, taking advantage of every counter in a way that is neither chaotic nor messy.

I do not know how she does it. She has made baking several treats on top of meal prepping for this week a pristine effort.

Her flowing dress sleeves maintain cleanliness as she sweeps from cutting vegetables to stirring something on the stove to topping a casserole in French onions.

She’s beautiful.

Resting my chin atop the back couch cushions, I let the trance consume me, nearly forgetting that I’m covered in glitter and I’m not sure if I’m actually not invited to Mars’s wedding or if this is a joke. I’d text him to ask...but...the man commits to a bit with a passion that rivals my love of mail.

I’d like to go to his wedding.

I’d like to show up and say I thought that covering me in glitter and sending a perfect, careful letter was a joke indicating that I was more than welcome.

If I text him, his dedication to the un-invited bit might hurt my feelings. If I write back asking for clarification, he’d definitely text me instead of writing another letter, so there’s not even a way to get more mail out of this situation.

My nose scrunches at that very concept.

I swear sometimes he does things just to bug me.

And, then, other times, he sends me an angel who adores mail and cooks and cleans and sings while she works and gets adequately excited when letters with colored envelopes come in.

Huh...

Bracing my arm atop the cushions, I nestle my chin into the crook and stare at Amelia's perfect, crisp hair bun.

I would have thought that after living together for several weeks I'd have seen her with her hair down at least once, but I have never in my life seen it down.

She has always, even when we were small, kept it up in this perfect, pinned bun.

Sometimes it's high. Sometimes it's low.

Sometimes she puts flowers or ornaments that match her dresses in it. But it is always, always up.

Makes a man curious.

"A-mail-ia?"

Amelia squeaks, whirling in a twirl of her gauzy skirt. Potato and peeler in hand, she stares at me. "Y-yes?" A peeling drops to the ground, and she flinches as her attention snags on it. "Sorry. I'll clean that up."

...I am covered in glitter. My living room will never not have glitter in it again. My couch will rot away someday and leave a pile of glitter behind. I think my kitchen floor will survive a potato peeling. "You know..." I begin.

In lieu of paying attention to me, she locates a paper towel and ducks down below my kitchen island.

I rise, scattering glitter across my floor as I approach to lean against the granite and peek over at her.

Furiously, she scrubs.

I blink. “A-mail-ia?”

Her head whips up, giant brown eyes fixing on me.

Gracious...she looks pretty, skirts all splayed around her. She’s spring and summer, bound together with warmth and gentleness. As comforting as a letter from a friend, who would never add glitter to it.

I forget entirely what I’m saying for a solid minute, then I shake my head and remember. “You don’t have to do all this.”

Tension floods her body as her eyes go ever larger. “I-I’m sorry. Am I being too loud?”

“No?” She could stand to be louder so I don’t have to strain to hear her singing, actually. She has a lilting, musical voice. Some mixture of fantasy and nature, pooling together. She’s like a fairytale princess.

“Is it...not helpful to have meals ready for after we get back from work?” she asks.

“It’s incredibly helpful.”

Confusion fills her doe eyes.

I walk around the counter and crouch beside her, bracing my arms on my knees and grinning. “I just mean you do not need to be so helpful. It’s Saturday. I’ve not cooked once since you got here eleven days ago. You’re gonna make me worry that I’m taking advantage of you.”

“Taking advantage of me?” she whispers. “When...you’re letting me live here for free and you’ve given me a full-time job, with benefits, and an hourly wage I could only ever have dreamed of? Aren’t I taking advantage of you at that point?”

I tilt my head against my knees, and glitter brushes from my pants onto the floor.

Amelia notices and has my smallest dustpan retrieved from beneath the kitchen sink before I can answer her. Staring at her hands as they literally clean up around me, I dare to say, “No. I don’t think you know how to do that.”

Once the floor is clean, I breathe, and it is no longer clean.

Distress rampant in her eyes, Amelia’s lashes flutter. “Why are you covered in glitter?”

“Because my friends hate me.”

Her attention lifts. “What?”

“Mars sent me a letter filled with glitter to tell me I’m not invited to his wedding.”

Amelia’s mouth opens, and closes. Finally, she says, “I’m sure that’s a joke.”

“I’ll be treating it like one, yes.”

She sweeps up more of the glitter, lip pouted. “I’ll vacuum after I’m done cooking.

Maybe you should change your clothes...”

“Are you going to lay them out for me?”

Face erupting with fireworks of pink, Amelia flicks her gaze to my eyes, then away.
“W-what?”

“I fear I may grow useless should you continue taking care of me so well, A-mail-ia,”
I provide, seriously.

“I’ve never been this spoiled before in my life.

My parents are great, but they aren’t entirely homemakers.

After a long day of school and work, all of us would forage for dinner.

Sometimes, all we’d have is Kraft singles and saltines. ”

Her pretty brown eyes break as she whispers, “That’s horrible.”

I shrug. “Not really. We were all busy with mail. But—still—this whole warm meal thing you’re doing?

” I smile. “It’s spoiling me something awful.

So...” I reach for her dustpan and slip it from her hands.

“...maybe let me clean up my own mess.” I get a wonderful idea.

“ And maybe after you’re done here, you could come with me somewhere? ”

“Come with you...somewhere?”

I grin, and rise, scattering more fairy dust as I offer her my free hand. “Let me help you wrap up here, then we’ll go on an adventure.”

Lips parted, Amelia looks up at me, glances at my hand, then brings her shaking fingers into my grasp. I help her to her feet, but I don’t let go.

She tries to pull free; I don’t let her. Her slender fingers shiver in my hold. “U-um...”

“Hm.” I turn her hand over in mine, look at her palm, drag my thumb up from the center of her lifeline to her middle finger. “Your hands are really small,” I say.

“They...” Amelia’s breath quakes on her inhale. “...are?”

I swipe my thumb across her palm. “Yeah.” Practically fragile. I’m not used to people’s hands feeling so small in mine. Since I’m barely above average height for men at five-foot-ten, most of the time I find myself in the presence of giants.

Looking at Amelia now and remembering hugging her in this very spot, it’s kinda clear. She’s tiny.

“You’re cute,” I say.

Amelia squeaks as her mouth falls open.

Smiling, I release her hand, spin a flurry of glitter around me, and start toward my room. “Let me get cleaned up, then I’ll help you, so we can go on our adventure.”

“I— You— Uh—” She grips her hands to her chest. “O-kay. Yes. A-adventure.”

Heh. Yeah. She's really so stinkin' cute.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:28 am

Cute...like a gnome.

Amelia

I'm cute. Brian thinks I'm cute. He said I was cute. I'm cute. Cute. Me.

I've not breathed correctly for the past few hours. Working side-by-side with him in the kitchen, listening to him laugh at his own jokes, hearing him hum the song I was singing back when my brain possessed the capacity to recall tunes... It has been such a blessing to exist today.

And now, here we are, on our adventure shopping for holiday decorations as though the day could get even better.

Brian, adorably, stares at an American eagle wreath made of fake feathers featuring the stars and stripes, and whistles. "Incredible." He places it in our cart— our ! cart ! Because we are shopping ! together !—and continues perusing the patriotic aisle of Hobby Lobby.

My eye catches on a bag of hard candies wrapped in flag-printed plastic, and I pick it up. "Brian."

He stops, tilting his whole body back when he looks at me.

Smiling, I present what I've found as though my heart isn't racing. "For the candy dish you keep at the front door?"

His green eyes sparkle as a smile overwhelms him. “You don’t say my name a lot.”

Forget breathing correctly . There goes my ability to breathe period .

He dips his chin toward the cart, indicating that I should add the bag of candy, then he returns his attention to the displays, noting mildly, “You should say my name more.”

Okay, well. I have died dead. I’m gone. My spirit is floating somewhere else. I think, maybe, during our years apart, I forgot exactly how... Brian Brian is. He’s such a casual dream, and I’m not prepared for the attacks on my waking mind.

I know it means literally nothing. I know, logically, he is not flirting with me, at all.

I know, deeply, that there is no room left in his heart for anything other than mail.

When I started work with him in the mailroom just last week, I read thousands of words about his love of mail in the training manual he wrote, and I have since re-read parts as though it’s my favorite book, because it very well might be.

Moments of kindness and compliments mean nothing.

And I can’t treat them like something.

Because I know better.

I have watched countless girls think Brian’s Brianness means something only to see their confessions go up in flames as Brian apologized.

I don’t think I’d be able to survive it if I were the one confessing and had to watch Brian’s usual smile drift off his face before his eyes widened and he just...

awkwardly explained how he never meant to imply he was interested.

Natural-born lady decimator, that's Brian Single.

Innocent to an impeccable degree...that's Brian Single.

His mischief has never before been the type that fools with people's feelings. Because mail is feelings, and he'd not disrespect the post like that.

"Ha," he says, already well past telling me I should say his name more as he picks up a large patriotic gnome in a very tall American flag top hat.

"Look." He shows me. "So cute." He waves the spindly arms on the bearded fella, oblivious that my self-esteem has dropped below sea level.

"He can hug our mailbox. I think this fabric is water-resistant." Preciously, Brian sits the gnome in the child seat, strapping it in with the seatbelt.

"I need a matching top hat." He pulls his phone out. "You need one, too, A-mail-ia."

I'm not sure top hats are my style...or that I want to look like a tiny man with a beard as long as his body.

I'm cute... Brian thinks I'm cute... Just like a gnome... Is this...colon, apostrophe, end parenthesis? Because. Yeah. That's where I am emotionally at the moment.

Amid searching for tophats, Brian freezes, looks at me, looks back at his phone. His eyes flick between me and the device for a long moment. "Huh."

I am afraid to prompt further words, but I dare to echo, "Huh?"

“I fell in a rabbit hole.” He shows me his phone screen, which is depicting a several hundred dollar steampunk dress with a cog-decorated top hat, asymmetrical and layered waterfall skirt, and a leather corset. “There’s a ren faire coming up in May.”

I blink.

“We should go together.”

My heart launches itself into my uvula. Together? As in together , together? Like right now? When we are shopping together ? My lashes flutter.

“And you should wear this.” He pulls his phone back and taps a few things.

“I’m ordering it so you can try it on. If you don’t like it, we’ll send it back.

I’ll get something that matches, so we can twin.

” Joy overwhelms him, shining in his every cell.

“There’s a size chart in inches.” He presents his phone to me again. “What looks right?”

Right about now? A hole. A hole for me to hide in looks right. Meekly, I say, “This is...over three hundred dollars.”

“I’m getting it for you. Don’t worry.”

That does not assuage my worries, but I still give in and say, “S-small. According to that chart, I’m a small.”

Brian’s green eyes glitter as his brows lift. He scans me, smiling, then nods and

proceeds to check out. “Yeah. That makes sense.”

“It sounds like things are going great,” Ceres says, as though I’m not having a minor breakdown, on the floor, in the crevice between my bed and the wall, on video call.

“Going to a ren faire this weekend is an adorable date plan. Get me pictures if any hot guys are dressed like dark fairies please.”

Beyond Ceres, on her couch, Mars states, “Do not do that.”

“I need it for research, for my clients,” Ceres offers, as though that will change Mars’s opinion.

His scrunched nose and frown informs me it does not .

My entire being droops, and I miss the days when Ceres and Mars weren’t together all the time. Their love borders toxic in a way that is both concerning and beautiful. It’s hard to explain, but I am glad she seems happier when he’s around. I just wish he wasn’t a part of quite so many girl talks.

Flopped, I pout at my phone. “If I see any dark fairies, I will send pictures to Mars, so he can dress up in your preferred archetype.”

Mars’s frown turns into a smile as he flicks a playing card into something outside the video angle.

Ceres rolls her eyes. “He’s not tall enough to be a dark fairy.”

“I’ll wear heels.”

Pulling her attention off her computer, Ceres faces him, threads of ecstasy glistening

on her face. “Femgoth boy?”

“Femgoth fairy boy,” he confirms.

When Ceres faces forward again, she’s smiling and fiddling with her padlock necklace.

I swear. They’re so cute in a “made for each other” way.

Makes me want to join a nunnery, because I’ll never have whatever it is they do.

I say, “It’s May , Ceres. May. I’ve been here for a day short of a month, and everything is so...

so nice. I’ve yet to screw it all up. No one is mad at me, ever, which gives me anxiety.

My savings is steadily growing, which also gives me anxiety.

Everything is amazing and I’m so happy , which just results in anxiety .

” I cover my face with my hands. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me.

I should be grateful. Instead, I’m anxious and afraid.

I want to be excited about this not-date, but I can’t stop thinking that I’m going to ruin everything I have by wanting more .

I...” I hate saying this with Mars sitting right there , but it’s impossible to pry these two apart these days.

“I love Brian. I love him. I can’t...” My chest hurts.

“I can’t even express how deeply I love this man.

” Tears bead in my eyes. “It’s not just an infatuation and obsession over the memory of an angel anymore.

Brian is so... kind . He’s the sun.” My voice breaks.

“He’s...the sun. I’ve been freezing without him. I didn’t realize how much.”

Ceres glances my way and arches a brow. “I don’t know how to help you with a sunshine male lead.

You’re desperately out of my genre with your sunshine/sunshine on top of a she-falls-first trope.

What are you supposed to do? Confess? First?

Risking rejection instead of trying to escape from his fervent and constant displays of bone-breaking affection—and also, possibly, his basement? ” Her eyes narrow. “Can’t relate.”

Yeah, I know you can’t, you darling lunatic. “He bought us matching outfits,” I say.

Mars cuts his eyes toward me, allowing a dry smile to possess him. “Wow. How very not in love of him.”

“Brian and Jupiter might need a support group,” Ceres offers.

Mars begins, “I agr—”

“To support me. Since I could not have either of them. My woes abound.”

Mars’s eye twitches while Ceres smiles, proud of herself.

If I could shoot myself, I think it would be less painful than whatever third wheeling I am being subjected to...

It’s nice to see Ceres so happy after years of seeing her working alone in her house and trying, desperately, to understand what it is I see in Brian, who happens to be the stark opposite of her type. I’m glad for her. I am. I just wish I weren’t also jealous.

How does someone who doesn’t leave her house more than once a month wind up in a storybook romance?

It’s not exactly fair. And I hate myself for thinking like this.

I hate myself for not just being grateful and counting these many, many blessings.

I hate, hate, hate myself for the way I’m behaving and the way my brain isn’t satisfied with something so. unbelievably. perfect.

Why can’t I just be...happy? With what I have? With the peace? With...this environment that is so soft, and gentle, and kind?

Why am I waiting for everything to break? Why am I searching for something wrong to grumble about?

It...really leaves me wondering if things with my parents were actually as bad as I made them out to be...or if I just can’t stop myself from complaining loud enough that other people go up in arms for me.

Maybe their negativity was never actually the issue.

Maybe mine was.

Softly, I say, “What am I supposed to do?”

“Have you tried explaining that you’re willing to bear his mail-loving babies?” Ceres asks.

My face implodes. “No. I can’t say that I have.”

“Hm.” She types something on her computer, keys clacking. “Maybe start there.”

I think that starting there would kill me.

But it wouldn’t even be a merciful death.

“I’m serious, Ceres. I don’t...I don’t know what to do.

I don’t want to live like this, always wanting more.

I want to be happy with what I have. I want to feel...

safe. Secure. I—” My voice cracks. “I don’t know what I want.

Everything. Nothing. I just...don’t know.”

Deathly serious, Ceres focuses her attention on me and softens her tone in a way that suggests she’s pouring effort into the interaction.

“Sweetheart, you’ve left an abusive household.

Feeling safe and secure is going to take time.

You're not used to it. You're used to people who use good emotions to manipulate you.

You're used to cleaning up messes that aren't yours.

You're used to an entirely different way of life.

And that doesn't mean you aren't grateful right now.

It just means you don't yet believe it's actually happening.

You're in a state of too-good-to-be-true.

Because, let's face it, literally none of your behavior has changed.

You're still calling me to talk about how much you adore Brian.

Now, you're just facing the guilt of adoring him in close proximity while the rest of your life isn't garbage. ”

I...guess that's not entirely untrue. But. “Adoring Brian from afar never felt attainable. I was little more than a fan fainting over a movie star. Things are...so different now. So much more complicated.”

“So much more real. So much more in reach.”

“Yeah,” I whisper. “I'm deluding myself into thinking that something between us could be possible.”

“Yet you’re scared you don’t deserve it, so you’re cutting yourself off by choosing guilt for wanting more instead of hope that you could have everything.”

May...be? I wrap myself in a hug and refuse to look at the screen. “Loving him is...so easy it’s hard. And terrifying.” Breath shakes through my lungs. “I know you don’t get it, Ceres, but he is just...such a beautiful person.”

“I get it,” she says. “Being captivated by how beautiful a person can be...that I get.” Her gaze is fixed on Mars when I find the strength to look at her.

Watching him, she continues, “It’s hard to feel like enough when someone else’s beauty seems to shed light on your flaws.

” Her attention returns to me. “I think the most astounding part, though, is when that person looks at you and sees who you are. Every flaw included. And says you’re the most beautiful person they’ve ever met, too. ”

A tear falls down my cheek as another catches on my lashes. I cannot even begin to picture that happening with Brian. After all, one of my biggest flaws where he’s concerned is the fact that I am flesh and blood, not mail.

To him, nothing could possibly be as beautiful as mail.

My heart skips a beat as the sound of the front door opening informs me that Brian is back from his work outing with all the department heads. Chest tight, I snatch my phone and sit up to whisper, “I’m sorry. He’s back. I gotta go.”

“Okay. See you.”

“I miss you,” I say, quickly, swallowing hard.

Ceres looks at me for a long moment, probably thinking about how we would only see each other once a month whenever she'd pick up her grocery order at Walmart and I'd bring it out to her car.

Nothing else about our relationship has changed with distance.

Nothing else at all. We never went out .

We never did anything together . And, yet, not being in the same town as her feels like a canyon has opened up between us.

At least.

To me.

Sincerely, there's no reason for Ceres to nod and say, "Yeah. I miss you, too, Mellie. We'll see each other soon, though, okay?"

"Soon," I echo, and force a smile, because in a month and a half when she gets married isn't exactly what I'd consider soon , but if it saves my sanity, I'll pretend it is.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:28 am

I know what to fill a sheath with. These feelings! Nyeh!

Amelia

I've never been to a renaissance faire before. Probably because I've never been to much of anything before. My parents didn't really like me hanging out with anyone, because for some reason no matter what friends I tried to make, everyone was a bad influence.

Looking back on it all, I wonder if they believed half of what they told me, or if almost everything was just lies meant to control what I did while protecting themselves from outsiders who might learn that something in our relationship wasn't entirely right .

After all, it didn't take long for Ceres to casually mention things that made me question how normal it was for them to treat me the way they did. Even though she was always somewhat impartial, it's because of her I started compiling a list, reviewing it, and wondering.

It's because of her I began searching for answers and recognizing less-than-healthy behaviors, and it's because of her help and support that I got out.

Without her, I wouldn't have moved in with Brian.

Without her, I wouldn't be here, looking ahead at a massive renaissance fair, and thinking...how nice it is to be free .

These kinds of feelings come and go, surrounded constantly by an overpowering guilt mixed with dread, but for right now, I'm grateful.

I'm glad. I don't care if I never speak to my parents again.

I'm not sure I ever want to be anywhere near them again.

I'm scared of being in a place they can even reach me.

Now that there's some distance, it's all so much clearer.

They hurt me. A lot. Constantly. And it wasn't my fault .

Because Brian doesn't hurt me. And Ceres doesn't.

And no one at work treats me like they did.

Even if they are an era past, the future is so, so bright.

So... so bright.

Sun shimmering all around him, Brian turns toward me, tips his newsboy hat, and grips his leather mail bag as he rubs at some grease makeup on his nose. "What do you want to do first, A-mail-ia?"

Breathe.

I want to breathe.

While I manage my breaths, I scan the stalls scattered up and down the dusty streets. Booths manned by fairies. Furnaces roaring beside blacksmiths. Turkey legs half the

size of my body roasting on spits.

People in mushroom hats pass elves in long cloaks. Knights on horses trot down the
throughway.

There is so much going on.

I have no idea where to start.

“What do you want to do first?” I ask.

Brian’s smile shines brighter than the sun, and he reaches into his bag to pull out a
small faded yellow envelope, barely a few inches wide and tall. Green wax seals the
parchment, and I perk.

Green?

Casual correspondence?

Tiny letter?

I want it. I want a handful of them. I want a whole stack of them to play with.

I—

Brian approaches a woman in a wide-brimmed mushroom hat and flourishes a bow.
“Afternoon, madam. A matter of utmost importance requires your attention.”

I want to kill her.

I want to wrestle a sword from a dwarf blacksmith’s hands and fight this woman to

the death.

It destroys me to watch her gasp and take the letter, frantically breaking the seal to retrieve the card within. Bits of precious, beautiful wax fall to the dusty ground, and I take personal offense. When she giggles, I decide I hate her.

It's not impossible that I blackout picturing ways to murder the mushroom lady until Brian is beside me, reviving my brain by offering me a letter. "Do you want to deliver one?" he asks.

My fingers flinch around the worn paper, and I think my eyes are pleading when they meet Brian's. No, they say, desperate and pitiful. I do not want to deliver one. I want to keep one.

He laughs, so open and bright. "You can have yours later. Promise."

"Mine?"

He pats a pocket on his thigh, where a letter I assumed was decorative pokes out. "Yours. For later." He lifts his mail bag. "These are more...generic. They'll make strangers happy. This one..." He grazes the letter in his pocket with his fingertips. "...this one is for you."

My heart squeezes, and I think I'll die if I don't get that letter soon, turn it over, and see what color the wax seal is. Imagine...if it's blue ...

No.

No, there I go again. Wanting more .

I can't be grateful for even five minutes?

I will be patient. I will be content. I will calm down .

I will calm down and pass out little letters to strangers, watch joy light in their eyes, and...let everything about this wrap around my soul.

Nothing can ruin this.

Nothing .

Not even the cruel, condemning words in my brain.

Brian and I spend the afternoon passing out letters, taking in the sights, petting dragons, contemplating purchasing fairy wings, and determining that Liam would absolutely, completely, entirely not allow us to come into work with swords.

That is to say, Brian called him to ask. And he barely got hey, boss, is it against regulation out of his mouth before Liam said, affirmatively, yes .

Seated under a tree in a copse strung with chimes that catch the dying rays of the rainbow sun and throw it everywhere, Brian sighs. Nibbling his turkey leg, he leans back against the bark, stares through the branches at the sky, and watches a plane go by. Soft, he murmurs, “Metal dragon.”

Sipping lemonade out of the belly of a pineapple, I force myself to relax against the tree, too. No matter how hard I try, though, I can’t drag my attention off Brian as his gaze follows the plane.

“I think HR’s gonna hate me,” he says.

How could anyone hate Brian ? “Why?”

“Loopholes.” His gaze flicks to me. “I can’t bring a sword to work, but I can bring a sheath and a hilt.

And, lucky me, people are making swords here.

I can buy a hilt and a sheath, sans sword.

” He knocks his shoes together. “But...what should I put in the sheath, I wonder...” His eyes close. “Maybe a water gun.”

I giggle.

His lips tip into an even brighter smile. “How’s the lemonade?”

“Amazing. Thank you for getting it.”

Brian waves a hand. “Of course. This whole thing was my idea, and you’re in the middle of saving money for your future. It’s only right that I treat.”

My stomach dips as I swallow, brutally reminded that living with Brian was never a forever situation even if my job might be.

Technically, I’m pretty sure I could afford my own place to stay right now.

Whirlwind pays well, and that bonus I got would cover three months of rent.

I could get an apartment easily. Right now .

I just hate the very idea of leaving my blue room in Brian’s home.

It’s the first place I’ve ever felt like...like I’m actually home .

“Want some?” he asks, holding out his turkey leg.

Fighting emotion, I say, “No, thank you.”

His eyes fix on me, polished emeralds and field grass beneath dipped brows. “What’s wrong?”

I focus on my drink, trace the bumps of the pineapple cup. “N-nothing.”

“A-mail-ia.”

I wince. “It’s just...I forgot.”

“Forgot?”

I stare at the bottom of my pineapple cup. “I...forgot that I need to be looking for apartments or some place to rent.” I squeeze my eyes shut. “Sorry. I know it’s stupid of me to forget the whole entire point, but you’re so welcoming, and I’ve really enjoyed being around you, and—”

“You don’t have to look for somewhere else to stay.”

“What?” I find Brian’s face, bathed in sunlight and scattered rainbows.

He lifts the hand not holding a giant leg of turkey and swipes a knuckle beneath my eye, catching a stray teardrop. The awkward, distressed expression I saw him make during countless love letter rejections crosses his brows. A thread of pain ripples in his eyes. “Sorry.”

My heart rate accelerates as panic takes hold.

He pushes back the lock of hair not trapped in the extravagant braided bun I put together to go with this outfit, tucking it behind my ear. “I didn’t mean to make it sound like you had to leave.”

I know. I know he wouldn’t. Brian isn’t the kind of guy who would kick me out before I’m ready. But, still. “I’m positive I have enough money to move into my own place. I shouldn’t continue imposing on your kindness.”

“My kindness?” He blinks. “You cook. And clean. And bake. I didn’t know so many muffins existed before you started making them for us to take as breakfasts.

My kitchen floor was a different color until you bleached it.

I thought it was supposed to be faded yellow until you made it white like a fresh envelope.

What do you even mean my kindness? You’re working full time and doing an entire salary’s worth of housekeeping as though you owe me something.

You don’t, Amelia. You just don’t. I should be paying you for your services. ”

My mouth opens, but I can’t find words for the longest moment. When I finally do, they’re not exactly eloquent. “I...but... I’m not doing much of anything. It’s the least I can do to thank you. I...I used to do the same for my parents.”

Brian—my ever happy-go-lucky Brian—frowns. “I’m not fond of your parents, Amelia.”

My heart drops like a rock into my stomach.

“They didn’t treat you right.” He sets his turkey leg into the paper bowl that the fries

we shared earlier came in. Wiping his hands on a spare napkin, he mutters, “It’s written all over you.”

“It?” I whisper.

“Abuse.”

My throat closes. “They...weren’t... They didn’t...”

“They were, and they did. You apologize for nothing every day, multiple times a day, several times in the same breath. You keep busy, constantly, as though you’re afraid I’ll be upset if you don’t make yourself useful.

You flinch when Ruby gets too aggressive with Will, which is often. Loud noises make you jump.”

“Isn’t...that normal?”

“No.” He drops his napkin beside his leftover meat and shakes his head. “Not like this, Amelia. Not like this.”

“I’m...” Sorry .

“It’s nothing you need to apologize for.”

I have never seen Brian so serious before in my life. There’s always, always been this air of wonder and childlike joy around him. He has never been upset about anything to a degree that it’s felt quite like... this .

Taking in air, he settles, rustling his hair in the rainbow rays.

“All this is to say, you aren’t an imposition, Amelia.

You’re not. I don’t think you know how to be.

I...would love it if you learned.” He finds me and smiles; it is starkly beautiful.

“I would love it if you imposed on me. Everyone deserves to feel safe enough to be taken care of.”

Hair prickles along my arms as a shudder works through me.

“And another thing,” he says, lifting the letter from the holster pocket strapped to his thigh. Tapping it to my head, he tilts his chin down and meets my eyes. “You are welcome to stay with me for as long as you want. Even forever if it suits you.”

“Forever?” I whisper as my shaking fingers reach for my letter.

“Sure.” He lets go once I grasp the spotted paper. “I like having you around. And not just because you spoil me something nonsense.” He returns his gaze to the pink and orange sky. “It’s just...you know. Because you’re you. I like you.”

Heart beating in my throat, I watch him until my trembling fingers have lowered my letter to my lap. It takes all my strength to drag my gaze down to the envelope, the seal.

There...against ripples of my manilla and leather skirt...rests blue .

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:28 am

Not nothing, but certainly not something either.

Amelia

It means nothing. Nothing . Brian likes everyone. That's—like—a thing . It's in his personality. He likes everyone. Because everyone , at one point or another, sends and receives mail.

And he loves mail.

Which means he should know what different colored wax seals stand for!

And he should know that blue wax is reserved for letters of passion .

Furthermore, this is a deep azure . The blueier the blue, the feelingier the feelings.

Chewing my lip, I pace in my bedroom, wondering how in the world I survived the entire trip back from the ren faire without blurting anything inane like I love you or do you know what very-blue blue wax means?

I'm being silly. Terribly silly. The letters we passed out had green and pink and red wax. Just an array of colors. Did I see any other blues? No. Was I looking for them, though?

Haha.

Yes.

If there had been a single other blue that I'd seen, I would have oh-so-casually said, "I think I'll go deliver this one to that person over behind that building," and then I would have hidden it in the frills of my skirt to hoard at home.

This means nothing.

Unless...it means something?

But it couldn't. It wouldn't. It doesn't .

You don't say I like you under a tree coated in fairy glow during a sunset and not kiss the person you're talking to if you mean like-like . That's a rule. I'm positive. Completely positive.

A swallow sticks in my throat as I settle myself onto the corner of my bed and stare.

I don't want to break the wax. It's a plain seal, strictly one color, nothing like the ones I put together with flecks of fake gold dust, flower petals, or gems. The motif is an elegant, if simple, rose.

I love it.

I deeply, deeply love it.

And I will not be breaking it.

I would rather die than break this.

I would also rather die than rip the envelope open.

My hands need to stop shaking if I'm going to manage reaching my letter without

hurting any part of it.

Carefully, I ease the adhesive apart, exhaling damp breath along the seam until it comes undone. Saving the entire seal on my desk beside my own organized collection of stamps and colors, I return to my bed and stare at the open envelope.

“It means nothing,” I whisper to emotionally prepare myself, then I slip the faded paper free, unfold it twice, and read...

Dear A-mail-ia,

Forgive the shade of passion upon the flap of this letter’s warm embrace. I know the code of seals; it’s such a beautiful part of mail’s history. From the days of Benjamin Franklin to the present electronic mail, nothing quite compares to a weathered envelope in the firelight as wax melts.

My reason for shirking such an honorable and important symbolism is really on the insipid side of logic. I’d be ashamed of myself if this letter’s recipient were not you.

You see, plainly, I have noticed that you gravitate toward blue shades, and I know you’ve an impressive collection of wax seals and colors already. I merely wanted you to have a favored hue since I know you—like me—are one to save memories like this down to the final piece.

Heh. Look at me. Writing you a letter, and spending half the page explaining that I don’t mean to make you uncomfortable.

This isn’t what I wanted to say, but maybe I’m stalling because I’m not quite sure how to put it all into words.

Allow me to try, at least, before I’m out of paper.

I'm glad you're here, A-mail-ia.

I have missed you, dearly.

Working with you in the mailroom and at the office is a unique joy. You are like sunlight upon still water, a glass sparkle that's nearly impossible to look at it's so beautiful. Your soul and spirit, however tortured by life's disrespectful whim, remain angelic.

I see the care you put into everything and everyone. Even me.

And I need you to know I am grateful.

Mail brings joy.

Nothing can quite compare to the simple joys of receiving a letter or opening a package. It brings people together. It crosses distance with physical displays of affection. It provides something to hold, something to catch tears, something to draw to an aching chest as emotions swell.

Mail is beautiful.

And when I'm near you, I see similar beauty.

Thank you for coming into my life again,

Brian

A tear traces down my cheek, and I gasp just in time to pull my precious letter away from it. The moisture soaks into my skirt while I watch, sniffing in an effort to contain myself.

I was wrong.

This does not mean nothing . It means so much. It just doesn't, quite, mean love. But, in some ways, it does.

Only Brian could look at a near-perfect stranger from his childhood and make them feel as though they are doing him the honor with their presence in his home. Only Brian.

After a day as wonderful as today, I think it's time I really make a point of being grateful . Brian says I can stay here, near him, for as long as I need. He wouldn't make an offer like that lightly. He wouldn't lie. He enjoys my company.

And that will have to be enough for me.

It is enough for me.

If these conflicted emotions prove anything, I am not ready for a relationship like the one I'm craving.

Being loved romantically isn't going to heal the deep-seated anxiety I feel while I'm surrounded by nothing but peace—because being loved like that should be peaceful.

A relationship is not going to fill the spaces in my chest that still don't believe I'm safe.

It won't stop me from apologizing. It won't keep me from jumping at every loud noise. It won't make me any less nervous to be seen doing nothing.

For now, I heal.

So that, later, I can really, truly love . Without fear. Without boundary. As wide and deep as a navy sky.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:28 am

Please, please, please do not remove the 'i' from my name...

Brian

Amelia is normally so... good at baking.

Glancing at my roomie in the passenger seat of my car, I find her cheerfully devouring one of this morning's breakfast muffins while she plays on her phone, messaging someone, likely Ceres.

I am unsure what I have just put in my mouth, but I do not like it. No, I do not like it at all.

Pained, I manage to swallow the single, earthy bite.

For the record, food should never—ever—be described as earthy . Just. Just a PSA to all right there.

Is it moist? Yes. Is it rich with the flavor of a pinecone?

Somehow also yes.

Clearing my throat, I turn toward Amelia, open my mouth, and think better of it.

The poor girl makes different muffins every morning for us for breakfast. She's allowed to have one recipe that I don't love. And I am allowed to not break her heart and soul by asking her if she used dirt in lieu of flour. I can force down some dirt

muffin...for her sake.

I attempt to take another bite as I turn into downtown, where our beloved mailroom lies.

I cannot do it.

Something in me rebels. Riots. Resists.

Self-preservation, probably.

“A-mail-ia?” I posture, gently.

Her sweet smile and brown eyes find me, eager, waiting. She finishes up her own muffin as though it is not the physical embodiment of death and says, “Yes?”

I can’t do it. I cannot. I just can’t . “What kind of muffin is this?” I ask, leveling my tone so it’s conversational, not pitching.

She brightens. “Bran.”

Bran.

Who hurt her? How badly do you have to be hurt to confirm that something is bran so chipperly? Yet again, I find myself compelled to seek out an audience and have words with her parents.

Maintaining glistening positivity, Amelia—dear, sweet, innocent Amelia—says, “It’s a healthy recipe I found in this new book I got. It has bran, walnuts, and raisins in it.”

Raisins? There are raisins in this? No. No, thank you.

Bless everything that I managed to get a bite with none of those .

One of the reasons Mars and I bonded in an odd way was, first and foremost, because he made absolutely gorgeous ransom notes, and, second and secondmost, because we both hate raisins .

We practically held back one another's hair that one time the lunch lady at our school bestowed a deceptively chocolate chip looking oatmeal raisin cookie upon us. Our eyes met, faces green, across the cafeteria, and solidarity had never been so pitiful.

I'm pretty sure Jove threatened that woman into never doing it again because my tastebuds were never more affronted so heinously...but...well...

Where did Amelia even get raisins and bran? Why is she going to the store by herself? She's tiny, and pretty, and too friendly for city crowds. Someone is going to take her home, and then I'll have to call in a favor with Mars. That favor, naturally, being murder, but—

Amelia has been talking.

I zone back into the conversation and find her fiddling with her fingers as I pull into our reserved parking spot. "It's just I realized that we've been eating a sugar-heavy breakfast for weeks...so when a healthier muffin recipe fell into my lap, I decided to try it out and look up more."

Healthier? Healthier.

Amelia, I am too spoiled now to consume healthier muffin recipes. What do you mean healthier? You make dinners with desserts . It's too late for us.

Doe, her eyes lift, and my chest squeezes. "You...don't like it, do you?"

I would rather die than disappoint her. And, yet, I cannot. If there are raisins in this, I will not be able to force them down. “I’m so sorry,” I whisper. “I don’t like raisins.”

“You don’t like raisins,” she whispers, breathless, eyes going huge.

I shake my head. They are the devil’s fruit. I am positive they grew, dried and shriveled, upon the tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Eve plucked a desiccated grape from the boughs, and Adam—the fool—ate it for his love of her.

Such a love I am incapable of, I fear.

It is with a heavy heart that I admit...I would not even do it for my love of mail.

Some things are not fit for consumption. And mail would never ask me to.

“I—” Amelia begins, then stops, and bites her lip.

Her eyes cut off me as she reassesses her words.

Evil raisin bran muffin aside, I’m proud of her.

She’s been making concentrated efforts lately to apologize less.

Just yesterday, she was in the living room.

Sitting there. Doing nothing . It looked like she wanted to die, or like she was waiting for me to kill her, but it’s beautiful to see her on a personal growth journey.

Carefully, eyes lowered, she proceeds, “I didn’t know you didn’t like raisins.

I can make them again tomorrow, without the raisins. ”

Haha. “No, no,” I say. “No need for that.” I lift the abomination. “See, the problem with this is that...” How do I put this kindly? “...it’s all bad.”

“O-oh.”

Crap. I cough. “Allow me to rephrase: my body no longer yearns for health. It wants chocolate chips, and strawberry cream, and coffee with the sugar crumbles. It will accept zucchini. It will cry if you feed it parsnip.”

“How did you know I found a parsnip muffin recipe?”

I come very close to swearing. “You are, surely, joking.”

She shakes her head. “It’s in my new book.”

“What’s the world coming to?” First, it moves into an electronic era, making personal letters far less common. Then, it starts putting parsnips in muffins .

“I was going to get slivered almonds for the topping after work today...”

“And that’s another thing!” I set the offensive muffin down, in the plastic bag, that I keep in my car to use as a trashcan.

Amelia startles, but it’s too late for me to adjust my tone. “There’s another thing?” she whispers, frail.

“Yes, there is. Why are you going to the store by yourself?”

Her lashes flutter as she looks at me. “To...get ingredients I need for things?”

“There’s a list for that. On the fridge.

So I can go to the store and get the ingredients you need for things.

You should not be using your own money to then cook my meals.

” I cross my arms, very serious. “This isn’t Bandera.

It’s dangerous to go shopping alone in the city.

There are all sorts of ruffians hanging around. ”

“Ruffians?” she echos, then realization crosses her face.

Inexplicably, my stomach knots. She’s met a ruffian, hasn’t she? And she didn’t even realize it until now? I cannot let her out of my sight.

“Is that what the teenagers who sold me my new cookbook are?”

What.

“It’s the healthy one I mentioned. It’s vegan. And it has lots of pictures.”

What, what.

“They stopped me as I was getting to my car and asked if I was interested. I’ll be honest, I thought they were selling drugs at first, but it was just a really pretty and well-put-together cookbook.

I bought it. I’ve been adapting some of the recipes since we’re not vegan, but the cashew cheese one looks pretty good, so I might give it a try. ”

Liam would love to hear about this.

Wait, no.

I thread my fingers back through my hair and rub the nape of my neck. “I don’t think those kids were ruffians, exactly. Still, you should let me handle the shopping. Just in case.”

“Just in case I’m...sold more cookbooks with bran recipes in them?”

Considering I think I would prefer drugs... “Yes.”

Clasping her hands together against her dress skirt, she blows out a breath and nods. “I understand. I shall be vigilant.”

Tension leaves my muscles. “Good. I’m glad we had this talk.” Mailroom calling my name, I pop open my car door.

Amelia’s timid voice stops me before I can step out. “You’re not mad, are you?”

“Mad?” At her? For...what? Spending her own money on a horrible attempt to get fiber and nutrients in me? “Why would I be mad?”

She opens her door. “N-no reason. I’m just making sure.”

Huh.

Mad. At her. What a wildly impossible thing to suggest.

I’m still thinking about it when I sit in my office and do everything in my power to make my Flag Day event presentation for Liam cute.

I’m still thinking about it thirty minutes later, when Amelia knocks on my door.

My attention leaves the pastel red-and-blue stars I'm scattering all over the PowerPoint slide to find a woman that no one should ever be mad at.

Ever.

It's unnatural.

It's unjust.

It's...

I blink at the small paper bag in her hand. "What do you have there, A-mail-ia?"

She enters my office fully and places the parcel on my desk. She cannot meet my eyes. "I feel bad...thinking about you going hungry."

I stare at the Sweet & Salty logo plastered across the brown paper. After our conversation about ruffians this morning and how she shouldn't be spending her own money on me, she left this building and went down the street to the best cafe in the world all by herself to get me breakfast?

That seems like a big breakdown in listening comprehension.

Planting my chin in my hand, I brace my elbow on my desk and sigh. "What am I going to do with you?"

She winces. "Sor..." She swallows the apology and stares down at her Mary Jane shoes.

Extending my hand, I say her name. Tangled together, her fingers twitch, then they separate and she reaches for me. As our skin meets, soft emotions flood my chest.

It's Christmas morning, with music and pine. It's Easter candy pillowed in a bed of fake grass. It's a crackling fire and writing love letters by candlelight.

I squeeze her small hand. "Are you okay?"

"I..." She bites her lip, takes a breath, battles to contain herself. "Yes."

"You can talk to me. I didn't mean to be so harsh this morning. I still appreciate you. Immensely."

"It's not that," she says, voice breaking. "I'm just stressed."

"Why?"

Using her free hand, she wipes her eyes and clings to me for stability.

"I shouldn't react like this. I shouldn't panic like this.

You should be able to tell me you don't like a stupid bran muffin without it feeling like this .

I shouldn't have to feel like I need to fix it.

I shouldn't worry that if you aren't smiling and energetic all the time that you're mad at me.

I..." Her head falls. "I'm sorry . I'm so sorry. It's so hard. I can't... I'm sorry."

I am uncertain what compels me, but I kiss Amelia's knuckles.

Breath enters her, quieting her apologies, so I kiss again before I rise and reach to curl

a finger beneath her chin. I guide her eyes to my face. Starry brown meets me, and I forget what I'm doing, what I'm trying to say, everything.

Wow.

It is actually incredibly stupid of me to let her outside where people who don't appreciate mail might get to her. Mars asked me to help her. And I'm doing a terrible job of that if she's crying in my office after only a month and a half.

"It takes an awful lot to get me mad, A-mail-ia," I supply, once I've regained the ability to speak. "It's going to take time for you to heal from everything you've grown up knowing, because you're right. You shouldn't be hurting like this."

"I don't know how to make it stop. I'm trying, in all the ways I know how. But it's still so hard."

"You have time."

"But—"

"You have time, A-mail-ia. A letter doesn't make it around the world in a single day.

There's processing, and customs, and all sorts of other things to take into consideration—like distance.

What matters is that you have an idea of where you want to be and know the steps to make it there.

Don't rush yourself Out for Delivery if you're still busy filling in the recipient address.

” I squeeze her hand, then let her fingers slip from mine as I sit back down.

“No one’s mad at you. There are no expectations to live up to.

You don’t have to take care of me or feel responsible for my emotions, likes, or dislikes.

You’re healing. And we’re existing. Together.

That’s all. There’s nothing else you need to stress over.

One way or another, you will reach your destination, and it will be just as beautiful as you’ve hoped for. Okay?”

Her eyes close, and she nods. “Okay.”

Wonderful.

Smiling, I return to the very important business of preparing my pitch for a month-long most-romantic-holiday-of-the-year event and enjoy the non -bran muffin she brought me. Honestly, it should be a crime to be this spoiled rotten.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:28 am

Working on myself. I call it DI-cry.

Amelia

“Yay!” I cheer, waving the adorable tiny American flags Brian gave me to help support him during his presentation.

Liam, severe as always, stares at the projection on the wall behind Brian while the firework animations on the last slide go off. Eyes narrow, he blinks slowly.

Dying behind his chair, Amber braces herself on the backrest and subdues her laughter.

Brian frowns. “I’m not sure why you aren’t taking this seriously, boss.” He throws a hand out toward the presentation. “I added so many patriotic puppy pictures.”

Tone seamlessly level, Liam says, “They’re adorable.”

“Do you know how hard it was to find a chiweenie in an American flag outfit? I couldn’t. I had to ask Frank to photoshop a bandana onto the little guy. She said she’d do it for fifty bucks. I gave her fifty bucks so you could have a chiweenie in a flag bandana.”

“I appreciate your efforts.”

Brian plants his hands on his hips. “And still you’re telling me no?”

Liam hasn't said no. He's not actually said much of anything. He has sat there. In front of us. And glared. Silently.

Brian begins pacing, cutting his fingers through his hair.

"How many presentations do I have to put my heart and soul into before this poor deprived office can have another month of joy? How many times do I have to bother Frank? How many activities do I have to plan? How many spreadsheets! How many schedules!"

"Brian—"

Brian slices his pointer finger toward our boss. "No. No more excuses." He sniffs. "Just tell me the truth. Is it HR? Have they banned whimsy?" His hand clenches in a shaking fist. "Micheal. "

"It's not Micheal."

Brian's nostrils flare. "Erin ," he seethes.

Liam lays a hand across his face. "It's not Erin, either. It's not HR. We can only support one event of this magnitude a year, and I pick Valentine's Day."

Valentine's Day...not...Christmas? I know Christmas is my last name, but I don't think I'm being partial here by finding it a bit odd that Valentine's Day takes precedence over the most popular holiday in the world.

Well. Not that having a month-long Countdown to Flag Day of all things wouldn't also have been odd, but if Brian says it is actually the most romantic holiday of the year, then it is the most romantic holiday of the year, trumping Valentine's by a substantial margin.

I lower my flags as Brian shakes his head. “My disappointment is immeasurable.”

My stomach twists.

“Bri—” Liam starts.

Brian lifts his hand and looks away, sucking in a dejected breath. “I’ll solicit fundraising.”

“It’s not the funds. It’s the distraction from work.” Liam threads his fingers together, muttering, “Our clients rely on us, and silly string battles in the lobby during work hours was not...the best business decision.” His shoulders slump. “In hindsight.”

Surely, surely, hindsight was not required to come to that conclusion; nevertheless, is not morale important in this building?

Only happy employees can create happy clients!

“S- sir?” I begin, and Liam’s heavy attention falls on me.

Gulping, I say, “Is there nothing we can do? Even if it’s not at this scale...

maybe some of the plans can still be used? The...least obtrusive ones, perhaps?”

Rubbing his jaw, Liam sighs and says, “Perhaps for Christmas we can reevaluate our capabilities.”

Brian points his remote at the projector and presses a button that shuts the whole thing down. “Welp. Thank you for your time.” He disconnects his laptop and tucks it in his arms, against his sweater vest. “A-mail-ia and I will be leaving early June 14th.”

Amber hums, cocking her head. “Really? You’re leaving the mailroom early?”

“Really.” Brian sniffs. “We’ve a wedding to attend. Please mark it on his schedule, Madam Secretary.”

Liam’s brows lift, and he looks between Brian and me. “A wedding?”

“That’s nearly as fast as ours,” Amber says.

“No, it isn’t.” Liam faces his wife. “It’s a month away. After our reunion, we were married in a matter of days. They’ve been reunited for over a month already. We were fastest.”

Brian, unamused, says, “It’s not our wedding. And there’s no race on who can marry their childhood friend faster. You’ve already, obviously, won.”

Satisfied, Liam settles back in his chair. “I have, yes.”

“Yet poor loser Brian can’t have his Countdown to Flag Day.” Brian turns the woe up tenfold. “Back in my hometown, they have an entire festival for Flag Day.”

They...do? I blink at Brian, wondering when that happened. How come I’ve only just left home, but I’m already out of a loop that Brian’s somehow maintained for years?

Turning up his nose in a final, pitiful flourish, Brian says, “I expect letters of apology and condolences to arrive within the business week. Come, A-mail-ia.”

As we’re leaving, I overhear Amber murmur, “That one is such an odd egg,” followed by Liam’s, “Get my stationery, please.”

“You got it, Cutie,” is the last thing I can make out before the doors close behind us

and I trot after Brian toward the elevator.

He pouts in the corner, hugging his laptop against his chest and looking somewhat utterly dismal in his baggy cardigan. Head tilted against the wall panel, he hefts a sigh.

“Are you okay?” I broach.

“First Easter, now Flag Day.” He droops. “Is this...hatred?”

I’m sure that a man currently drafting an apology letter does not hate Brian. I’m sure that no one can hate Brian. He is, after all, Brian . Just...just look at that face .

Eyes downcast, lip juttet, tiny sniffles wrinkling his perfect nose...

Yes, this is a man that no one can hate. No one at all.

“At least now we won’t have to worry about coordinating anything for the event while we’re back home for the wedding?

” The wedding that Amber and Liam thought was ours .

The wedding that Brian immediately brushed off as absolutely not ours, don’t be ridiculous, you think I’d marry this thing? No way.

Er.

Well.

That’s absolutely not what he said. He just also barely reacted to the speculation while I am still a tomato and fighting desperately to regain my working on myself

and not asking for more peace.

It is...very hard.

Especially when Brian is being particularly adorable right now.

I just want to wrap him up in a hug and tell him that he can have all the Flag Day events he wants.

But I am incapable of that, and I am not making other people's troubles my responsibility right now.

I am strictly working on myself and other things I can control .

As though "controlling my feelings" is actually an attainable goal.

Brian's gaze drags off the ground, finds me, and stops. He stills, then he straightens. Cutting his fingers through his sandy hair, he murmurs, "Back home...?"

My brow furrows. "In Bandera? For Mars and Ceres's wedding? On Flag Day?"

He watches me, vaguely distant. He watches me so long, my stomach begins to curdle and the slowest elevator in the world reaches the very opposite part of the building, opening up to reveal his kingdom of mail.

Dropping his arm, he strides past me, murmuring, "That's not your home.

Home is where your mailbox is." He sets his laptop down on one of the desks, letting his fingers trail across the silver back as he continues toward his office.

"Mail will be here soon. Let's get ready to do our rounds. "

As every organ in my body gains twenty pounds, I force myself to regulate. To take in air. To practice character growth . Ceres would be proud of me for it. But I'm not seeking external validation...so...that doesn't matter.

Yeah.

And Brian being upset right now matters , but it's not something for me to fix . I can be here for him as a friend without needing to find a solution when there probably isn't one.

I can bake him some flag-shaped cookies to go with dinner tonight, and I can let this weight go. Because it is not my job to handle the world's problems while I have so many of my own.

Yeah.

Yeah...

Yep.

Easy.

"I don't want to work on myself anymore," I whisper, into the carpet, because I am lying facedown on the carpet, while on video call. "Ceres, do you have any problems I can work on instead?"

"Mars wants me to wear a veil at the wedding."

I shift my nose out of the rug and look at my friend, who is—as always—sitting at her computer, working. Today, blessedly, it's girlie time. No Mars on the couch behind her, throwing his cards at who knows what. "I do not understand the

problem.”

“I do not want to wear a veil.” Her clicking fingers fly across her keyboard.

Sitting up, I lift the phone and scoot in—problem solver extraordinaire. “Have you communicated that to him?”

“Yes.”

I gasp, letting my eyes widen. “And he got upset? Is that why he’s not here today?”

Ceres arches a brow at me, then she says plainly, “No? He’s not here because it’s Tuesday.”

Tuesday? “Yes? And?”

“Tuesday is meeting day. He’s with Jove.”

Ah, yes, of course. How silly of me. Tuesday is always meeting day.

I know this. Just like I know the third Saturday of every month is shopping day.

Ceres spares very little information about herself, but what I have managed to glean during our beautiful three-year friendship, I cannot help but cling to.

As it stands, Ceres is the first person in my entire life who has both not grown to hate me and who I have been able to keep secret from my parents.

She lets me be me . And now she has a problem...

I think. I press, “So...he didn’t get upset when you told him you didn’t want to wear

a veil for your wedding? ”

“Mars only gets upset at baddies. There’s no reason for him to ever be upset with me.” She smiles. “I’m a good girl.”

Uh-huh. “So, what’s the problem?”

Her attention flicks off her computer screen and finds me. “Oh, there isn’t one. I just said the first thing I could think of that resembled the most dissonance I have experienced in roughly three years.”

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:28 am

I stare at the swirls of color in Ceres's hazel eyes. "Can I say something mean and have you recognize that I love, love, love you and don't mean it in any sort of way, really. I'm just quite literally in the middle of a character arc regression right now?"

"I cannot actually imagine a way you'd be able to offend me, Mellie."

I nod. Very good. "You are ruining my life. I mean how is someone actually this content and at peace with everything all the time?"

She stops working. "When you don't really leave your house all that much, there's very little that can bother you."

"I know that isn't true. I was basically imprisoned in my house my entire childhood." Isolated from people and activities, kept solidly away from any would-be friends who might not have minded my boy-crazed tendencies. My parents' personalities made existing tough from the very start.

"You went to school and worked at Walmart," Ceres says.

"School and work don't count."

"They force you to be around people, so they actually do."

I huff, puffing a breath out my nose. "Fine . But! You were like this as a kid, too, I bet. When you were in school, I bet you also presented zero problems. You are the least problematic person in the whole entire world, and—as stated previously—that's a problem for me because it is ruining my life. "

Ceres lifts her attention toward the ceiling, blinks, and says, “Oh. Well.” She smiles. “Dark romance gurlies are just built different. Have you considered falling for a raging red flag?”

“No.”

“Pity. You’ll never attain inner peace.”

I know she’s making jokes, but it so deeply feels like the truth. My eyes catch on the letter Brian gave me at the ren faire. It remains, unbothered, on my desk. A constant reminder that I’m welcome .

Sometimes, it’s the only thing getting me through the anxiety that I’m a burden on everyone around me unless I’m giving up everything of myself. And, even then, it still never quite feels like enough .

Shaking my head, I divert my focus off my thoughts and frown at Ceres. “Why can’t my external peace translate into internal peace? Nothing is wrong. Yet it feels like I keep getting electrocuted when I’m just wandering around.”

“Your nervous system is programmed for issues. Your parents created an environment that plateaued at anger. So when there’s nothing wrong, you keep thinking that something’s wrong.

Because something must be wrong. But there’s nothing.

Still, it feels like there’s something. Because there has to be.

But there’s still nothing. And then you start thinking that you’re going to ruin the nothing.

So, sooner or later, you realize that you're what's wrong. It's just you .”

I swallow hard as Ceres stops suddenly, and her rendition of my inner monologue ceases.

Softer and slower, she says, “This is very normal in the healing process. Lying on the floor in a bundle of dysregulation is an incredibly normal step.”

Clutching my phone, I say, “I’d like to be all healed now, please.”

“I’m sorry that’s not how it works.”

I slump. “How did you get all healed up?”

She laughs. Actually laughs. That’s so rare for her.

Arching a brow, she rustles her long red hair.

“I didn’t get all healed up at all. I just embraced my penchant for the unhealthy early on, decided an isolated lifestyle was totally fine, and stopped going outside.

Before Mars, I dreaded leaving my house.

I still do, actually. I’m just getting a little better at managing the fear that stops me. ”

I wince. “I’m sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing?”

“I should have been inviting you to do things, or something.”

“You also weren’t doing things, though, Mellie.”

Because my parents demanded my work schedule, and they would keep tabs on when I was supposed to be home and get...

some kind of way...if I were late even just because the person coming to relieve my shift was late.

“Still,” I whisper. “Maybe we should have been doing things together.” Before now.

Because now I’m a million miles away and it almost feels like it’s too late to have what we’ve lost.

Ceres picks up her phone and stands. “Six hours, huh...”

“Six hours?”

“I’ll be there around 2:00 AM.”

“What? ”

“I bet the Taco Bell in a big city will still be open. We’ll get Taco Bell at 2:00 AM. It’ll be great.”

My mouth opens and closes, flapping for several moments while Ceres gets her keys. She can’t mean... She does. The camera angle isn’t the best, but I am now looking at a blue sky, because she’s heading to her car. “Ceres, you hate driving.”

She stops on her sidewalk and lifts me so I can see her face and the pragmatic stability in her eyes. Without exaggeration, she says, “Sure. But I like you.”

That breaks the dam holding back countless emotions, and tears fill my eyes.

She begins walking again, opening and closing her car door.

The engine starts, and I blubber, “Ceres, no. Don’t. I’d feel too bad making you come all this way.”

“You’re not making me.”

“Still. I feel responsible. And don’t you have deadlines?”

Her lips pinch as she looks outside her window, toward Mars’s house. “Ah.”

Her door opens, and Mars enters the phone’s view as he leans in her doorway, a forearm braced against the roof. “Hi, love. Where you heading?”

“You’re supposed to be in a meeting, not watching the cameras.”

The...cameras?

“I installed motion sensors at your doors that send texts to my phone when triggered. Can’t very well have you leaving without permission. You might realize you can brave the outdoors all by yourself, and that’s just not codependent enough for me, I’m afraid.”

Ceres and I both blink.

My blink, it should be noted, is in horror , though. Hers is more...a lash fluttering. The most beautiful, excited smile I have ever seen overcome her face appears to make me think,ahaha, oh . This is what she means when she says she’s not all healed up.

Because, I'm sorry. What?

Mars's attention skates my way, and his flirty smile dies. "Oh. You're on the phone."

"Am," Ceres chirps.

Mars cuts his fingers back through the wild black strands of his hair. "Everything okay?"

"I'm going to see Amelia. We are getting Taco Bell."

Instead of informing Ceres that this is a horrible idea, Mars says, "Okay. I'll drive."

"Girlies only."

"I'm good at cosplaying as a girlie."

"You're in the middle of a meeting."

"I will text Jove that there was an emergency."

"You'd shirk part of your very rare and important weekly meeting to invade my girlie time?"

Mars rests his forehead against his arm and smiles down at his fiancée. "Yes."

"Poor Jupiter," Ceres bemoans.

When Mars's eye twitches, I interject, "I'm fine! No one has to come take me to Taco Bell. Promise. I'm trying to help other people, not myself." Taking in a deep breath and fighting the urge to sob, I blurt, "Mars, do you have any problems I can fix?"

Mars arches a brow and looks at Ceres. Ceres says, “She is done working on herself. Now she’d like to work on us.”

“Ah.” Mars hums, contemplating his many issues, I’m sure. Finally, he locates the perfect one for me, and says, “My wifey-to-be doesn’t want to wear a veil at our wedding. I am peak distress, thinking about how many people will be ogling her.”

These people really don’t have normal problems that are within an attainable and fixable sphere for me, huh?

“Whose fault is it that we’re getting married in full view of the entire town?” Ceres mutters.

“The most romantic holiday of the year’s,” Mars replies.

It’s like they aren’t even speaking English anymore.

One way or another, I manage to coax the lunatics down from coming to see me at two in the morning for Taco Bell. I hang up only once I’m convinced they won’t be bothering Brian on my account by showing up in the middle of the night, then I sigh.

Drained, I return to my carpet-yoga, listening distantly for Brian to make it home from the store, so I can make dinner.

All the while, I do my best to focus on anything, anything, anything ...other than myself.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:28 am

No one tells me anything.

Amelia

I was locked in a car with Brian for six hours so I could watch grown men in sunglasses get married at night during a ten minute ceremony that took place on the outskirts of a town painted red, red, and red.

I was locked in a car with Brian for six hours , and I only barely survived, because at one point he had to make a U-turn, and he single-handedly handled the wheel full circle.

It took everything in me to keep my heart from leaping out of my throat.

Because I am no longer allowed to obsess over Brian Single.

No, sir.

I am on a personal growth journey, marching valiantly toward healing...and peace...and security.

And just in case anyone asks, I am doing a great job and making excellent progress.

“I have not seen your parents here,” Ceres says, seated beside me in her wedding dress as though she’s not eating a messy Grilled Cheese Burrito that could forever stain the fabric. On the whole, her “wedding gown” is more of a “white summer dress,” but still.

It's beautiful, and I wish she weren't opening a Taco Bell sauce packet over it.

At the very least, it helps me pretend that the deep-seated anxiety taking residence in my stomach is wholly her fault, not the fault of my being in my hometown for the first time since I had a less-than-great exodus.

Also, on the topic of parents , hers happen to be here, too, and judging by the awkward, tear-filled way she hugged them goodnight after the service, she should also be a puddle of nerves right now, yet she isn't.

I love and loathe her in the very same breath sometimes.

Worriedly watching the crowds, I peel back the wrapper of the burrito I got at the Taco Bell truck near us and shift at the picnic table beside the festival's food court.

"Everyone in town must be here, and you have been kind of busy getting married and with your own parents, so the fact you've not seen mine means nothing ," I provide, confidently, well on my way to obtaining true zen.

Ceres drenches her burrito in sauce. "This event was advertised at key cities within a logical distance, so tourism is at an all-time high. The fact there are a lot of people here doesn't necessarily mean the entire town came out. It's all cityfolk."

Crowds and crowds of cityfolk, playing games, riding rides, eating food.

I've got to hand it to whoever put this festival together, it's amazing.

I wish I knew whether or not it's normal for me to never have heard of it before.

With my social media time consisting entirely of stalking Brian in Iferous, Indiana and my parents not loving whenever I'd do anything but come straight home from

work and school, maybe it's only logical that I missed this whole extravagant, annual Flag Day celebration.

My attention navigates to Brian, a light in the fray, surrounded by people who haven't seen him in ages. He's hugging a stuffed cat he won at a fair game earlier, laughing, and—

And I am not staring at him.

I can't distract myself from everything else going wrong inside my head by fangirling over Brian anymore.

In my search for mental wellness, I read an article about attachment styles and discovered I'm a collection of bad ones.

I'm unwilling to let my avoidant behaviors with my parents turn into anxious ones with Brian.

It's not his responsibility to constantly reassure me of anything, and, furthermore, getting into a relationship won't fix me.

Dragging my attention away from my reason for life, I locate a red flag.

Letting my gaze trail, I find more. I noticed earlier that the red, white, and blue expectation of this holiday seemed overshadowed by, well, just red...but... It's like I'm being told off, or something. "Why aren't there any American flags?" I ask.

Ceres eyes me as she dips a chip in nacho sauce. "Because. Mars is crazy."

I stare at her.

She arches a brow at me.

I blurt, “Mars stole all the white and blue decorations?”

Despite the surrounding noise, Ceres’s nacho crunch is deafening. “No? He didn’t order any.”

Order...any?

I smile, but only because I do not wholly know what else to do right now. My dear sweet Ceres... My only real friend... What do you mean he did not order any? “I do not understand.”

Sighing, Ceres mutters, “He only likes red flags, so he did whatever he wanted. Basically.”

“What does Mars have to do with the festival’s decoration committee? I didn’t know you could be on a decoration committee with a criminal record.”

Ceres freezes before dipping another chip. “Oh,” she says, with insufficient guilt. “This was his idea. This whole thing was a scheme to get his brother and Lyra to realize their feelings for each other.”

You have got to be joking.

“Along the way, I found feelings for him, which I am assuming was also part of his master plan.” She smiles down at the rest of her food. “He’s resourceful like that.”

My friend barely tells me she’s getting married and now she’s telling me that her now-husband planned an entire town-wide Flag Day festival that has brought more tourists into Bandera than I have ever seen, even though I used to work at the

Walmart right by the interstate exit?

“Ceres,” I say.

She hums and sips her drink.

“We have got to have a conversation about your communication skills.” Forcing in a deep breath, I use this information to settle my fears over the possibility I might see my parents.

“I want to know what’s going on with you.

Especially right now, while I’m trying to tame the rabid, Brian-centered chipmunk in my brain.

Please tell me things. Is there anything else going on in your life that I don’t know about? Like, I don’t know, are you pregnant?”

This time, both her brows shoot up. “I just got married.”

“Yes, I know. Pretty fast marriage, wasn’t it?”

“I’m not pregnant.”

“Okay. Do you have a terminal illness?”

“Only if chronically avoiding my own needs is terminal.”

My turn to hum as I sip my drink. “Yes, I think it is.”

“Ah well. We had a good run, didn’t we?”

“No,” I snap. “No, we did not ‘have a good run’.” Raking in air, I attempt to control my tone, my raging emotions, my everything .

Nothing stops the feeling that everything is falling apart.

It’s like I’m standing on the edge of a crumbling cliff, unable to move, as I watch chunks of dirt tumble from beneath my shoes.

“In three years, this is the first time we’ve ever done anything together in person.

In three years, I have seen you less than thirty-six times. ”

“Fewer.”

“What?” I reach for a brown paper napkin, in case the tears I feel threatening to break free get any wild ideas to ruin my makeup.

“Fewer. The number of times we’ve seen each other is quantifiable, so you use fewer instead of less.”

If Taco Bell still had sporks, I think I might be inclined to stab her with one. “You are missing the point.”

“I’m...not. I’m just bad at letting people get close.

It usually ends poorly, and I don’t want what we have to end.

” She scrapes the bottom of an empty nacho cheese cup.

“You’re the only person I invited to my wedding beyond my parents, the only friend I have who didn’t start as a client. You matter to me.”

“You matter to me, too. And I’m...I’m scared that if I no longer have things to fill the quiet with, we’ll die out.”

Unbidden, Ceres leans toward me and rests her head against the top of mine. “We won’t.”

My chest constricts, and I crumple my napkin. “How can you be so sure?”

“Neither of us has many friends. We’re kind of stuck with each other.”

I free a wet laugh. “You’ve got a whole husband now. Sooner or later, I’ll—” My voice breaks. “—become obsolete.” I’ve already felt the distance I’ve fought against widen with the addition of Mars. He makes Ceres happy in ways I’ve never been able to achieve.

And I know I’m not practiced where it concerns people. I know all I have going for me is my sunny attitude. But...still...very few things hurt more than seeing someone else—someone you care about—find everything you’ve ever wanted without you.

I am so, so happy that Ceres has found an uncanny love that matches her.

I guess I just wish I could have been more a part of that journey, like she’s been such a foundational part of mine.

I am so tired of feeling utterly useless.

I want to be loved, cherished, and irreplaceable, too.

It’s so hard to not be selfish when I’m so scared. All. The. Time.

“I don’t talk that much,” Ceres says, as though I haven’t noticed, “but I will always

be happy to sit with you in the silence.”

It hurts to swallow. “I don’t do well with silence. It always feels...angry. Somehow.”

Ceres waits several long moments before saying, “Does this feel angry somehow?”

Fair game music, countless voices, and endless laughter hardly counts as silence , I think. And it’s not even the anger that matters. It’s my response to it. It’s the fear.

Currently, I’m terrified.

That my parents will appear out of nowhere.

That my only friend will slip away.

That this will be the first and last time we do anything together.

Maybe that day a few weeks ago when she was going to come see me I should have let her. Maybe I should have stomached the guilt over letting someone else expend so much energy on me and let her prove that out of all the relationships in my life this one is secure.

But I couldn’t do it.

Because I don’t feel worthy of the kindnesses I’ve been granted.

And I’m terrified that I never will.

All the same, I say, “No.”

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:28 am

Oh dear.

Brian

“Phew,” I say upon entering a hotel room sporting two entire beds. “We’re lucky.”

Beside me, pale, Amelia stares dead ahead at the twin mattresses arranged a few feet apart from each other against the right wall. “Lucky?” she whispers.

“Mrs. Albee is notorious for matchmaking. Even with the influx of visitors for the festival, I almost didn’t believe her when she said there was only one room left, and I was expecting a single bed in a honeymoon suite.

” Sighing merrily, I take myself to the bed closest to the door and set down my overnight bag.

“I’d have had to stay with my parents so you wouldn’t be uncomfortable, and that would have been less than comfortable for me.

” Not a single person in the Single family understands why I gave up the Bandera post office for an office building mailroom, and whenever I see my parents or my sister, they bring it up. A lot.

When I told my father I was moving, he went on for hours about how I was abandoning my legacy. He implored me for an explanation. He pleaded with me to reconsider.

I did neither.

I had already set my sights on my destination, and there was no way to return to sender...at least not without additional fees and...

Amelia has not moved.

Lifting myself from thoughts of my sordid past, I find her lingering at the door, clutching her overnight bag tight in both hands.

Elegance does not seem strong enough a word to describe how Amelia looks tonight. Not even the cheap hotel lighting can steal her splendor. Every hair in place, even after an evening exploring this elaborate Flag Day festival. Not a wrinkle in her formal dress.

She's ravishing.

But, then again, when isn't she?

"A-mail-ia?" I query, snapping her back to reality.

Her gaze finds mine, panics, and darts off. Steps sure, she marches to the other bed and drops her bag atop the comforter. Voice less sure, she stammers, "Y-yes?"

Ah. Well... Maybe I rejoiced too soon. I guess I am doomed to spend the night with my parents, dodging comments about how there's still time for me to regain my legacy.

"Sorry." I comb my fingers through my hair.

"I suppose sharing a room is a touch immodest on its own." I slip my phone from my

pocket.

“I’ll text Dad and let him know I need to use my old room. ”

With any luck, asking to use my old room won’t give them any weird hopes that I’m returning for good.

Unfortunately, I do also know my parents, and when I mention that there wasn’t a suite with two rooms available at the hotel, my mother will cry and ask why I didn’t send a letter of reservation a month in advance.

She’ll claim I’ve abandoned my love of mail.

And it’s all because of that office mailroom .

She would be joking of course. Big on dramatics, my parents, but I just don’t know if I want to weather theater this late at night.

Maybe I’ll just have to sleep in the car...

“N-no,” Amelia squeaks after I’ve drafted and deleted a text three times.

Looking off my phone, I locate Amelia sitting on her bed, back toward me, rivulets of dark hair spilling across her wingbones. My breath catches as she pulls a pin from her bun, and the cascade continues. She unwinds a decorative braid and faces me as she begins untwining the strands.

My mouth...goes dry. Too dry to lick an envelope.

“No,” she repeats, softer. “This is fine. I just...wasn’t expecting it.” Her doe brown eyes lift, fix on me, and her pink lips part. “Are you comfortable here, or at least

more comfortable here than you would be at your parents'?"

I so dearly thought so. Until...about three seconds ago.

All the same, I remember how to breathe and swallow.

"Sure, sure. Yes. Absolutely. It's a sleepover!

A slumber party!" My heart arrests me, pounding incessantly.

"We can make letters and sort them alphabetically. I have supplies." I always have supplies, because my love of mail is not compromised just because I shirked the family expectation of taking over the post office here.

You never know when you might need to write a letter, or twenty, after all.

Dang it. My mother's dramatics are right. I should have sent in for a reservation the second Mars covered me in glitter.

Amelia's braid comes fully undone, and she runs her fingers through the kinky waves until they spill like silk around her face. I never knew her hair was so long.

It's...pretty.

Yeah, pretty.

But of course it's pretty. I've known that she's pretty since the moment I first saw her. She's always been pretty.

"Brian?" she says, and my broken heart thuds.

“Yes?”

Her worried eyes trace me. “Are you okay?”

Am I okay? Of course I’m okay. I’m about to do some letter arts and crafts with Amelia. Why wouldn’t I be okay?

My attention catches on the bright red neon of the room’s alarm clock, and all my burgeoning plans stutter. “It’s late, isn’t it?”

Her gaze follows mine to the glaring almost midnight presented on the clock face. “Yes.” She straightens, dropping her hands from her hair. “But if you want to write some letters, we can. I’d like to write one to my future self.”

“Your future self?” I ask.

“In case I forget that I survived today and enjoyed the time I was able to spend with Ceres. It’s something the internet suggests, to help with healing.

” She hugs herself, managing to look both tortured and modellesque.

“I don’t want to lose the good things in my hometown because I’m anxious to be where my parents might show up when I’m not ready.

I’m an adult. They have never had the right to treat me poorly, but now they no longer have the control to continue.

I shouldn’t be afraid. And I might need that in writing. ”

Well said, Amelia. Late-night letter making it is. Pushing aside my clothes, I remove my to-go set of stationery, pens, and envelopes, then I retrieve my seal kit.

Amelia's tiny gasp coaxes my heart into another trepidating thud, so I dare to steal a glimpse of her.

She's staring at my seal kit, flushed, and I...

I am uncertain what's going on inside my body right now. Maybe I, too, need to write something to future me concerning this topic. For the sake of healing. "What is it?"

"That's the most darling seal kit I have ever seen."

I gesture toward the rest of the supplies. "It goes with my travel kit. Five by three-point-five envelopes and matching stationery. The smallest standard letter you can send through USPS."

Her eyes sparkle. "It's beautiful." She inches closer, until only my bed separates me from her. Her hands plant on the mattress as she gets a better look at the dusky blue, lined paper I brought. It is painted with forest trees.

"Azure Winter," I offer. "That's the style name. I have a decent selection of stationery I can bring when I pack my travel bag, but I...I picked the blue one. Because it made me think of you."

Wide brown eyes above rosy cheeks. She stares at me, her slender fingers rising to graze the seal kit. "May I?"

I wet my lips. "Of course." Forcing myself to break this odd spell, I look toward the desks along the wall opposite the beds on either side of a small TV. While Amelia peruses the modest selection of wax and stamps I have, I set us both up at the desks with pens and paper.

Dropping into my seat, I stare at the navy black tree branches stretched across my

page, then I lift a black pen and let my thoughts wander through the ink.

Hi Brian,

You're sharing a room with Amelia Christmas right now.

It's Mrs. Albee's fault, and as the night grows longer, you are considering a high possibility that other rooms were available, but that meddling woman knew she could get away with this.

She's smart, too, you know. She knew better than to think we'd ever agree to share a single bed, so she gave us two.

If you're honest, you miss Mrs. Albee even with all her mischief. She was at the post office every week, sending letters to pen pals and packages to friends. You bet she still does. You bet Brianna gets the pleasure of chatting with her about the things her Italian pen pal is up to these days...

This town has a lot of memories. A lot of good. There are things you miss. Things you made yourself leave behind.

Right now Amelia is writing herself a letter so she won't forget good things like these, but I think I forgot on purpose. I think I imposed some distance between myself and this place, so saying so many goodbyes wouldn't hurt as badly.

I don't know.

Maybe I'm being overly sentimental since I just went to a wedding and it's been a minute since I've been back in Bandera.

Or maybe I'm just plain not thinking clearly at the moment.

Did you know that Amelia's hair holds a wave?

Did you know it nearly reaches her hips when it's let down?

I remember the days when she'd come see me at the post office. She'd bring letters with the most beautiful seals I've ever witnessed, and I'd hand-cancel them all so the processing machines wouldn't damage the wax.

She was a lonely kid. Shy. Careful. Sweet.

It hurt me when the pen pal she received for a project in third grade stopped replying right after the assignment ended. I hated no longer being able to see her art. I hated thinking of how lonely she must be without the comfort of mail to get her through.

After that, I saw her everywhere at school.

We didn't share any classes until she skipped grades, but I couldn't help myself. I just kept noticing her. So I'd talk to her sometimes. And she'd glow like the sun.

When the epidemic of love letters appeared unexpectedly in middle school, I didn't know how to handle them. I didn't know how to express my disappointment every time a letter came without an elaborate blue seal.

I love mail. That's one of my defining characteristics. But those love letters? They just made me feel bad. There I was, disappointing people, disappointing myself, not appreciating the effort that went into what I was receiving. All because I only wanted an Amelia Christmas original.

All because...

My pen bleeds into the paper as I stare at the words I've written, skimming them.

Swallowing hard, I find Amelia seated at her desk on the other side of the room, dress splayed around her chair legs, ankles crossed and tucked underneath her.

Pure, unhindered joy reflects in the candlelight as she drips wax and crafts art.

Wow. She's... beautiful .

...huh.

Have I... Have I been writing about Amelia this entire time?

Her lips form a dainty circle as she blows out the flickering candle, plants her stamp, and perches with her chin in her hands, watching it lovingly while it cools. This time, my swallow sticks in my throat, and it takes everything in me to drag my attention back to my letter.

Grip tightening around my pen, I proceed, valiantly testing how my straying thoughts might look against Amelia-blue paper.

All because...all I wanted was Amelia Christmas.

The words gleam up at me, confessing an idea I don't believe I have ever once toyed with before.

Do I like Amelia?

Have I always liked Amelia?

I like people; that's another base character trait of mine. I like people, because people are fascinating and fun and inexplicable. They're like love letters to life, cozy little packages of wonder and hopes and dreams that sometimes appear on your doorstep

and change your world.

If Amelia had given me a love letter in school, how would I have responded?

After marveling at the honor of owning one of her brilliant blue seals, what would I have said to her in a reply?

When people gave me love letters, I'd apologize and turn them down as gently as possible, bemoaning the loss of a letter I could never rightfully cherish.

I can't stand rejecting people's feelings. I prefer to welcome them. But some emotions aren't mine to hold onto like that. I've never felt conflicted like this before. Never once.

If Amelia were to give me her feelings... what would I do?

Blowing out a breath, I stab my pen to the page a final time, scrawl a closing remark, and fold the letter up in its envelope bed.

This is a problem for a Brian who isn't tired, I think.

So it really is a shame that I just signed:

Unlikely to get much sleep tonight,

Yours Unfortunately,

Brian Single

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:28 am

I cannot be expected to improve my mental health under these conditions.

Amelia

As it turns out, it's quite near impossible to work on myself when I live in the same house as the object of my greatest distractions. That said, it is assuredly impossible when I am sleeping in the very same room as him.

Staring at the ceiling and trying not to annoyingly rustle my sheets overmuch due to anything silly like breathing , I police my rampant thoughts. They refuse to tame.

Three feet to my left, Brian is sleeping.

Twenty-three minutes ago, he showered in the same bathroom I used before him.

When he emerged, I learned that he sleeps in his boxers , only his boxers, which are covered in little red hearts and little white letters. As the thick scent of sandalwood robbed my air, the sight of topless Brian cemented itself in my brain for all time.

Topless Brian.

In mail-themed boxers.

With damp hair.

Yawning.

Labored breath manages to whistle into the cavities of my chest without disrupting the sheets, and I squeeze my eyes shut only to find myself bombarded yet again with the fresh, clean scent of him .

This is impossible.

Who cares about character growth anyway?

I'm less than a half hour away from where my parents live right now. Would I rather come to terms with that or be a creepy, lovesick disaster?

Cutting my eyes toward the dark outline of the love of my life, I think it's more than clear what my preferences are.

Lovesick disaster all the way.

“A-mail-ia?”

My heart slams into my ribs, and I squeak.

Brian's outline shifts, and his lamp light blisters my eyes a moment later. Hopelessly handsome pushed up on one elbow and looking at me, Brian says, “Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you.”

Squinting through the pain at beautiful man chest, I whisper, “No...it's fine... Is everything okay?”

It's two. The clock says two. We wrote letters together, then we got ready for bed, and now it's late . I should be sleeping, not scalding my retinas in an effort to drink in a man's body.

What is wrong with me?

Brian settles, pillowing his bent arm beneath his head. “Everything’s fine. I’m just having trouble sleeping. You too, huh?”

Ahahaha. “Yeah. A little bit.” I dare to roll toward him as my eyes adjust better to having the light back on. He’s...so... everything .

“Unfamiliar beds.” He chuckles. “Almost makes me wish we were sharing, because then at least we’d have something familiar in reach.” Brilliant green eyes find me as my entire body blossoms crimson.

My Brian isn’t suggesting... He didn’t just... He wouldn’t ...

“I’ve always admired your handiwork with wax,” he says as though I am not struggling to maintain some basic level of function.

Choked, I stammer, “O-oh? Th-thank you.”

“I apologize that my meager kit didn’t have more for you to play with.”

I apologize that I keep staring at your bare shoulder. “That’s all right. I’m glad I was able to seal my letter at all. I love that you keep a wax kit on you.”

His smile softens. “Never know when you might need to seal a formal invitation.” He laughs again, shifts his position so he’s on his back, and stares at the ceiling. “It’s important to always be prepared for any eventuality...even falling in love.”

Falling in...

It becomes very difficult to swallow as I grip my blankets tight against my panicking

chest.

Right.

Yes.

His kit did have a selection of blue wax beads, didn't it? It's very good to always be prepared for stuff like... that .

Tormented, I murmur, "I suppose so."

"I have lunch scheduled with my parents tomorrow, at Sweet & Salty."

Right. Yes. I know this. He mentioned it while we were getting ready for this trip.

I was planning to be annoying and call Ceres the day after her wedding to see if she wanted to leave her house twice in a row and spend time with me instead of her new husband.

But. More likely. I was going to stay here and play free games on my phone.

"Why don't you come with me?" he asks.

My brain turns off, shutting down ninety-three percent of all necessary operations for survival. "You...want me to interrupt lunch with you and your parents?"

"You're not an interruption."

"You haven't seen them for months. I'm sure they'd love to spend quality time alone with you."

“They love people. They’d love to meet you.”

I’m being invited to meet Brian’s parents. Brian’s parents . The people who might become my parents someday, assuming I can fix my stupid self up enough to enter into a healthy relationship with their son. Against plentiful better judgment, I say, “S-sure. Sounds...fun.”

Brian sends me a smile that crinkles the corners of his eyes, then he reaches for the lamp. “Great! Night.”

And the room returns to darkness.

I have no expectations. None. Zero. Nada. I have in no way mentally prepared for what I am experiencing here. Which is, of course, Brian’s mother standing beside me while Brian and his father hug in front of a register manned by the sun god Apollo.

“It’s so...” Brian’s mother squints ahead at the scene, lashes fluttery. “...bright.”

Appearing quite similarly blinded, I echo the sentiment.

“I’d heard someone where I used to work mention that an angel who could control light transferred in from the Sweet & Salty location near where Brian works in Iferous...

but I haven’t been here for a while.” Not since Brian first paved the way for a Sweet & Salty to spring up in Bandera.

While they were still hiring, I visited, applied, and had to bite back my disappointment when I didn’t get the job.

“I think his name is...Sol?” Brian’s mother says, eyes narrowed presumably on Sol’s

nametag. Shocking she can see well enough to read, honestly.

Taking a page from Ceres's book, I say, "It's a hazard to have so many sunshine character types in such close proximity..." They are going to start a fire.

"Scott, honey." Brian's mother approaches the nuclear explosion, and the sheer light rays of her own blond hair and kind smile entering the picture might very well blast me back into the glass front windows of the establishment. "Can't I have a turn?"

"Sorry, sorry. I'm hogging him." Scott moves back, sniffing, then Brian gleams at his mother before they embrace.

I lose several layers of my skin to the super nova, but it's fine, because it's beautiful, and I...

I can't remember the last time I hugged my parents.

That...doesn't matter right now. Not while I'm going blind watching a sun eclipsing a sun.

Brian's mother frames his face in her hands once she pulls back, and green eyes glitter against green. It's such a beautiful shade, such an incredible reflection, and the brightness isn't the only similarity these people have with the sun. They're also putting off so much warmth.

There's love here. Endearing, long-suffering, endless love.

I bury my nails in my arm just to ground myself in the presence of such a thing, to keep myself from begging to be a part of it.

"Lucia..." Scott murmurs.

Brian winces, hesitating. “Mom? What’s wrong?”

Lucia’s nails prick into his flesh, then she frees his face only to snatch his hand. The heels of her Oxfords click as she drags him into the corner farthest from us.

Scott looks at me. I straighten myself under his scrutiny.

His curious glance melts into an older Brian smile, and I see Brian’s future—full head of hair, handsome—in the way Scott tucks his fingers in his pockets and says, “So, Amelia was it? Brian mentioned you when he said he’d be bringing a guest.”

I have not yet introduced myself. “Y-yes, sir. Sorry.” I remove my nails from my arm and offer him my hand. “Amelia Christmas. Nice to meet you.”

“Amelia Christmas,” Scott murmurs, taking my hand in his. “It’s been a while since I’ve heard that name.” He snaps his fingers the second our hands part. “Wax seals.”

My heart launches into my throat.

“You made an incredible impression on Brian quite near a decade ago.”

“I...did?” I whisper.

“Once, I found him staring at a letter you’d dropped off at the post office muttering that it wouldn’t be right to keep the seal for himself.”

Brian.... the Brian, angelic and perfect Brian...wanted to steal one of my seals from when we had that pen pal assignment in school?

“Even I remember it.” He releases a breath. “You’d painted a feather so it looked like a tiny peacock’s, then you’d paired it with a glittering green and adorned the surplus

wax with flecks of fake gold. Heavens, it was beautiful. Nothing short of a work of art.”

“Dad,” Brian states, suddenly behind me, suddenly very close.

I leap out of my skin and whirl to find Lucia’s eyes crinkled, a new sort of joy shimmering across her face as she stands a foot behind Brian, who is frowning...and blushing?

Red undoubtedly highlights his flawless bone structure.

Scott lifts both hands in defense. “I’m not doing anything. Can you blame me for wanting Miss Amelia to coax you back home?”

“Amelia can’t coax me back to Bandera. She lives with me in Iferous.”

Scott’s smile vanishes as his eyes slice between us. A wicked gleam renews as he perches his hand at his chin and leans in. “Ohh? You don’t say? With you? As in, in the same big, huge, massive, no-one-knows-anyone else city...or...”

“With me,” Brian clarifies.

“Congratulations on the nuptials we weren’t invited to,” Scott provides, eyes scathing where his tone remains flighty and free of all malice. “How heartbreaking that you’d give up the chance to mail wedding invitations marked with Amelia’s gift.”

Now I’m blushing, too.

And I think having a bunch of sunshines in this small cafe lobby is starting to up the temperature to a breaking point.

“Could you and Mom stop trying to make us uncomfortable? Amelia’s a friend.”

“Nonsense.” Scott sniffs. “Look at her. She’s gorgeous. You’re telling me you both share the same living space, but you’ve not put a letter in an envelope yet?”

“Dad .” Brian crosses his arms. “Don’t be vulgar.”

“I’m just voicing what everyone’s thinking.”

Lucia nods, agreeing, so I shoot a look at Sol, the only other person here right now, just after rush hour. He smiles at me, which doesn’t confirm that he was thinking about any letters being enveloped.

“Are we going to order food or not?” Brian asks.

“Don’t think you can change the subject, young man.

You’ve never introduced us to a lady friend before, and certainly never one you’ve been living with.

” Scott’s hands return to his pockets as he lounges, looking elsewhere, half pouting.

“I’m gonna need some explanations before my appetite returns. ”

Helping nothing and no one, Lucia plants a hand at her heart. “Your poor father. Imagine learning that your son is going steady with someone like this .”

Brian’s brows dip, unamused. Drier than I knew he was capable of, he outright ignores his parents and approaches the front counter. “Hey, Sol.”

“Hi, Brian. How’s it going back home?”

Smiling, Brian plants an elbow on the counter and shrugs. “Pretty normal. Will misses you.”

Sol laughs, running his fingers through his Adonis-pretty blond locks. “So Elodie’s told me.”

“Where is your sister? I saw her at the wedding last night, but she ran off with Lyra before I could get a chance to say hi.”

A nervous chuckle escapes the Grecian ideal. “Yeah, she’s hard to get a hold of these days. It’s probably a phase.”

“Definitely a phase,” Brian reassures.

Scott juts a lip.

“Oh, honey,” Lucia soothes, rubbing his back. “It’ll be okay.”

“My favorite son hates me.”

“Your only son,” Brian corrects, before seamlessly proceeding to peruse the menu.

“Brian Franklin Single, you give your father some attention this instant,” Lucia demands.

Brian cocks a look back at his parents, then taps a finger to his chin and hums as he swings back toward the menu. “I think I want a ham and swiss croissant. With a mango refresher. What are you considering, Amelia?” He pulls his wallet out. “My treat.”

His treat? He’s paying for me? While his parents are low-key, high-key shipping us ?

Does he realize how that helps nothing? Is he doing it on purpose?

And why, oh why, isn't he calling me A-mail-ia ? If he's stopped because he realizes it'll fuel his parents' headcanon about us, then that means he recognizes that the nickname he has for me fuels romantic headcanons .

I don't know what to do with myself.

Inner peace at an all-time low, I scoot up to the counter and try to remember how to read. I cannot. So I just say, "I'll have the same, please."

"You don't like swiss," Brian says, as though he is supposed to know that. Why would Brian know that? Why can I feel his parents' eyes boring holes into my back while they watch us like we're a sitcom?

Because I am deeply distracted and impossibly stupid, I just look Brian in his pretty face and whisper, "I...don't?"

His expression softens, then he lifts his hand and sets a lock of my hair back over my ear .

At this point, I can only assume we're pranking his parents. I'm pretty sure Ceres has mentioned this sort of thing before. It's a trope. A book trope. The fake dating one. I could have sworn it came with contracts and also maybe consent, though.

Brian turns back to Sol. "She'll have the strawberry smoothie and a pita sandwich, white not wheat."

"They get along so well," Lucia whispers.

Conspiring, Scott replies, " Really well."

“You got it,” Sol confirms. “Anything for...your parents?”

Brian spares his parents a look, and they hold their breaths. He says, “Nah,” then he flattens his hand against the small of my back and sweeps me away to a table in the corner. Pulling out my chair, he presents the seat with a flourish. “M’lady.”

What is going on?

“Th-thank you.” Legs trembling, I seat myself and fold my hands together in my lap.

This man...is making it impossible to keep the focus on myself. Utterly impossible. I should give up. I should just give up. It’s pointless to grow when Brian Single is around.

To make matters worse, he sits right next to me, chair inches from mine. When he sighs, I smell mint toothpaste in the air. It makes me lightheaded. “Brian?” I whisper, his name strained and low.

“Hm?” He plants his chin in his hand.

I wet my lips. “What...are you doing?”

He watches me, gaze enigmatic. “Performing an experiment.”

An experiment? “What kind of experiment?”

“I might tell you later. Might not. Who knows?” He rocks back on the legs of his chair. “I’m unpredictable at best.”

Oh. Okay. Cool... I’ll just wait on that, then.

By the time his parents sit down in the other two chairs at the table with us, Sol's bringing out our food. Attempting to maintain something akin to composure, I reach for my smoothie straw, take a sip, and find that everyone —except Sol—is watching me. My heart stumbles around. “W-what?”

Brian's lips curl first, then his parents' follow.

“Nothing,” he says.

I cannot shake the feeling that it is very much something , but they fall into an amicable conversation too quickly for me to decode anything more.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:28 am

Peace, Joy, and Love.

Brian

So. I harbor affections for Amelia Christmas.

What an unforeseen set of circumstances.

I was nearly positive that bringing her to lunch with my parents would result in something of a cure for the odd thoughts and feelings I began dealing with Friday night. After all, what cures emotions better than your parents teasing you about a relationship you're not in?

Cooties, maybe.

Problem is, Amelia doesn't have cooties, and the way she reacted to my parents being, well, them was...cute.

Yes, cute.

Adorable, really.

Her eyes got massive and pleading and confused, and the way she looked at me, constantly, searching and begging for help, did something to the primitive, masculine, protector part of my brain.

Everything she does is a fusion of pretty and cute.

She's elegantly clumsy, as though her body knows the perfect time to misplace her footing so her skirt might sway just so when she catches herself.

In no uncertain terms, she is precious.

Desperately precious.

Cheek resting in my palm, I stare at the closest thing to a love letter Amelia has ever given me. Pinched between my fingers, a perfect frosted letter cookie sits. The white icing with a pink heart seal taunts me.

I must woo her.

But how does one woo a woman?

All throughout my life, nearly every girl I've come across has fallen over themselves for me. Amelia hasn't. Or, rather, Amelia just falls over herself in front of anyone. It's a side effect, I think, of her upbringing.

Amelia is insecure and cautious and embarrassed easily in front of everyone. She blushes at the drop of a hat. Once, she apologized to Frank of all people. Frank is too tired ninety percent of the time to realize when she's been slighted, and all Amelia did was her job .

That is to say, she delivered a letter from Norm.

And Frank unleashed the deity of all sighs, before—somewhat merrily—opening the envelope.

Despite this, Amelia stammered out an apology while her face turned red.

If Amelia likes me, I won't be able to tell unless she tells me outright.

I snap a corner of the cookie off with my teeth and chew, delighting in the buttery flavors.

She's such wife material.

Makes me want to keep her at home, playing with wax and baking.

The old nine-to-five doesn't suit her fragile disposition.

If I wouldn't miss her here, I'd be terribly inclined to suggest she take up full-time housekeeping.

Not to mention that she's begun to turn heads.

Nearly every single guy in the office watches her a bit more closely than I'm just now coming to realize I'm comfortable with.

I snap off another bite.

Honestly. How dare?

Just because she's perfect and demure does not mean any other singles should be fixating on the sway of her dress or the way she pushes the strands of hair she leaves out of her bun to frame her face over her ear.

The curling rivulets that fall against her cheeks have an owner, and that owner is me.

My lip juts.

Yup. Decidedly, there's just one Single for her.

Wooing a woman would be so much easier during a holiday. But noo . Brian isn't allowed to have another holiday until maybe Christmas.

It would already be Christmas right now if it weren't for Halloween holding back the floodgates of my cheer.

Just think of all the mistletoe I could plant down here. Mail and white berries, and pretty Amelia caught beneath the sprigs, face crimson, eyes wide, lips trembling as I lean in...

I snap another bite, close my eyes, and sigh.

Cutting a look at my office calendar, I behold June 17th . I'm not even halfway to Christmas, in both a literal and metaphorical sense. I'd write her a love letter if I hadn't gone on and on concerning how my gratitude letter wasn't meant to make her uncomfortable.

My passion stamps now would mean absolutely nothing and seem like a cruel game.

Furthermore—I munch, irritated—Amelia lives with me, and I want her to keep living with me, and she does not presently need to live with me anymore.

If I freak her out, she could bounce away like a frightened rabbit.

Dumb dilemma.

Stupid Liam.

We'd already be married if he'd let me have my Flag Day event. The power of the

most romantic holiday of the year is unbridled.

According to Mars.

Who should never truly be trusted.

But who am I to deny false information that suits me?

Let's see, it's June 17th... What's my next holiday magic opportunity?

July 4th?

A July 4th celebration would pale in comparison to Flag Day's romance since there's nothing romantic at all about independence.

Waking up my desktop, I click my browser search bar and type what holidays are in July?

Then I scroll with a single goal in mind: What might I be able to get away with? Even if it's just for a week...or a day...or...

I blink, staring at my work computer screen, at a particular holiday listed on July 25th.

Christmas.

In July.

It's perfect.

It's flawless.

Liam told me we could reevaluate our capabilities for Christmas . But he never specified which Christmas.

I'd say this is grounds for a presentation if ever I have seen grounds for a presentation.

I need to make the cutest, most manipulative PowerPoint ever .

I need to practice my Brian is pitiful and sad expressions in the mirror.

I need to pack this event with romantic moments that slowly, casually, gently throw Amelia and me toward romantic bliss.

Oh yes. It's all coming together.

This is going to be great .

"So..." I blink ahead at Liam, who has just told me some wonderful news. "...you're going to be in Europe, with Amber, for the month of July?"

"We never took a honeymoon," Liam informs me, fingers steeped.

"Launching a new location for Whirlwind Branding is the perfect excuse to take some time to be together. I work a lot. She works a lot." Threads of sadness burden his dark eyes before his lashes kiss his cheeks.

"Although she will absolutely just be thinking about how she can use whatever we do in Europe as research for her books, I'm willing to take what I can get. "

I adjust my position to tuck my laptop with the presentation for Christmas in July primed on it behind my back. "Nothing wrong with a tax write off, right, boss?"

“It’s already a tax write off since we’re going to Europe to launch a new branch.”

“Oh, yeah.”

Liam’s eyes narrow on me.

Possibly because I’m vibrating with poorly-concealed glee.

I am to be unsupervised for the month of July.

I need to order Christmas trees.

I need to assess what decorations we already have on hand.

I need to—

“Come again?” I ask, blinking at my boss, who surely didn’t just say words that should never, ever, be said to me.

“I’m leaving you in charge.”

My gaze flicks off Liam, toward his penthouse windows, which remain covered since my dear boss struggles some with light sensitivity. Finding no camera crew, I tilt myself to peer elsewhere. Still nothing. So. This... isn’t a prank?

Pointing at myself, I say, “Me?”

“Yes?”

“Mailroom Brian. Your favorite mail guy. You’re leaving... me in charge of a branding business?”

Liam nods. “In the context of handling disputes and making emotional decisions, yes. I’m leaving someone else in charge of the business aspect, but you know everyone, probably better than I do.

You care about everyone, just like I do.

I want you to make sure the safe environment we’ve built here persists in my absence. ”

Slowly, I lower my hand. “To...clarify...” I cannot believe the power about to fall into my lap. “It’s my job to maintain the peace and joy?” And, y’know, goodwill toward men, perhaps?

“Yes.”

I beam and wheel myself toward the door. “You got it, boss. I won’t let you down.”

“I’m counting on you,” he says.

A terrible decision, really.

But I am very much not one to argue with information that suits me.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:28 am

All's fair in love and fire.

Amelia

“Mars?” I say, staring at my box of...unmentionables.

Perking, the man, the myth, the legend turns his attention from a book toward the phone propped on Ceres's desk.

These two might be married now, but nothing has changed.

I call. She works. He messes around behind her.

Occasionally, depending on when Brian heads to the store or a work meeting, Mars will leave and return with food, but... that's about it.

I'm jealous of how married couple they've been from the very first moment I witnessed them together.

Rising, Mars approaches Ceres's desk, plants a hand on the back of her chair, and smiles. “How can I help you, Mel?”

“I have a box of things I'd like to burn.”

“What sorts of things? You shouldn't burn plastic, treated wood, styrofoam—”

“Letters.”

“Letters?” Ceres asks, dragging her attention off her computer for a rare bit of almost eye contact. “Why are you burning letters? Won’t that make Brian hate you?”

Yes, well. Possibly. But...

I stare at the overwhelming number of love letters I have drafted and sealed and shoved under my bed in my lifetime.

I restarted the habit on Monday, after we got back from Bandera.

In a desperate effort to shove my emotions somewhere else so I could return to my very important task of becoming a healthier person, I somehow have managed to spend the entirety of my free time writing letters...

about Brian...and working on myself just about, oh, not at all.

Mars says, “You shouldn’t burn cardstock, or ink, or paper products, really. Those are recyclables.”

“And if...I never want the contents to be read? Not by anyone? At all? Even by mistake?”

Dry, Mars says, “That’s what a shredder is for.”

I need to invest in a shredder. And remove all the carefully-constructed and decorated wax seals.

It seems...like so much work. And, yet, one of the horrible new additions to my box of shame was written in a fit of sleep deprivation and manic.

It is just a poem—a soliloquy, a reminiscence—about Brian’s bare chest. I compare

its pale tone to a fresh page and suggest a desire to leave my kisses like penstrokes across the canvas.

So, haha, yeah! No. That along with all my worse childish musings must be destroyed.

“I’d...really like to burn it, I think,” I murmur.

Mars arches a brow. “It’s bad for the environment. Think of the sharks.”

“I thought you were pro-arson, Mars. I’ve seen you start forest fires.” I fix my weepy eyes off the unmentionables. “You are disappointing me.”

“For starters, I do controlled burns , and I’m disappointing you because I’m thinking about the well-being of terribly misunderstood and mistreated oceanlife?”

I think for a moment. Then I say, “Yes.”

Ceres sighs. “Girls, please.”

Mars’s lips quirk, then he hangs his body on top of his wife, wrapping her up in his arms. Peace consumes him as he closes his eyes, and it’s hard to work on myself when myself is a jealous, selfish monster who wants so badly to be loved like...whatever this is.

Without the anxiety.

Without the fear.

Without the constant, unbridled sensation that something is wrong.

Full contentment isn't that much to ask for, right? Having everything should do the trick, and since all my basic needs are met in surplus, the only thing missing is love. Romantic love. Because, clearly, I have incredible friendship love already.

Pouting, I push my secret box of love letters back under my bed and locate my natural Ceres phone call position on the carpet, face down.

"Mellie?" Ceres hedges. "You good?"

"Totally," I mumble into the shag. "What gives you any other idea?"

"Certainly a mystery."

"I'd like to make myself be happy now."

"It will take time."

"It has been months."

"It will take a lot of time."

Facing the camera, I say, "My mother didn't know how to give anyone a compliment.

No matter what anyone did, it was only ever insults and passive aggression, a constant you can do better or you still need to work on that .

I'd bring home perfect grades, but since I'd once made a one hundred and one percent with extra credit, she wanted that .

Perfecter than perfect. Always, always perfecter than perfect.

” I squeeze my eyes shut. “I want to be the kind of person who is happy with a ninety-four, and I need to be the kind of person who is at peace with an A-. Or even a B. I want to find rest. I’m so tired of everything I’ve been taught to become.

I just...don’t know how to get rid of it.”

“With time,” Ceres presses. “Give yourself time. It can take years for some plants to get strong enough to bear fruit.”

Years of this sound absolutely terrible. “Don’t talk plants at me. I’m not a plant girlie.”

“It’s like...a sourdough starter,” Ceres clarifies, clearly confused. “You have to...feed it? And take care of it? And then it takes a lot of time to be ready?”

“On average, it takes two weeks to prep a sourdough starter for baking, Ceres,” I drawl.

“Oh. Well.”

“Alcohol,” Mars interjects, lifting a finger. “You’re being aged like a fine wine.”

“Alcohol is bad.”

Mars lowers his finger. “I agree. It goes rather poorly with chocolate milk... I don’t know that this is the best analogy. The plant one was pretty good. Let’s go back to that.”

“I do not know where you both decided I lost the concept. I’m just upset about it.”

Ceres nods, affirmatively, then says, “Be the alcohol sourdough starter tree you want

to see in the world.”

I would so dearly like to pass, thanks...but since that's not an option, I guess I'll keep on struggling. “Mars?”

“Yes, Mel?”

I blow out a breath. “What do you think would happen if I gave Brian a love letter?”

Mars's eyes spark in a way I find slightly concerning as his chilling smile grows. “I don't know. Why don't you try it?”

Because I am scared out of my mind of rejection and making my present, perfect, living situation so awkward that I'll be forced to move out immediately and get a job where I won't see the reason I enjoy being alive every day.

Even though mailroom is love, mailroom is life.

And nothing is better than my life right now.

And honestly why, why, why can't I just be happy with it ?

I mutter, “What if...I give him a love letter from a secret admirer? Do you think he'd reply?”

“Absolutely,” Mars says. “If there's one thing, other than our hatred of raisins, that Brian and I have in common, it's an incurable curiosity.”

Could I stomach a rejection letter from Brian? Would it actually be harder if he doesn't reject some mystery girl while I'm right here ?

I don't know. Probably.

Let's face it, there's no good ending to this horrible, grasping-at-straws idea. I'm fooling myself and chasing distractions, desperate to strive for something that keeps me from needing to process all the tangled tightness in my chest.

It's a bad plan.

"Do it, Mel," Mars says, and I locate that wild craze on his face. It spurs something like a flickering bit of misguided confidence in me. "Write Brian a secret love letter."

"You think I should?"

"Yep."

If a crazy man tells you to do something, it's a very bad idea.

Nevertheless, once we hang up, I select a page of my favorite stationery, sit at my desk, and put pen to paper.

It hurts everything in me to forgo the seal, but most people don't use wax seals to close their envelopes, and I am doing my best to maintain that whole secret aspect of secret admirer, so I finish the letter, and I close the envelope, and I stare at it.

Heart racing in my chest, I decide that getting a PO box so I can send this with a return address is a problem for tomorrow's Amelia. Putting the whole thing in my desk drawer, I hope a modicum of sense might compel me to toss it under my bed with the others in the morning.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:28 am

Trading my favorite kidney for validation. Any takers? No? Haha. 'Kay...

Amelia

Sitting in a conference room full of fake snow, bathed in the light glimmering through snowflake window clings, I vibrate—giddy.

Christmas in July! Brian was able to get permission for a Christmas in July event! I don't know when or how it happened, but it did. I...also don't know where our boss is...but I'm sure that's not important!

Just look how happy everyone is!

Seated beside an ecstatic Will, who has been narrating the slides for her thus far, Ruby groans.

Across from Ruby, Frank has collapsed against the table, and she might be sobbing...from joy definitely.

Micheal from HR opens his mouth, but Brian presses the button on his remote before he can speak. "Our Christmas in July event is not mandatory. It is not invasive. It is not a lawsuit."

I hardly know why such a thing would need to be said. Of course it's not a mandatory, invasive, lawsuit. HR is always trying to ruin good fun and team-building morale for no reason. The department just doesn't appreciate kindness or blessings.

Crossing my arms, I shake my head at the man—stopping abruptly when he glances my way.

“While Liam is busy in Europe launching a new branch and taking a late honeymoon, he’s left me in charge of morale,” Brian declares.

“What?” Ruby snaps.

Frank lifts her head. She looks starkly horrified...but I’m sure that’s just the snowflake light across her round cheeks and fabulous glasses. “I thought he left the manager of our closest branch in charge.”

“Of business things. I’m in charge of morale, which is very different.” Brian nods, chipper. “Not to mention I’ve got the platinum AMEX to prove it.”

Micheal pales.

“I’ve planned a very special month-long celebration to keep up morale in our beloved boss’s absence.

” Brian changes to the next slide, which boasts an incredible amount of adorable Christmas cheer.

He paces in front of the snowmen and reindeer set up behind the projector screen.

“You may have noticed the decorations that have sprung up overnight.”

I have. They’re lovely.

Brian continues, “That is because I have been here all weekend.”

My mouth drops open. So that's why he's barely been home these past few days. He should have asked me to help. I would have loved to decorate for Christmas in July. It's quite practically my namesake, and I'm sure decorating with Brian would be fun , not whatever decorating with my parents was.

"Some of the tiny, brief, practically-inconsequential complaints I overheard where it concerned our Valentine celebration was that it interrupted workflow and was an overall 'nuisance' ." He air quotes as his eyes merrily roll.

I plaster my hand to my heart. " No ."

Solemn, Brian pins me with a sorrowful look.

"Yes." Then, in a whirl of brightness, he throws out his arms and the slide behind him changes to display Christmas-colored fireworks.

"That is why this time all events shall take place outside working hours and! Not be a daily conundrum to coordinate into everyone's schedules.

Remember how I said this time our fun isn't mandatory? "

Feeble, cautious confirmation rises around the table.

"Well, I lied," he says.

" What? " Ruby exclaims, yet again. I think she's either hyperventilating or seething while her husband attempts, futilely, to settle her.

At one point, I'm pretty sure she whacks him with her cane, but who can say for sure?

I'm focused on the very important presentation that Brian clearly put immense time and sleepless nights of effort into.

Brian's lashes flutter, innocent as a dove.

"Only a little bit. Most of the event isn't mandatory.

But the Christmas party on the twenty-fifth?

That is. One eensy-weensy little mandatory thing that you merely have to make a five minute appearance at.

That's all. For the sake of team building and fun.

Unity. Morale! Remember the morale? Very important thing, morale. "

I agree! It's so important that everything Brian's worked very hard on should be mandatory! Not wanting to improve your morale by a riveting three hundred percent—according to a slide from earlier in Brian's presentation—is crazy.

"I'm emailing Liam," Ruby grits, reaching for her phone and scowling as the screen reader assists her.

"Our first event starts today, after this meeting," Brian says. "And it is a work-related event, purely voluntary...for everyone but Will."

Ruby's husband perks as her fingers stall.

"For Will, it is mandatory," Brian states.

Will presents an offended front. "As if I'd ever pass up some good morale and team-

building fun.”

Brian beams. “That’s the spirit. I’ve set up an email to go out with information on how this will work.

In it, you’ll find your log-in information and a link to a website that possesses a game-styled database to track building-wide performance.

Department heads will be at liberty to alter and add tasks to the database.

Everyone who wants to participate can earn points for completing their work and lose points for causing distractions or failing to achieve their bare minimum work requirements each day—as determined by you, our department heads.

Earning enough points puts you on the nice list, which will result in a marvelous prize come the Christmas party on the twenty-fifth.

Losing points or failing to procure enough to reach nice-list status before the party results in being placed on the naughty list.” Letting his voice turn from chipper to pitiful, Brian says, “I have done my very best to make this appealing to everyone, Ruby. I built a website for you. An entire website. With full alternative text. Is making an appearance at one Christmas party on a day you’ll already be here for work anyway really a big deal? ”

“This is manipulation,” she states, voice hard. “ Gross manipulation.”

Brian pouts. “Well, you can’t see how terribly sad I look, so I have to resort to other means in order to be inclusive.

I am, after all, nothing if not an equal-opportunity manipulator.

The terms are simple, Mrs. Ruby Vann... Nearly an entire month of bribing your coworkers into focusing on work in exchange for not bothering our dear boss when he's asked for me to do this while he's gone.

Furthermore, I've made you the sole benefactor of your department, which means you are free to tank your husband's points and rob him of the party prize should he fail to adhere to your standards of work ethic. For one. entire. month."

Horried, Will grips the dress shirt over his heart. "How could you?"

"Easily," Brian says, merry. "A month of bribery, and five minutes at a party. Everything else you're free to skip...

unless the feeling of joy compels you to enjoy yourself or something.

I dunno. It's really all up to you if you participate in anything beyond the work motivation I spent hours setting up with specifically you in mind. "

Looking positively unhappy about it , Ruby sets down her phone. "Will has to work?"

Brian locks his hands behind his back and rocks on his heels. "Yep. Invested individuals are curious to see if it's possible."

"Hey," Will protests. "I work all the time. Very hard."

"Organizing your photos of Ruby doesn't count as working hard ." Frank rubs her eyes and fixes her dark-rimmed glasses back on her nose. "What's the prize for making it to the nice list?"

Brian's smile is either angelic...or positively wicked.

Whichever it is, I am in love with the way he says, “I suppose everyone will find out...just like everyone will find out what happens if they’re naughty by Christmas.

” He presses the next-slide button. “Here’s a breakdown of the calendar, which will be in everyone’s inboxes by the time you return to your offices.

I could go on and on about all the fun I have planned, but I can tell everyone is raring to return to their offices and log in on Love Letters to Christmas, AKA the charming name I gave to the site.

On your way, do remember: we must work very, very hard in Santa’s absence, lest he be grumpy upon his return.

” Beaming, Brian locks his hands behind his back.

“Since I’m never asking for questions at the end of a meeting again...”

“But I have a ton of questions,” Micheal begins.

Brian wisely refuses him the opportunity to continue as he proceeds to the final slide, and Christmas music plays, drowning out the man’s dissent.

Procuring a box covered in red and green from behind an inflatable snowman in the corner, Brian declares, “Please leave any complaints or concerns in this complaints and concerns box, which will absolutely not be shredded and recycled by EOD. For notable and esteemed members who may find this method tedious, my email is open for your convenience. Verbal discussion has thus ended. Good luck getting on the nice list, everyone! Meeting adjourned .” Giggling somewhat maniacally—er, I mean, wholesomely and adorably—Brian pulls a page from Liam’s book and says, “Now get back to work.”

So, we all do.

I love working here. This is incredible.

I can't imagine what the Countdown to Valentine event looked like with activities every day.

This Christmas in July list is already bursting with excitement, and it's not even daily events since everyone will be busy on Love Letters to Christmas as Santa's little elves.

The ability to establish ourselves on the nice list through completing tasks based on our department or assisting other departments with entry-level requests once we've finished all our own work each day is the best idea since self-adhesive stamps.

It's the perfect way to usher in the true meaning of Christmas and cultivate a loving, kind environment.

I don't know how long Brian's been working on this in order to manage putting together such a beautiful website, but it sure is effective, sleek, and fun, full of emojis and the ability to personalize the user interface.

Checking boxes and getting points is a system that results in many happy brain chemicals for sure.

I'm obsessed with the genius, the commitment, the sincere faithfulness to spreading joy among his coworkers.

It's just so... Brian .

Finishing up my task of cleaning out all the mail sorting boxes, I find my way back to

my computer and check a box that gives me points and plays a Christmas-themed firework animation.

Giggling, I check the other available tasks in my department, only to discover that Brian and I run a very economical mailroom. We're caught up. Substantially so.

But of course we are.

We pride ourselves in a prompt, tidy process, as mail deserves.

Unfortunately, we have no more points to get until after lunch when today's mail comes.

"Hm..." I click on the list of tasks available in other departments to see what I can help with. Something appears at the top. Urgent. All caps. All red.

FRANK NEEDS A COFFEE. PLEASE. SOMEONE. ANYONE. brING FRANK A COFFEE.

Giggling, I contemplate whether or not it was a good idea for Brian to let department heads add tasks...

but...well...at least he knew better than to allow them to give any added task more than a single point.

I have a feeling without that limitation, Frank would have accredited a million points to coffee and rocketed anyone who fulfilled it onto the nice list forever.

I accept the task and stand, heading toward the elevator.

"A-mail-ia?" Brian calls from his office.

I straighten, turning to find him looking past his computer at me. “Yes?”

“Where are you going?” he asks.

I beam. “I accepted a helping task! I’m going to get Frank a coffee.”

Brian’s lips tilt. “Oh, Frank. Already abusing the system. It took her all of a single hour... That’s practically a record.” With a sigh, he says, “Be safe.”

“I will!” For absolutely no logical reason at all, I salute, then I spin on my heels and head up to the nearest breakroom so I can make Frank a coffee and earn my nice list points...

After all, I love a good ruse and a feeble attempt to distract myself from the fact I woke up this morning with New Month, New Me energy.

The crazy first-of-the-month vibes compelled me to shove my secret admirer love letter in my dress skirt pocket and concoct a plan to get a PO box on my lunch break while I brushed my teeth.

Regardless that it’s July 1st, I am still the same old Amelia Christmas, perpetually basking in Brian Single’s whimsy and seeking validation from anything that might spare me a moment’s consideration.

Even if that anything is a program on a computer claiming that my efforts result in admittance to a nice list.

Let’s just say that if the Amelia Christmas of yesterday would still do anything for a fireworks animation, then really nothing about me has changed at all.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:28 am

Is this...hatred?

Brian

I'm disappointed.

I'm devastated.

I shall never recover.

Blowing out a breath, I turn a letter that I've just found in today's mail over and stare at the flap.

No wax. Not a drop of art. The handwriting is painfully familiar, because it is obviously Amelia's, which means—first—it should have a wax seal that belongs in a museum gracing it, and—second—it should probably have her name on the return address.

It does not.

All it has is a PO box.

A PO box .

Do I have a PO box? Yes. Of course. Anything to support the post. Liam sends random magazines there sometimes as little surprises for me. PO boxes are great. Love them.

I'd just like to know why Amelia isn't using our home address. Is our mailbox not good enough for her even though a gnome is hugging it right now?

Does she...hate me?

Maybe she decided that she hates me mere weeks after I realized I hold her in rather high esteem. Maybe she has determined to despise me, to taunt me with a seal-less hate letter, to suggest she has recognized my feelings for her and demand I stop.

Okay, maybe I'm exaggerating. Amelia is sweet and kind. She wouldn't send me hate mail in response to learning about my feelings, but she would carefully and articulately say please, no .

I'm certain that's what this is.

And my chest hurts just thinking about the heartbreaking rejection I'm about to face.

I can't believe she figured out I planned this entire Christmas in July event as a means to initiate romantic scenarios with her.

She must have scrawled a please cease and desist letter during her lunch break yesterday.

Then she went and got a whole PO box so she could send the clear message that we aren't ever going to share a mailbox.

If only I'd been able to prepare myself better.

I did think it was odd that she disappeared for her lunch break, but I assumed she was doing tasks in other departments.

I spent my break pouting over a croissant from Sweet & Salty and bemoaning that my month-long scheme was a waste if it stole her from me so she could get people coffee.

In reality, she wrote her letter and walked down the street to the post office off main so she could send it.

Flicking my attention toward Amelia—who has been energetically bouncing all over the building for two days but who is currently busy sorting packages on the other side of the room—I swallow my feelings in favor of logic.

Even if Amelia has no interest in my affections, she wouldn't be cruel about it.

I'll survive whatever she's written in here.

I'll survive, and it's not like I'll have to stop loving her.

It's not like stopping is even an option at this point. I love her. That's just how it is.

Her eyes meet mine as she finishes arranging the packages that arrived today onto our mail cart. Her mouth opens, then her attention drops to the pale pink letter in my hands. Heat explodes on her face. "I-I'm ready to start our rounds."

I watch her. "Kay. I'll catch up to you in a minute." I lift her letter. "I got mail."

Her lashes flutter as blush darkens the tips of her ears. "What...a pretty color."

I stare. "Yes. Very." Is she pretending that this isn't very obviously her handwriting? She dots her i's with tiny circles. I've never before in my life perceived such a bubbly script, and that's saying something, considering my entire life has been dedicated to processing people's handwriting.

What manner of rejection letter involves not knowing who's rejecting you?

I think I can hear my fragile heart shattering.

I so dearly wish she'd told me before I'd gone and put a substantial number of Christmas decorations on Liam's business card, which he told me I could use for employee appreciation .

He recommended a complimentary Taco Tuesday or donuts, but then he gave me the kind of budget that covers full-building decor, fireworks, and masquerade balls, sooo.

"Anyway!" Amelia wheels the cart to the elevator. "I hope it's a very nice letter! Catch up soon!" She presses the call button, then she loads up as quickly as possible, providing me with a plastic smile as she frantically mashes the close-door button.

Once she's out of sight, I think I panic.

Slightly.

Just a little bit.

"Ha ha ha." Nervous laughter spills out of me as I turn her letter over, frantic. "What did I do wrong?" Please tell me that she explains whatever it is, and I can fix it.

Gulping, I send myself to my office, sit in my chair, and plant the letter on my desk.

Pretty pink. Pretty handwriting. Pretty hatred.

No one has been subtle where it concerns how much I love her wax seals. At lunch last month, my parents brought it up a separate eight times. They told her that I—Brian Single, honorer of the post—contemplated tampering with the mail in a

desperation to own her handiwork.

Yet, cruelly, she withholds my right to one.

It takes everything in me to hold it together as I brace myself for the inevitable and open the envelope.

Unexpected words hit me immediately.

My dearest Brian,

It takes all my courage to write you, but I cannot contain these feelings any longer.

I admire you. Your passion. Your confidence. Your kindness.

You're a beacon of light in an often dim world. I find myself constantly enraptured, drawn helplessly into the sphere of your glow like a moth to a flame. You make life more bearable. You make the world more possible.

Recently, I've been trying to focus on myself and become someone more worthy of your attention, so I don't expect anything to come from this unless I become strong enough to face you directly, but I feel as though sending this letter is an important step in the right direction.

At the very least, it is a way to pretend I'm humoring a distraction that has plagued me for as long as I care to remember.

You make it near impossible to think of anything else, which—as I'm sure you can imagine—makes it very hard to work on personal growth.

Your joy and hope and light and love are contagious.

You are everything I have ever wanted, everything I desire to emulate.

When I think of peace, I think of you.

And then I remember that true peace isn't something I can obtain through the efforts of someone else. True peace is something I need to come to terms with and attain within myself first. So, you see, I'm in quite a pickle here.

I'm perpetually stuck between wanting you and knowing I've got massive amounts of baggage to work through before I should even ask you to be mine.

This whole thing is foolish, I know. It's inconvenient and pointless at best.

I'm not even sure what I'm trying to achieve with it.

Perhaps the still broken parts of me know you love mail and while I am not mail, I am able to produce it. I hope that creating something you might love eases the ache in my chest.

If nothing else, please enjoy this letter and know that someone treasures you above the breath in her lungs. Should you wish to reply, I have enclosed postage.

Should you not wish to reply, I understand, and I'd simply like to thank you for the joy you bring into my world whenever our paths cross.

Adoring you always,

Your Secret Admirer

I blink.

I reread.

My heart seizes.

I swallow.

I forget entirely how to breathe.

Adoring you always, Your Secret Admirer .

This isn't a hate letter. It's a love letter. A love letter from Amelia Christmas .

"Surely...not," I whisper beneath the rampant sound of my heartbeat in my ears, then I reread yet again, searching for the proof that this is a hate letter filled with rejection and disgust. Because it must be. Because there is no love seal .

Unless...could it be...

Did she leave off the seal, thinking it would give her away?

Does she...does she not realize how terribly incriminating her handwriting is?

No, can it be? It can't. She cannot be this oblivious to how cute and unique her handwriting is. It's impossible.

I cover my mouth with my hand and scan the bubbly font as it bounces across the stationary—adorable, adorable, adorable .

She's too adorable for words. And she likes me.

Adores me. Thinks I'm confident and kind.

The passion, of course, is given, considering how entrenched I am in the mail business.

But kind ? That's not an accurate compliment at all.

I have, in a matter of days, charged several thousand dollars to my boss's credit card, manipulated my blind coworker, and conned my entire office into participating in my own personal romance schemes.

If there's one thing I'm not, it's kind.

Which is probably why—instead of going to Amelia and telling her that I also like her, she's fine just the way she is, and working on herself is pointless when she's already perfect—I peruse the collection of stationery I keep at work, select my bluest style—dubbed *Ethereal Night*—and secure a pen.

My dearest Admirer,

It's an honor to make your acquaintance...

Is this kind ? No. Will it result in more bubbly font letters for me? Yes. Might I even obtain a seal at some point if I play my cards right? Maybe.

And am I going to pretend I'm doing this out of respect for her desire to somehow become an even better person before anything between us goes anywhere?

Totally.

Therefore, "kind" really is a poor assessment, and maybe it's prudent for her to learn that before we find ourselves romantically entangled. Because if she decides later that I'm not what she thinks I am after I've lost my entire heart to her? Well.

I just don't know how I'll ever recover.

Probably, it's safe to say that I won't.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:28 am

Tomorrow's Independence Day! But I'm not allowed to be independent without a taser?

Amelia

Letter from Brian. Wax seal from Brian. Blue wax seal from Brian. In my PO box.

To think I was disappointed to learn that I'd need to make special trips to check my box or risk getting my letters a day late since the mail here delivers around four, well beyond my lunch break even though I work just up the street.

Fingers shaking, I lock my post box and turn out of the clinical aisles, heading for the exit.

I'm practically hyperventilating by the time I make it to my car in the parking lot.

Sitting inside, I throw the AC back on and stare at the letter in my lap.

It's beautiful , but my heart actually may not be able to handle this.

Brian wouldn't reply to my love letter with a blue seal unless he's encouraging having a secret admirer.

And he isn't just encouraging it. His reply came fast .

It's been a single day since I saw that the letter I sent in a fit of insanity made its way into Brian's hands.

He must have written a reply in his office immediately, sealed the envelope with a stunning floral stamp, and taken it personally to the post office.

So now, on July 3rd, I have received a gift.

I don't know what to do. I don't know how to feel. Brian replied. With a glittery white envelope and blue wax. Brian is interested in his secret admirer. Which means he's not interested in me. Which makes enough sense.

But also his secret admirer rambled . She used the moth-to-flame cliché! She's basically illiterate. Yet he still bestows her with a response?

I hate her.

I hate me.

I am my own love triangle.

What was I thinking?

Lip pouted, I dissect my letter, leaving the seal whole and the envelope untorn. Breathing deep, I unfold the beautiful paper and begin to read.

My dearest Admirer,

It's an honor to make your acquaintance. I don't consider sharing your feelings to be foolish in any way. It's remarkably courageous. To take a chance on something as vulnerable as confessing emotions that may not be returned is brave.

You are brave.

I cannot imagine what character growth you're focusing on right now, but your self-awareness and honesty has struck me. I find myself invested in your journey and smitten by your fixation.

Certainly, any man would be flattered by such sincere compliments. Any man would wish for such compelling adulation. But, you must know if we've crossed paths a number of times before, that I am not any man.

Mail is of utmost importance to me. My first love. To get to me, you must find yourself a bit more obsessed with it, I think.

Please learn the code of seals and reply accordingly.

That is to say, I do hope you reply and update me on your personal growth. I also hope you'll tell me what your favorite flavor of muffin is. And your favorite color. And also, perhaps, your favorite restaurant.

I'm a bit of a planner, you'll learn, and should you live up to my expectations, I hope I'll be prepared to spoil you as you deserve.

Eager and hopeful,

Your Brian

My Brian?

I have a letter from Brian in Brian's handwriting, whereby he calls himself mine . Not only that, he wants me to reply. He wants to know more about me. He wants me to send him wax-sealed letters.

How painfully romantic .

I don't know whether to be overjoyed or heartbroken.

On the one hand, he's giving me a chance! On the other...he has no feelings at all that would bar him from corresponding with a secret admirer, meaning that my living with him for the past two months hasn't resulted in anything akin to romantic interest.

On the one hand, this is an opportunity for him to get to know me and maybe fall in love with who I am.

On the other, he might notice the similarities between me and me, which will lead to disaster.

Should I alter my answers in an effort to fit his preferences...? Am I really that desperate?

Possibly. Potentially. Absolutely and completely.

Unfortunately, his preferences? Are mail.

Mail does not eat muffins or have a favorite color. Mail does not go on dates at restaurants.

I cannot be mail.

But I can let myself have an evening to ponder how I'll reply since mail won't run tomorrow anyway.

I can allow myself to breathe. I can remind myself that I'm healing and growing, and Brian is so wonderful he's invested in my journey.

I can set my letter in my glove box, drive home, and get dinner ready for him.

I can sort through my emotions and react both rationally and responsibly.

I can...

“Oh, hey, A-mail-ia,” Brian greets me—topless, hair damp—as I come through the front door, and my brain launches back a few weeks, to the first time I saw him basically naked, moments before we shared a room for the entire night.

Emotionally, thinking about that night is not a safe space for me since it results in my heart attempting to vacate my body and all. Nevertheless, here I am. Doing dangerous things.

He asks, “Where have you been?” If his chest weren’t already blinding me, his smile would.

“Not shopping, I hope. Or outside, all alone, in this big city full of treacherousness.” His smile fades, and he pins me with a look that pierces me through my soul.

“I don’t know what I’d do if anything happened to you. ”

My heart gives up on escape in order that it might explode.

“I— Uh.” I try to remember how to breathe.

“I’m okay.” My fingers shake as I push a strand of hair over my ear.

“I’m grown.” Bare chest. Bare, bare chest. Concerned brows, resting low.

Beautiful green eyes, fixed on me. Above bare chest. Very bare, very toned, very perfect chest. Hardly whispering, I say, “I need to be able to go outside alone.”

He approaches.

He. Approaches. Half. Naked.

His hand reaches for me, and he curls a finger beneath my chin. The air stills. My already struggling breath catches. Time slows down.

Then he smiles and flicks. “No, you don’t. Why would you need to? Give me one example.”

When I need to go get a letter from you from my secret PO box. I avert my gaze, glance around the living room and kitchen, search for an answer that does not present itself. “W-well...”

“ Well? ” he prompts, leaning ever closer, bare skin and beauty, right there in front of me.

Amelia.exe shuts down.

Chuckling, Brian steps back, giving me a few spare inches of space. “Next time ask me to go with you.”

I cannot do that, sir. I simply cannot. This is one of those times where I must put my shoulders back and exercise being a strong, independent, adult woman, who no longer seeks validation or approval from authority figures, because Brian isn’t an authority figure.

This might be his house, but I am free to leave, and not being allowed to go out on my own should not be a rule.

Even though he’s only worried about me.

And wants what's best for me.

And didn't know where I was.

And...

I drop my chin and stare at my feet. "I'm sorry I made you worry."

His brows dip. "I'll order you a Creep Be Gone kit."

"Creep...Be Gone kit?"

"Pepper spray. Taser. One of those tags that sends location to emergency contacts if you press the button." Pulling his phone out of his pocket, he lounges against the kitchen island, tossing one ankle over the other.

"It'll make me feel better. I hadn't even realized you left today after we got back from work. Your favorite color's blue, isn't it?"

"Green..."

Green flicks toward me. "Green? Do we need to repaint your room?"

My head shakes. "No."

"Are you just saying that because you don't want to trouble me?"

I'm saying that because if you touch the room you prepared special for me, I will go feral. "I like how calm and pretty my room is. Green and blue are my favorites. Mostly blue. I only like a...very specific sort of green."

“Nature shades suit you.” He pops his phone back in his pocket. “Alrighty. The gift of mail that promises your future protection is imminent, since you insist on leaving me all by my lonesome these days, what with all the tasks you’re doing outside the mailroom and now this after-work abandonment.”

My shoulders bunch.

He tucks his hands in his pockets and angles his body toward me. “Relax, A-mail-ia. I’m teasing you.”

Yes, you are. But not in the way you think. If I’m honest, I barely know what he’s saying right now, on account of the half-nakedness.

Humming, he lets his head fall back so he can peruse the ceiling. “Tomorrow, I’m thinking we should go out to dinner before we head to the fireworks.”

That gets through to my brain.

“Dinner?” I whisper. Together? Just the two of us?

“Assuming my palate can adjust to inferior food after having been spoiled rotten by homecooking, yes. Dinner. Is there somewhere you like best?”

In Bandera, the best place to go isn’t a chain. It’s a diner that sells homecooked meals and treats you like family...which means that the open kitchen in the back has a lot of unrestrained yelling. The best part is probably that no tourists show up there.

Bandera, on the whole, isn’t exactly a tourist hot spot, but it does happen to be located on the way to one of the most beautiful little towns in West Virginia.

I forget the name, but that place is practically a fairy village.

Travelers opt for the chains. Locals scurry away to our unfriendly diners with questionable health code scores.

I'm...not sure if that's my favorite place actually, or if it was just the only place my parents would ever take me.

"What's your favorite place?" I ask.

"Sweet & Salty."

I suppose that is the only other place I'm sort of familiar with. I open my mouth to suggest we go there, but he cuts me off before I can, "They're closed for dinner, though. Only open til five-thirty."

"Oh." Well, great. I don't know what else to suggest. I'd rather not go to Taco Bell. Even if Taco Bell is the only other place I can remember exists since Mars and Ceres are unnaturally obsessed with it.

Now I'm being annoying, not knowing the answer to a simple question. I should be able to make stupid easy decisions like this.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I will an answer to appear. It's useless. All I can see is bare Brian chest in my brain.

"It's okay if you don't know what you'd like," Brian says.

Softly, I say, "I don't even know what's around here."

"Everything."

Great. That's not helpful at all.

“We have food representation from all sorts of countries. Italian. Various Asian, Japanese, Thai, Indian et cetera. American. Greek. Mexican.” Brian lists on his fingers, and then he adds, “Breakfast.”

Ah, yes. The country of Breakfast. I visit there every morning.

Their state bird is the Muffin, their flag the Bagel.

It’s safe to say that prolonged exposure to Brian Chest results in loss of brain cells.

“Is there anything you’ve been wanting lately that I haven’t made?

” I ask, while I graciously retain the ability to speak.

His head shakes, damp curls rustling. “Just your company.”

He’s so pure . It doesn’t even matter what we get, as long as we’re together. “Maybe subs?”

“Sounds great.” He pushes off the counter. “I’ll get my keys.”

I blink. “Your keys?” Not...a shirt? Wait. No. That isn’t the problem. “You said tomorrow. Before fireworks.”

“Yup.” He lifts his brows. “I lied. No cooking for you tonight. I want attention.”

I want you to understand that it is impossible for my attention to belong to anything else while you do not have a shirt on.

Gulping, I fiddle with my skirt. “I’m sorry if I’ve made you feel neglected.

I just really like the system you've set up at work.

It's really fun, and I'm obsessed with getting points. ”

“It is pretty cool, isn't it?” He turns on his heel. “Come on.”

My legs are moving before I comprehend that we are heading down the hall toward...his...room. I freeze when the door opens, blasting me with so much Brian I lose the ability to breathe.

Pictures of stamps and seals from different countries scatter across his comforter.

Strings covered with tiny clothespins holding letters run all over his walls.

Sunlight flows through his windows, casting his desk and all the neat stacks of stationery, stamps, stickers, pens, and wax in a warm glow.

“A-mail-ia?” He pokes his head into my view.

I jump, forgetting that he kinda asked me to follow him. “Y-yes?” I squeak, wringing my hands.

Brian room. Brian room. Brian room .

It's so beautiful.

He keeps letters he's received on display all over his walls. Is mine here...?

I find it just past his damp hair. Hung perfectly above his bed, my light pink envelope sits.

“We’re still talking about food,” he tells me. “Subs is vague.”

“It is?”

“Yes.” He hooks a finger at me, forcing me to take steps into his room and up to his closet, where he begins far too casually locating a shirt and sweater vest combination. “We’ve got Subway, Firehouse, AlleyDog.”

“AlleyDog?” I ask, eyes caught on a mirror stuck full of postcards. It reflects light pink. Above his bed. My letter. In a place of honor.

“It’s a small business,” he clarifies. “They’ve got giant cookies.”

“That sounds amazing,” I offer, completely dazed.

Brian slips his arms into a shirt and begins buttoning. “A-mail-ia.”

I tense and rip my gaze off the mirror. “Yes?”

“You’re still not giving me enough attention.”

I stare at his chest, following his fingers as he hides away the pale skin I’ve written poetry about. He said something, didn’t he? I blink. “What?”

A smirk quirks the corner of his mouth. “Nevermind. Let’s go.”

Go. Yes. To AlleyDog. For subs.

Together. Just the two of us.

This is absolutely something I am capable of surviving.

With only minimal tachycardia.

Lightheaded, I follow him out of his room, casting one last glance back at my letter before we head to the car.

Page 20

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:28 am

Christmas sparks and candy cane conundrums.

Brian

I knew that my holiday events weren't an inconvenience. I knew my mean coworkers who pretend to hate fun do not actually hate fun. I knew it.

What a turnout.

Smiling, I peruse the snack tables I've had set up in the large Whirlwind Branding parking lot and refrain from looking smug as I pluck a marshmallow snowman off a tray.

A bustling hum of voices fills the night.

Some of my coworkers have set up lawn chairs and camping chairs, where they recline with their snack plates.

Some others have snuggled up with their families in truck beds loaded with pillows.

Laughter abounds. Joy washes in like a wave.

Peace settles in my chest as I pop a pretzel reindeer in my mouth and behold my small town, nestled into a city overflowing with lights.

My parents don't understand this part. They can't fathom why I gave up a close-knit town like Bandera in order to become just another ant in a hill here.

But, in the city, people form communities and circles.

Everyone longs for connection, so it's inevitable no matter where you wind up.

My community just happens to be the couple thousand members who work here at Whirlwind Branding's HQ instead of the couple thousand who live in a whole town.

My circle just happens to fill a sprawling parking lot when lured out by snacks on July 4th.

Ever since night fell, stray fireworks have been lighting up the sky all around. The other shows distantly create a symphony in the jet canvas above. In Bandera, fireworks compete against stars. Here, they rival skylines.

There's a limitless beauty to the ways life can be appreciated.

And speaking of limitless beauty...

I take my attention off my extended family to find Amelia rife with distress staring at her plate, so I bump her shoulder with mine. "What's wrong, A-mail-ia?" I bite the head off my snowman.

Her tiny gasp preludes dread overcoming her pretty face as she watches me. "Everything's too cute to eat."

I chew my decapitated marshmallow man and hum. "Oh."

"Someone must have spent a lot of time making all these. It seems mean to eat them."

"You'd rather waste food?"

The streetlights highlight the red on her face. “N-no. I wasn’t thinking when I took them that I’d have to eat them. I just wanted all the cute things. But now I have regrets.”

She’s freaking adorable.

I call upon the theatrics that were entrusted to me at birth and place my palm over my heart.

“You’d withhold their destiny from them?

They’ve waited their whole lives to be enjoyed.

When an angel plucked them from their trays, I can only imagine the elation they experienced, but now—sorrows—that very same angel hesitates to bestow upon them the finale of their reason for existing.

Cruelty has never before looked so sweet. ”

Her red cheeks darken by several shades.

I pluck a reindeer from her plate and hold it to her lips. “Don’t be cruel, A-mail-ia. Cuties are meant to be devoured.”

Before her trembling lips can open and take the morsel from my fingers, a whistle soars into the sky on the other side of the lot. The pyrotechnicians I hired send several more barreling upward, then green and red bloom in the dark.

Christmas fireworks.

For Amelia Christmas.

Reindeer forgotten, Amelia stares—wide-eyed—at the sky flowers while sparks erupt. The colored light reflects in her eyes, glittering, and for the first time tonight, she relaxes.

“It’s beautiful,” she whispers beneath the fizzing scatters.

“Yup,” I reply, not even looking. “It sure is.”

My dearest Brian,

I’m not sure I’d call myself brave, but something about the way you believe the best of others makes bravery seem more attainable.

Unfortunately, I fear that my character growth journey is going somewhat poorly. Every time I think I’ve made progress, something happens that informs me I haven’t at all. It’s hard to heal. It’s hard to feel worthy. Have you ever wrestled with inadequacy? It’s kind of annoying.

Just once, I’d like to wake up and believe that the world might not end by the afternoon because of something I’ve done or have failed to do.

But, anyway, that’s the journey update—if you can call it a journey when I’ve yet to do anything but stand still and pout at my stationary feet.

My favorite flavor of muffin is blueberry, with the coarse sugar on top.

My favorite color is a very specific shade of green, and blues for anything else.

I have absolutely no idea what my favorite restaurant is.

I wish I could tell you, but I’ve not had much experience going out to eat.

My mother was the sort to tell me we had food at home while I was growing up, so I would make the food at home and forgo an opinion on the matter.

Every so often, we'd go to this small family-owned restaurant, but the food there is actually terrible, and I don't know what compelled my parents to bring me.

Perhaps so I'd stop asking to go out? I don't know.

It's possible, but I'd rather not think about it.

I like not having to cook sometimes, so maybe any restaurant with better food than what that place had would tie.

Do you have a favorite food and color? What about a favorite flower?

Looking under rocks for her character arc,

Your Secret Admirer

P.S. - I hope this wax seal suits you. It's the bluest blue I could find.

Lip pouting, I stare at the plain blue seal that I've left untouched on my envelope.

It's pretty, but of course it is. Amelia did it.

It's clear she used a seal mold, which is something I don't remember her employing in previous creations.

To my memory, she'd let her wax bubble, then she'd decorate the trim.

It was natural. Organic. New every time.

Sometimes, she'd swirl the colors and add a further layer of uniqueness to her art.

In contrast, this is almost clinical. Careful. An effort at dissecting her from her passion. In what I can only assume is a concentrated attempt to keep her identity secret.

Nevertheless, it is cold.

And I am sad.

Sad that she feels the need to hide anything from me.

Sad that my first seal from Amelia is pitiful when compared to the realm of her abilities.

Sad, sad, sad.

"B-Brian?" Amelia says, voice wavering by the entrance to my office.

Dragging my attention up, I blink at... her .

Wow.

Yes.

Wait.

No.

No, no, no. Nope. Absolutely not.

Oh dear.

Tugging on her flouncy green skirt, Amelia swallows and shifts her weight. The bells on her hat chime, and she adjusts the material of her costume as her cheeks add a fabulous balance of more red to the mostly green ensemble.

My eyes scan, drinking in my little Christmas elf.

The candy cane striped tights are a vision. The peppermint buttons look sweet enough to bite. She's a delicacy, a sugar-taunting delicacy.

Violently, the compulsion that she not leave my sight and enter anyone else's grips me.

And that's a rather compelling issue, considering we're dressed as elves on this lovely Monday after the Fourth of July in order that we might go around the office and collect letters to Santa.

Amelia's eyes flick up to me, then back down.

Oops. Right. Yes. She said my name, didn't she? Love that...love that... Maybe if I wait long enough she'll say it again? Nudging that thought from my brain, I plant a smile on my face and my chin in my palm. "What's up, A-mail-ia?" I ask, ignoring the odd strain in my voice.

"Is this skirt...too short?"

My attention dashes between her face and her hands as they clutch the material of her skirt. It sits roughly an inch above her knees, which are covered in her candy cane tights. There is no skin to be seen, and I'm not entirely the type of guy who pays attention to skirt lengths, either.

Except, probably, if a skirt proves to be shorter than a mailbag.

And Amelia's skirt is absolutely not shorter than her mailbag, which rests against her hip.

Because she's not just a little Christmas elf. She's a little Christmas mail elf.

I am...actually unwell. Voice distant, I echo, "Short?" Emotions conflicted, I stare.

I want Little Mail Elf-melia, but I do not want to share Little Mail Elf-melia.

I could ask her to stay in the mailroom and sort letters, except all the letters we're getting this afternoon are for Santa and we've already sorted today's incoming mail to deliver when we gather Santa's letters so we can streamline the process.

Not to mention, if she stays down here while I'm upstairs, I will not even get to enjoy Little Mail Elf-melia.

"I don't know if this is business appropriate," she whispers.

Absolutely it is. But also it isn't. Because we are dressed like elves. And dressing like an elf isn't exactly up to dress code.

And if Micheal knew I shoved an elf costume into my subordinate's hands ten minutes ago, he would have words for me.

Words like You're and possibly fired . Even though Micheal has no real jurisdiction over those kinds of things, he might whistleblow. I've managed thus far to keep people from attempting to contact Liam with complaints, and I'd like to keep it that way.

“If it makes you uncomfortable, you don’t have to wear it,” I say, an HR icon.

“I don’t want to ruin the fun.”

I don’t want the public to witness how well her red cheeks complement the green of her outfit. Therefore, it is at this exact moment I have a positively Grinchly idea.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:28 am

Santa-melia is coming to town.

Amelia

“Ho, ho, ho!” I cheer, voice as deep as I can make it. “Have any letters for me, little one?”

Frank stares at me. Potentially concerned. Potentially trying to figure out if this is a good joke, or a very, very bad one.

Realization hits me, and I shuffle in my mail bag. Using my normal voice, I offer her a letter from Norman. “I almost forgot. You have mail, too. Or I hope you have mail too.” I make my voice deep again. “Assuming you do have a letter for me.”

That makes Frank snort. “Brian needs to be stopped.”

“Huh?”

“This?” She flicks her finger at me before taking the letter from her husband. “This is criminal. There has to be a rule against making your underlings wear a fake beard and stomach.”

I look down the white beard of my Santa costume at the pillow I stuffed in my red coat. The outfit is way too big on me in every way since it was something Brian ordered for Liam to have whenever he gets back, but he said it was fine, and Liam doesn’t need it anyway.

For some reason, when I mentioned that I could wash it and return it, Brian just smiled very brightly and said, No , before ushering me into the mailroom bathroom.

“Heh,” Frank says, grinning at her open letter when I look back up at her. She shows me the cardstock interior, boasting a simple but effective, Hi. :) “He paid postage for this.”

It’s wild what adults decide to do with their adult money.

“What an idiot,” Frank murmurs. “My idiot.” The card goes in what has steadily become an overflowing drawer of Norman letters before Frank opens what I can only assume is a lesser drawer of not Norman letters and pulls out a post-it note. “Here.”

“Um.”

“My letter to ‘Santa’.”

Upon the hot pink paper, a barely discernible list is scrawled. A million dollars takes up first place.

I adjust my Santa hat. “Brian provided everyone with special envelopes for their Christmas lists.”

“Yeah.”

Anxiety knots in my chest. “This...isn’t that special envelope?”

“My special envelope got lost.”

I glance behind her, at a stack of papers, including the special red envelope Brian made sure to provide to every single person who wanted one in the building.

Something in my head says just tell her and what's the worst that could happen?

But something in my heart is playing boss music very loudly and reminding me that respect means silence.

But silence isn't very character arc of me...

Taking a deep breath, I situate my pillow stomach, march past Frank, and retrieve the envelope. Unreasonably terrified, I say, "Tada..."

"Was that actually there the whole time?" Frank asks, brows lifted above her glasses.

"I...think so."

She takes it from my hand and slips her post-it note inside, murmuring, "And that's what happens when you have the object permanence of a newborn..." as she closes it. With a smile, she offers me the envelope. "It's a Christmas miracle, Santa."

I offer an awkward laugh as I tuck the letter in with the others I've been collecting. "Ho, ho, ho! Have a merry day!"

Unreasonably exhausted, I make my way out of Frank's office, through the graphics department, and into the hall.

It shouldn't be this hard.

I know it.

I shouldn't feel like my arms and legs weigh thirty extra pounds after doing nothing wrong. I was only trying to be helpful. Without an envelope, Frank's list may have gotten crumpled in the bottom of my bag, and then she wouldn't be able to participate

in whatever Brian's planning.

It's not bad to try and help someone. It's also not bad to mention the rules kindly.

I guess I'm just used to people who insist that the rules don't apply to them and who take offense that they would ever need help.

"Santa?" Brian's voice makes me tense, but I turn to face him.

The bells on his hat ring as he stops and salutes.

"This floor is cleared, sir. All incoming mail to the North Pole has been intercepted and is ready for processing. Awaiting further jolly orders. Or, perhaps, it's time for a milk and cookies break?

"Losing all his militant airs, Brian grins, pinching his fingers together as the corners of his eyes crinkle.

"Maybe just a little milk and cookies break, hm?"

My shoulders ease. My heart quiets.

"Come on," he says, so warmly, ushering me toward the elevator. "Sweet & Salty has Christmas cookies this month."

Christmas cookies. In July. As the silver doors close, I ask, "How did you manage that one?"

"I have excellent powers of persuasion, and an entire office building next door hyped up on Christmas fumes. It's hot.

Even the people who aren't entirely participating are enjoying pretending it's not the dead of summer this month.

Everyone's a little happier to walk into work, see a stuffed snowman by reception, and munch on their breakfast snowflake cookie from everyone's favorite cafe.

"He plants a finger beneath his nose like a mustache. "That's elementary, my dear St. Nick!"

I laugh.

He drops his hand and switches our hats before he leans against the wall. "What happened, A-mail-ia?"

My head shakes, and I find myself toying with a tiny bell on his elf hat. "Nothing. So genuinely nothing."

"It's okay for nothing to feel like something ."

"Is it really, though?"

"It takes a while to start feeling safe again."

So people keep telling me. Time . It all takes time .

Right now, I only feel safe with him, and even then, I'm too scared to tell him everything going on in my head and my heart.

Because he doesn't need this kind of garbage.

Because he's already doing more than enough for me.

“I’ll be okay,” I say. “It’s just taking time.

I think, probably, on a diagnosable level, I have anxiety. ”

“What would you like to do about it?” he asks.

I press my lips together. “What do you mean?”

“Therapy, drugs, suffering. Which suits you best?”

Suffering. Yes. That one. Entirely that one.

I don’t think anything I’ve gone through is quite terrible enough to warrant therapy, and drugs are absolutely off the table, because if it’s not even bad enough to talk about, it’s definitely not bad enough for prescriptions.

All the same, suffering doesn’t feel like the correct answer, so I merely stare at Brian with my mouth hanging open.

“You’re allowed to answer honestly,” he says.

“Am I?”

“Always.”

“It seems wrong to say I’m not planning to do anything about it.”

His brows rise. “Not doing anything about it wasn’t one of the options I gave.”

“Isn’t that what suffering means?”

He flicks the white pompom at the end of the Santa hat.

“Nope. You’ll either suffer yourself to improvement, or you’ll suffer yourself to a different decision.

People don’t stand still, even when it feels like they do.

Even against our will, we’re always going somewhere, always learning and discovering.

It’s a beautiful part of the human experience.

You know, the human part. It’s the unique reality that when we’re uncomfortable—”
He cuts his attention down my outfit, which was supposed to be an elf one, then he lets his eyes close. “—we change.”

It becomes slightly hard to breathe, but for a reason entirely apart from my out-of-control nerves. Fighting to grasp the calm Brian offers, I say, “Is that why you left Bandera? Did something make you need a change?”

He exhales a brief laugh and kicks off the wall. “Something like that, I suppose. I wasn’t uncomfortable , per se, with Bandera. I was uncomfortable with the situation that my presence incited.”

“What situation?”

He glances at me. “Too many heirs.”

I blink.

He lifts a finger to his lips. “But that’s a secret I’ve never told anyone before, so

make sure it stays just between us, all right?”

I...nod. Because I completely do not know what he means in the slightest, and a secret I don't even understand is not exactly one I can share.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:28 am

Progress is progress.

Amelia

I'm not sure I'm old enough to view this image.

Face scalding, I stare at my phone, at Brian's feed, a place I haven't been for a little while considering I've been living with the man himself...but I am weak. And you may consider this yet another regression.

"Good picture, isn't it?" Brian asks, suddenly behind me, and so I do what any sane woman would.

I scream bloody murder, throw my phone across the room, and fall off the couch.

Panicked and on the floor, I hold my shaking self up on my arms and look up at Brian, who was supposed to be shopping. "You're supposed to be shopping," I inform him, breathlessly.

He lifts a bundle of grocery bags in his hands. "I just got back." Sly, a smile curls his lips. "Were you too... engrossed to hear me come in?"

I was. I very, very much was. But what do you expect ?

When he posts a picture of himself posing in a puddle of the hundreds of red envelopes we collected yesterday...

it's only natural that all my senses would turn off.

He is every woman's scarlet letter, and seeing him unabashedly surrounded by them is not humane.

Making the matter about seventeen billion trillion times worse, he was holding my letter to Santa—white-and-red wax seal decorated in tiny polymer clay Christmas trees—to...his... lips . The sultry smile he fixed on the camera felt personal. As though he meant to stare directly into my soul.

So, yes , I was too preoccupied to hear he'd come home.

Stable as a baby deer, I try to peel myself off the floor as I find an excuse for my behavior. "I-I can't believe you highlighted my letter."

"I can't believe it took me this many years to finally con one out of you."

I slip back to the floor as he turns for the kitchen and unloads. "What?" I ask.

"Were my parents too subtle when they told you how much I love your work?"

I don't think they were, actually. I...must be an idiot.

"Finally, I have my very own Amelia Original."

"I can make you as many as you'd like. I love to play around and try new things."

Brian tuts as he begins unpacking the groceries.

"That's not how it works. Without a letter attached, seals are just pretty scraps of wax.

The mail is what gives them feelings . Depth.

Wonder. Purpose .” His brows wiggle. “Now, you’re more than welcome to write me as many letters as you’d like to go with the seals. ”

I gulp. What would I even say to him as myself ?

I couldn’t even bring myself to write a response of gratitude to the letter he gave me with my bonus or to the one he gave me at the ren faire.

I’m much too worried I’d ramble like a lunatic.

Or, worse, confess how I’ve always felt about him.

No, a casual letter to Brian won’t do at all.

Even if I really, really, really should put together a thank-you letter for allowing me to live here.

Which should be a safe topic.

Even though my nerves refuse to believe it is.

It’s actually despicable that I haven’t gotten over myself enough to just write one.

I’m the worst.

And I’m sitting on the floor while Brian unloads the groceries, which makes me the double worst.

Finding a deep breath and my legs, I rise. “Let me take care of that, and I’ll get dinner

started.”

“Nope,” Brian says, stealing a milk carton before I can reach it. “I’m making dinner tonight.”

He’s...making dinner?

If he’s making dinner, what am I supposed to do?

“Relax,” he says, as though he’s heard my unspoken question, as though relaxing is something I’m capable of. “Start up a movie. Make sure your phone survived being thrown across the room.”

It should have. Ever since my first phone’s screen protector shattered on the sidewalk outside the Verizon store, I have invested in the practical lockbox cases. Needless to say, my phone’s prepped to handle my unique disposition.

My unique disposition is ill-equipped to handle being told to sit down and watch a movie while someone who already does so much for me makes me dinner.

“Can’t I help you?” I ask.

“Nope.”

I do not know what to do with my hands. “What...movie do you want to watch?”

“You decide.”

I hate this.

Twisting to look at the entertainment center, I locate the two movies he keeps on

display and gravitate toward Klaus , because it's Christmas.

Slipping the disc into the DVD player, I cast a look at Brian. He is merrily setting pots on the stove, pulling down the cookbook that those teens sold me, and scanning the pages. His nose scrunches on one page, and I suspect he's just found the bran muffin recipe.

A thread of unease and regret prickles down my spine.

Stupid bran muffins.

I should have known better.

After I press play on the movie, I get my phone and escape the shame of Brian's feed before it can haunt me anymore. One of the first things I did when I learned I'd be moving in with Brian was remove my Brian-themed phone and computer wallpapers.

I was supposed to be safe from this exact trauma.

Ugh.

I so desperately want Brian kissing my letter to be my new wallpaper.

But some things must be sacrificed for the sake of my sanity.

Uncomfortable, I sit myself down on the couch and pretend that every noise coming from the kitchen doesn't add to the suffocation in my lungs.

I'm jittery right up until the moment Brian settles in beside me—close—with two plates. He hands me mine, finally providing my hands with something to do.

I stare at the display. Mashed potatoes. Green beans. Scallops?

Certain something isn't quite right, I poke the entree with my fork to distract myself from Brian's nearness.

He says, "King mushroom scallops. Courtesy of your parking lot book. We're taste testing it for Liam." He shoves a big one in his mouth and lets his eyes drift skyward as he chews. He swallows. "It's...edible."

I take my turn. Buttery garlic sauce floods the tender vegetable, and I swallow thinking that I'm maybe not suited to cook if this is what he's capable of turning a mushroom into. "It's delicious."

"It's oil-free."

"Oil...free?" I look at what I swore was a garlic butter dressing the vegetable. Sure, it's not quite pure butter and garlic, but I just assumed the flavor came from other seasonings.

"Broth with nutritional yeast whisked in." He takes another bite. "Who'da thunk it?"

He's an alchemist.

Meanwhile, I feed him bran muffins that offend his senses in every possible way. I didn't think they were bad, really. They would have been better with some butter, but if we're making oil-free vegan mollusks now, I'll have to throw out all my muffin recipes in favor of steel cut oats.

I might, maybe, just a little bit, whimper.

Brian chuckles. Then he has the audacity to lie to me. "I prefer your cooking."

“Surely not,” I whisper, falling in love with the fake food on my plate. Not mollusk. Not butter. I can’t believe it’s even dinner.

“Surely, surely. Your meat isn’t mushroom. I value that in a protein.”

“This is really good, though.”

“It’s passable.”

“It’s amazing.”

Brian’s brows dip as he looks at me. “It’s a fungi masquerading as a shellfish.

Amazing isn’t the adjective I’d use. Food just tastes better when it’s made for you.

I’m sorry that the first meal you’ve had made for you at home in months is only somewhat edible.

We’re giving that health book away to Liam as a Christmas gift and getting something from the girl who uses butter like it’s going out of style. ”

“Paula Deen?” I ask.

He nods, affirmative. “Paula Deen. The butter queen. If we both don’t die from a heart attack by Christmas in December, we’re doing something wrong.”

I laugh. “ Christmas in December ?”

“I think Christmas should be every month. Christmas in January. Christmas in February. We can break for October and November, but only because I’m scared of witchy girls and love Thanksgiving. Flood every other month with Christmas cheer

and Christmas letters. The world would be a kinder place.”

Isn't that just the theme of every Christmas movie out there? The power of kindness and generosity to combat the world's natural tendency toward negativity and selfishness.

Sadly, the part that makes Christmas special and fresh often fades with time even when it's only once a year.

Kids grow up. They lose the magic and gain the workload.

They join the elf and Santa force when they're already tired.

It's no longer about just enjoying the gifts given to them.

Now they have to be the ones to create those gifts for others.

It turns from selfish and easy, to selfless and hard.

That's the beauty of what Brian does. All year round, he takes the brunt of the magic upon his shoulders and presents it to adults with tired children sleeping inside of them. He shares his joy, because other's happiness compounds his own.

He is the least selfish, most wonderful person I have ever met.

And, for some reason, he thinks I'm worthy of the kindnesses he offers.

That has to mean something to me, right?

That has to heal something in me, doesn't it?

It has to make me feel blessed rather than perpetually inadequate, right?

It has to result in gratitude instead of this hollow fear that I've somehow tricked him into thinking I deserve anything good...doesn't it?

I...hate this.

I hate my brain. I hate the way I look at the world. I hate everything inside myself. I hate myself.

I hate my bitterness. I hate my fear. I hate my worry. I hate, hate, hate.

I am a direct opposite of Brian. I am everything he isn't.

I am a nightmare. And it's a nightmare to live inside my skull, trapped within the bone, constantly comparing, constantly battling for a fleeting sensation of peace or worth or meaning in this horrible landscape I create with my own two hands.

I am a product of the darkness and the sadness and the insults I grew entrenched in.

My spirit lies rooted in a subtle, constant negativity.

It does not know what it means to be enough.

It does not know what it means to see something good and enjoy it without wondering if it's supposed to be better .

Logic demands I understand that there is nothing I can become that will ever seem good enough. Logic demands I recognize that peace isn't in the potentials; it's in the now. Peace is taking hold of what is in reach right now and demanding that you're happy with it.

I am grateful to be here.

I am grateful for oil-free mushrooms.

I am grateful.

I am a grateful person.

And when I'm not, I will employ grace.

Because I'm still growing.

Like a sourdough starter, I just need to be patient and feed myself the truths that lead to growth. And if I spill out of my bowl and onto the counter in a dreadful mess? So be it.

That doesn't mean I'm too much . It just means my environment needed to grow, too.

Forcing myself to take in air, I scoop a bite of mashed potatoes into my mouth, fix my eyes on the movie, and determine to thrive .

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:28 am

Thriving is, actually, quite hard.

Amelia

I love Brian's events. Brian's events are the best things since airmail.

Cheerfully, I scoop my sweetened condensed milk into a large bowl and go through the self-serve ice cream making bar, adding a heaping helping of peanut butter and magic shell.

Today's event is prepping homemade ice cream with a side of hot chocolate to tide us over while it freezes.

Ice cream making instructions and ingredients fill several key conference rooms in the building, and despite the initial bah-humbug I witnessed when Brian first presented his Christmas in July plans, hundreds of people signed up to put together their own ice cream flavor today.

Every freezer in every break room is going to be packed with take-home containers of everyone's favorite.

Making today even better, tonight Brian is staying late for a meeting with Liam, which means I have brought my own car and will be taking a minor detour on my way back home to retrieve my mail from the post office.

In a modest number of hours, my ice cream will be ready and I should have a Brian letter to go with it.

“Peanut butter and chocolate?” Brian asks, stepping up beside me with a pink mixture in his bowl.

I beam. “It’s my favorite. What’s yours? Strawberry?”

“Watermelon,” he says.

I pause on my way to the whip cream station. “Water... melon?”

“I’m going to add Watermelon Sour Patch Kids.”

“Aren’t those gummies?”

Blissfully unconcerned, he says, “Yep.”

“Don’t...gummies turn into rocks when they’re frozen?”

He nods, sage. “That’s when you suck on them until they soften.”

Brian, my perfect Brian, surely isn’t making a watermelon gummy ice cream. That’s a touch unhinged, even for him.

Unfortunately, he very much is making a watermelon gummy ice cream, and he spends the minutes I spend folding Mini Reese’s into mine cutting Watermelon Sour Patch Kids into triangle slices for his.

Upon completion, he has a spiral arrangement of watermelon gummies atop his bed of pink while I have a scattering of Mini Reese’s atop my bed of peanut butter. He sprinkles whatever powder he used for the watermelon flavor over his then puts on the lid.

Together, we move to the label section, where Frank is doodling a masterpiece For Normie sign upon a paltry slip of masking tape. It cannot contain her skill. Even her penmanship puts letters to shame, for they are not worthy of her.

Her attention lifts to my container when I sit, then fixes on Brian's. "Watermelon?" she asks.

"You know it."

"Excellent arrangement."

"Why, thank you." Brian slips into a seat at the table beside me and plucks a marker from one of the cups arranged down the center. "What have you made for Norman?"

"Vanilla Bean."

I peer out at the tables of ingredients and the simplest ice cream recipe in the world, which has been written on a whiteboard where you're meant to begin the process—two cups of heavy cream, whipped; one can sweetened condensed milk; add toppings and flavors.

Reaching for a slip of tape to label my container, I ask, "Did we...have the ingredients for Vanilla Bean?"

"I have my ways," Frank says.

"Love always finds a way." Brian doodles a bunch of cute watermelon slices on his masking tape around his name, and I decide that if it's possible, I will be stealing and saving it.

"That it does." Frank caps her marker and rests her chin in her hand. "How much

longer am I allowed to stay here before I have to go back to work?"

"Technically, this event resides squarely within the confines of your lunch break, so as to not interrupt the working day in any way, shape, or form. Which someone during the Valentine event complained about. Since their skills could not be replicated by the temps hired." Eyeing Frank, Brian also caps his marker.

"Now, of course, if you've already obtained your nice list points for the day, you're welcome to stick around for as long as you like. "

Frank hums. "Assuming I have not , what happens to the naughty list peeps?"

"No one wants to know."

"Do they get coal? Because summer is a great time for barbeque, and Norman would not mind if I bring home a bag of coal for him."

Brian scoffs. "Don't talk to me like that man doesn't purely smoke things over apple and cherry wood chips. He demands a high flavor profile for his queen."

How in the world does Frank accept being pampered like that without constant guilt that she's imposing herself on her loved ones and becoming a burden that will inevitably be tossed aside?

Brian made one meal for me yesterday, and I'm still worried that he's going to realize how useless I am if he can do what I can better.

Peaceful, Frank smiles. "Fair enough." Rising with her ice cream, she yawns. "I guess I'll get back to it, then. But only because nice list people might get wood chips instead of coal."

“That’s the spirit.” Brian grins.

Is that really the spirit?

Wait. No.

Stop it, Amelia.

We’re being positive , remember? We’re taking up space and not crumbling under the awareness of it. We are seeking and accepting help in order that we might grow and thrive. Like sourdough. Because it has the shortest prep-time, and I’m ready to be healed. Obviously.

“How...” I begin.

Brian’s attention shoots to me, hitting me hard between the brows, and I choke on my words. “How?” he prompts.

Chest tight, I focus my energy on scribbling my name onto my slip of masking tape. “How is Frank so confident?”

“Because she’s Frank.”

What...does that mean?

The cluelessness must reflect on my face, because Brian clarifies, “She’s not always confident.

Sometimes, when her graphics or art don’t turn out exactly the way she wants them to, she isn’t very confident.

I'm not sure anyone can be confident all the time, but everyone does seem to have a few things they're confident in.

For Frank, it's that her husband loves her. ”

Imagine being confident in someone else . “I don't... How do you get that?”

“Get...that?”

“Confidence in another person like that.”

“In Frank's case, I'm pretty sure Norman brought her food every day for months, wrote her love songs, and just loudly and obviously built his life around her for a long and consistent period of time.

It takes time for confidence and faith in someone to blossom.

” Brian rises with his ice cream tub. “Norman made her a priority and showed her. That's all. ”

Once again, I'm hearing that all good things in life take stupid amounts of time. Discouraged, I rise with my ice cream tub, too.

“It's the same with you,” Brian says as we're heading to the elevator to put our mixtures in the mailroom's breakroom freezer.

I find his eyes. “What's the same with me?”

“I'm confident that you'll do a good job. I'm confident that if I need help with something, you'll be there to offer it. I'm confident that you're a good friend and a kind person.”

I'm not sure a good friend or a kind person would need to physically guard against wincing when told they're a good friend and a kind person by the guy they'd like to be more than friends with.

"Even if it doesn't seem like it, your actions prove it." He presses the call button on the elevator.

"I'm always relying on other people. It feels like I've spent most of my life trying to repay a debt I never knew I signed up for."

"That's what happens when you're raised by parents who make a point of forming transactional relationships.

It's hard to understand that sometimes people just do things and don't expect anything in return if you've only experienced self-serving behavior.

All you've seen is that the moment someone becomes unable to perform their part, they're cast aside.

" He flicks a finger between us as we load onto the elevator.

"There's no transaction here. And, actually—" He settles against the wall, tucking his free hand in his pocket.

"—I'd like you to test it from now until the masquerade ball. "

"Test what?"

"What happens if you stop cleaning up after both of us, stop making my breakfasts and dinners, stop trying to make sure you have worth, and start learning that your worth is innate and not based on anything you do. Allow me, for these next two

weeks, to take care of you.”

My heart thuds . And I accidentally say what I’m thinking, “I would rather die than experience last night’s stress for two weeks.”

“I’ll have to do better to not stress you, then.”

My head shakes.

“More verbal reassurance, maybe? Or perhaps physical? Hugs? Probably hugs.”

My head shakes more violently as my face turns blistering red. “I’ll become complacent. And then when the test is over, I’ll be useless and annoying.”

“Unlikely.”

“Very, very likely. That’s what happens when you get secure. My parents were very secure. And all they did was take advantage of everyone.”

“Really?” Brian’s brows rise. “Your parents were secure? Are you sure about that? Secure people don’t take advantage of others.

Secure people know how to take care of themselves.

They don’t put their eggs in other people’s baskets.

If you want an example of someone who has an above average level of security, A-mail-ia...

” His expression melts into a smile. “...you’re looking at one. ”

My heart thuds again, but for a minorly different reason.

“We’ll begin tomorrow, since I have that meeting with Liam tonight.” The elevator doors open, and Brian steps out, heading toward the breakroom. “Prepare yourself.”

With nothing else I can say, I gulp.

My dearest Admirer,

I once wrestled with inadequacy. I’m afraid that’s a common side effect of having a little sister...

however, do not despair, for I won the battle.

It was a bit annoying for a while, like a tug-of-war against a tree, but it’s worth it to keep fighting.

Nothing beats the moment you feel something that was once so immovable budge.

Allow me to reassure you: there are very few things one can do, or fail to do, that would result in the end of the world.

Unless you are secretly in charge of the country’s nukes, the only thing anyone worth your energy is going to ask of you is that you do your best. Also, assuming you are in a place that wants the best for you, you will heal regardless of whether or not it feels like you are healing.

Our environments nurture us. If you’ve found yourself out of a toxic one and into a safe one, you will grow.

It is inevitable.

To answer your questions, my favorite food is Thanksgiving dinner.

My favorite color is a very specific shade of pink.

My favorite flower is the peony. The closed bud—beautiful in its own right—reminds me of someone I cherish.

When they bloom, it will likely be the most incredible sight in the world.

Let's see now...why don't we ask some tougher questions?

How do you know when you're loved? What can people do to make you feel welcome?

Don't mind my research. It's my natural tendency.

Best boyfriend in training,

Your Brian

P.S. - The blue you selected is stunning. Have you considered adding your favorite flower's petals or decorating it somehow? Someone I know does it, and they turn out stunning.

I do not know how many times I reread boyfriend in training , but each time I might breathe less. It doesn't make sense. We've exchanged only a few letters, and half of mine have been complaining about how I'm not the person I want to be yet.

What has compelled him to want to be my significant other?

Unless...

What if he's messing with me?

What if he knows it's me and he thinks this is all a big joke?

He is trying to get his "secret admirer" to do their wax seals like I do them. He'd surely not compare two different women like that. Not my Brian.

My stomach tightens, and I lower the letter to look at the collection of wax and stationery organized pristinely on the desk before me.

Maybe he recognized the paper I've used.

I don't think he's been in here since helping me bring my boxes in, but...

there's a chance, isn't there? Brian loves pretty mail things, and I have a decent number of pretty mail things.

Brian wouldn't mess with me unless he thinks I'm messing with him, and growing up where every girl fell over themselves for him, he has to know I'm not messing with him.

Could that mean...is he actually interested in me ?

Or am I delusional and trying to create a scenario where that's a possibility because I am desperate for it to be the truth?

Haha. Yeah. Probably that one.

I help sort the mail at work and see his mail at home. I'd know if Brian were still getting love letters these days. He isn't. Possibly I'm the first he's gotten in a while.

Maybe he's just ready to settle down and is taking this opportunity to get to know someone who has professed interest in him?

Selecting my paper, I get through writing My dearest Brian before I remember that I am here in his house. I, Amelia Christmas, am a woman living in Brian's house. And he has made it impeccably clear that I am welcome to continue living in his house. Indefinitely.

If he's looking to settle down, he has to know that some other girl would not be okay with that.

Ice cold dread washes over me.

He. Knows.

He knows his secret admirer is me.

He knows, and he's entertaining the idea.

Because Brian wouldn't play with my feelings like this, right? Not if he knows I'm serious, at least. I need to make sure my next letter makes it very clear that I'm deathly serious about him. Then, then I'll see how he responds.

Here goes...everything.

Heart in my throat, I put my pen to the page.

Page 24

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:28 am

It's your favorite mailroom guy, Brian! And he would never, ever, do anything wrong.

Brian

"Morale is at an all-time high, I can confirm." I beam, innocently, at my boss while he peers at me through the computer in my office, which has been conveniently left void of decorations directly behind my camera. "Productivity is also at an all-time high."

"Is it now?" Liam asks, narrowing his eyes in a way I hope is normal and not accusatory.

I cut my attention to my other screen, where I have a check box hanging out right beside the task Call Liam . It's gonna be so dopamine-inducing to mark it off my list. Nodding, I say, "I've created a system that promotes unity and achievement in return for reward."

"There are several thousand-dollar charges on the card I left you. Already."

I nod some more. "Those are the rewards. I assure you, I've had Will run the numbers, and there's a substantial increase in productivity, which has led to income that more than covers the positive-reinforcement."

Liam grunts. "Huh. I did intend for you to focus on keeping spirits up, not productivity, but if you've found a way to incorporate both, I'll not argue with it." Rubbing an eye, he yawns.

Not arguing is good. Love not arguing with happiness. Especially when the happiness in question is mine. “How late is it over there, boss?”

“One thirty-two,” he mumbles. “I still have paperwork to go through.”

Yikes. I do not envy him. “Well, if there are no other questions, I’ll let you get back to that, and I’ll get back to my Mail-ia.”

“How are things going with Amelia?” he asks. Another question.

My disappointment is immeasurable.

I reply, “Her work is excellent. She is an enthusiastic servant of the mailroom, and I could not ask for a better coworker.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

I blink. “You are not interested in hearing accolades of her work-related efficiency and passion as it relates to your thriving business?”

“No. You don’t hire anyone unless they pass your arduous tests, and then you quietly let people who don’t live up to your expectations go with a viciousness that borders on evil.

I think the last time you had any help was in February, purely for the sake of Valentine’s.

If Amelia’s still on staff, she’s doing an exemplary job.

” Liam steeples his fingers. “I am invested in your relationship.”

My head tilts. “Why?”

“Because. It’s similar to mine and Amber’s.”

In...what way? The childhood friend part? I think Liam and Amber were actual friends. Amelia and I pretty much only went to the same school.

Liam says, “I’d like to know what an appropriate timeline would have been for us to get married without a contract. Please consider yourselves my AU.”

Amelia and I are not a Liam and Amber alternate universe by any means. Also, by contract does he not mean without coercion ? “Amelia and I aren’t getting married anytime soon. Unlike you, we’re to have a proper wedding, with lots of invitations.”

“So you are planning to get married already?”

My mouth opens as what I just said catches up with what my boss has. Am I already planning to marry Amelia?

It is possible I’ve considered how she’ll hand out white wax-sealed envelopes to dozens of people, thus blessing some who won’t even appreciate her handiwork with an Amelia Original while I’ve only had one true Amelia Original on a letter addressed to not even me .

It is possible this knowledge bugs me .

It is possible...I am planning to get married.

Huh.

I should have signed my last letter to her Best husband in training .

Clearing my throat, I say, “She doesn’t know that yet.”

Liam, unbothered, nods. “He falls first. A beloved trope. Very acceptable.”

Somehow, also no.

To think this guy’s wife says I’m the odd egg.

“I hope things continue to go well,” Liam says, stifling a yawn. “I should probably get back to my paperwork now.”

“I hope you’re able to get some rest tonight.”

His head tilts forward in a sleepy little nod, and after a final goodbye, we end the call.

Blowing out a breath, I sag in my office chair and peer out the glass walls toward the desk Amelia claimed for herself. It’s vacant here right now, without her. My quiet kingdom. The heart and soul of Whirlwind Branding’s HQ. Missing a beat. A pulse.

Like Liam said, it’s basically how it’s been most of the time I’ve been here since good help is hard to find. The silence shouldn’t feel as empty as it does right now. I should be used to it.

But I’m not used to it anymore.

Because my new normal contains her .

“Marriage, huh?” I whisper into the stillness.

Mr. Brian Christmas.

Mrs. Amelia Single.

My nose wrinkles.

No, definitely we're keeping the Christmas .

Brianna can carry on the Single name. That is, after all, why I left.

Brianna loved mail and Bandera. I loved the people, but after moving here to Iferous, I'm not sure Bandera ever felt completely right.

There was never quite enough going on in that small town to satiate my desire for novelty.

I crave movement. Newness. Extravagance.

Things that seem diametrically in opposition to settling down .

Moreover, Amelia is...soft. Serene. Familiar.

She's willing to participate in my antics without question—like how she happily adapted to wearing Liam's Santa costume instead of the elf one even though a fake beard seems arguably more embarrassing—but she doesn't spearhead them.

She is absolutely wife material. She should not be my wife material.

And...yet...

Eyes remaining fixed on her desk, I settle my chin in my hands. "My wife, Amelia Christmas." Everything about that makes me happy. Everything about the idea of taking care of her makes me happy, even though I know she's going to respond to it

as though I'm torturing her.

That part does not necessarily make me unhappy , either.

I think... I think I might be a bit of a bully.

I am looking forward to these next few weeks more than is entirely reassuring.

At least, with any luck, by the end of them Amelia will understand I'm not some paragon...and maybe, just maybe, she'll still like me anyway.

Standing, I release a breath and see myself out of my office and to my Amelia's desk.

I let my fingers graze the back of her seat, then I place my hand at my heart and present the empty chair.

"Oh? Yes. This is my wife , Amelia Christmas. I call her A-mail-ia. Though, if you do that, I'll stab you with a letter opener.

" My lips quirk. "Hm? What's that? You need my wife ?

She's not here right now, but I can take a message and let you know if I think it's worthy of her precious time.

" I pull out her chair and bow. "After you, my wife."

Heh.

Yeah, that's the good stuff.

Pushing her chair back in with my hip, I tuck my hands in my pockets and start

toward the elevator, so I can head home to my wife, Amelia Christmas.

Help.

Amelia

This is torture. Absolute torture.

Worse, I think Brian's enjoying it.

Heart panicking, I cut my attention off Brian's bright smile and toward my desk, just to make sure I put the letter I wrote for him last night away. Thankfully, I did.

But air doesn't return to me as I find myself still in bed, still in my jammies, still looking at a tray of food.

Whimpering beneath the covers, I tug my blanket up to my nose. "What...is this?"

"Breakfast in bed!" Brian cheers, disregarding the fact he has waltzed into a female's bedroom and woken said female from a deep slumber.

Does he not think of me as a woman?

Wasn't it literally last night that I was thinking how he'd not been in my room since he helped me bring my boxes in?

Talk about dreadful foreshadowing.

Every muscle in my body knots as I look at what exactly breakfast consists of.

Scrambled eggs, turkey bacon, and...a blueberry muffin.

He knows.

He knows .

My life is over.

Unless...unless this means he might be interested in me ? If he's replying and knows and doesn't think I'm messing with him, doesn't this mean I have a chance? Is that too good to be true?

I whisper, "Blueberry?"

"A classic." He sets the tray down beside me.

"Tomorrow, I think I'll try coffee crumble, chocolate, or banana nut.

" He fixes a stray lock of my hair, practically combing his fingers through the loose strands lovingly before pulling away.

"Let me know which you want most. I'm gonna clean up the kitchen while you enjoy your breakfast."

As my bedroom door shuts behind him, I know I will be doing no such thing. This cannot be what he meant when he said he'd take care of me between now and the masquerade ball.

I won't survive two days of being woken up to breakfast in bed.

Guilt is already petitioning a riot inside me, and I want nothing more than to go clean

up the kitchen myself.

The urge to apologize for being trouble is so compelling I'm practically forgetting that he is the one who walked into my room while I was asleep.

That's surely a red flag. Even though it's Brian . And Brian is the greenest flag in the history of the world.

Isn't he...?

Scrambling, I reach for my phone and text Ceres.

Amelia : Is it normal for someone to walk into your bedroom without permission??

Ceres : Yes.

I...don't know why I thought she'd say anything else. What if Brian—my perfect, precious Brian—is taking notes from Mars ? Mars makes Ceres meals all the time, and he clearly doesn't understand invasion of privacy.

Which means this is not a red flag. This is Brian taking advice from a bad influence . In an effort to...to woo me.

Heat explodes in my face, and I dare to look at my tray of food.

I don't want it to go cold, not after he's worked so hard on it.

I'll find a way later to make it up to him. Maybe I'll wash his car or move the couches and vacuum under them.

Right as I'm taking my first bite of egg, a vacuum turns on in the other room, and I

feel myself slip toward insanity. There is no way. There is simply no way he is vacuuming under the couches right now.

Setting my food aside, I sneak to the door, peek down the hallway toward the living room, and gasp before tucking back into my room.

He. Is.

He is literally vacuuming underneath the couches.

When the vacuum turns off, I hear the dishwasher cycling. So. That means the kitchen is clean, too.

“Oh, hey, A-mail-ia,” Brian says, casually and suddenly at my doorway.

I squeak and launch myself back. Heart heavy, I clutch my footboard for dear life.

His gaze slips down across my nightgown, then back up to my eyes.

He smiles and angles himself beneath the doorjamb so I can see a hamper propped against his hip.

“I’m starting a load. Do you have anything you want me to throw in?”

” Sunshine has never looked quite this evil before.

His attention flicks to my mostly-untouched tray of food. “I hope you’re enjoying breakfast.”

I am not enjoying this horror story, actually, and you, sir, know it.

“You can’t do this,” I whisper. “I-I’ll have to contribute at work.

” I’m going to wash his car tonight while he’s distracted with dinner.

I’ll find a way to help. He can’t bar me from everything for two solid weeks. He just can’t .

A funny look creases his brows. “I’m not sure I understand what you mean?”

“Have you been talking to Mars?”

“Not regularly. He sometimes sends me weird questions; I answer them; he doesn’t reply.

I wish he’d mail more, but, well, to my knowledge he usually only sends ransom notes, and I already have you, so what else could he possibly put a ransom on that would affect me?

My sister, Brianna? He can keep her.” Brian’s gaze falls on my laundry basket in the corner. He points. “May I?”

I shake my head. “I’ll do it. There’s...unmentionables. A lady’s unmentionables in there.” Because I’m a woman, remember? A woman . “We need to establish a line.”

He hums. “The line is that you’re not allowed to do anything for me for two weeks. You are allowed to work. You are allowed to clean up after yourself. But nothing, at all, for my benefit at home.”

I shrink. “I very deeply hate that line.”

He lifts a shoulder. “I know. Which is why I’m removing temptations. I need a few

more things to make a full load and thus bar your ability to do my laundry.”

I cover my mouth with a shaking hand. “I would never . Those are your unmentionables. It wouldn’t be decent for me to do them unless I was y-your wife or something!”

Eyes sparkling, he laughs. Laughs . Laughs at the very idea of me being his wife. Cutting his fingers through his hair, he shakes his head at me and says, “I’m afraid we both don’t know what you’ll do when you’re desperate.”

“Absolutely, completely, assuredly not your laundry,” I provide.

“So, if I were to start a load and leave it in the washer, it wouldn’t wind up mysteriously dried, folded, and ready for me on my bed?”

Voice reedy, I ask, “Are you...going to do that? It’ll go sour if you leave it in the washer.”

He turns on his heel. “I might , later this week, as a test of endurance. This is a learning period , my Mail-ia. The difficulty needs to scale in order to strengthen your education.”

“Brian, please...”

He casts a look over his shoulder at me, then faces me again, with an endearing sigh. “You will know what it feels like to be taken care of, completely, and loved through it.”

I die. I completely and utterly die . Brian’s not only planning to take care of me but also planning to love me through it. I... I do not know how to handle that. At all. Not even a little bit. I think my body goes into shock. My nerves spark. My organs shut

down.

I find myself slipping to my knees at the foot of my bed. Holding my soft kitty-cat nightgown down over my thighs, I whisper, “Please, Brian, I won’t survive.”

“True enough, Mail-ia. You will do more than survive. That is, after all, the goal.” Smile tenderly obscuring all his devious plots, he says, “May I please have some mentionables to complete my load?”

“You...won’t have a full load to leave in the washer later this week if you do one now.”

He hums. “That’s a fair point...”

“And if you put my clothes in it, I might convince myself it’s only right if I take care of my own laundry, but then I wouldn’t be able to just leave yours, so I’d be forced to-to touch unmentionables .”

“Do I need to ban you from taking care of your own things, too?”

I gulp and adamantly shake my head. “N-no.”

“Then don’t be hopeless. This is healing .” He dips his chin once, very affirmatively.

“I don’t think a licensed therapist would approve of these methods...”

“Well, in my defense, you did not choose therapy, now did you? No. No, you did not. You chose to suffer, so suffer you shall.” He tips his head against the doorjamb, peering down at me.

“I don’t mind if you change your mind. But I hope you won’t mind if I oblige your

wishes until the point that you do.

” Lifting his chin toward my bed, he says, “Finish your breakfast now, dear princess, and know that it is an honor to serve you.”

I do not estimate that I will last more than one singular...hour.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:28 am

This is fun.

Brian

“This is actually...probably...fine,” Amelia whispers to herself while she sits, so princess, in bed, eating her breakfast oatmeal and muffin.

I tried coffee crumble this morning, per the request I ripped out of her yesterday.

All it took was cornering her in the elevator on our way out of work and refusing to move until she told me what type she wanted.

Which was, obviously, a whole delight and a half.

Merrily, I peruse her dresses, selecting a pink one that matches her cheeks when she blushes. As with many of her dresses, tiny flower petals fill the sheer material of the skirt. So, so princess.

Turning, I lay the garment out over her footboard and see myself to the door, twisting on my heel before I exit, so I can bow. “Will there be anything else, my Mail-ia?” Peeking out of the bow, I beam. “Shall I, perhaps, help you brush and set your hair once you’ve finished eating?”

Her eyes cling to the dress at the end of her bed. “Are you...” Fragile breath slips through her lungs. “Are you laying my clothes out for me now?”

“Yes.”

“It seems like we’re accelerating too quickly? Surely getting dressed lies within my own responsibilities?”

“No.”

“But...I’m still not comfortable with being given breakfast, and lunch, and dinner...

? It’s only been one day.” Her lower lip trembles, so she pulls it between her teeth.

“It’s frightening how good you are at this.

I...I just don’t know that it’s creating an environment conducive to improvement...

? This is definitely just cultivating a codependency that will become concerning. ”

“I think it’s far more concerning that I had to literally intercept you while you were trying to sneak a basin outside and wash my car, A-mail-ia.”

Her eyes slant off me. “No. That was...normal. What’s concerning is that you vacuumed under the furniture before I could.”

“The concerning part is the before I could , dear one.”

Pink blossoms in her face.

My arms cross. “I’m washing the walls and baseboards today, too. To deter you. Yet you really think the problem is what I’m doing? I slept with my door open last night, just in case you got any ideas about trying some funny business during the witching hours.”

“I would never risk waking you. Especially not when you work so hard.”

“Mm.” I sigh. “You know what? I’ll give you a reprieve this weekend.”

Hope ignites in her pretty brown eyes.

“You can help me switch the decorations from patriotic to Christmas. We’ll put up the trees.”

“Yes, please.”

I’m actually growing reliant on the desperate way she says please .

There’s a quality of anything for you in her eyes that makes me feel...

special. Wanted. I don’t know. She’s just precious and really knows how to make someone else feel precious, too.

I doubt there’s a single thing I could ask of her—outside letting me take care of her—that she wouldn’t willingly offer in spades.

Honestly.

She really knows how to make a man worry.

I say, “I’ll vacuum the plastic pine needles that fall off.”

Her lip escapes her teeth to jut, positively princess.

Twirling, I lift a scolding finger. “I’ll hear nothing more of this! You shall help me have fun decorating. Then you shall sit in the cranked-up AC with a hot cocoa while I tidy.”

“You monster,” she whispers at my back.

So I cackle and scurry away to clean before she can discover a single oat out of place in the kitchen.

An Amelia Original. For me. On a letter addressed to me. Finally .

Staring at the transparent wax exploding with drops of deep blue and burdened with splashes of tiny white petals, I know joy. I know love . Wow.

Amelia, you...you really have outdone yourself.

I melt into a smile, grateful that I have a few moments to spend alone with my letter while Amelia is upstairs desperately assisting anyone she can like a frazzled little rabbit. I have been blessed. At last.

Careful as ever, I open the envelope and read.

My dearest Brian,

I hope you like what I’ve managed with the seal this time.

I spent quite a long while researching and practicing to get it just right.

I hope you know that my feelings for you aren’t a joke.

I’m very seriously doing my best to become both someone who deserves you and someone who doesn’t hate herself.

Sincerely, I just hope that person is one in the same.

How do you know when something begins to budge? How will I know when the person I am doesn't...suck quite so much?

It feels like I'm constantly fighting a self-centered nature that makes me hate everything about who I am.

My immediate defense is to pour all my attention into someone who isn't me.

I keep myself busy, even if I do it bitterly, just so I don't feel like a waste of space, just so I can distract myself from the constant uneasy knowledge that I am never going to be good enough.

I'm sorry this letter is darker than my previous missives.

With every correspondence, though, I find myself ever more enamored by you. You're safe and strong and a picture of who I wish I could be.

You've said that you think I'm brave, but when I think of bravery, I think of you. You charge forward, expending so much energy, just to make people happy. You don't flinch in the face of rejection. You pout, then you pull yourself together, and make another bigger, better plan.

It's remarkable.

You're remarkable.

I hope you understand how wonderful I think you are. I keep rereading your letters to find strength and reassurance. They mean so much to me. That you'd be willing to offer your time to a stranger means so much to me.

But, I guess, that's just who you are. And that's why I love you.

To answer your question, I don't know. I don't know what makes me feel loved.

I'm not sure I've ever felt loved before.

I have a best friend. And I know she loves me.

I know it. She's the only person in my life who has tolerated me for longer than a few weeks at a time.

Yet I am constantly worried that I'm messing up with her.

I am constantly afraid that I'm going to lose her.

Don't get me wrong. It's not because of her.

She's amazing. Heaven knows she's listened to unbelievable amounts of my nonsense without saying a single thing to make me feel like I should shut up.

I know, logically, a person like her wouldn't waste time on someone she doesn't like.

I know she'd do anything for me. I know the lengths she'd go.

But, still, I feel like I should shut up. I feel like I'm begging for attention.

I crave a lot of attention, Brian. A lot. It sickens me how insecure I am, how constantly I want reassurance and validation from everyone I interact with.

I want to be more fearless. I want to be less afraid. I want to know who I am.

I want so many things that I hate myself just for the wanting, because I know it's selfish and greedy to want when I have things so good.

I'm sorry about all of this. This is why I'm not ready to be in a relationship yet. I probably should know how I even want to be loved before I ask to be. I need to know what I even want so I don't lose the people who want to welcome me.

I wish I could expedite the character development. I wish I could find peace.

I wish it didn't feel like everything I do is narrated in someone else's unkind voice.

Despite all of this and how devastatingly unprepared I am, may I return the question in the hope that I will find myself in a future where I will be able to love you? When that time comes, how can I make sure that you know you're loved?

Struggle-bussing my way through, fr,

Your Secret Admirer

She's just so...adorable.

It's physically painful to know that she's hurting, but I cannot express how dear a woman who sends information about how she hates herself on the same page that she writes struggle-bussing is.

Genuinely—so, so genuinely—I want to keep her and protect her from everything in the entire world. The desire to coddle her until she knows nothing but blissful happiness rivals only my urge to use my good intentions as a means to tease her to no end.

I mean, please. She was smuggling a bucket of warm, soapy water outside last night, and she squeaked when I caught her searching for a car sponge in the garage.

I'm not the angel she thinks I am.

Not by any means.

It is nice to be thought the best of, even to the point of egregious delusion, though.

I suppose I just wish that she understood I think the same of her.

Except, with her, I don't need delusion at all.

She is an angel, constantly fighting everything she claims is selfish, constantly striving to do better.

She would never torment someone trying to heal from people pleasing and low self-esteem like I am.

In the end, what I'm doing might help, but I'm certainly having more fun with the process than is entirely kind or selfless of me.

All her "selfishness" is nothing more than a desire that her basic human needs be met.

All my selfishness is the brand name, plain and simple, clear-cut, good old regular, home-grown kind.

And, to make matters worse, I'm at peace with that.

Imperfections are human, and I've never professed to be anything but, so I look at my desires—which are wants, not needs—recognize that they're nonessentials, and laugh as I plow ahead to achieve them anyway.

Without guilt.

Without shame.

With nothing but a loose this'll be fun for everyone involved, probably to guide me.

Setting her letter down, I pluck the envelope off my desk and look at the seal. So pretty. So bubbly. So Amelia .

Heaven knows I don't have a clue where she got her rose-colored glasses.

But, boy, do they make her eyes look pretty.

Am... I dessert?

Amelia

Brian owns the most Christmas decorations I have ever seen, and that is saying something considering my mother is very proud of her last name and persists in making sure our house is the most decorated for Christmas in the entire neighborhood every single year.

While “A Holly Jolly Christmas” plays and the scent of eggnog cookies—made with fresh eggnog since it’s not in stores at this time of year—pours through the house, Brian puts up a string of garland all around his living room.

In the open dining area beside the living room, I take my time decorating the third tree of the night, each covered in tiny decorative letters with little green-and-red Christmas-themed wax seals.

I have never been this happy.

Decorating with my mother was always a chore.

I’d be braced constantly, waiting for her to tell me I’d done something wrong.

Her arguing with my father over how he’d hung the lights outside would drown out any music, assuming music hadn’t already been outlawed as a distraction, because, many times—after I’d made too many mistakes—it was.

And I'd blame myself for having the audacity to sing along instead of staying focused.

Decorating beneath the scrutiny of a dictator in silence made it hard to still appreciate how beautiful everything was in the end...

Decorating with Brian brings the beauty forward, and you know something?

I'm not even scared to be singing along.

Hopping down off his ladder, Brian beams at me. "You're doing amazing, A-mail-ia." He then marches himself right on over to a box filled with fake snow, buries himself inside, and carries a pile to the last tree I decorated.

White fluff scatters behind him as he unceremoniously drops his load in a way that would make my mother livid .

With her, everything had to be perfect . We'd be up all night trying to obtain this mysterious level of perfection, all for her to cross her arms and pinch her lips and mutter that the Winter Wonderland we'd all spent hours putting together would have to do .

At least until one of our neighbors put up one more inflatable Santa than we had.

Then we needed not just all of the main reindeer, but also a collection of others, and elves, and snowmen, and the entire North Pole.

Breaking into a box filled with mismatched stuffed snowmen, Brian sets up a lovely little family in his chaotic fake snow mound, planting a crooked North Pole among them.

There's something about the chaos. About the miniature village on the entertainment center, comprised solely of different types of post offices. About the warmth amid the AC being turned down to forty. About being here in a world of kind words, joy, and peace.

I love it.

“Mistletoe!” Brian declares, and my heart thuds.

Why would he have mistletoe decorations in his private collection? I turn from my duty of placing little letters all over this tree to find Brian approaching, swiftly, a green sprig with white plastic berries in his hand.

My heart trips into overdrive.

He can't.

He isn't.

He wouldn't .

Grinning, he lifts the mistletoe above our heads, takes my hand, and—presses the letter I'm holding to my mouth. Breath held, I stand motionless as he leans in, settles his lips against the envelope, and kisses me through it.

Warm green eyes find me as he pulls away. “There,” he murmurs. “Now we're safe. We've already kissed under this one, so I'm free to put it up.”

He... I... What?

Merry, he hums along to the Christmas music and finds the perfect place to hang the

mistletoe, as though he has not left me traumatised or anything. Shaky, I look down at the decorative envelope and find my lip tint glazing the paper in a smudged kiss mark.

Heat explodes in my face.

Oblivious, Brian retrieves the eggnog cookies from the top oven, checks on the roast in the bottom one, and calls out, “Ten minutes until dinner break for all my busy little elves.”

I have ten minutes to stop floating and pull myself together.

Dazed, I set the letter upon a tree bough, adjust it so its seal is perfectly presented, and lose myself watching Brian set out an assortment of snowglobes down the center of the dining room table.

He stuffs more fake snow around their bases, then fluffs it.

Our eyes meet.

My heart launches itself to the North Pole.

Something sly slips into his smile a second before it's gone, the look so brief I barely know whether I really saw it or not. He plants his hands on his hips, beholds the beautiful chaos, and says, “Perfect.”

Perfect.

Even with flecks of white peppering the floor and chairs, it's perfect .

I cannot express how much being here is like breathing for the first time, despite how

often Brian manages to take my breath away. The freedoms afforded to me, the care presented, the consistent behavior, it's all so much more than I could have ever dreamed of.

Right now, when Brian is refusing to let me do anything to contribute, he still makes me feel like I have worth. Right now, when the point is that I am useless to him, he still makes me feel like he values my company.

He treats me like a person.

I don't think I ever completely realized how my parents never even granted me that much. To them, I was extra labor, extra income, extra emotional support. Being here, now, I do not understand how anyone can survive in so much anger and negativity all the time .

It's exhausting. It makes you irritable. It fuels its own awful cycle.

Being here, now, I pity them. I pity them and mourn what could have been.

"Whatcha thinking about, A-mail-ia?" Brian asks when he places our dinner on the counter and swipes a cookie off the stove.

Christmas music swells. I take in my home. It bursts with life, character, joy. Peace infiltrates my bloodstream, and I say, "I'm grateful. For everything."

Brian laughs, offering me a cookie. "Well, of course you are, silly. You tell me that every day."

My stomach tightens, and I flinch before I can take the offered cookie. "I don't, though. I don't tell you nearly as much as I should. After everything you've done for me—"

He mutes me with the cookie. “You tell me when you smile. When you do everything in your power to fight me on not letting you help out. When you hum along to the songs I play in the car on our way to work. When you laugh. Gratitude pours out of your actions every day, A-mail-ia. Just because your head voice has been trained to tell you horrible things doesn’t mean that what it says is true.

You’ve been lied to constantly, so now you lie to yourself.

But I know you’re grateful. I see it in your character. ”

A tear slips down my cheek as I take the cookie.

He swipes the drop off with his thumb and wipes it on his sweater vest. “Is it good?” he asks while I chew.

I can only nod as I sniffle.

“Excellent.” He touches his fingertips to his lips and turns to get plates out of the cabinet, murmuring, “Dessert first usually is.”

Before I can decode if that means something, he’s humming along to “Jingle Bells” and dishing out our roast.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:28 am

I'm not sure how well this plan was thought through.

Brian

I think, probably, there should be two first prize winners.

Honestly, what was I thinking hosting a gingerbread mansion decorating contest when Frank works here?

Obviously, she wins. Lunch break's barely started this fine Monday afternoon, and yet she's built nothing short of a gingerbread castle out of the ingredients I've supplied.

Seriously.

I didn't even see her do it.

It's like I'm distracted or something...

My attention glides toward Amelia's creation—a stack of letters with frosting seals—and I sigh into a smile as her tongue peeks out while she works on icing another letter for the collection.

“Frank?” I pose.

Frank cocks her head as she assembles wings. “Yeah?”

“Is that a dragon?”

“Maybe.”

Yeah, Frank wins. This is actually not fair to anyone else.

Frank wins, because skillz. And Amelia wins, because mail.

This is probably why I have a co-judge, to keep me true. Turning to Ruby, I say, “What do you think, judge buddy?”

Arms folded, Ruby grips her white cane and mutters, “I think I’m only here because you conned my brother into making the gingerbread for you, and I want some.

Also—” She points toward her whistling husband, who is making a...

mess. He’s making a mess. I don’t know that whatever is on the table in front of him can be considered anything but a mess. “—he wins.”

I wince. “I can assure you, he does not.”

Ruby sniffs. “Does.”

Alrighty, then. That’s three people tied for first, one skillz, two nepotism.

This was, obviously, a great idea!

Running my fingers through my hair, I lose my co-judge to her husband and think, maybe, I should reevaluate my life choices. Casting that silly thought aside, I find my way to my future wife, whom I caught trying to wipe down a counter this morning.

Poor thing.

I'm sure she'll learn soon.

But if she refuses, I am not above getting a gun safe to house all our cleaning supplies.

"That is adorable," I say.

Single glitter sprinkle by single glitter sprinkle, Amelia decorates the edges of one of her gingerbread letters. "Th-thank you." She smiles. "I do think you're biased, though."

Oh, undeniably. "Me? Biased? Just because you're my favorite person here?" I place a hand to my heart. "Don't be ridiculous."

Wide brown eyes pull up off her cute letter pile. Cheeks deepening with pink, Amelia gulps. "I did mean because...it's mail."

Yes, I do realize that. But far be it from me to pass up a perfect opportunity to remind you that you're precious. "Oh," I note, basically oblivious. "I do suppose that plays a part. However small."

Her lashes flutter, as though she does not believe me, but she goes back to adding the last of her glitter sprinkles without a word. Once finished, she pushes one of those strands of hair she always keeps out of her bun back and smiles down at her work.

I stare.

At her.

Because she had frosting on her hand, and now it's on her cheek. The little heart-shaped and red-sprinkled smear sits seductively upon her rosy flesh, taunting. Were we alone, instead of in this conference room packed with coworkers, I do not know what I would do.

Which is why instead of mentioning the flirty little smudge, I leave it and calculate whether it might survive long enough for us both to get back in the mailroom together.

Unfortunately, while I'm picturing unseemly behavior taking place in the most passionate place on earth, Amelia realizes she has frosting on her cheek.

"Oop," she says, cutely, and gets a napkin.

I, naturally, pout, life ruined.

Her eyes find me, and she tenses, folding the frosting heart away in her napkin. "Is everything okay?"

No, actually. I'm sad and dying. I sigh, casting a forlorn look toward Frank's dragon castle. "I'm fearing that calling this a contest was a bad idea. There's a clear winner, but my co-judge doesn't agree."

"Your...blind co-judge?"

"It's called being inclusive."

"It's inclusive to put someone in a position with tasks that their disability makes impossible?"

I blink. "She's having fun instead of sitting in her office, grumbling over whatever

she eats for lunch, so yes.”

“She’s eating her husband’s...house.”

It is so kind of Amelia to call whatever I’m looking at a house .

“Yeah, I’m pretty positive he made it with all her favorites in mind.

The point was, really, this outcome. Luring her in to have a little fun every once in a while is good for her.

” I smile as Will steals some frosting off her lip. Lucky them.

Amelia and I should get married in a courthouse like they did and have our proper wedding later. Then we can be all lovey-dovey at work, too.

“How do you do it?” Amelia asks, and I find myself requiring an antecedent.

“How do I do what?”

“Think about everyone else, so much, all the time?”

I know she’s not suggesting my manipulation is some kind of commendable act. Except, I think she is. She’s truly too good to me. Plucking one of her letters off her display, I touch the corner to my lips and smile. “If you’re asking, I’m pretty sure you already do.”

Her chin dips. “No... I really don’t.”

“If you want to, what’s stopping you?”

“What if I only think I want to because I like the idea of being a good person, but really I don’t want to and all I want is the high?”

What if I’m stunting Amelia’s potential as a philosopher by keeping her stowed away in the mailroom at Whirlwind Branding? “I think you’re a good person,” I say instead of worrying about all that .

“I’m not.”

“Do you think I’m a good person?”

She nods, and her brown eyes lift. “Absolutely.”

“Well, I’m not.”

Her lips part, and if I were a better person, I think I’d feel worse about directly shattering her worldview. I don’t.

I say, “If you’re only after a high, you only worry about appearances.

Still striving for something that goes beyond surface level is what counts.

It’s easy enough to look good and present goodness to other people.

Some of the darkest monsters out there manage it long enough to do some really frightening damage.

” I take a bite of gingerbread, chew, and swallow.

“Give yourself some grace, Amelia. People don’t care if you’re good.

They care if you're kind, and people don't care why you're kind, because every single person in this world has ulterior motives and selfish thoughts.

Love's the only thing that diverges from that nature.

And, if you'd do me a favor as someone who loves you, stop being so hard on yourself. ”

“Someone who...” Breath leaves her, and her lips tremble as her eyes glass.

A harsh word slides casually through my brain, so I loop my arm around her back and pull her from everyone working on their sculptures just in case they look up.

Stopping in a quiet corner of the hall outside the conference room, I run a knuckle beneath her eyes and continue munching on what is probably the best gingerbread I've ever had.

“You think I'd let just anyone live in my spare room, Mail-ia?” I ask, gently.

“Y-yes?”

I chuckle. “You really do have rose-colored glasses for me, don't you?” I pull the hem of my vest up to dry a tear that falls. “You're allowed to be kind to yourself, too. If you can't do it for you because you think it's selfish, do it for me because I don't like to see you hurting. Okay?”

Her fingers splay beside her skirt, flat against the wall that I am—quite apparently—pinning her to. Fragile, she whispers, “That's...an interesting way to put things.”

“Is it really? Seems fairly normal for a friend to not want another friend to beat

themselves up all the time.” Did I just say friend twice?

Oops. She’s gonna be up all night thinking about that one.

Which means she’ll be up all night thinking about me.

I let it slide. “It doesn’t make you any better of a person to think how horrible of a person you are, and it even hurts the people who care about you.

If you’re determined to believe you’re selfish, be selfish.

Because, really, before this week, I let you spoil me rotten, and you still think I’m some kind of good person, which must mean you’ve either got a messed up idea of how things work, or double standards.

Face it, Mail-ia. All I’ve done is flip the script.

If I wasn’t selfish during the months you spoiled me, you aren’t selfish now. ”

She flinches, and her pupils dart between my eyes.

“Well?” I prompt after a minute.

“I think I have double standards,” she says.

Chuckling, I finish her gingerbread letter and give her a little more space in the corner. “Awareness is the first step to leveling them out, don’t you think?”

Silent, she nods.

“You okay?”

Air fills her chest as she laces her fingers in front of her skirt. Hopeful, she says, “I will be.”

I hum. “That’s all I can ask for. Come now, my precious girl. I think I need another cookie.”

Page 29

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:28 am

Character growing...like a chia pet...please wait.

Amelia

My precious girl .

Brian called me his precious girl. I don't know how to handle that information. I don't know how to implement what he told me. He's not wrong, at all. I know that.

I have double standards.

I expect things of myself that I don't expect of others.

Worse, if Brian behaved toward my acts of service the way I've been behaving toward his, I'd be hurt .

If he took one look at the muffins I'd been making us for breakfast and winced and made it seem like a burden on him that I was asking him to accept them...

Ugh.

I need to do better. Get out of my head. Give myself the same courtesy that I give to others.

Because the more I think about it, the more I realize that I am the only thing standing in my own way.

No one is making demands of me anymore. No one is saying that my best isn't good enough.

No one is getting angry over nothing. Ever since I moved and started working in the mailroom, I have been given tasks that I have accomplished without further instruction or complaint.

My cleaning hasn't been nitpicked. The only thing I've made that Brian didn't like was those vegan raisin bran muffins.

I am appreciated here.

And if I spend all my time waiting for something to change, I'm never going to be able to appreciate being here.

I cannot keep living my life waiting for people to start acting like my parents. I cannot allow my upbringing to dictate my future.

Sitting in my car outside the post office, I run my finger over the wax seal on my new letter from Brian. I rambled a lot in my last letter, dumped a ton of nonsense onto the stationery. I'm a little scared to see how he responded.

At the very least, he should absolutely understand that I'm serious after he's read nothing short of a breakdown.

Taking a deep breath, I carefully open the envelope.

My dearest Admirer,

This seal is beautiful. I adore it. It's perfect. You are the remarkable one. I would utterly perish the thought of your feelings not being serious, as I am sure you know

mine are.

Sadly, I'm not sure if my answer to how you will know when you've changed will be very helpful at this point, but I'll give it anyway.

You will know one day, when you wake up and you realize that the voice in your head is naturally kinder.

Small realizations will come along the way, and I encourage you to dwell on them, the differences, the meaningful moments that might hurt to look at since they've not always been your reality.

They might make your past feel like lost time, but nothing that has created the you of this moment is truly lost, because who you are in this moment is someone beautiful and worthy.

I can guarantee right now that you do not suck at all; you're just dealing with sucky thoughts that are attempting to define you.

Please don't let them.

People are self-centered. I'm afraid that's life. We are the only vessels we have to look through, so the world is twisted to the shapes of our eyes.

Thinking of others is a muscle I'm sure you have been forced to stretch. Force is a dreadful way of building character. You are good enough. You are not a waste of space. You are capable and strong and worthy of far less bitterness than you have been given.

I, too, with every correspondence find myself somewhat more taken by you, which is troubling given that you appear to have a flawed perception of me.

Allow me a moment to open your eyes to my own nature.

I am not so wonderful. I am somewhat human. I scheme quite constantly.

My own wants motivate me toward questionable action, and I don't repent whenever I find that my wants contradict someone else's. I mess with people more than I should. I derive an odd enjoyment from seeing how people behave.

I love people, but that doesn't mean I always have their best interests in mind—and certainly not when I decide that a less-than-best interest might be more fun.

Like you, I crave attention. Unlike you, I am not considerate enough to wait, starving, while the potential for validation passes me by. I ask for it. Loudly. Usually while pouting. Which, yes, is very mature of me, thank you for asking.

Everyone has their inner darkness. Almost everyone prefers to present a more angelic front. But the truth is usually less glistening once you really come to know someone.

Logic will ever battle emotion. Emotion will ever distort reality.

We shall ever watch the sparks fly.

I hope that one day you might allow me the honor of teaching you what love feels like.

Until then, you may know that I adore the gift of time.

Being with someone who spends their time with me or for me means a lot.

It's another reason why mail matters so much.

Someone had to sit down and spend time creating something for me.

They put their time into a package and sent it my way to treasure.

In conjunction with my revelation of selfishness and my desire to be shown love, I have a terrible question for you.

Might I steal your time on July 25th?

There's a Christmas in July party at Whirlwind Branding at 7:00 PM. I do assume you know this, as I do assume you must work there, too, seeing as I rarely am in a position to meet anyone outside of my place of employment.

Cast off the anonymity for me. And, if you still do not feel ready for a relationship, allow me to love you anyway. As it stands, it is my belief that growth is easier when it isn't pursued outside support.

Eager to give you all my attention,

Your Brian

P.S. - We can still send letters to each other after we've met. Don't worry.

My eyes glue to allow me to love you anyway , and I can't breathe. It's a huge promise if Brian doesn't know who he's talking to. But...if he does...

I swallow and run my fingers across the words.

Could I, in ten days, be strong enough to stand before Brian and plainly admit that I've been writing him love letters?

My rampant heartbeat does not seem to think so.

Mulling the possibility over, I drive home to find Brian standing at the door with a tray of turnovers in his hands. “A-mail-ia,” he declares, brightening. “Dinner’s ready.” His green eyes heat. “Unless, you’d prefer your dessert first?”

I mess with people more than I should.

Yes.

I, um, knew that.

Already.

It’s, how do you say...? Obvious.

It is also one of my favorite things about Brian.

He is joy and whimsy and the lightness of a child who never lost their spark or wonder.

He is hope and belief in the impossible.

I turn an absolute blind eye to any mischief that bothers others because just look at how happy it makes him! Do we not want him happy , people? Please don’t be ridiculous.

Flushed, I grip my purse and clear my throat. “I’m so sorry. Have you been waiting long?”

“I’ve been standing here for three years.” His eyes flick to my purse strap, where I’ve

clipped the self-defense kit he bought for me. “You were safe, I presume?”

“Very safe.”

“Marvelous.” He plucks a turnover off the tray and heads into the kitchen. “I’ll set the table while you wash up.”

“Okay.” Swallowing nerves, I head to my room, carefully remove my Brian letter from my purse, and tuck it into my desk drawer with its friends.

If I accept his invitation...

I’m not sure I’ll survive.

Worse, what if he doesn’t actually know it’s me? What if he’s disappointed? What if he’s been thinking about someone else at his work this whole time?

So many things could go wrong.

My entire living situation is at risk.

I’ll just...have to make a decision later. Right now, Brian’s waiting on me after he’s spent time making dinner. And I’m going to set aside the feeling that I’m not doing enough to appreciate what he has done.

Because that’s character growth.

And character growth? Is very important...

My dearest Brian,

I am going to do my very best to take your words to heart. They make sense, and I want to allow myself to be human with kindness.

As far as your nature is concerned, you remain wonderful. I have always admired your penchant for mischief and known that it in no way hinders your tendency to make the world a brighter place.

There's freedom in your passion, and I stick by my adoration.

I apologize for the briefness of this letter. It is because I fear I might talk myself out of my next words if I spend more time writing.

No, I must say what I am to say, then lock it away.

There's no need to steal my time; I gift it freely.

See you on Christmas in July.

Signed and sealed,

Your Soon To Be Not-So-Secret Admirer

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:28 am

Who got my confession stuck in customs?

Brian

I'm excited.

"Food?" I ask, tapping my pen against my lip.

Amelia, not entirely the most nervous creature in the world at all , chimes, "C-check!"

I put a tick in the box on my list. "Decorations?" My eyes scan the lobby of Whirlwind Branding, which I have kitted out in all manner of Christmas.

Several trees dot the extravagant marble tiles.

Fake snow fills every corner. Wreaths and garlands burden our one and only Aubree Waltz original painting titled Shark .

Behind the reception desk and burdened by the weight of Christmas cheer, the massive megalodon painting peers.

Amelia takes in the same scene, gaze lingering on the photo set up I've put together beneath Shark with an assortment of holiday props. "Very decorative."

I tick the box. "Music?"

She trots toward a DJ booth I've erected and turns on the selection of Christmas music I've provided. Cheerful tunes swell. "Playing!"

Perfect. So, so perfect.

I tick the box and click my pen closed. "Well then. I suppose all we have left to do is get changed and wait for our guests to either drag themselves away from their overtime upstairs or get back from their wee jaunts home."

Amelia twists her fingers together in front of her skirt. "Y-yes. Right. Changing time." She smooths her hands down her dress, which—in due Amelia Christmas fashion—already displays elegance just short of a gown. Smile shaky, she says, "I'll just...go do that then. See you at the ball."

For some odd reason, my heart skips a beat.

"Yeah. See you." I can't pull my attention off her until she disappears into the elevator to get the hanging bag she put in the mailroom this morning.

Once she's out of sight, I shake my head, pull myself together, and get my own outfit from the back seat of my car.

The oven that is my vehicle in July toasted my candy cane suit enough to combat the chill of an office lobby that I have set just a few degrees below might be winter outside. I change in the main men's bathroom located off the lobby and emerge to find several familiar faces.

Which means—as I feared—my rotten coworkers largely ignored the masquerade aspect of this shindig.

Rude of them.

I delineated my expectations of the dress code so clearly in an email.

And, yes , I know they can't read, but still...I really, so dearly, could have sworn I made it obvious, what with how I bolded, underlined, and italicized the word masquerade and all.

Lousy, illiterate—

“That is...” Frank's voice drifts below the music, and I stop my inner monologue to turn and find the world's best graphic artist with a snack plate full of cheese. She completes her assessment of my outfit. “A choice.”

Under my half smiling, half crying drama mask, I raise a brow. “Aren't you lactose intolerant?”

She pops a cube of sharp cheddar in her mouth, chewing around it to speak. “I have no idea what you're talking about.”

Right.

Crossing my arms, I tilt my head toward the smiling half of my mask. “I did put out a very decadent and well-labeled vegan selection of gourmet cheese.” They cost Liam a fortune. Hopefully leftovers survive to wind up in his fridge.

Frank blinks, slowly, practically feline, and eats a cube of colby. “Brian.” She blinks once more. “Never say those words to me again.”

Heh... Noted.

Relaxing, Frank fixes her eyes across the room and murmurs, “Whoa. That stands out...”

I twist on my heel to discover what that is and...

My heart thumps.

Tucked against the wall by the elevator, Amelia clasps a hand to her chest. Frightened eyes gaze from beyond the slits of an elaborate mask covered in seals and drops of red-and-white wax. Peacock Christmas greens shift shades in her skirt, every sequin shining, every feather floating.

She is ethereal. Fantasy.

My hand lifts to her last letter, which I've tucked beside my heart in my breast pocket, and I find it quite near impossible to breathe.

"I should've worn my best suit," Frank says, causing more problems for a future Frank as she tears through the cheese on her plate. "Poor thing."

Poor, enchanting, lovely, beautiful thing...

Wetting my lips, I make sure I still know how to speak. "She's...stunning."

"Go to her before she has a panic attack, maybe?" Frank suggests.

Straightening my clothes, I nod and force my legs to work. They drag me across the room, growing heavier as my heartbeat accelerates.

This is it.

She'll tell me about the love letters. We'll leave this party as a couple. I'll ask her if she maybe wants to marry me in the car or something. She'll turn completely red...and then she'll match her mask and be red and green for Christmas in July.

Dark lashes flutter as brown eyes take me in. “Brian...” she whispers.

I brace, ready, eager, awaiting. All I can think to say is, “You look beautiful.”

The tension in her shoulders falls, for barely an instant, then it’s back. She scans the others in the room. “I think...I’m overdressed.”

“You’re not.” I offer her my hand. “They’re underdressed. I ought to dock them all down to the naughty list for failing to follow simple party dress code.”

Beneath her half-face mask, a small smile appears as she lets her hand meet mine. “What is the prize for being on the nice list?”

“Mostly? Not being on the naughty list.”

“What...happens to the people on the naughty list?”

I chuckle and hook a finger beneath her chin. “Don’t worry. You won’t personally find out.” Lacing our fingers, I ask, “Shall we free anyone who’s only here for the prize...or do you have anything you’d like to tell me first?”

Her fingers flinch in my grasp, then she returns my squeeze and stammers, “I-I can hardly stand the anticipation.”

Right-o. No confessions yet. No problem. Perhaps it’s a little too loud and crowded and embarrassing for her to be among the spare two—us—who know how to read. Minority anxiety experiences are understandable. I’ll thin the crowd for us first.

Pulling my reluctant future bride across the lobby, I make my way to the DJ station and grab my Will-issued walkie-talkie. “Come in, Mr. Vann. Over.”

Will's voice crackles through the line, "Go for Brian. Over."

I grin. "Copy. Are you ready? Over."

A nervous laugh. "Copy. As ready as I'll ever be. Over."

"Excellent. Making the announcement now. Over and out." Putting my walkie-talkie back, I grab a microphone and adjust the music volume so I'll be heard easily within the room.

"Attention, party people! I know some of you are only waiting to learn what's come of the nice and naughty lists, so allow me to provide the metaphorical cake at this birthday so you're welcome to move freely about the cabin in the aftermath. "

Some of my coworkers blink and glance at one another.

I continue, ignoring their obvious confusion, "I'd like to extend a blanket congratulations to everyone who has participated in all our Christmas in July fun.

Thrillingly, only one person couldn't quite drag themselves up off the naughty list." I sweep my hand toward the glass front windows.

"If all my nice list homie buddies would direct their attention to the parking lot, you'll see your reward—and that poor unfortunate soul's punishment. "

Gasps and a maniacal chuckle—from Frank, possibly—rise.

Smirking beneath my mask, I say, "For those in the crowd who can't get a good look, William Ivan Delimar Vann is sitting upon the platform of a lit dunk tank with a dark background. The poor man just could not be convinced to work. Alas. Alack."

Ruby's slow-rising smile catches in the corner of my eye.

"Please enjoy your reward and the amenities provided at this, our Christmas in July party. Our absent boss and I would like to thank you for participating in the fun this month and extend a warm expression of gratitude. We, deeply, appreciate each and every one of you and what you do for the Whirlwind Branding team. Merry Christmas." I turn my mic off and resume the music's volume as many from the finance floor charge through the crowd to reach their boss outside.

Amelia, beside me, says, "I thought the prizes would have something to do with the letters to Santa we collected."

I laugh. "Oh, absolutely not. That was for mail's sake. I have about negative faith that people were reasonable with their requests, and, anyway, I'm not Santa. All the letters, except yours, will be going straight to Liam once he gets back."

"E-except for mine?" Amelia whispers.

"I'm keeping yours. I'll be your Santa and fulfill whatever requests it contains. It's a small price to pay in order for the right to keep your seal."

"You mean...you haven't opened it yet?"

"Nope. I've savored it, waiting for Christmas Day."

"What if I asked for a million dollars?" she says.

I hum. "Then I suppose I'll have to ask Liam for a raise." Distantly, beyond the glass, where the sun hangs low in the July sky, Will's yell as he plunges into the dunk tank weasels its way into the symphony of Christmas music around us. My brows rise. "Did...Ruby just punch the target?"

“I suppose she couldn’t exactly aim?”

“I specifically rented the tank with the brightest lit target and set up a black tarp behind everything in hope she might be able to.”

Amelia steps a fraction closer to me. “I suppose she wasn’t a fan of the odds.”

“And here I thought she enjoyed statistics.” I look down at Amelia’s silken hair, still tightly wound in a bun at the base of her neck.

Everything in me wants to free it so it can cascade around her shoulders and kiss the shades of her gown, but I wouldn’t know the first thing about which pins to pull.

As though feeling the weight of my gaze, Amelia straightens, looks up, and locks eyes with me. Heat warms her cheeks beneath the Christmas collection of shades she’s used to decorate her mask.

“This,” I say, touching a fingertip to the gold-colored design of a white baby’s breath seal, “is stunning. How long did it take you to make?”

Her breath catches. “I’ve been working on it since the fifteenth.”

The fifteenth. When she left to not-so-discreetly check her post box.

With a good number of people milling about near the dunk tank outside, heading home, or on the other side of the room by the refreshments, it’s almost private for us over here, by the music.

So I search, desperately, for a seal that matches any she’s sent me as my secret admirer, so I might recognize it and coax things along.

I can't find a single one.

"Do you..." she begins, slipping her hand out of mine to point, "...want to get a picture together?"

Closing my fingers to ward off the chill of abandonment, I glance toward the quiet receptionist's desk.

She whispers, "We don't have t—"

"Yes," I say. "Absolutely." Forcing myself to wait on her lead, I refrain from taking her hand again.

Like a lost puppy, I trail after her toward the racks of props I set up.

Perhaps confession is an end-of-night sort of thing?

The sun is, after all, still casting rays across the sky, beaming orange shades into the lobby.

Confessions must be strictly for beneath the street lamps and Christmas lights.

It hurts to swallow when Amelia puts a reindeer headband on and smiles at me, adorable.

With the way my heart's pounding, I'm sure my face is crimson beneath this mask, so I'm glad it can't give me away.

"What are you going to pose with?" she asks while I set up my phone in the stand on the desk and make sure the timer is on.

Removing the last love letter she sent me from my breast pocket, I say, “This.”

Her sharp intake of breath makes my heart skip a beat. I wait. A moment. Another. No confession. Still sunlight. No problem. I can be patient.

Probably.

I press the button on my phone and move to the staged area beneath Shark . Scooping Amelia closer, I touch the letter to her lips and look past her wax mask, into her eyes. “Mail and A-mail-ia,” I murmur. “My two favorite things.”

When my phone camera flashes, I’m kissing the seal.

And when the sun sets...nothing happens.

Page 31

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:28 am

If only I weren't such a coward.

Amelia

I should die.

Why couldn't I just be brave enough to tell Brian something he so very clearly already knows? What is wrong with me?

Staring at the ceiling of my bedroom, I watch as morning light streams in through my windows to illuminate the shadows. I have lain here, watching those shadows live and die. I was here, at their inception, and now I am here at their end.

Ah, how fragile is life... How cruel...

Tired, my poor eyes close and open, and maybe it's brighter, maybe I slept some just now, who knows?

All I know is that my self-loathing remains, and were I less of a coward, I might bite off and swallow my own tongue.

A knock sounds at my door, and I jump out of my own skin as the first rap descends into a pattern timed to "Jingle Bells." Holding my breath, I stare. Time slips by, then my door cracks to reveal Brian, one hand holding my breakfast tray, the other covering his eyes.

He peeks between his fingers at me, and our eyes lock, so he drops his arm. "Oh.

You're awake."

I am. Yes. I am awake, and I'm gripping my blankets, and I can't breathe, and—

Warmth suffuses in his smile as he approaches. "Breakfast today is avocado toast, apple slices with caramel, and a blueberry muffin."

Air enters my lungs like a saw blade. "I...thought you said until the ball? Which was yesterday. Don't things go back to normal now?"

"And, if they have, why am I still in bed when it's breakfast time?"

Here I am, yet again, thinking only about myself and allowing kindnesses to turn into complacency.

"I'm so sorry," I whisper. "I've slept in. "

"Hey." Brian sits beside me and pushes locks of my hair off my cheek. "There's nothing to apologize for. I'm early. It's early still."

"It...is? It's not breakfast time?"

He shakes his head. "No, I know how you think. I had to beat you before you could get right back into old habits. You see, it is the day after the ball, and I am supposed to let things return to this 'normal' you speak of, but I still happen to love you, so I still want to take care of you. Too bad, so sad." He kisses my hair and lets it flutter from his fingers. "You'll get over it. Eventually."

My chest squeezes, and it's probably the sleep deprivation that loosens my lips. "What do you mean when you say that word?"

His innocent wide eyes deepen. Then, practically sultry, he asks, “What word?”

Oh... swear words .

I sink into my pillow and cover my face with my hands. “I’m so sorry...”

“A-mail—”

“I’m so, so sorry. I’m so stupid.” Tears gather in my eyes and spill.

“You’ve known. You’ve known for a while, haven’t you?

And I— I’ve known that you’ve known for a while, and it’s not like you haven’t made it obvious, but I couldn’t just—” I gasp for breath that burns.

“—I couldn’t just get over myself and tell you .

Even though you were waiting. All night. ”

His fingers wrap around my wrist, pull my hand from my face so he can meet my tear-filled eyes.

I must look awful. Pathetic.

“Hey,” he soothes, swiping his thumb across my cheek. “I’ve been waiting longer than all night, precious girl...”

“What?” I croak.

Half a smile lifts one corner of his mouth. “You’ve been sending me letters for, what? A few weeks? So I’ve been waiting at least that long knowingly. Who knows how

long I've waited unknowingly."

My stomach sours, and I cave in on myself. "Was I really that obvious? From the very start?"

"You have a very distinct handwriting."

I whimper. "No, I don't. My mother has always said it's bland and boring, like a child still learning how to write."

Brian frowns. "Your narcissistic mother was even threatened by the fact you have a cuter handwriting than her? That's...gross."

"She isn't..." I can't finish whatever I was going to say when I see Brian's expression. He is quietly angry. Calmly upset. A silent force to be reckoned with. And I can't bring myself to finish contradicting him.

Firm, he says, "She is." He releases the strictness. "But that's not important right now..." He scratches his cheek and clears his throat. "What happened last night, Mail-ia? I thought I made the required nature of my feelings apparent."

I hide beneath my comforter. "You did. I'm so sorry."

"There's no need to apologize. Just talk to me. If you're not ready for anything, okay. We'll continue as we have been, and I'll apologize if I've pressured you. If there's something else going on, I need to know."

"You're too good for me," I blurt.

"How so?"

“What do you mean how so ? You’re everything I’m not. You have a good job, a nice home, loads of friends. You’re thoughtful. Kind. Compassionate.”

He interjects, “I’ve let you write me love letters for weeks because I’ve wanted genuine wax seals from you. I’m no saint, A-mail-ia. Not even close.”

“That’s just how passionate you are!”

He tugs my blanket down off my head so I’m once again forced to weather him directly. Brows dipped, he sighs. “I think, maybe, you give me way too many allowances.”

I jut my lip. “I do not. You simply have never done anything wrong ever, and I am constantly messing up.”

“Earth to, A-mail-ia... Reality has been trying to reach you, but you’ve been adamantly shredding its letters...” Concern ripples in his eyes. “I mess up all the time. I just pretend I haven’t or resort to a backup plan. I’m human. Promise.”

“I know that,” I whisper. “Logically, I know that...but I can’t bring myself to believe it.”

“Ah...” He lets go of my blanket. “And since you recognize that your mindset involving me isn’t healthy, you’re refusing to entertain what we could be.”

Oh, if only. If only that were the issue.

I don’t care if I over-adore him. He is dear .

He deserves loyal admiration at unhealthy levels.

There's nothing wrong with loving someone so much it distorts the world around them, so long as they can be trusted.

And I trust Brian. Completely. Folding my arms over my eyes, I sniffle.

"No..." he murmurs. "That's not it. You're too sweet to care about over-loving me, aren't you?"

"I'm not good enough," I whisper. "I don't feel good enough.

I'm scared I'll become a burden. I'm scared I'll rely on you too much.

I'm just...scared. What am I supposed to do with myself if the thing I've been chasing for most of my life suddenly becomes mine ?

Wanting you has been the only good part of my personality...

for years. What am I supposed to do without it?

How am I supposed to be worthy of you if it's the only good thing in me? "

Brian watches me, green eyes steady. "A-mail-ia," he says, in a tone that suggests he has the answers to all my problems, "once we're in a relationship, you don't have to stop wanting me.

I think, probably, wanting one another is a foundational part of being together.

" He sets my food tray down on the other side of my bed, then braces his elbow beside my shoulder.

Hovering over me, he combs his fingers through my hair.

“I plan to keep wanting you, even though it is more than clear I have your heart...” He touches a fingertip to my chest. “...mind...” He kisses my forehead.

“...and soul.” His lips pause just before mine.

His breath—pepperminty and Christmas—warms them.

“Do you think you could adopt some hubris for me and understand just how good enough you really are?”

Shivering, I say, “I-I’d become unbearable.”

“Have you ever considered that I’d like you to be unbearable?” He kisses the corner of my mouth, and my eyelids become too heavy to keep open. “I’m unbearable. It’s so lonely being the only one.”

“You’re...not.”

“I once spent thirty minutes telling Liam about this season’s stamps, only for him to get a roll of one hundred American flags in the futile attempt to maintain a professional business front and save a rough total of twenty-five cents. I judged him for weeks after that. I’m still judging.”

“That’s reasonable.”

“For people like us, maybe.” His forehead settles against mine. “A-mail-ia...am I not allowed to like you just the way you are? In the same way that you like me just the way I am? Blinded to faults? Consumed by nothing but the idea of making you mine?”

My hands close into fists, and I brave the sight of him, so near. “You don’t

understand how much I like you. You don't understand how pathetic I am. I've spent years like this. Years , Brian. Decades even. I...I need to show you something."

He kisses my cheek and frees me from my blankets.

Slipping out of bed, I smooth my shaking hands down my nightgown, round my footboard, and kneel in front of my secret box of Brian love letters.

My fingers graze the cardboard, then I pull it from the shadows.

Keenly aware of him watching me, I open the flaps.

Rows upon rows, all chronologically organized. Colors upon colors. Seals upon seals.

Hundreds of unsent letters.

Eyes teary, I look up at him. "I've been writing love letters to you...for decades. I've withheld mail from you. For decades."

His eyes widen, flicking between me and my box of sins.

"I'm a coward, Brian." I grip a fist in my hair and let my head fall forward. "I struggle so much with what people think of me. I don't know how to get rid of the things my parents have taught me. I'm...not ready. I'm just not ready ."

Silence fills my bedroom, and the tension weighs in my chest. It is so heavy I'm sure breathing under water would be easier than whatever this is. But this is all I have to drown myself in. So that is what I do.

Busted.

Brian

Mail. Letters. Hundreds. Seals. On all of them. Bubbling the rows. Making them uneven and perfect and lovely. Each one stamped. Each one taunting me.

The massive box before Amelia bursts with letters for me . Perfect, beautiful letters for me . The colors dance before my eyes, and I lower myself—trembling—to my knees.

“I started as soon as I could write,” she whispers. “So many of these are atrocious.”

“No.” I swallow hard. “Don’t say that. They’re beautiful.”

Her head shakes. “They aren’t. One is just poetry about your eyebrows.”

“My...eyebrows?”

She covers her face with her hands. “They’re very specific. Very...expressive. I don’t know. I was maybe ten.”

My very specific eyebrows rise.

“The point is if I can’t even confess to you properly when I’ve had hundreds of chances, if I can’t stop focusing on myself for five minutes, if I can’t shake this feeling of worthlessness, I should not come to rely on you.

You cannot be my courage. You cannot be my self-esteem.

You shouldn't have to be. It's not fair to either of us. "

I...

I swallow hard.

Right now, I do not think I care what is fair to either of us. I want to open letters. I want to savor Amelia's words and feelings every day for however many years she has blessed me with. My itching fingers reach. "M-may I?"

She covers the box with her entire body and looks at me, terrified, as though completely oblivious to the fact that she is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. Eyes wide, waves cascading around her and over my mail, she says, "No. Please. They're stupid. And embarrassing."

I need to know more about my specific eyebrows.

That's not the kind of thing you can just tell a man and leave him hanging with.

Chest tight, I pin my hands under my arms and clamp them down against my body.

"Amelia. I... I really don't know how to say this eloquently. " I find her weepy eyes. "I love you."

"Do you love me, or the box of mail?"

"You. I have said so before."

"Are you just trying to get the box of mail?"

While she remains a part of it, yes. If she were to separate herself from it...I think I'd choose her. In a heartbeat. And not just because I understand that it's smarter to obtain the source of beautiful things over obtaining a handful. Teach a man to fish, and all that.

Having her means love letters for the rest of my life.

Having her means folding tiny origami letter notes to her and perhaps getting a few with miniature seals in return.

Having her means battling over who makes the other breakfast. Having her means never coming home to an empty house again, never going into a vacant mailroom that lacks employees who want to be there.

Having her is everything.

But I can't force her to understand that.

I can't force this overwhelming gratitude and adoration into her blood.

I can't.

And it is breaking my heart.

Voice raw, I say, "How can I help support you?"

"You shouldn't have to take on the brunt of this, Brian."

"I'm not asking just because I want you to be happy and healthy, Amelia. I want you . And I will do anything to close the distance between where we are now and wherever we need to be so I can have you."

Her lips part, broken eyes filling with confusion. “I...I don’t understand.”

“I’m selfish. I’ve told you that. I’m just at peace with all my horrible pieces. I’d like to help you reach that same serenity in any way you think I can. So we can live happily, horribly, ever after.”

“People keep telling me that it’ll take time.”

“It will. But it takes less time with support.” I fill my lungs with air. “So. How are we doing this? What’s the game plan? Shall I write you letters of affirmations every morning, noon, and night?”

“That would get exhausting.”

I laugh. “Oh, precious girl. Mail never gets exhausting.”

Her eyes widen. “I meant the affirming part, not the mail.”

“Oh.” Yes, that makes sense. I’m too used to dealing with unbelievers, I suppose. “I think it sounds like fun.”

“I think it sounds like conditioning...”

I frown. “Like you haven’t already been conditioned to hate yourself.

Your parents have done an awful lot of conditioning , Amelia.

They’re the ones who raised you in an environment that has twisted your kindness and concern for others into some sort of horrible obligation.

They’ve imprinted in your brain a focus on making sure you look good so you don’t

make them look bad.

You are already conditioned toward guilt and shame and never being good enough.

So what if I'd like to condition you toward joy and peace and love?

Wouldn't you prefer to settle your self-worth into the hands of someone who loves you more than they love themselves? ”

A tear traces down my beautiful Amelia's cheek, and she whispers, “Yes.” She turns her face so I can't see her cry.

Buried in my box of letters, she no doubt lets her teardrops fall onto the paper.

“I keep having moments where things seem possible, and I swear I've figured it all out.

But they slip away, leaving me back here in this place I don't know how to escape. ”

“Healing is a process of two steps forward and one step back.”

“It feels like one step forward and a dozen back. Because I should just be done already and stop bothering people with this nonsense.”

I touch her shoulder, and she tenses beneath my fingers.

“I'm sorry,” she whispers. “Maybe...I do need therapy. I just don't know how I would bring myself to do it when nothing I've experienced holds a candle to the abuse some people deal with.

And I know that comparison doesn't help anyone, and if something affected me, it

affected me, but...

comparison is what I've been raised in. I couldn't be tired without my mother telling me she was more tired.

I couldn't work hard without her explaining how she was working harder.

Every single moment of my childhood feels like some sort of exhausting and twisted game.

I don't know how to stop playing when it has been my life since forever.

I'm so afraid of becoming my parents. I'm so afraid, all the time, of everything.

I don't want to live like this. I promise I don't.

But it's all I've ever known, and I don't know who I'd be without it. "

"Free," I say.

Her eyes meet mine, wet lashes fluttering.

I push hair back from her cheek, over her ear, and repeat, "You'd be free." Wiping the streaks from her face, I ask, "Would you like that?"

"Yes." Her gaze falls. "But I don't know if it's possible to change quickly enough, and I refuse to ask you to keep waiting for me."

"You don't need to ask. And I don't need to wait. You...are staying with me, aren't you?"

“You still want me to?”

“Always. My life is better with you in it. And even though you aren’t where you want to be right now, that’s still the truth. I can only imagine how much better it’s going to get.”

Pink fills her cheeks, and her lips part. “I want to love you like this.”

My head tilts. “Like this?”

“Selflessly.”

“Oh, Mail-ia. You already do. This would be a non-issue if you didn’t. I don’t know how to get you to understand that.” I jut my lip. “I’ll keep trying, though. Probably come up with a few schemes for it...”

A frail smile touches her mouth, then realization steals it. Lifting her attention, she looks at the neglected tray on her bed. “I’ve let the breakfast you made for me go cold.”

Rising, I offer her my hand. “And that’s why some guy invented the microwave.”

Angelic, Amelia slips her fingers into mine. She rises, and her nightgown splays. Pale green against flushed skin. Mercy, she’s pretty.

“You deserve kindness,” I say.

Her fingers flinch in my hand. “Is the affirmation bombardment starting already?”

“Yep. Consider it the beginning of your cognitive behavioral therapy. We’ll ease you toward seeing a professional who can do it correctly, lest I launch you fully to the

other side of the spectrum whereby you consider yourself to be as perfectly flawless as I consider you.

Just imagine how insufferable we could be, though.

Thinking so highly of ourselves and one another.

” I click my tongue. “Could be fun. Maybe we should.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“Perhaps I’ll spend my afternoon scribing an essay for you on why it’s a very good idea. You’ll receive it in a few business days.” Before I can continue, my phone begins to ring, so I reluctantly release Amelia’s hand and pull it out of my pocket to look at the caller ID. “Liam?”

Well, that’s surely not a great sign.

I answer, “Hiya, boss. How’s Europe treating you?”

“Why is the office decorated for Christmas, Brian?”

I clear my throat. “Is...it?”

“I am staring at a snowman taller than me in the lobby right this second.”

He’s back already?

Well.

That’s...

Not good.

Turning my back on Amelia, I comb my fingers through my hair. “An adorable snowman, perchance?”

“I expect to see you in my office in thirty minutes.”

I glance back at Amelia, who still hasn’t had her breakfast or the chance to get dressed. “Thirty minutes is cutting it a bit tight, don’t ya think? It takes that long just to make it to the penthouse office in our elevator.”

“You have one hour, or you’re fired.”

My heart plummets, but before I can open my mouth, he’s hung up.

“Is...everything okay?” Amelia asks, nerves tight in her voice.

I blow out a breath and look at my phone, at a picture of my boss hugging a stuffed animal I technically got for his wife during our Countdown to Valentine’s Day event, which he loved. A lot.

Ah.

I see.

He’s upset that I threw an adorable celebration without him. Understandable.

“I’m sure everything’s fine.” I pop my phone back in my pocket. “I’ll warm up your food while you get dressed.”

“You don’t have t—”

“I want to.” Lifting her tray, I use my free hand to flick a finger between us. “What we have isn’t a transaction. What we have is better, okay? I will do what I want for you, and inevitably you will adore me, won’t you?”

A swallow moves her throat as she wets her lips. “Y-yes.”

“Perfect. Love you.”

Her sharp intake of breath makes me smile.

So I add, “Dearly.”

Her hands wring before her nightgown as I turn toward the door, and I don’t at all expect it when, “I love you, too,” hits my back.

Halfway out of her room, I face her again.

Beautiful, shy, scared, she stares at the floor, vibrantly red, vibrantly Christmas . “So, so much.”

At the sight, peace fills me.

Because whatever’s about to happen hardly matters...so long as I can stay near her .

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:28 am

Almost fired to almost married.

Amelia

I am terrified. For several reasons. Primarily, however, because my boss is glaring at Brian, who has just set a Christmas present down on his desk.

“And so,” Brian declares with a remarkable amount of hubris considering this conversation started with Tell me why I shouldn’t fire you and give your job to Amelia , “that is why you shouldn’t fire me, but you’re welcome to move Amelia up the corporate ladder and make us prince and princess of the mailroom. ”

My stomach twists.

“I never gave permission for a Christmas event in July, Brian,” Liam states, cold and hard.

Brian deflates. “Did you not hear my riveting recollection of how both employee and client satisfaction has improved over the course of the month? In your absence, I have fostered a kind and collaborative environment, all on a budget that neither overdrew the card you gave me nor resulted in a net loss. Will’s been running the numbers for me.

Profits have improved. Workloads have leveled.

You’ve not had any complaints.” Brian presents his fingers, counting on them.

“I followed your instructions. I listened to your we’ll reassess for Christmas .

I bring you the gift of mail!” He throws his arm out toward the giant red sack in the corner, which contains all the letters to Santa we collected—except, of course, mine .

“What more do you want from me?!”

Heaving a sigh, Liam presses his fingers to his temples. “What is this?”

“This?” Brian asks.

Liam taps the gift before him, which is wrapped in blue penguin paper.

“Bribery, obviously. It’s a little something for you and Amber.” Brian’s arms cross.

“Speaking of, where is your wife?”

“Home. Sleeping. Jet lag.”

“Oh, fantastic. You should open that, say thank you, Brian, you’re the best mailroom guy ever , and follow in her footsteps.”

Liam’s frown suggests that is not what he’s going to do. Nevertheless, he peels away the paper, opens the slim box inside, and stares at a pair of extra large polar bear pajamas.

Blood rushes from my head into my toes.

Brian’s going to get fired. I’ll have to run the mailroom by myself to support him. He’ll be devastated. I’ll lose my job because I’ll spend half my time petitioning for Brian’s reinstatement. We’ll be on the streets. I’ll have to sell my wax collection so we’ll fit in our cardboard box.

“Next time,” Liam grumbles, “don’t leave me out.”

My panicked thoughts screech to a halt.

Brian locks his arms behind his back and pouts. “Next time? Who says there’ll be a next time? I am underappreciated.”

Liam discovers a smaller matching set of pajamas beneath the first. “There will be a next time. I’ve seen your site. It’s effective. But it requires a reward system to stay effective. I expect you to maintain that. Unobtrusively. So Ruby can enjoy herself, too.”

Brian drops his pout in favor of a sly smile. “Well, I do hear that Grandparents’ Day is coming up.”

Liam stares, unblinking, at Brian for far too many chilling moments, then he says, “Maybe wait for October.”

“Cute Halloween?” Brian asks.

Liam nods.

“You got it, boss.” Brian plants a hand at his chin and begins pacing in front of Liam’s desk.

“Pumpkin carving. Costumes. Haunted house. I’ll start researching, planning, and making sure the website can be set up to reflect the theme.

A trick-or-treat motivation system adapts well to the naughty-or-nice list system. It shouldn’t be too difficult.”

Liam's eyes lift toward the ceiling, and he smooths a hand down his face before saying, "Get back to work."

"On it! Come along, A-mail-ia."

I jump and end up bowing to Liam before rushing after Brian as he enters the elevator. Heart still in my throat, I try to process what's just happened. Brian didn't have permission for Christmas in July, like, at all . Brian almost got fired. "You almost got fired," I whisper.

"Well, what is fired , really?" He rests back against the elevator wall, perfectly calm.

I stare at him.

He cracks an eyelid at me. "What?"

"You almost got fired from your mailroom."

"Yes, and? I didn't?"

"But...if you had been..." I don't even want to imagine how sad he'd be. I'd be writing hundreds of strongly-worded letters a day to Liam, demanding he reconsider, until I, too, followed in the firing.

"If I had been, you would have taken over, and I could have become your stay-at-home husband, like Norman."

Heat explodes in my chest, flooding my face and limbs. Lamely, I murmur, "B-but you love the mailroom."

Brian eyes me for several long moments, then he tucks his hands in his pockets and

settles in. “Yep. Love it.”

I shiver as the unspoken but I love you more skates across my flesh. My chest tightens. “B-Brian?”

“Mm?”

“Is it...worse to say I’m not ready for a relationship than it is to take a chance and just be as honest as possible with you in one?” I crush my hands together and drop my attention to the flooring. “Is it cruel of me even to bring it up again?”

“You’re not cruel,” Brian notes, casually, as though it’s the irrefutable truth. “And it’s not about better or worse, A-mail-ia. It’s about what makes you happiest.”

I’ve not been raised to do anything that makes me happy.

I’ve been raised to shut up, look busy, and take up as little space as possible.

I’m not even sure I really, truly know how to be happy.

Every last bit of joy I’ve ever shown feels hollow, like an act.

As though it’s just something else I put on in the morning in order to keep the peace and do the right thing.

When I’m happy, I question it.

When something might bring me happiness, it feels wrong.

“I’m scared,” I say. “I’m so scared, of every option.

Of annoying you. Of inconveniencing you.

Of relying on you. Of not letting myself rely on you.

I don't know how to achieve balance. I don't know how to be grateful for what you do for me when it feels like I need to do more just to make sure I'm doing enough.

A relationship like this...is a really bad idea. ”

“Is it?”

I nod, take a breath. “But if it's worse not to...if it doesn't make you happier...”

“Who cares about making me happy?” Brian asks, pushing off the wall as the elevator lands at the basement floor.

“Um...I do?”

“Clearly, I make myself happy—much to the chagrin of all surrounding individuals.” He strides out when the doors open.

“Or did you miss the part where I twisted rules and abused my boss's credit card in a loose scheme to woo you mere minutes before a love letter with your handwriting arrived and informed me that I did not really need to woo you much at all, so I kept up the guise purely to get more pretty love letters while using the woo scheme to make memories instead?

Come now, precious. I called the website Love Letters to Christmas.

Love Letters to Amelia Christmas, if we're being precise. ”

My lips part. “Christmas in July...was a plot to...”

“To gain your affection, yes.” He enters his office while I trail awkwardly behind him.

Opening the top drawer of his desk, he removes an envelope and twists it to show me a seal boasting a sprig of mistletoe.

“This isn’t about me, A-mail-ia. I’ll just do whatever.

” He lifts the letter above his head. “This is about you. What you’re comfortable with right now.

What will let you find the most peace. That’s what love’s about, after all.

Putting someone else first in the moments when they need something more than you do.

I enjoy spending time with you. I will continue to enjoy spending time with you.

I want what’s best for you. But I’m also absolutely not going to argue if you come over here...

and kiss me.” His eyes half-lid. “That choice is yours. And whatever happens after is also yours. I’ll support you, and love you, through anything. So...what do you want?”

I...don’t know.

I want the voices in my head to sound more like his, right now. I want to be strong and confident. I want...

Brian looks down at me, inches from him, standing beneath the raised card and mistletoe. I don't know when I moved. I don't know much at all. His lips soften and curl. "Is this an answer, or are you just in a trance?"

"I'm not sure." My heart won't stop racing. "Will you..." I close my eyes, try to breathe through the unnecessary duress. "I don't want to ruin this. I don't want to ruin our chances."

"You can't."

"I want to be good to you. I want to be better to myself. Will you help me find help, if we do this?"

"Do or don't, of course I will."

"Are you...sure you want me?"

He cups my chin in his free hand and catches a tear that falls on his thumb.

"Oh, Amelia..." Leaning in, he kisses the corner of my eye.

"You are lovable. And likable. And precious. Not because of anything you do, but because of who you are. I am very sure that I have never wanted anything more... I have seldom wanted anything half so much, and the last time I came close, it was when I was bemoaning not having been the person chosen to be your penpal and receive your letters in third grade." The tip of his nose brushes mine.

"May I have the honor of loving you, through the moments when you feel broken and to the day when you will feel whole?"

My fingertips graze his wrist, clutching him for stability. "That almost sounds like..."

“A proposal?” His breath ghosts across my cheek. “Probably because it is.”

When his lips meet mine, I don’t know if I’m ready.

I don’t think anything could prepare me for the way Brian sweeps me off my feet.

Warmth flows into me, settling in my chest, and my heart calms. As I melt into his arms, unwelcome doubts flee.

Air eludes me after a minute, and Brian laughs as he frees my mouth .

“Easy,” he murmurs, voice rougher than I’ve ever heard it. He holds me tight, lips brushing the crown of my head. “You can have as many as you want. Anywhere you like.”

I flush, peeling myself back just enough to find my Brian’s not-so-innocent eyes.

He wiggles his brows.

I cover my face and hide against his chest. “Stop it.”

“What? Can’t handle how specific they are when they dance?”

I whimper. “I’m never going to live that down, am I?”

“Possibly not.” He squeezes me tight. “I love you.”

“I love you,” I mumble into my fingers.

“It’s gonna be okay.”

I press my cheek to his heart, hear it hammer. “Promise?”

“I do.”

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:29 am

A letter a day keeps Brian fed.

Brian

“ Yes! ” I cackle, devious, and run—because there’s no way Amelia lets me keep this long enough to read it if I do not.

She’s already on her feet, chasing me from the box of letters in her room, to the kitchen, around the island, toward the couch. “ Brian, no! ” she shrieks. “You give that one back right now .”

“ Expressive mischief in your eyes, clear as day when your brows rise ,” I read, smile wide. “ The secret to the thoughts within, those two curved clues upon your skin. ” I look up, and dart left, keeping Amelia on the other side of the couch. “You spelt expressive wrong. Also mischief .”

“I was ten!” she cries, and lunges.

I catch her before she goes careening off the back of the couch.

Bracing her, I hold my letter out of reach and continue, “ Here, my meager attempt at an ode to your fair brows and their strange code. For though they say eyes are the windows to the soul, in my opinion eyebrows take that sacred role .”

As I finish, Amelia snuffles and says, “I am going to kill myself.”

I tutt. “Hailey would be so disappointed to hear you talk like that. I’m framing this.”

She buries her face against a cushion, free strands of her hair floating down her back, so pretty. I have no idea why she started wearing it down. Maybe because she noticed I'm a little obsessed with it.

Pitiful, she says, "I think you shouldn't get a letter tomorrow, or for the rest of this week."

"Now, A-mail-ia," I chide. "You know that would kill me. After a month of daily letters, I can't stop cold turkey. It's against doctor recommendation. They are a drug that you take once daily forever, and that's just the way it is."

She liquifies, melting off the couch and onto the floor. Face down in the carpet, she mumbles, "This was a terrible idea."

This was the best idea ever.

Swinging myself over the backrest, I settle into the corner nook of the couch. "I quite enjoy my daily hit."

"You'd have been so uncomfortable if I'd given you that atrocity."

"I'd have been hypnotised by the pretty seal and asked you to marry me, using naught else but Eyebrow-ese."

Amelia tilts her face, looking feebly up at me. "Eyebrow-ese?"

"The language of my face caterpillars." I waggle them, certainly saying I love you in Eyebrow-ese.

"Caterpillars are adorable." She pouts. "Yet that's still an insult to the majestic nature of your regal countenance." Her phone alarm goes off in the pocket of her dress, and

she winces.

I grin. “Are you going to tell Hailey about my eyebrows today?”

“No,” she protests, pulling herself off the floor, but I do have my doubts.

She rambles about me to her therapist whenever she needs to distract herself from some heavy topic.

I once overheard her explaining that her favorite color is technically blue, but only after the exact green of my eyes, but since you can’t just get the exact green of my eyes outside my eyes, whenever someone asks her what her favorite color is, she either says a very specific green or blue .

Into specific things, my Mail-ia.

Dusting off her dress, she glances at me.

I watch her, listening to her alarm for her virtual therapy session with Hailey sing “Invisible” by Zara Larsson from the movie Klaus .

I let my smile warm.

She lets herself smile. “Well,” she says, “I should go set up my laptop.”

“Yeah, probably. You shouldn’t be late. It would be a shame if Hailey can’t hear as much as possible about my eyebrows.”

Amelia rolls her eyes, then she leans down and grazes my lips. “I love you.”

I catch her waist and deepen the kiss. “I love you, too.”

And that's when she steals my letter.

Or tries.

I catch her forearm and reel her—laughing—in on top of me. “How dare you.” I work my fingers up her arm to her hand and my stolen letter as she giggles. “This is mine.” I kiss her wrist, planting the seal of my lips against her pulse. “Please be careful with my precious things.”

“I’m trying to,” she whispers against my throat, before she kisses. “I’m getting better each day.”

Her alarm stops, which means she really needs to get ready for her appointment. I sigh, squeeze her once more, and let her go.

She presses my letter to my lips, kisses, then abandons it with me. Walking backward to her room, she points at me. “I’m making dinner after my session.”

I settle in, getting comfy. “Keep believing that.”

“I mean it.” She tucks into the hall. “I will leave all my healing behind if I hear a single pot clatter.”

“Make dinner quietly, got it.”

Her lip juts. “You’re impossible.”

“I am not the one who woke up at three this morning to make breakfast before my adoring lover could.” I link my hands behind my head. “I think the only true solution is if we start sharing a bed. Then neither of us can sneak away. We’ll have to make breakfast together, like newlyweds.”

Amelia gasps, peeking at me around the corner. “Scandalous.”

“Hey, Mail-ia?”

Her lashes flutter. “Yes?”

“I’m ordering a pizza. What toppings do you want?”

Wicked, she says, “Raisins,” then she scurries off to get all healed up from whatever trauma compelled her to make me think of such an abomination.

Afterward, we eat our pizza and watch Klaus while I write wedding invitations and she seals them in white. We’ve yet to decide on a date, but we have decided on a day.

It might be next year, might be the year after.

But whatever year it is, it’ll be Christmas.

In July.

This concludes Love Letters to Christmas .

Keep scrolling to explore the next book in the Fire at Will series!

Page 35

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:29 am

The book is starting now. Please pay attention. There will be a quiz at the end.

Elodie

“September? Like... September September?”

That’s... two months. To plan a wedding.

I always thought I’d be the one whose mind would crack, but as I watch Ruby Vann’s adorably scowly face move up and down in a nod, I have to hand it to her.

Today, sitting across from me at a seen-better-days wooden table in Sweet & Salty – the café where I work alongside her brother – she’s out-cracked me.

My fingers hit the bridge of my nose, pinching the lightly speckled skin there in an effort to stave off the headache my bestie’s mental break is bringing on.

I mean, sure, Will’s been practically married to her for a decade and a half. This is no surprise on his end, even though they’ve only officially been together for five months. But for Ruby, those five months have been just that. Five months.

And not an easy five months, either, as my grumpy, stubborn friend has spent them learning the delicate arts of compromise, affection, and trust with her beloved and beleaguered boyfriend-fiancé-husband-person – William Vann.

No one was happier for her than me when she finally came to her senses and had a steamy make out session with the man in the elevator at their work – one I sincerely

hope was rated higher than PG-13, but that Ruby will give me no deets on, so I cannot confirm the steam levels exactly. A pity.

“September,” Will chirps from his spot beside Ruby, blond hair flopping as he munches happily on a blueberry scone in the after-hours calm of Sweet & Salty. “Isn’t it wonderful?” He smiles, and a stray bit of blueberry juice dribbles down the corner of his mouth.

He’s such a besotted little puppy, totally in love with my best friend and determined to wife her up immediate-like.

And who can blame him after 15 years of steadfast devotion and loyalty, never once so much as looking at another woman – though his obsession with my brother has, at times, been questionable. Still.

Will loves Ruby more than anything in this world.

Is it fast? Yes. Sort of. But is it something bad?

Something they’d regret? Is Will going to finally have her next to him only to discover that, hey, actually, the way she brushes her teeth is wrong and her hair routine takes too long and by the way it’s really not cute when she picks up a new hobby or tries out a new thing and maybe she could try being a little less spontaneous because it’s starting to look more annoying and less endearing ?

Um.

No. No, Will is not that type of guy.

I sigh, dropping my hand and ignoring the pang of horrible, selfish jealousy that shoots through me. I have to work double time to squash it when I see Ruby’s

freckled face soften, her usually tense jaw relaxing as both corners of her mouth tip up in a rare Ruby smile.

She's happy.

My bestest best friend in the entire world is happy, and I'm fighting off jealousy.

I say an internal goodbye to the Best Friend of the Year award and redouble my efforts to be nothing but joyful and supportive of Ruby and Will.

"September doesn't give us a lot of time to plan," a deep voice rumbles to my left, interrupting my struggle to be a decent friend.

My nose wrinkles. "Who is us?" I ask, narrowing my eyes at Roman, Ruby's brother.

He narrows his back. "You and me," he answers.

"You." I point at him. "And me?" I ask. Because... absolutely not.

Absolutely, 100 percent, unequivocally not.

"Sweet, I'm not about to let you plan my best friend's wedding by yourself. For one, you're more likely to hire a gregorian chanter than a DJ for the reception, and for two, it's a lot of work. More than any reasonable person would take on by themselves."

"Are you calling me unreasonable, Salty?" I growl.

"Of course not," he replies. "Because you aren't taking it on by yourself. We're doing it together."

“I would rather fling myself off the side of a mountain than plan a wedding with you,” I snip.

“I’ll be handling the DJ,” Ruby cuts in. “And any other planning that needs to be done should be simple enough, since Will and I don’t really care about the wedding aesthetics. We just care that it happens.”

Will nods beside her, wiping blueberry juice off his chin.

“Yes, what my beautiful, lovely, gorgeous, smart, funny, incredible wifey said. Except also I care about the vows, but you guys don’t need to worry about that.

I have plans .” He grins, eyes going just the wrong side of manic.

“Oh! And I’d like to have lots of do-it-yourself projects incorporated into the wedding.

Personal touches. We did so many crafts for the Valentine countdown – bless that countdown for bringing my love to her senses – and I’d like to honor that time in our lives.

” His grin goes goofy. “Plus, I love a good arts and crafts time.”

Uh.

I glance at Ruby, who apparently has zero input on arts and crafts time, despite the downturn of her lips.

Seriously, the character growth on that girl.

Six months ago she would’ve been whacking him with her cane and calling him an

idiot for even suggesting a DIY heavy wedding.

But, then, six months ago she was whacking him with her cane and calling him an idiot for breathing , basically.

And now look at her, shrugging as the silence stretches taut following Will's request and saying things like, "I'll handle the DJ.

Will will handle the arts and crafts. Problem solved, wedding planned. "

Somewhat aghast, torn between pride at my friend's personal development and horror at the idea of classy, fancy, rich Ruby and Will having a DIY wedding, I look around for some form of support.

I find it, to my great horror, in the man sitting beside me.

Roman's eyes lock on mine, green to blue, and we have a never-before-experienced moment of solidarity as we think in tandem: WTF?

"Liam wanted to be involved in the planning also," Will comments around another bite of scone, drawing our attention.

"I'll put him in charge of planning the projects.

I don't want to plan, obviously, which is why we've asked you, but I also don't want you being overworked on this.

You can just tell him what areas are ripe for an artsy touch, and he can arrange supplies and project plans.

" He hums thoughtfully, eyes roaming the ceiling as he pushes another half a scone in

his mouth.

Crumbs fly as he says, “Maybe Brian can help him. He’s great at this kind of stuff. ”

I inhale, exhale, and count to ten.

Roman, having done zero chill out exercises, speaks before I reach the end of mine. “Again, September doesn’t exactly give us a lot of time to plan this. Have you guys considered pushing it? A little? Maybe a winter wedding?”

Ruby sniffs. “I’m not getting married at a time that’s riskiest for me for falls. That’s just asking for disaster.”

“Not to mention,” Will mentions. “ Technically , we’re already married. This is just the ceremony and the reception and the ‘Hey, everyone on planet Earth, she really did say yes!’, and I’d like that to happen as soon as possible and also at a time when traveling doesn’t suck for people coming in.”

Right. That part. The technically they’re already married part.

Months ago, Will somehow managed to con or coerce Ruby into legally marrying him.

I didn’t ever get the details, but I did gather there was kissing involved, and perhaps a bit of bribery.

Within twenty-four hours of this agreement, the four of us – Ruby, Will, Roman, and me – were at a courthouse and signing papers to bind them forever to each other.

It was the least romantic wedding I’ve ever been to, even if Will did shed several tears as they kissed amongst the clerks and other soon-to-be- wedded couples.

Despite not being the most romantic thing in the world, the wedding was life changing. Ruby and Will's, of course, but also mine .

Marriage meant Ruby moving out of Roman's house, which meant Roman losing the rent money he was getting from her, which happened to coincide with my brother, Sol, abandoning me to move to freaking West Virginia to work at an offshoot branch of Sweet & Salty – despite the fact that we had a perfect set up working together at Sweet & Salty Downtown, living in an apartment together across the street and getting to see each other every day.

All of this culminating in Roman needing a housemate and me being unable to afford Sol and my apartment on my own and doubly unable to manage the emotions being there or at the café where we worked together brought up in me.

The solution, sadly, was obvious. To Ruby, anyway.

It took her a month to convince her brother and me to swallow our pride, stop being stubborn morons, and have me take over Ruby's old room.

I made the move, reluctantly, and transferred to Sweet & Salty Uptown – the location where Roman works – so that we could carpool and I wouldn't have to think about Sol or how much I miss him every time I walked into work.

Jokes on me, I think about it anyway, because, hello dummy, the different Sweet & Salty locations look exactly the same .

The sole difference is that Uptown has a bigger kitchen space, since it's where Roman develops all of the recipes for the menu.

Whenever I need a break from the Sol sadness, I'll sneak back there under the guise of needing some water.

It means seeing Roman, but sometimes that's just the distraction I need.

Hard to cry over missing my brother when I'm busy arguing over half-prepped café food with a big, giant jerk.

"I get not wanting the wedding to be in winter," the big, giant jerk says, a tinge of exasperation covering his words. "Perhaps spring?"

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:29 am

“Perhaps not,” Ruby replies. “Mom and Dad are already upset that we didn’t wait for them for the courthouse.

I’m not making them wait any longer for the ceremony than they have to.

We would’ve done it in June, but June 14th was booked at all vendors, and the next date available that wasn’t in the middle of hot and humid summer was in September.”

Right. So. We’re having the wedding in September then. Nobody wants to disappoint the Vann parents.

Roman comes to the same conclusion as I do, jaw working as he grinds his teeth. “September,” he grumbles. “I’ll start making the menu.”

Will beams at him, and Ruby manages a teensy smile. “You guys are the best,” Will says.

My phone alarm goes off before I can think of a reply for that, especially the part where he’s lumped Roman and I together. I shudder. Icky.

“If this is all settled,” I say, fishing my phone out of my pocket and silencing the alarm. “I’ve gotta go. I have a class.”

I ignore Roman’s mumbled suggestion that I should be staying to help iron out a plan for how we’re going to plan this wedding, not attending my class on, he assumes, “shrimp herding and other mainland practices”.

He can think what he wants to. And then, later, he can feel like an idiot when he finds out he's been wrong.

"I think we're done," Ruby says. "If Will's finished shoving pastries in his mouth."

Will, mid-shove, freezes. "You're so smart and hot and cool," he says around his third scone before he can't speak at all because he's pushing the entire thing into his mouth in one go .

Ruby's nose wrinkles, and she scowls.

Beside me, Roman's chair scrapes as he stands, and I rise when he pulls my chair out too.

I grab my huge lemon-yellow tote bag and round the table before I leave, hugging Ruby and Will and telling them that I really am so happy for them, even if planning is tight.

"It's going to be beautiful," I assure them.

"It'll have the best music and the best flowers – smell and sight – and the best couple, and it'll be everything you want. I promise."

Ruby nods, unconcerned. "I trust you. Just stay in budget."

Ah, yes. Budget. "Of course," I reply. "Which is?"

I'm not sure what I expect, considering Ruby and Will are loaded but also want to DIY things, but "\$200,000" coming out of my bestie's mouth is certainly not it.

Two. Hundred. Thousand. Dollars.

On what? I think, but do not ask. What could possibly cost that much?

“I think I can manage that,” I say instead, hugging her again.

Roman uses his superior breadth and width to nudge me out of the way to get his own hugs, and I take the opportunity to wave my goodbye to Will before speedwalking through the clutter of empty tables that dabble the after hours Sweet & Salty floor.

At five foot eight inches, my legs aren’t exactly short, but Roman still manages to eat up my stride with his super-humanly long limbs and make it to the EMPLOYEE’S ONLY door before me, holding it open with a frown.

I return his grumpy face, and we walk in tense silence through the hallway, past the doors to the kitchen, office, and bathroom, and out the back door to where his car is parked in employee parking, my pretty yellow bike hanging off a bike rack on the back of it.

Roman beeps the locks on his car while I pull out my keyring, unlocking the bike lock keeping my baby semi-safe from robbery.

I pull her down as he grabs a girly, adorable, pink and yellow polka dotted drawstring bag from his back seat.

It holds my safety gear – helmet, elbow pads, knee pads – and he’s religious about making sure I wear them.

I would anyway, so it’s a waste of his time, but still, he hands the bag over to me while going over common sense safety rules, as if I am a child.

“Wear them the entire time you’re on your bike, please. The joint pads too, even if you think they look goofy.”

I don't think they look goofy. They're yellow, to match my bike, and I painted big pink flowers on them. They're adorable. My nose scrunches to relay that information to him.

He glances at my nose scrunch, scrunches his own back, and continues. "If it's dark after class, come in the front of the shop. The light in the alley is out, and they aren't coming until later this week to fix it. You don't need to wind up a statistic in a dark alley."

"Oh, really? You're joking. All I've ever wanted to be is a statistic." I blink at him, wide-eyed and naive.

His eyes narrow. "Come in the front. I'll leave it unlocked for you so you're not fumbling with your keys in the dark at night. You can bring your bike in, too. I have to mop the main floor tonight anyway."

"Yes, father." I salute as my phone's second alarm rings. "I really have to go now, if you're finished giving me safety tips a kindergartener would know? Believe it or not, I'm not actually a moron."

"I didn't call you a moron," he retorts, crossing his arms.

"No, you just treated me like one." I snap, buckling my knee pads on, then the elbow ones. "You know, I am capable of reasonable thought, despite what you think." I plop my helmet on my head, glaring at him.

He frowns. "I know that."

Right. Sure. "Whatever, Roman," I mutter, mounting my bike and silencing my third and final alarm. "I have to go. I'll be back in two hours."

"Elodie, wait-"

I don't, putting my feet to the pedals and swerving around him. And I don't even run over his toes as I do it.

And I thought Ruby had the lock on character growth.